

a tu per tu



Stephen Prina. Concert for Modern, Movie, and Pop Music for 10 Instruments and Voice, 2010. Foto di Maria Baranova. Immagine digitale © 2025 The Museum of Modern Art, New York

## MUSICA E PERFORMANCE STEPHEN PRINA A NEW YORK

*Le radici, l'insegnamento, la ricerca instancabile. "A Lick and a Promise", la rassegna al Moma, è un omaggio alla libertà e alla trasformazione*

opera su punto autobiografico presentata al Madre di Napoli nel 2017, che racconta l'esperienza del padre dell'artista, Pietro Prina, scappato giovinissimo dall'Italia Fascista nel 1923. E chiede a Stephen di raccontarmi di più a riguardo. "In quel caso ho immaginato il lavoro in un'accezione

più 'patrimoniale' che emotiva. Quando avevo 20 anni ho ereditato da mio padre un libro con quel titolo, *English for Foreigners*. Mi fece arrabbiare moltissimo, e un testo per cui è appena arrivato in questo paese, per imparare l'inglese, ma l'agenda ideologica è quella di prendere l'immigrato come

materia grezza e trasformarlo in un cittadino accettabile. E questo mi ha fatto stare male. A un certo punto ho pensato devo in qualche modo liberarmi di questo sentimento, metterlo fuori, analizzarlo e condividerlo con altri facendone un'opera. Avevo bisogno di una valvola di sfogo artistica.

Tornando ai miei genitori - entrambi di origini italiane - devo dire che la loro identità, non ha marcato la mia, almeno concepualmente. Quello che ha fatto la differenza è stata la loro attitudine. Erano due persone molto semplici, mio padre aveva la prima media e mia madre la terza. Eppure

*l'opera*



**L'**opera *Tilted Arc* di Richard Serra si inserisce nello spazio di Federal Plaza come una lunga barriera d'acciaio che interrompe e ridefinisce il flusso quotidiano dei passanti. Pensata in dialogo diretto con il contesto urbano, la scultura trasforma la piazza in un'esperienza fisica e percepitiva, obbligando il pubblico a confrontarsi con la sua presenza.

Fotografata poco prima della rimozione dalla Federal Plaza, New York, 10 maggio 1985. Foto di Robert R. McElroy/Getty Images

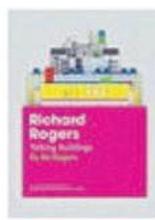
il libro

Cos'è che ha le gambe ma non cammina? Non, non la sei. E nemmeno i pantaloni. E' la *Zip-Up House*, il primo progetto di Richard Rogers, che nel 1967 immaginava una casa a forma di struttura tubolare, composta da una sequenza di pannelli curvati in alluminio giallo sigillati tra loro da cerniere (quindi estensibile), e ancorata a gambe non fissate in modo permanente al suolo (quindi agile). Sebbene mai realizzata, la *Zip-Up House* racchiude nel suo luminoso carcere i principi che il celebre architetto avrebbe sviluppato lungo la sua carriera, materializzati nei 16 edifici protagonisti di *Talking Buildings*. Gli "edifici parlanti" del libro-oggetto, disegnato dal figlio, Al Rogers e ispirato all'omonima mostra al Sir John Soane's Museum di Londra, si raccontano con parole semplici, adatte ai giovani lettori cui in primo luogo si rivolgono, svelando i capitali del pensiero dell'architetto, insieme a curiosità e aneddoti. Leggerezza, adattabilità, basso impatto ambientale, leggibilità, trasparenza sono alcuni dello idee che si trasmettono di edificio in edificio - sebbene ciascuno risponda con soluzioni formali diverse alle specifiche funzioni che è chiamato a svolgere - suggerendo che questi sono al centro in dialogo tra loro.

Il libro nasce dalla convinzione di Rogers che l'architettura debba comunicare con le persone, e cosa meglio

un libro per bambini per veicolare i criteri di comunicabilità e leggibilità che affidava ai suoi progetti? Il leopolare - estensibile, agile - si dispiega dalla *Zip-Up House* alla Drawing Gallery di Château La Coste (2020), passando per il Centro Pompidou di Parigi (1977), realizzato con Renzo Piano, che col suo radicale design "inside-out" con tubature e ascensori a vista e le facciate trasparenti ha rivoluzionato la fruizione del museo, creando un luogo leggibile, accessibile e integrato alla città. Scopriamo che il Millennium Dome a Londra (1999), gigantesco "ombrello" che pesa meno dell'aria che contiene, è nato da un tavolino tenuto sospeso da 12 matite; e che il terminal 4 dell'aeroporto Barajas di Madrid (1997) sorride con un arco-baleno di 52 sfumature a chi va e chi viene, scalando il non luogo per eccellenza. Il libro ercede il formato rettangolare: i profili degli edifici sovrastano le singole pagine, tracciando lo skyline di una città colorata e mobile. Una città che ciascuno possa sentire propria, secondo l'etica di Rogers, certo che lo scopo dell'architettura sia quello di migliorare la qualità della vita, stimolare l'impegno, ispirando gioiosità - che piccoli e grandi possono ritrovare tra le pagine di *Talking Buildings*.

Sara De Chiara



RICHARD ROGERS  
*TALKING BUILDINGS*  
Ab Rogers, con Philippa Wyatt; illustrazioni di Yeonju Yang e Claudio Ropoli  
Owl & Dog Playbook, London  
pp. 22 £10 sterline

libreria

**IO, FUTURISTA**  
Roman Jacobson  
Milano, Feltrinelli  
pp. 240 £17 euro

**ARTHUR RIMBAUD IN NEW YORK**  
David Wojnarowicz  
Milano-New York, Skira  
pp. 208 £49 euro

**BLACK IN BLUES: HOW A COLOR TELLS THE STORY OF MY PEOPLE**  
Imani Perry  
New York, Ecco  
pp. 256 £28.99 dollari

**CARMELO BENE-  
MAURIZIO COSTANZO.  
NESSUNO CONTRO TUTTI**  
Annalisa Prestice  
Milano, Luni Edizioni  
pp. 288 £25 euro

**COME L'ACQUA**  
Anne Carson  
Milano, Crocetti Editore  
pp. 464 £25 euro

**THE WOMAN QUESTION 1550-2025**  
Alison Gingers  
Chicago, The University of Chicago Press  
pp. 400 £69 dollari

**Interview with Stephen Prina**  
**Geraldina Polverelli for IL FOGLIO ARTE**  
**New York, December 15<sup>th</sup> 2025**

Beneath the snow, New York is transformed. The energy that usually courses through it slows down. The noise of traffic becomes muffled, as if filtered through an invisible layer. The passersby quicken their pace, chilled to the bone, exchanging brief glances in a silent complicity. The gray sky diffuses a cold, pale, abstract light, and yet the city seems wrapped in an unexpected form of intimacy. I walk through this rarefied landscape, clutching my coat around me. I am heading to Chelsea, one of the world's most celebrated art districts, where today I am meeting one of the most influential figures of American post-conceptual art: Stephen Prina. Punctual, smiling, utterly serious. Milky skin, brown eyes piercing like sparks amid the white of the snow. His presence is silent and dense, like a volcanic stone retaining heat beneath its cold surface. Prina is an artist whose practice traverses, with rigorous ambiguity, the territories of language, music, performance, and art history. Active since the early 1980s, his work investigates the structures of power and desire that inform cultural production, constantly placing under tension the ideas of authorship, appropriation, identity, and representation. Through installations, texts, music, and performative interventions, Prina constructs open, often self-referential systems in which the subject fragments and reflects itself in a network of citations, absences, and repetitions. It is an articulated and coherent practice that destabilizes notions of stability, intention, narration, and univocal readings of the artwork.

At MoMA, “*A Lick and a Promise*” has just concluded, the first major survey devoted to the artist’s engagement with performance and music, curated by Stuart Comer.

“We began working on this project fifteen years ago. Stuart is the one who proposed that, and then we started, almost laying bricks in a wall. It was a survey from the beginning, but maybe that’s something that also emerged in our discussions. Despite constant dialogue, Stuart let me do whatever I wanted. The *fil rouge* of the retrospective, for me, was the assumption—borrowed from Surrealism—that *Incommensurable does not exist*, and that, consequently, any musical score can sit next to any other. With this freedom, I set about juxtaposing very different works of mine, leaving some unchanged and rewriting others. The piece ‘*A Lick and a Promise*’ was completely new.

I wanted the visual component related to performance to be as simple as possible. And I loved the fact that this musical and performative aspect was inseparably linked to some of my installations in the museum. The audience—but also the musicians—had to pass through these installations to reach the studio where the pieces were performed. This created a sort of visual counterpoint, in which everyone could enjoy their own perception in an autonomous and personal way. The survey didn't have the title "*A Lick and a Promise*" from the beginning. I went to a meeting at MoMA and I said, 'Well, what about this as a title?' And I thought they would shoot it down, but they immediately went for it. I don't know if you've heard the phrase 'a lick and a promise' before. It comes from an idiomatic expression (in Italian it would sound something like: 'a quick fix for now, and I promise I'll do better next time'). My mother would say this. I grew up in a very tidy household. When company was coming to visit, and my mother couldn't do the complete cleaning, she would give it 'a lick and a promise', so it would be presentable. I think of this retrospective as being dedicated to her".

This assertion immediately brings to my mind "*English for Foreigners*" another autobiographically inspired work presented at the Madre Museum in Naples in 2017. It recounts the experience of the artist's father, Pietro Prina, who fled Fascist Italy at a very young age in 1923.

I ask Stephen to tell me more about it. "In that case, I imagined the work in a 'patrimonial' sense. When I was in my early twenties, I inherited from my father a book with that title, '*English for Foreigners*'. And it made me so angry. It was a book that was given to people who had recently come to this country so that they could learn English. But the ideological agenda is to take the immigrant as raw material and shape that person into an acceptable citizen. This made me sick. So I thought I had to make an artwork about this. I had to get rid of this sentiment. That was really the heart of that.

Returning to my parents, my father was originally from Italy. My mother's parents were from the same Northern Italian village—Canischio—as my father. They immigrated to the United States, where my mother was born. My parents met in the US. My father was a man of few words... I have to say that their identity didn't mark mine, at least not consciously. What made the difference was their attitude. They were very simple people: my father had completed the sixth grade, my mother the eighth grade. And yet they supported me as much as they could. When I told them—out of the blue—that I wanted to be an artist, rather than study architecture, they said, 'We do

not understand you, we don't understand what you're doing, but you must know better.' And I didn't realize what a gift that was, an absolute gift. It took me a long time to acknowledge that. I wasn't able to acknowledge that to either my mother or my father before they passed; it remains so nonetheless."

Stephen was an *enfant prodige*: at twelve he was painting oil on canvas, and at fourteen he was performing in a band.

"I've always been an interdisciplinary artist; I realized that already at the university. But what was very helpful to me was reading Theodor Adorno—"In Search of Wagner"—which is a scathing critique of Wagner. Somewhere in Adorno, I got the idea of really investigating a genre. So I didn't think of myself as always making interdisciplinary projects. Every time I was a project-based artist. Project to project, I would start with: 'These are the materials I want to animate. Now, how do I animate them? How do I bring them to form?' And it would be the same thing with a sculpture project, a project in language, or a project in music. It wasn't making a hybrid of all these things, but every time I would make a project, I would want to really dig my heels in and discover. If I was working on a photographic project, how to make it as photographic as possible? Or a painting project as painterly as possible? Over the course of time, it was my hope that members of the audience would see all of my different projects and realize that they were in different territories, different areas, but there would be a structural connection between them. So that's how I really started to think about it. If you're going to talk about the interdisciplinary, that kind of changes how the disciplinary functions. You have to be very strong in each discipline. Otherwise, what's the point?"

Prina taught at Harvard for more than twenty years and at Art Center for twenty-three: a total of forty-three years in the classroom. I ask him about his teaching method.

"I want my students to find a way to take what's inside of them out. I try to stand back, and education can be so damaging. Especially at Harvard, so many times students would come to me wanting my permission to do something. But what's important is actually figuring out what is at stake for you in developing a practice: that is very, very difficult. I want to make sure that they have unobstructed space where they can pursue their own interests. Education gets in the way so much with that kind of thing. It's not as easy as it sounds to strip away all of that framework."

And what's the role of the artist today, I ask Stephen.

“It is to respond to our environment, but that environment includes history and the artists that precede us, and to find something that is relevant to you today, that reflects upon what we have, what our inheritance is. That can take many different forms, but I think that’s all we can do, is to respond to our extenuating circumstances. That is also more difficult than it sounds, because there are so many preconceptions about what an artist is supposed to do and what an artist is supposed to develop.

Some artists don’t want to be exposed to other artworks because they think they will be influenced and that will desecrate their essence. I don’t understand that. I want to be contaminated by as many things as possible—things that I don’t know, that challenge me. That’s my temperament: I live to be challenged”.

Speaking of challenges, I ask him what he thinks about artificial intelligence. “I don’t understand it; I think I’m the wrong generation. There are a lot of discussions today—should the artist use it? Shouldn’t the artist use it? There are all these people who want to regulate AI. They’re never going to be able to regulate it in the way that they would like to, that is, to basically neuter it and eliminate it. And doesn’t it always come down to the same thing: how am I going to use this pencil? It’s not about the pencil. There’s nothing special about it. It is how you use it. I think the same thing with AI. Some people want to use AI in the most doctrinaire and conventional ways, and I’m not interested in that. But some people are finding ways to use AI to expand their vocabulary. I’m not against it at all. I don’t understand it, but maybe I’ve used it already without knowing it—probably. When you really think about what the potential of AI is, it is to be so algorithmically complex that it can organize and accommodate much more data than we would ever be able to. So it could really generate something worth engaging—and challenging—also. So why not have AI? And I certainly wouldn’t want to regulate it in the way people were talking about it. I think that you could use AI in all sorts of different ways. Maybe that’ll be my next project: to figure out a way to use AI in a more engaging way for myself.

In your practice as a post-conceptual artist, what comes first: the idea or the emotion? “I usually don’t talk about things in terms of the emotional, but I will talk about it in terms of the passionate. It is about what grabs my attention, what demands for me to be engaged with it. A lot of my projects begin with some kind of research, and I think about it like a desktop with a bunch of photocopies on it, and I rearrange them and rearrange them until something starts to emerge out of that. I start asking the questions: if I am going to work

on this material, what is the appropriate form that it takes? So that's not really an idea. I have never seen ideas. That is a research that comes in contact with the desire to give it form so that it might have the capability of being transformed into an artwork. And every time is different."