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**Stephen Prina. *ENGLISH FOR FOREIGNERS***

**15 May – 16 October 2017**

**Opening: 14 May 2017, 5.00 pm-10.00 pm**

Curated by **Andrea Viliani (Re\_PUBBLICA MADRE gallery)**

***ENGLISH FOR FOREIGNERS* is the first solo exhibition in an Italian public institution by the Italian-American artist Stephen Prina** (Galesburg, Illinois, on November 3, 1954), one of the most seminal and influential contemporary author. In his research – which involves visual elements, sound pieces and performative acts – Prina explores the legacy of the conceptual artistic practices of the sixties and seventies, analyzing their historical matrices as well as their possible transformations. The exhibition, which comprises an entirely new body of work realized for this occasion, was conceived by the artist as the ideal follow-up to the two exhibitions (*galesburg, illinois+*) devoted to his hometown and presented in 2015 and 2016 at the **Kunst Halle Sankt Gallen (Switzerland)** and the **Museum Kurhaus Kleve (Germany)**.

In his exhibition at the MADRE the artist goes indeed back in time to relive the journey that led his father to travel, in the first half of the twenty century, from Fascist Italy to the United States. The artist writes: “Peter (Pietro) Prina, my father, played clarinet for the local band in the Comune di Canischio, in the Piedmont region of Northwestern Italy. One day the Black Shirts arrived and demanded that the band perform the anthem of the Italian National Fascist Party. This event convinced him it was time to emigrate from Italy — immigrate to America — at the age of 17 in 1923”. ***Second Book in English for Foreigners in Evening Schools*** by Frederick Houghton (American Book Company, 1917), is the title of the book used by the artist’s father to learn English in his new country: handed down to Prina, among many other objects of his father, it became the **starting point for this exhibition**, in which individual dates and events are connected, from 1917 to 2017, telling a **personal story** which, however, reflects the **stories of many other families, fathers and sons**.

“My father wrote notations on the endpapers of the book and on the pages of the book, lists of words and phrases, highlighted passages, or simply circled page numbers”. Prina scanned each double page of the book containing at least one of these notes, making eighteen digital prints of equal format that record at least one of these notations. In this way, these prints retrace the learning process of his father in his new language (English) after his arrival in his new

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country (the United States). The text of the book also contains forty-five images and a frontispiece, which, even without captions, provide a model guide for turning the immigrant into a “perfect citizen”. For example, it displays his ideal domestic life, while he is dealing with plumbing problems, or coping with an attack of diphtheria or while learning about the history of the United States. This sequence of illustrations, transposed by the artist into a portfolio of the same number of etchings, represents the various phases of the **gradual acquisition of a new public identity by Peter/Pietro Prina**, as well as the **radical change in the history of his family**. But it also provides a **possible critical engagement with the permeability of the seemingly dichotomous models of “ideal citizenship” which have marked, in the opposition between totalitarianism and democracy, the political, social and cultural history of the twentieth century itself**. The artist transforms in this way the exhibition into a **journey through time which, on the one hand, is structured like an analysis of twentieth century history and, on the other hand, like a story of a family and of the relationship between a father and son**.

“In 1968, when I was 13 years old, I tried to make a smaller scale copy of *St. Joseph, The Carpenter* by **Georges de La Tour**”. Based on a reproduction of the painting in the volume *100 Masterpieces* (1964) – the same used for his first attempt – Prina has made another copy of the painting especially for this exhibition. It is the same size as the original (137 x 102 cm) but done in the form of a diptych (137 x 204 cm). The diptych is inspired by Andy Warhol’s early portraits (such as the ones of the actress Elizabeth Taylor exhibited by Lucio Amelio in Naples in 1971) and is presented as a pair of works, a replica of the painting and a monochrome panel of the same size, painted in burnt umber, from which the composition of *St Joseph* emerges like a mirror image. This copy of the work by La Tour appears to be identical to the original but, on closer inspection, it is possible to detect that it is done using painting techniques that differ from the original baroque ones. Prina has also scanned and made a digital print on vinyl of two sections of the copy of the work done by him in 1967: these two sections, which portray a wood chisel and a spiral of wood shavings, represent the artist’s favorite details from the original painting. It is a complex process of recreation that explores the affinities between different artistic practices, even though extremely distant in terms of time, as well as the affectionate proximity between a father and his son.

The exhibition also includes a musical component, presented by the speaker display developed for the series *The Second Sentence of Everything I Read is You* (2006-in progress). Several compositions are played through a speaker grid. For the cover of *Giovinezza*, anthem of the Italian Fascist party, Prina reinterprets it as an instrumental version with the vocal part played on a clarinet (the same instrument played by his father in the band in Canischio). It merges with a song composed by the artist himself incorporating words and phrases of the notes compiled by his father in the book *Second Book in English for Foreigners in Evening Schools*, and a cover of *Sabato Sera* (“Saturday Night”), a song by Bruno Filippini that the artist’s parents brought him in 1964, as a present from their first trip to Italy together, and the first his father has made since his escape in 1923.

One of the distinctive features of the project is as well the **textile design, with the repetition of the same decorative pattern, devised by the artist as an additional memorial palimpsest of the exhibition**: the front and back cover and the spine of the *Second Book in English for Foreigners in Evening Schools*, a sober brown-on-brown design, is re-contextualised in a scheme that records, in red, the words “Pete’s Meat Can’t Be Beat”, the slogan of Prina’s father’s grocery in Galesburg. The same fabric pattern is used to line all the exhibition materials of the various works on view: the glass display case containing the original book, together with other objects and documents, the

speakers and the cushions placed on the crate in which they were transported, and it appears as image-frame in the scans of the book, the snapshot of Canischio and the portfolio of etchings. The exhibition space and the whole corporate identity rather use the *Pantone Color of the Year 2017 (Greenery)* as a main color and reference to the temporal placing of the exhibition itself.

Eventually, during the preparation of the project, the artist discovered a **snapshot of Canischio taken by his brother Gary in 1973 when he went to visit his father's native town four years after his death**. It is a square photograph, with the letters "MAR 73" (March 1973) printed on the white edge. The photo, which has faded, shows a clear blue sky, snow on a mountain range in the background and a desolate winter landscape in the foreground. The original image has been scanned, printed digitally on vinyl and blown up to a monumental scale, like a similar image of the Harbor Lights Supper Club in which the two *galesburg, illinois+* previous exhibitions culminated.

**Placed at the end of the exhibition in scale with the room, the image of his father's small town – upon what the film Fortini Cani (1976), by Jean – Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet, is projected - becomes the horizon of the exhibition, taking on an atmospheric quality, not only in terms of spatial depth but also in terms of a memorial one.**

Inspired to the book *I cani del Sinai*, by the laic Jewish and communist intellectual Franco Fortini, the film show views of other towns and villages (Marzabotto, Bergiola, San Leonardo), by overlapping the Resistance attestation of September '44, that took place there, with contemporary matters as the Shoah, the Israeli-Palestinian issue or the perpetration of different forms of racism.

By setting all these autobiographic details within a more general context, Prina also refers in this project to the Italian writer **Cesare Pavese**. In *La Luna e i Falò* ("The Moon and the Bonfires", 1949-50) and to a film directed by **Danièle Huillet and Jean-Marie Straub** inspired by the Italian writer. In *La Luna e i Falò* ("The Moon and the Bonfires", 1949-50), Pavese tells the story of an emigrant (only the character's nickname, *Anguilla* ("Eel"), is given) who leaves Italy to seek his fortune in America and returns after the Second World War, driven by an inextinguishable sense of belonging: "a town means not being alone, knowing that in the people, the plants, the soil, there is something of yourself, that even when you're not there it stays and waits for you [...] one needs a town, if only for the pleasure of leaving it". This text – in which, like Prina's project, the past and present are inextricably intertwined – along with some passages from Pavese's collection of short stories *Dialoghi con Leucò* ("Dialogues with Leucò", 1945-47), provided to Straub/Huillet the inspiration for the film *Dalla nube alla resistenza* ("From the Cloud to the Resistance", 1978). A panning shot of a monument to the Italian Resistance – shot starting from its base, with its dedicatory inscription, and proceeding along the central obelisk to reach the top – is the inspiration for various artist's drawings.

The themes developed in these narrative works and films – through their **examination of the intricate ties between sedentariness and migration, the affirmation of identity and its uprooting, monumentality and intimacy** – are brought back as vinyl writings on the wall, sprinkling the gallery and outspeaking the emotional and conceptual roots of Prina's project at the MADRE. A full-blooded account with images and sounds, which, from the **story of a father and son**, becomes an exploration of the **statute of the work and the exhibition as a source of multiple references as well as an analysis of the dynamics of memorials and of the relations between personal and collective sphere, between stories and History**.

**Stephen Prina** (born in Galesburg, Illinois, on November 3, 1954; lives and works between Cambridge, Massachusetts, and Los Angeles) is *Professor of Visual and Environmental Studies* at Harvard University. Solo shows have been devoted to him by some of the leading international museums such as the

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Museum Kurhaus Kleve (2016); Kunst Halle Sankt Gallen (2015); LACMA- Los Angeles County Museum of Art (2013); Wiener Secession, Vienna (2001); Kölnischer Kunstverein, Cologne (2011 and 2009); Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis (2010); Centro Andaluz de Arte Contemporaneo, Seville and Bergen Kunsthall (2009); Staatliche Kunsthalle Baden-Baden (2008); Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts-Harvard University, Cambridge and Cubitt, London (2004); The Art Institute, Chicago (2001); Museum für Gegenwart, Berlin, Frankfurter Kunstverein, Frankfurt and Art Pace, San Antonio (2000); MAMCO-Musée d'Art Moderne et Contemporain, Geneva (1998); Museum Boijmans-van Beuningen, Rotterdam (1992); The Power Plant, Toronto (1991); The Renaissance Society, Chicago, Los Angeles Municipal Art Gallery and P.S. 1, New York (1989). Among the biennials and periodic exhibitions whom he participated to: *Time Crevasse. Yokohama Triennale* and *Witney Biennial*, New York (2008); *SITE Santa Fe Biennial* (2001); *Documenta IX*, Kassel (1992); *51st Carnegie International*, Pittsburgh (1991); *APERTO- Venice Biennale* (1990). The artist has returns to exhibit in Naples more than thirty years since the collective exhibition *Rooted Rhetoric. Una Tradizione nell'Arte Americana*, presented at Castel dell'Ovo in 1986.

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