

EMILIO PRINI'S CONSCIENTIOUS OBJECTION:

The simultaneously marginalised and mythologised position that Emilio Prini continues to occupy is a dual result of his militant ambivalence to the systems and desires that attempt to dictate the visibility and valuation of artworks. Around 1971, after a period of inclusion in most of the storied era-defining group exhibitions of Arte Povera and conceptual art that launched and cemented the careers of most of his colleagues, Prini instead further withdrew from the art system by further advancing his own strategies of biographical and stylistic restraint, almost to their logical extremes. Indeed, from the point of view of the production and visibility demands of the art system, Prini's position could stand as a diagram-through-negation for the construction and maintenance of an economically and institutionally viable career. As history tends to be written by the authority of the institution through the mechanisms of capital, Prini's relevance and semi-visibility is maintained primarily through the continued insistence of a small group of artists, writers, curators, and other cultural practitioners. His continued visibility, despite a system that would perhaps prefer to exclude him from dominant historical narratives, and despite his own best efforts at self-occlusion, seems to be the result of his emblematisation of a practice or position that stands in opposition to this system, offering a glimmer of hope for an alternative to the totalising either/or nature of a market that increasingly renders such positions peripheral and precarious.

Like water, financial and cultural capital tends to flow in the direction of least resistance. The art market, and the mechanisms of the art system that ride on its back out of parasitical necessity, have a few essential demands on artists that, it insists, allow for the conditions to make their positions viable within the frameworks that create the conditions of visibility that art, indeed, requires to function; this need is exploited as a form of blackmail to ensure that the demands are met with little resistance.

The first demand is the development of a signature style, a "unique" brand that can be marketed as the product of individual exceptionalism. (All of the attacks on authorship and skill mounted from the historical avant-gardes and their successors have done little to change this.) Few artists have resisted this more than Prini, whose indefatigable mind never allowed him to repeat himself, to the point that he mostly refused to re-exhibit existing works, preferring instead to remake or re-imagine them, or, alternately, to redact them or refuse their exhibition. Even looking through his comparatively modest output we find the materials for the basis of at least several potential career trajectories that could have been easily viable as the basis for a "life's work", especially given the professional context in which he first became visible. His output, however, proved too heterogeneous to propose even heterogeneity as a signature style. Indeed, what unites his work is its unwavering expression of an attitude of ambivalence towards the idea of autonomous artworks and an intellectual curiosity that insists on their inherent contextual contingency.

The second demand is the cultivation and maintenance of a marketable persona. This persona must exist in relation to perceived complicity (though it may appear as antagonistic so long as the antagonism is dependable and constrained mostly to attitude, not productivity). What is required is the biographical imperative that allows for strategic branding of the brand, which is the artist's ostensibly exceptional product. Prini, like Stanley Broun, whose fate within the regime of the star-system is quite similar, rarely allowed biographical information to be released, literally and figuratively stayed on the sidelines of professional situations, and eventually cut most social ties with other artists and art-world colleagues. While his public demeanour was reportedly often unpleasant, his behaviour never satisfied the demands of performative antagonism and transgression necessary to cast him as an *enfant terrible* myth-figure. Prini, whose face and name often appeared directly in his work, somehow maintained a level of anonymity that secured his (ostensibly intentional) marginality.

The third demand is the reliable satisfaction of participation and production expectations, an inevitable consequence of the aforementioned brand and branding imperatives; the product must be available for presentation and sale at any moment, as dictated by the system in which the work operates. Prini, who, even during his most active period often contributed to exhibitions by simply sending or publishing the missive *CONFERMO PARTECIPAZIONE ESPOSIZIONE* [I CONFIRM EXHIBITION PARTICIPATION]¹ or a variation thereof, entered a semi-retirement from the art system in 1971. Seemingly determined not to satisfy the institutional desire to solidify and historicise the so-called Arte Povera and Konzeptkunst "movements", and thereby his place within their narratives, he became (perhaps, more accurately, remained) unpredictable and unreliable, refusing exhibition invitations or accepting them only to cancel at the last moment.

While the boneyards of the empiricist and devourous art system are peppered with the remains of so-called “difficult” artists whose primary indiscretion was pointing out structural injustices or inequities within the system that their intellectual and physical labour feeds, Prini – perhaps through a privileged lack of economic and social necessity – was able to retract himself from the very demands that functioned structurally against his conception of the necessity of art-making. Indeed, his manifesto-like statement that “I create nothing, if possible”² situates his artworks as examples of instances when creating nothing was not possible – in other words, when the necessity to produce was stronger than his tendency towards restraint, towards non-participation. This throws his statements accepting participation into high relief; they were not glib jokes about the minimum level of activity necessary for inclusion, but rather expressions of a deep confliction with participating within a broken system.

Prini’s relationship with art, it seems, was not marked by ambivalence towards the potential power or necessity of artworks, but rather towards systems that determine their hierarchical positioning within what Julia Scher calls “the ecology of visibility”.³ Prini’s restraint, then, was not positioned in opposition to artistic production per se, but rather was the result of his realisation that neither his participation nor non-participation could affect the structural changes he desired. It is then reductive to heroicise him as a figure of resistance, or as a Bartlebyesque forerunner to what Josef Strau has termed the “non-productive attitude”⁴. On the contrary, the urgency of his work is not undermined by, but rather relativised by and defined in relation to his periods of inactivity.

Perhaps his position is closer to that of the conscientious objector, whose refusal to follow a nationalist imperative into battle to “defend their country” transcends the label of deserter when it is the result of a moral stance against an unconscionable choice. Conscientious objection is fundamentally not apolitical; it entails, simultaneously, recognition of the innate injustice of the system into which one is enlisted and a belief in its possibility for redemption. Importantly, Prini, and the artistic milieu around him, came of age in the climate of the political movements of the late 1960s⁵. These movements saw the interconnectedness of capital’s exploitation of labour and consumption and the war machine that it necessitated to expand. To resist the demands of the art world was part of a greater resistance, functioning against the demands of a society propelling towards its own obliteration. Now more than ever, the will of capital is systematically swallowing the viability of radical and hypothetical cultural expression, along with our cultural and political freedom and survival on a global and existential scale.

Prini realised that the art system, as inherited, was not outside of, but was rather a function of, market forces that desired control over its own product. In the decades since, these forces seem to have gained much ground. If we once believed in art’s exceptional position within culture as a place where the fulfilment of consumer desire is not predetermined within its production, then this definition seems to be erasing itself from within. The art system’s demands of individualism, exceptionalism, and work ethic, torn verbatim from neoliberalism’s handbook, is designed to preclude or subsume the production of the unexpected, allowing it to function seamlessly within the logic of the luxury goods market. This was the logical conclusion that Prini foresaw and spent his life resisting.⁶

The goal of a system is to subsume our behaviours into its own desires, turning its participants into functionaries fulfilling its will. Prini’s exemplary antipathy towards the art system is precisely what allowed him to function outside of its desires and within his own. What art forfeits when it is consolidated into the logic of the luxury and entertainment industries is the space to imagine futures outside of the inevitable, to shape desires away from the self-obliterating endgame of our current cultural trajectory towards a potential future in which our desires are our own, and to operate in our own interest. To fight to retain cultural space for the unexpected is a small first step in the direction of hope.

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2. Prini's full statement reads:

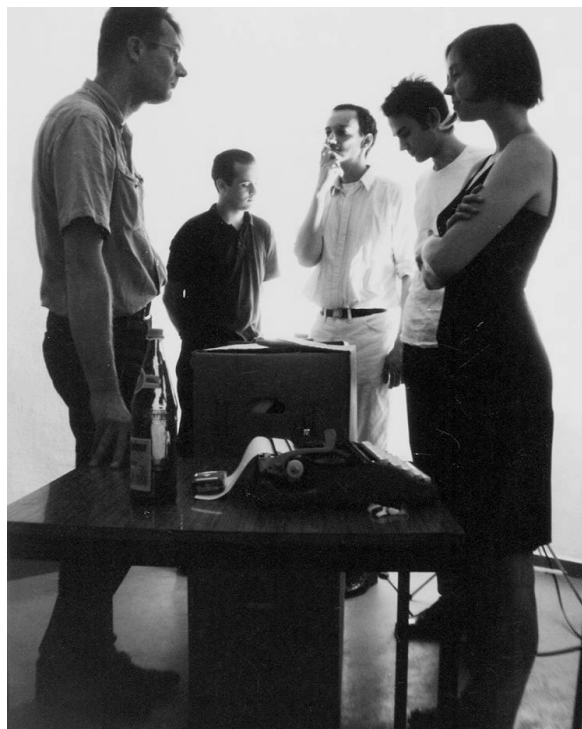
"I have no program, I grope my way, I see no trace of the birth of Art (nor of Tragedy) because the C.S. is not the fruit of pure human work (because I did not make the chair, the table, the sheet of paper, the pen I use to write). I create nothing, if possible."

3. Julia Scher's work since the late 1980s has been primarily concerned with the politics of surveillance and public space. Her exhibition *The Ecology of Visibility* took place at DREI in Cologne in June - July 2020.

4. Strau's text, 'The Non-Productive Attitude', considers a prevailing attitude within Cologne's art scene of the 80s and 90s in which he was deeply "active". He suggests that it was "maybe a kind of transformed fetishism attitude to live the social life of an artist without actually producing any art, or at least without presenting any art. ... In other words, this was a process of gaining recognition through a production of negative surplus value. ... On the one hand, the motives of this attitude could have been simple fear of representation, but on the other they could have announced a desire to practice in a radical consequence what many theories suggested by the death of author- or producer-subjectivity. I would characterize the prevailing attitude as a lack of interest in the procedures of production, with more emphasis on positioning oneself as an artist within the social fabric. ... The non-productive attitude should be seen as a refusal of production values, but not as a refusal of expression as such." (see: Josef Strau, 'The Non-productive Attitude', *Make your Own Life. Artists In and Out of Cologne*, University of Pennsylvania, 2006) Strau, who has referred to Prini as the "father of the non-productive attitude", first contacted Prini's work in the 1993 Arte Povera exhibition at the Kunstverein München. Upon returning to Cologne, Strau restaged the photograph from the newspaper clipping from Prini's 1971 work *Monaco* (4a), with (left to right) artists Stephan Dilleuth, Nils Norman, himself, Merlin Carpenter, and critic and *Texte zur Kunst* founder Isabelle Graw as models (4b).



4a



4b

5. Arte Povera's foundational exhibitions, which took place in Genoa and Bologna in 1967 and 1968, overlapped with exhibitions – such as *Konzeption – Conception* (Städtisches Museum, Leverkusen), *Op Losse Schroeven* (Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam), and *Live in your Head: When Attitudes Become Form* (Kunsthalle Bern) – that linked some of those Italian artists, Prini included, together with an international network of artists that became loosely associated with conceptual art. While, like Prini, few of these artists claimed direct association with the revolutionary movements that were contemporaneously occupying universities, factories, and cities, it is difficult to not see the influence of their critiques and theories on this generation of artists. Arte Povera's and conceptual art's implicit critique of consumerism and labour exploitation can be at least partly understood as an analogous expression of discontent with the societal results of consumer capitalism's explosion in post-war Europe and the West's fight against Communism as exemplified by the Vietnam and Cold Wars.



6. As a result of his death, Prini's resistance to his work being utilised by others loosens as it becomes more easily mobilisable within the "rediscovery machine", a contradiction that this exhibition and indeed this text find themselves directly implicated within, especially as it plays out in London's luxury district.
7. This text was printed on the occasion of the exhibition *NOT MADE NOT CHOSEN NOT PRESENTED* at ML Fine Art, London, 6 October, 2020 – 29 January, 2021. It was printed using the redundant space on printing plates for contracts for Lexical Items from Studio for Propositional Cinema's Focal Vocabulary Index produced for the Lexical Structure 'NOT MADE NOT CHOSEN NOT PRESENTED', 2020.

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