

secession

Vereinigung bildender KünstlerInnen Wiener Secession
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Interview / Stephen Prina **Vienna May 6, 2011**

We turned down the music of *TV on the Radio*, so that we could begin our discussion while Stephen Prina continued to paint the objects in the cellar of the Secession.

Annette Südbeck What has been your point of departure for the project?

Stephen Prina It is the text that is on the invitation card. It is a personal anecdote. Sometime in the early-to-mid 1980s Chris Williams and I were on La Brea Avenue late one night in Los Angeles. We saw a storefront window across the street and we could see that there was a pink object highlighted in the spot light. We were curious, because at that time I don't think there were many art galleries in that neighbourhood. Later a friend of mine suggested that this could have been the gallery of Larry Whiteley, who had been a dealer of American folk art and architectural furniture. I had never visited the gallery during its open hours. It seems to me that there were people aware of mid 20th-century modern furniture, it seems to me that architects always have been aware of this design phenomenon and they would collect these when they would find them in second-hand stores. It was around the moment when mid 20th centuries furniture was being recuperated as something collectable, and this gallery was instrumental in excelling this process. So, I believe that this has been the gallery were Chris and I had seen the object, but I actually can't be certain, because that gallery doesn't exist any longer, Larry Whiteley is no longer alive, so there are these things that are actually difficult to recuperate. When we realized that this pink object in the window was a piece of furniture by Rudolf Schindler it peaked our interest. We knew of Schindler and were interested in that period of architecture and how that responded to the vernacular California architecture of the time when Schindler and Richard Neutra started to built in Los Angeles. And this was past the moment of that kind of primacy.

But then when we realized that the object in the window was not a free-standing piece of furniture but as it appeared to us originally some kind of build-in furniture, we were horrified. We viewed this as an atrocity as though this was an amputated limb of a body. I was describing it to a friend of mine not long ago and he said, well that is like the phantom limb, isn't it, that one can find in the writings of Freud and Merleau Ponty. But then I realized that this is not really like that. This is like the phantom body, because the limb is there and it is the corpus, the body that is gone.

So, this produced a striking image in my memory, that kept returning over and over again, and I told myself you've got to do something with this. I could never figure it out, until I received the

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letter from the Secession inviting me to do an exhibition and for some reason the convergence of the two architectural models – that of the Secession and that of Schindler – seemed to make sense. I couldn't tell you what sense it makes, but it seemed to be a solid starting point for the project.

Personally I have a prejudice against using personal anecdotes in art. But, embracing that which I resist or reject has been a *modus operandi* for me in the past: I don't reject or dismiss certain configurations that I take issue with, instead I try to adopt them and try to make something that I think that is actually generative by incorporating them.

For instance with the *Exquisite Corpse* project – I am showing some examples in the exhibition at the Secession – when I first started to develop that project there was a tendency for a lot of artists, a lot of painters, to use diptychs in their work. I thought that was a way that only functions in a critical fashion, it is kind of like the ping-pong-effect, if you don't find something in this panel you turn to that panel. Well, I really don't like that kind of suggestion and the attitude towards spectatorship. So that is what I tried to work through with the *Exquisite Corpse* series of diptychs. Could I make the diptych do something else?

So maybe with this project that I am working on here at the Secession, I seize on the personal anecdote, but redirect it to what I think it does in contemporary and maybe even not-so-contemporary art.

AS For the Secession you will recreate the built-in furniture of two Schindler-houses, the Hiler Residence and the Harris Residence. What is it that interests you in Schindler and why did you choose these two residencies?

SP I am not really a realist or a naturalist, I wouldn't for instance just replicate that storefront. Well, I don't know what the original house had been from which that object had been removed and who knows if that house or structure even still exists, that is something that I wanted to fold into the project. I wanted the source piece of architecture to be a house that had been designed by Schindler, had been built, but is no longer extant, one that had been demolished. As it so happens there were two very small houses that had been designed by Schindler in close proximity in time, one was 1941 and the other one 1942-4, and coincidentally that is during the war. At one moment I thought of that, does that bear upon the project? And it does in certain ways because certain building materials would have become scarce, because they would have been redirected for the war effort.

AS So you think that the use of plywood comes out of a lack of available materials?

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SP Either that or plywood could be seen as the modern material. How do you take wood and reconstitute it, make it affordable and available, but still very strong. I wouldn't call it a miracle material, but I think that during the time there was the call for miracle materials and it is not quite plastic but it is kind of right there with plastic. And then, when you see how Charles and Ray Eames use plywood to reinvent the chair, that was such a radical position for furniture design. And, of course, Eames and Schindler are working in close proximity at a certain moment.

Selecting these two houses, at one point I was trying to decide which house I am going to turn my attention to. I was attracted to the tiny little house that had been built for Mrs. George (Rose) Harris up in a little canyon. The house is an ingenious use of little available space. There is a sofa that is designed to also accommodate the dining room table and seating, there is a desk that accommodates a piano in its back with a long window seat and a book shelf. So, I was very seduced by those design elements as they were making the rooms multifunctional, showed the use of a room in a variety of different ways. But on the other hand there is the Hilber residence, that is a studio-residence for an artist, and I thought that that opportunity for self reflexivity is just too tempting to avoid. So, I kept going back and forth. At one moment it stuck me I really should concentrate on both houses. It took it off the focus of "The One" house. When you make it the two houses, especially as they are actually integrated into categories of bedroom and bathroom and living room etc., that takes it away from the exemplary model of Schindler and collapses the singular into the multiple. This is what I mean about beginning to work and develop the project: How can I build complexity and density into the project. Maybe it is not even building it, maybe it is allowing for complexity to be generated with it and avoiding these problems that I have which is connected with the personal anecdote and going back to that single source. I wanted to finally go away from the original source, if not to flee that.

AS Looking at the original plans of Schindler, that are the basis for your work, one has to notice a number of uncertainties, points that the architect left for the carpenter to decide. How are you dealing with this? Or more general, how do you deal with issues like determination and its limits?

SP That becomes a very important part of the project: principles of translation. This was another benefit of actually not having the house. We couldn't go back and measure or inspect the houses, so we had to start from the original plans of Schindler. In his early work the plans are

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quite detailed and as he continued working over the years the plans became less and less detailed. It wasn't so much that he had an idea about a building and then executed it, so it wasn't about the pre-executive, that is fully determined and then realized, but it is the idea that the architectural plans are a proposal in a certain direction and in the process of building he would make decisions and revisions. It wasn't even that he would revise it on the drawing, he would revise on the work site. I was reading about Schindler the other day and there was a photograph of a living room with a window and in the caption it states that the window is not on the original plan – a huge window! Schindler put that in because he realized he needed light in that area. So, even in the way I just described it, does that function as a critique of Conceptual Art or some kinds of Conceptual Art? Perhaps! (Laughs.)

AS I would like to take this notion a little further. Talking about Conceptual Art, I am wondering about how you think of yourself and your starting point at a certain point in the history of art?

SP I have been described as a conceptual artist more than once in the past and my response to that is that during the period of high analytical conceptual art, I was in junior high school and all I was trying to do was learn to play the guitar so I could be in a rock band. It is not to be doctrinaire to respond in that way, but by the time that I was a conscious being, beginning to conceptualize myself as an artist, Conceptual Art was historical already. It wasn't some radical proposition or rupture. I don't think Conceptual Art was ever perceived as a rupture in Europe, it was conceived as a rupture in the States, but that is another kind of discussion. For instance I remember having no problem seeing the continuity between Minimal Art and Conceptual Art. So, at that point I was trying to come to terms with a larger arc: the reductive impulse. What does it mean to go from Jackson Pollock to Donald Judd to Ad Reinhardt to Joseph Kosuth? Is that trajectory inevitable? Is it logical? Is it the only trajectory? Many different artists confronted that impasse. I think it is a productive impasse. Isn't that tantamount to the Pollock story, the famous incident: Lee Krasner who has heard something in the next room, went into Pollock's studio asking what happened. He had thrown a Picasso book into the corner of the room and said "He had thought of everything". Now as we see it in retrospect we don't think so, but that is how it appeared at the time: there was nothing left to do. I think a lot of artists were grappling with the question of what to do, because there was even the perception that to follow through with the so-called preferred critical practice and attitude of the Conceptual, whatever that is, because Conceptual Art was never singular, it was always multiple to begin with. But I think a lot of artists were trying to figure out what is the direction that I should take at this point.

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AS You think of yourself also as a painter and it seems very important to you to paint the objects yourself and you choose this kind of pink colour, which Pantone called “Honeysuckle” and nominated “Colour of The Year 2011”. Two questions, the first one is: why this kind of pink? Second, why does it seem necessary to you to do it yourself?

SP To talk about the Pantone Colour of The Year, that afforded me a relief. It is a relief from the total dependence upon the personal anecdote we started with. I thought, at some moment I have to select a pink and that pink is only in my memory. I remember it one way, but how do you even describe a colour that is in your memory? I was a little bit concerned that there would be too much of a preoccupation on everything going back to the memory. And, at one point I was speaking with Kimberli Meyer, who is the director of the Schindler house, and we were talking of the fact that Pauline Schindler, the ex-wife of Schindler, had painted her half of the Schindler house pink, she painted over the concrete, she painted over the redwood beams. And, for all we know, that object Chris and I saw that night might have been taken from the Schindler house itself. However, there is no way to trace that, the records don't exist - which of course is part of its power. Kimberli Meyer said that in the 1970s when they really renovated the Schindler house they had to remove all that pink, and even though they tried to do their best they couldn't get it out of every little crack. She suggested I can even come and look at it over there. But in speaking with her it made it very clear that I didn't need to do that. I don't think that is the proper approach. In fact I don't even think that it follows through with the logic that I was employing with the project. So, I don't remember how it happened but somehow I was online and I became aware of the fact that Pantone has a Colour of The Year. And it just happened that this year it is pink, this very particular “Honeysuckle” that is dark and vibrant and has yellow in it.

So, for instance, I couldn't have made the project in the same way last year, this is a window of opportunity and it becomes a beacon of the contemporary, too. It is an institutionalized taste being rammed down our throats, one could take exception with that I haven't really taken an exception, I decided to embrace it and in some respect accelerate its tendencies. And by accelerate I mean, when we see 28 painted objects all assembled in the Secession space, one word to describe it will be “excess”.

AS You have also been very precise about the underlying stain, however, the decision making behind it was very different, wasn't it?

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SP The stain that has been used on the plywood follows from the way in which Schindler would make his furniture. But I say that with reservation, because, for instance, when we finally decided on the plywood to be used for this work, we decided to use poplar instead of fir. If I were interested in trying to accurately replicate Schindlers furniture I would have most certainly taken douglas fir. But I realized that that was not the most important aspect about it. Having the discussion with the architects about the selection of the materials, we had samples of it and one of the architects said that poplar is extremely strong and it is light weight and, of course, it is cheaper.

Actually, Kimberli Meyer made an interesting comment as she said, Schindler never met a budget too small. He never went over budget and he was very proud of that. He was very thrifty in that way, he wanted to demonstrate that strong architecture could be made with very affordable materials. So, at one point I turned to the architects and said “If poplar would have been available don’t you think Schindler would have used it?”, and they said “well, certainly”. So there is this shift in material and inclination.

For instance with the stain: Schindler often used stains of different colours to give a certain surface to the wood with the idea of enriching that affordable material. I wanted to do something like that. And in the end, actually very close to the moment, I decided not to use one stain for all the objects but to select one stain for the Harris House and one for the Hiler House. And, when Kimberli Meyer mentioned that many times Schindler, as if he were a site-specific artist, picked colours from the location where the buildings would be built, I did the same thing. I selected a sandy brown-greyish colour from a photograph I took of the rook upon which the house rests for Harris and at the location of Hiler I photographed a eucalyptus tree and tried to match the green to the leaves of that tree.

AS So, it is actually based on perception?

SP Perception, but also the site specific impulse in Schindler. I come out of the site specific, I more often described my work as being system specific instead of site specific, but you know I studied with Michael Asher, so that is something that is very ingrained into my methodology, both in terms of adopting those strategies and operating at a critical distance to them. Then with the stain, if you bring it into the level of phenomenology, what does it look like, and especially when we know that I intended to paint over it with pink it operates as an under-painting.

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I never refer to these painted objects as sculpture and I trying not to refer to them as paintings. I refer to them as objects almost in the way that Donald Judd would refer to his as specific objects. So they are coloured objects.

But I realize that in the painting application there is the tradition of painting function of the under-painting. I am painting a green object as we speak, so I look at how the green comes through when the brush strokes get a little bit thinner. And then when the paint pools on the surface it doesn't allow that come through so much and it advances itself as a surface that has more shine. You know, when I started this painting process I wasn't sure how many layers of paint were going to be involved, because I wanted to see it. I was actually very, very surprised that one coat seemed to do it. When we were actually painting them and they were still wet I thought no this don't look right. And, then when I came in the next day I saw everything changed when it dried. If I put any more paint on it, it will occlude some of these details and you will not have visual access to the under-painting. It won't have this play and range of incident that I wanted. Because I think these objects have a peculiar design, as any kind of functional object that has been ripped of its context will have, but then beyond that, I wanted people to inspect these painterly incidents. So it wasn't that they were made out of a slab of a solid material, but they actually have a skin that envelops the objects and alters the way in which we apprehend that skin.

AS One thing I would like to go back to is the series *Exquisite Corpse* series, which you have been working on since 1988. They are monochrome adoptions, with the same dimensions and measurements but - carefully carried out - cover the whole surface with abstract rhythmic strokes. You have been doing this for more than 20 years. Is there something that has changed in your approach, in the way you feel about it.

SP Maybe I could talk about what I think that project does and that has something to do with how is has changed.

Maybe one small part of it was responding to the convention of the practice of artist drawings. I thought artists are supposed to have a drawing project and, if I were to make drawings, how would they look. Because I didn't make my preparatory drawings part of my visual display, I wanted to turn that around and, instead of saying I don't make drawings, say this is the kind of drawings that I would make. I am making this series of diptychs, a unique drawing united with a multiple, which is an offset lithograph on paper which is an Index of the overall project. The *Exquisite Corpse* might function as a spine of my overall practice as it rubs shoulders with subsequent, unlike projects, unlike, at least, in form. For a while I would always have an

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example of in my *Exquisite Corpse* in an exhibition along with a new project that I would make. Then for several years I didn't do that any more and I am getting back to it. So, in Vienna, a part of the way these diptychs will function is that examples from this project have been shown here on more than one occasion. So people who have had a long lasting relationship with contemporary art in Vienna will remember that and some will not. That kind of differentiation in the audience is more than fine with me, it is a way to point at how art functions nowadays.

Also, it becomes like a measuring stick. Where is he at now? I recently showed 222 of 556 in Berlin, people who have seen the project before may ask what happened between the last time I saw this and now? Where are those? They are not present, because that work is really about the instantiation of fragments and the presentation of the fragment. It is not even by coincidence that you come in contact with this, because there is the index that reminds that there are 555 others of them.

I was my way also of trying to be On Kawara. He is a very different generation than I am. I must admit that I felt some envy, when I saw his work, because he really figured out the perfect project. Many artists of that generation figured out a project and then continued to occupy that space basically in perpetuity. I realized that this was not part of my project to occupy any space in perpetuity.

AS Calling yourself a post-media-artist you also work as a musician and a composer. When I think of the arrangement of the furniture on the floor and the certain kind of order you establish, I see parallels to the Manet Index that is part of every *Exquisite Corpse* work, but also to musical scores and certain ways of notation. Does that make sense to you?

SP I don't believe that I had stopped to think about that, but it makes total sense. In fact I think that you should invite the Vienna Philharmonic in to perform my score. Consider them invited! (Laughs) You know, I am also of the attitude that anything can function as a score and so anything can be performed as music. It depends on how you determine the way in which the score will be interpreted. And I think that is very much what this entire project is about: How do we use the few drawings that remain of Schindler as a way to translate, to basically perform, that score of a Schindler architecture drawing.