

Property and Self Possession: on Stephen Prina and the Eames

The Way He Always Wanted It, II (2008) is an almost thirty-minute film made by the artist Stephen Prina. The film consists of five tracking shots that move through the interior of the Ford House, a strange circular house designed in 1948 by the architect Bruce Goff (completed in 1950) in Aurora, Illinois.¹ The tracking shots also pan and tilt while tracking so that, across the film's duration, we see quite a lot of the house, despite the fact that our view is often frustratingly—but also pleurably—too close to the house and its surfaces, furnishings, and objects. The film is scored, as it were, by the live performance, recorded in situ, of a composition elaborated by Prina from musical fragments composed by Goff himself, as well as lyrics, sung by Prina, which were adapted from letters to Goff from his lover.

Prina's work has frequently taken its inspiration, its points of departure, and its material grounding from other works of art—including architecture. He produces complex installations, moving image work, and musical compositions, that, while cerebral and conceptually oriented, cannot be classified as “conceptual” insofar as they privilege a formal, material weight, or presence. The means by which one of Prina's artworks appears are intensely depersonalized, but the resulting objects have their own personality, exhibit a formal, material, and even sensual force that resists the category of the “conceptual.” For instance, the recent installation of **As He Remembered It** (2013) reproduces the entirety of the built-in cabinetry, cupboards, and furniture from two houses designed by the architect Rudolf Schindler. The resulting disarticulated objects (they do not always look exactly like furniture once they have been shorn out of their intended environment) were then painted bright pink and exhibited in geometrically regular patterns in the gallery space. The installation resembles a campy series of minimalist sculptures—one might think

in particular of Donald Judd here. However, upon close inspection, the flimsy constructions, bereft of the Schindler structures to which they would have been attached, begin to sag, and thus produce an ambience of wonky, forlorn imperfection.

As He Remembered It emblemizes the way in which Prina's work indulges in the perfectly imperfect. Each work is crystalline in its conceptualization: the ideation is complete, there are no loose ends, every element proclaims an unassailable intelligence whose formal analogue is the glossy sheen of the Pantone Honey-suckle 2011 Color of the Year paint in which each bit of furniture has been lacquered. At the same time, the imperfections bred by contingency are everywhere on display as the unsupported wooden expanses of some of the works droop towards the gallery floor. Things seem at once too hard, and too easy, and one wonders if this tension—between conceptual difficulty and easeful delight—is a problem for Prina in a way that even his (shall we say?) anal-retentive aesthetic cannot quite account for. That last sentence sounds too derisory, especially given the fact that there is so much to admire in Prina's work, which, at its best, is provocative, engaging, and—obviously—“rigorous.” (At its worst the work can seem anemic, academic, and over-determined precisely because of the way in which it admits its academicism and over-determination—which may only be a way of insulating itself from criticism.) But I think the tension between the difficult and the easy in his work can offer a means of returning to an unresolved problem in the history of the modernist architecture that has recently proved to be such a fertile territory for Prina's practice.

Whereas so many forms of aesthetic modernism (in literature, music, painting) seem to be predicated on difficulty, obscurity, and opacity, much of modernist architecture seems to promise



Stills from **The Way He Always Wanted It, II**



ease, efficiency, intelligibility, and availability. The cognitive experience of a Le Corbusier building seems a long way away from that of **Finnegan's Wake**. That comparison is, itself, too easy to make, however it helps to elucidate the difference between what was promised by modernist architecture and what was promised by modernist literature.

The Way He Always Wanted It, II takes place in and exhibits to its spectator a modernist house via preternaturally smooth tracking shots that record both the rigor of Goff's architecture and the contingent accumulation of stuff that index the lives of the house's inhabitants. Also recorded by the moving camera are Prina's production team and the musicians, including Prina himself, who perform the score. The Goff house itself is visually, spatially, and structurally complex—bizarre even—but dedicates itself to otium: the 1951 *Life* magazine story that covered the house's novelty emphasizes that it is "a house that requires little care."² Moreover, its circular plan "was generated by the informal circle of a friendly gathering."³ This same circular design is what suggested and made easy the computer-controlled tracking shots that constitute Prina's film.

What is at stake in the encounter staged by Prina's practice and Goff's Ford House can be thought of by comparing this film to another encounter between a house and cinema, although in this case the architects and filmmakers were the same. I am thinking of the Eames House designed by husband-and-wife team Charles and Ray Eames and the film **House: After Five Years of Living** (1954) that they made to document and explore the life and way of living that had prospered under the shelter of their famous home. The Eames House is completely rectilinear and constructed entirely of industrially manufactured building materials. The Ford House is circular and embellished with vernacular, artsy-crafty flourishes. However, both embody and make material a postwar optimism that often seems best—or at least most prolifically—expressed in American housing at mid-century. And both have been made to act as subjects or vehicles for modernist or late-modernist filmmaking practices (that of the Eames and of Prina).

The Eames House was, of course, the Eames's house: it housed their belongings and was, for several years, the base of operations for their professional design and filmmaking practices. The rigorous, if entirely "blank" or "empty" space of the Eames House acts as the neutral container for the Eames's impressive collection of modernist art objects, folk artifacts, toys, textiles, natural specimens, and other objects of delight and utility. The house becomes a kind of hypertrophied cabinet of curiosities. It displays, perhaps, some modest wealth, but, more importantly it exhibits the Eames's exquisitely quirky, bohemian taste—their cultural capital, perhaps more than their financial capital itself. As Beatriz Colomina has written, "What was on display...was the equal status of all kinds of objects...The role of the architect was simply that of *happily* [my emphasis] accommodating these objects."⁴ The Eames and their house make everything seem incredibly easy. So too does the film they made about their house. **House** consists of a sequence of shots of the interiors and exteriors of the Eames House and pays special attention to the art objects and artifacts that were so artfully arranged inside the house by the Eames during their occupation of the house. The collection of objects in the house has its analogy in the collection of fragments—the shots—that constitute this ten-minute-long film. Both house and film share the ontology of the fragment, but of the fragment housed by the harmonious space of modernist architecture's and modernist cinema's easeful expanse and accumulation of space.⁵

It is less comfortable to acknowledge that what is disavowed in the Eames's **House** and in the Eames House is the fact that we are being asked to bear witness to the exhibition of private property. The film's and the house's visual pleasure—the gratification that both so effortlessly offer to us—is (once we think about it) uncomfortably underwritten by the sense that what's theirs is theirs, however much they keep waving it in front of our eyes. Both film and house suggest that the mid-century modernism they spectacularize is one that can appropriate objects from anywhere—with enormous ease—and dissolve them in the spaces of their modernism. They disavow the difficult fact of private property.

The Way He Always Wanted It, II takes a different approach to the private property of the Ford House (now no longer

lived in or owned by Mr. and Mrs. Ford, who first commissioned and lived in it.) The impersonality of Prina's formal approach determines that no single object, architectural element, or bit of domestic detritus receives the concentrated attention that the Eames's method of framing endowed to the things we see in **House**. While **House**'s orderly succession of shots and their more or less similar duration reinforce, like the house itself, the "equal status of all kinds of objects," the way in which each shot so carefully frames these objects tells us that while they are all equal, they are also all important, worth being looked at. Prina's moving camera, very differently, makes us see things that don't seem like they are meant to be looked at all. The Ford House (as it existed at the time Prina shot it) conveys a sense of the same bohemian collector's sensibility that pervades the Eames House (and **House**), but Prina's film lets us see not just the *beau desordre* but also merely the *desordre*. For instance, at one point in the film the camera tracks in wonderful proximity to a circular bookcase. Not only are we confronted with the handsome spines of a private library, but also sheaves of photocopies, messily shoved between books and held together by paper clips. Prina's approach to filming the house is calculated, but calculated so that the uncalculated elements of the human life of the house make themselves felt. **The Way He Always Wanted It, II** exhibits a tendency towards a coolly regulated contingency. In watching the film we move through its spaces in a way that we cannot in **House** (which has no moving shots), and the camera's (and our) movement allows us to see elements of living that are foreclosed to us in the Eames's film. We feel rather less like we are merely meant to marvel at what we see but also note the imperfections and the genuine weirdness of the house. Prina's film seems less to celebrate the spectacle of property, of private property as spectacle, as object of visual pleasure, than to suggest the precariousness of possession, the contingency of what we call our own. The Fords were apparently forced to sell their house due to "financial difficulties" in the 1960s;⁶ The Ford House is thus no longer the Fords' house. Similarly, Prina's film, which looks at and is scored by Goff's own work, seems slowly to merge the authorial status of these two artists. As Ian White suggests, the film "indicates an intense affiliation between Goff's multifaceted practice and Prina's own genre-defying oeuvre."⁷

The complexity of Prina's conceptualization of the film and of the programming of the camera movements feels, however oddly, effortless. The easy glide of the camera seems sensually to disavow the artistic labor that has produced the film, even though those same movements are what give us visible access to the labor of the film's production—as well as to the laborious tedium of domestic life (e.g., the paper-clipped photocopies). White touches on this problem when he remarks that "if it were not for" the manifold evidence the film offers of its own mode and scene of production, "these images and sounds would be as impeccably untroubling as a photo shoot for **The World of Interiors**."⁸ White seems to suggest that the film's inordinately theatricalized reflexivity saves it from **The World of Interiors**. I am less sure. The steady glide of the tracking shots suggest that, despite our best intentions, nothing every really belongs to or can be owned by us anyway—that possession is a trial when it is not an outright falsehood. This is not the Fords' house, nor is it Goff's, nor is it Prina's. But that same steady movement bespeaks a mode of production—Prina's—that has perhaps too confidently figured it all out beforehand. Even as we see the indices of contingency as the camera moves around and around the house, the film (or Prina?) seems to have foreseen our seeing, and so we in turn see ourselves seeing a display of contingency and not contingency (always the enemy of possession) itself. Prina, in a sense, carries on the long history of modernist depersonalization that was most famously theorized by T.S. Eliot in "Tradition and the Individual Talent," where he asserts that serious poetry "is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality."⁹ This is the same Eliot who also insisted that "poets...at present must be difficult."¹⁰ Depersonalization and difficulty seem to walk hand in hand down the corridors of modernism. Prina's manner of dispossessing himself through his own practices, however, does not quite risk the extinction of selfhood, but rather reinforces the property boundaries of his own work. Everything seems to flow back to the brilliant way in which a work as thoroughly depersonalized as **The Way He Always Wanted It, II**

has *managed* its own divestment of personality. The film's title tells us that the film already knows this and wants its spectator to know this, too. The immaculate neatness of the film—unlike the shabby disorder of the house it exhibits—keeps everything in its place.

Goff's work—and the Ford House in particular—risked embarrassment, which is something that Prina's work, and this film in particular, seems never to do. It seems like it would be really weird to live in the Ford House in a way that it does not feel very weird to watch Prina's film. According to the 1951 article in *Life*, the Fords, who were tired of the abuse that their neighbors were directing at their house's curious appearance, put up a sign in their front yard that read "We don't like your house either."¹¹ The sign articulates a defensiveness that betrays an anxiety. As wonderfully strange and inventive as it was, maybe the house was ugly and maybe the Fords worried about this and about whether they were in full possession of what they owned. **The Way He Always Wanted It, II** betrays no such anxiety. Charming and intelligent as it is, it vibrates with a dispiritingly sublime self-possession. In that sense it forecloses on the powerful force of expropriation that modernism promised. In the end, it's actually just too easy.

1
David Gilson De Long, **The Architecture of Bruce Goff: Buildings and Projects, 1916-1974** (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1977), pp. 240-42.

2
"The Round House," *Life*, March 31, 1958, 70. The article quotes Mr. Ford's expression of delight at the "doorless" carport's convenience: "No trouble now to put the car away." (Ibid.)

3
Jeffrey Cook, **The Architecture of Bruce Goff**, (London: Granda Publishing, 1978), 37. The Fords were old friends of Goff, thus the familial, the familiar, and the easeful inform the project from its very inception.

4
Colomina, "Reflections on the Eames House," **The Work of Charles and Ray Eames**, Donald Albrecht, ed. (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1997), 147.

5
Here I do not in any way intend to impugn modernist architecture with the charge of coldness, dehumanization, or "universalizing" abstraction, too-easy terms with which to abuse modernist architecture's achievements. (Clearly the Fords and the Eames found their homes cozy and *heimlich*.) Rather, I want to inject into the pleasure we take in modernist architectural space a sense of the way in which this space might both rehearse and re-inflect, in a way yet, I think, to be accounted for, our experience of private property, an experience made so ubiquitously concrete by the house. These are concerns I've written about briefly in a post to the *in media res* project: "The Spectacle of Property," <http://media-commons.futureofthebook.org/imr/2013/09/06/spectacle-property> (last accessed 19 January 2013). That short piece and the present essay both extend out of a book manuscript I am completing on the subject of the house in American cinema. This book project is also titled "The Spectacle of Property."

6
De Long, 247.

7
Ian White, "Stephen Prina: **The Way He Always Wanted It, II**," *Art Review* 25 (September 2008), 32.

8
Ibid.

9
T.S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," **The Sacred Wood** (London and New York: Routledge, 1989 [first published 1920]), 58.

10
"We can only say that it appears likely that poets in our civilization, as it exists at present, must be difficult. Our civilization comprehends great variety and complexity, and this variety and complexity, playing upon a refined sensibility, must produce various and complex results. The poet must become more and more comprehensive, more allusive, more indirect, in order to force, to dislocate if necessary, language into his meaning." "The Metaphysical Poets," first published **The Times Literary Supplement**, October 20, 1921.

11
"The Round House," *Life*, March 31, 1958, 70.