

Three Hypotheses for a Text on Emilio Prini Published on Flash Art 306, January – February 2016, pp. 51–59

Since his earliest contributions to the Arte Povera movement in the 1960s, Emilio Prini (b. 1943 in Italy; lives in Rome) has refined an art practice sometimes described as “ungraspable,” “deceptive” and “cryptic.” It is a practice grounded in pure ideas, without regard for conventional aesthetic criteria — a practice that isolates the act of “art making” from those of creating and producing, thus demanding art’s true potential as a critical tool outside the constraints of capitalism. Given the total saturation of images, objects and experiences provided by the art industry today, Prini’s declaration, “I create nothing, if possible,” and his persistent revisions and recontextualizations of his own past works, suggest new strategies for a dematerialized conception of art that defies the limits of commodification. The three texts that follow — by Luca Lo Pinto, Pierre Bal-Blanc and Alfredo Aceto — survey Prini’s production, delving into the ideas that characterize his oeuvre, namely those of nonproductivity, standardization and void.

Alfredo Aceto on Emilio Prini's "La Pimpa Il Vuoto"

I was fifteen when I first encountered the work of Emilio Prini in the Galleria Giorgio Persano in Turin. I went into the gallery somewhat listlessly but I recall that in the short corridor from the entryway to the exhibition rooms I caught a glimpse of a few images of the animated film *La Pimpa* [by Italian cartoonist Francesco Tullio Altan], which awakened some strange sensations in me. I perceived that I was approaching something that, considering my young age, would be an experience that was hard to talk about.

The great white walls of the gallery were almost completely covered with steel panels. Prints of Altan's cartoons were attached to each of them. The colors of the amiable little red-spotted dog had disappeared, and with them the spirit and the poetry of the cartoons, suggesting however that the visitor might discover another more complex poetry.

The appearance of the steel supports was very cold and industrial, unexpected and not connected with the images. *La Pimpa* (the little dog) and Armando (his owner), whom I knew well, were present in each vignette, but here they had lost control of their dialogue. The sense of narrative had also disappeared, even though the balloons took up most of the space

of the images. It was something like when snakes shed their skin, leaving behind a sort of empty and transparent reproduction of themselves.

Although the gallery space was full, when I left I felt a strange sensation of emptiness. I had the impression that those enlarged vignettes were there only to avoid disappointing the people who had climbed the stairs to reach the gallery. But that was not the case. With this action, Prini had filled the empty gallery with tangible elements that, paradoxically, left it even more empty. The task of defining that unbridgeable gap was left to the visitor, an action that could be completed only in the absolute presence of something tangible.

What was soon evident to me was that the work of Prini was not there where I sought it, in the image, but rather was to be identified in the spaces between one panel and another, which formed a kind of suspense: the impossibility of a logical thread and thus of a progression.

Years later, when some began to confuse what the French call *le fond de la forme* [the content of the form] with regard to digital art, I realized that in "La Pimpa Il Vuoto" [La Pimpa the Void] Prini had anticipated what emerged many years later. The two characters of

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 "La Pimpa Il Vuoto" (2008)
 Installation view at
 Galleria Giorgio
 Persano, Turin
 Courtesy of Galleria
 Giorgio Persano, Turin
 Photography by
 Paolo Pellion

Next page:
 Emilio Prini and
 Claudio Abate
 Caso fotografico (1971)
 Courtesy of Galleria
 Pio Monti, Rome
 Photography by
 Claudio Abate



the vignettes, victims of their own non-dialogues, were winking at the difficulties of communication that arose with the arrival of new media. Today, looking back, those hermetic exchanges, without resolution but still omnipresent, seem to almost move away from the look of a cartoon and to now resemble a chat.

The void that Prini created is capable of expansion by conquering new territories. In this case, for example, the subtraction implemented at the exhibition went on to contaminate the text that Hans-Ulrich Obrist wrote about this body of work. Prini first censored some phrases in Obrist's text and then continued the subtraction by penning some corrections in the published version of the text. The resulting text is a manifesto that, together with the La Pimpa panels, constitutes a single installation titled "Installazione alla Galleria Persano, Torino 2008" [Installation at the Persano Gallery, Turin 2008]. In this way, the void that Prini generated at the beginning contaminated all phases of production, mediation and enjoyment of the work.

The exhibition at Giorgio Persano's gallery seriously shook me up. Perhaps it was the first time that my boyhood status had been seriously challenged. An important moment. I thought of Emilio Prini as the caterpillar in *Alice in Wonderland*, a creature who made silence his strength and wisdom, and who assisted others by giving them their own tools for taking on the world. Perhaps I automatically associate him with Carroll's character because of the poetry with which Prini refuses to fulfill what the world expects of artists. His resistance is not based on a calculation, but on the preservation and avoidance of what he himself calls the "Prini brand."

Each exhibition and each gesture of the artist are an invention — thus never a derivation — that delivers the artist to a place of transition and discovery. I believe that these inventions of his are akin to silences amid the noise caused by all the other works of art that saturate our perception. I recall a conference that Romeo Castellucci held at the ECAL in Lausanne, during which he spoke of how the saturation of images today leaves us in the middle of an absolute desert, a place where it is impossible to believe in the force of representation any longer.

Conventions are often turned upside-down in Prini's actions. By redefining the context, the artist stimulates our interest in an apparently simple, accidental, underlying reality: a standard linked, in the first place, to the small scale of the boring day-to-day that flows within the narrow alleys of the mind, and subsequently, to the fairytale poetry of a disturbing fiction. In Prini's exhibitions, time always gets the better of space. This is a very unusual attitude in the world of art; we are used to having time regulate space rather than a space that hosts time.

If Emilio Prini's work has influenced the artists who have followed him most persistently, outside of Italy his name is not familiar. This ambiguity between the potential of his work and the scarce visibility of his radical implications fascinates me considerably. Often I have looked among artists my age for any sign



of his legacy. Even if less radical and more inclined to compromise, many young artists take us back to a world in which the object produced is less important than a precise and interested attitude with regard to its contemporaneity. Some, like Cameron Rowland, communicate with a poetic inspiration not too distant from Prini, in which the economy of art and the authorship of the object are again subjects of interest. Others, like Achraf Touloub, just film a fragment of their own leather jackets while they are walking down a street with their backs to the audience — always fleeing but always nearby, incapable of evading the image.

(Translated from Italian by Nuovo Traduttore Letterario)

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The exhibition "Emilio Prini: Uno standard meraviglioso" opens at Centre d'Art Contemporain Genève on May 20.