Stephen Prina
The Way He Always Wanted It II
Galerie Gisela Capitain, Cologne and Friedrich Petzel Gallery, New York, 2008, 35mm, approx. 27 min.

In 2002 the Los Angeles–based artist Stephen Prina found himself in his home state of Illinois, working on a commission at the Art Institute of Chicago. While there, he paid a visit to Mies van der Rohe’s Farnsworth House (1945–51), that wonderfully pristine glass jewel box of European modernism in the American heartland, which has now become a de rigueur destination for cultural tourists and workers alike. On the return trip from Plano to the city, Prina discovered that there was another architectural attraction in nearby Aurora that might interest him as well, Bruce Goff’s Ford House (1947–50), a structure that gives a distinctly more eccentric spin to the theme of the freestanding home. As opposed to Mies’s museumified dwelling, the Ford House is still privately owned and inhabited; even so, Prina managed to himself invited inside. The Way He Always Wanted It II (2008), a 35mm film shot in the house’s interior some six years later, is the meticulously-rendered result of this first encounter.

Though Prina had made a number of paintings, records, and installations, prior to this project, he had completed just one other film, Vinyl II (2000), which had come about as the result of an invitation from the Getty Center in Los Angeles. Shot inside a gallery of early Netherlandish painting, it features a chamber ensemble playing a score of Prina’s own devising for which the artist himself sang the lyrics. With its similar incorporation of musical performance and architectural space, The Way is in many ways a twin to Vinyl, almost a kind of remake. And yet despite the many overlappings between these two films, Prina’s desire to work with the Ford House—his identification without invitation—seems to demand a distinct set of questions. Starting with the most insistent one: What is it about the Ford House that excited Prina so?

Before we get to the film, however, a little warning seems in order: Those familiar with the Ford House might not recognize it here at first glance since many of its most characteristic aspects have been occluded. There is no shot of the striking domed exterior, for example, composed of wooden shingles and exposed Quonset hut supports. Nor is there a view of the glass skylight that penetrates its pinnacle, which makes the house look something like a Maharishi temple. The richly paneled wooden ceiling and the hot pink struts that bring it to a close have been skipped over as well. Even the cozy and modish conversation pit is only glimpsed momentarily in one of the film’s occasional pans. Instead of these signature moments of Wright’s disciples. This is our first glimpse of the distinctive brand of genealogy and intertextuality that has long defined Prina’s practice. Suddenly, everything we see seems to be a clue.

Not all signs here are lodged within the field of vision, however. We hear music from the start of the film. At first we do not know where it comes from, though soon the raised top of an orange piano comes into view, followed by a
As is made clear by the incorporation of Goff’s music, Prina’s interest in the Ford House is not derived solely from the formal features of its architectural structure. As an artist-musician, he identifies with Goff as a musician-architect. (Maybe, then, this film is the way Prina always wanted it too.) Goff’s relationship with San Jule, which was homosocial if not homosexual, would seem to appeal to Prina’s queer subjectivity as well. If Prina’s singing of the letters is an attempt to embody the Goff–San Jule relationship in his own body, what appears to interest him even more is the body of architecture—the ways in which architecture does and does not speak, the way histories can be encoded within it, the way these histories are lost, and the ways they might be recovered as well. Prina seems to have turned to the Ford House on a hunch that architecture harbors specific subjectivities despite its relentless materiality. The film believes this, and yet it relieves itself of a “if these walls could talk” mentality by making clear that if subjectivities reside within walls only a deeply subjective response can tease them out. (The particularity of the walls, moreover, seems to matter. One suspects that Prina’s technique would not work in any dwelling; the idiosyncrasies of the Ford House give themselves over to such an investigation.) The Way He Always Wanted It II is no traditional exultation of an architectural masterpiece then, nor is it a biographical film attempting to reconstruct an historical personality. It is rather a study of details, a collection of fragments, a tracing of traces. It is an attempt to retrieve something of the spirit its subject, which is both the architect and the house alike.

In his ongoing project Architecture as Autobiography, the German filmmaker Heinz Emigholz has attempted to read architectural production as personal history in a way that seems pertinent to our discussion here. His Goff in the Desert (2003, reviewed by Nicolas Olsberg in the June 2008 issue of this journal) is a nearly two-hour documentation of every one of the sixty-two structures that Goff ever had a hand in designing, number nineteen of which is the Ford House. In Emigholz’s film we are delivered all the traditional views described above, albeit from a rather quotidian perspective—the shots are all static, somewhat snapshot-like, the angles typically a bit off-kilter, the sound of a breeze pervasive. Perhaps more important than Emigholz’s casual treatment, however, is the fact that the Ford House is pictured as one of many structures: It is the assembling of an entire oeuvre that allows Emigholz to make a claim regarding biography. In many ways his project is the filmic heir to André Malraux’s photographic Museum without Walls: through establishing a catalogue raisonée of Goff’s work, Emigholz believes that the defining

Figure 1, 2 Stills from The Way He Always Wanted It II (2008), courtesy of Galerie Gisela Capitain, Cologne
contours of the architect’s project will come to light, that a common language will be detected. Goff’s work, however, resists such conclusions in its very heterogeneity, a fact that Prina clearly comprehends: Rather than trying to understand his subject by offering the “complete Goff,” he seeks to rekindle a subjectivity through a scrupulous and meticulous attention to detail, by lingering over the house’s bits and pieces affectively. Just as Goff attended to the particular subjectivity of each of his clients in designing projects for them—a practice that had the effect of liberating him from a signature style—so does Prina attend to Goff’s. It is this affective and deeply personal dimension of Prina’s film that is its most notable dimension and which distinguishes it from so many other contemporary artistic representations of modern architecture, from Dan Graham’s to Thomas Ruff’s.

Though the entirety of Prina’s film takes place within the Ford House, other works by Goff appear in it as well. There is a passage when the camera passes over two of Goff’s models, including his unbuilt design for the Joe Price Studio in Bartlesville, Oklahoma (1954). Suddenly the viewer is made aware of scale, and of the deeply hermetic situation in which the film is taking place. There is a sense that we are inhabiting a world within a world here. It is not so much that the models appear to be real spaces but rather that the house itself is a type of model, a reserve or reserve, perhaps a model world for us to take refuge in. The story about Prina finding the Ford House after the Farnsworth House makes perfect sense in this regard. After encountering the long glass walls of Mies’s transparent rectangle in the woods, exposed to vision on all sides, Prina comes across a round hut stuck in the ground, bordered by dark coal walls. (Although the house has a large glass wall, it is never seen here.) There is a deep sense of interiority, of protectiveness, and also perhaps of an opacity before the world captured in the Ford House. But it is only a temporary reprieve from the world outside. In the film’s penultimate sequence, we are given a long shot of the house’s door, a threshold space, a wooden plane hovering between two thin panes of glass. In the film’s last shot, the camera is suddenly transferred to someone’s shoulders and moved outside, wobbling now, into the snow-covered ground of the Illinois winter. The camera stands there for what feels like a long moment, staring out at a trio of leafless trees. We hear the last notes of music. A couple of cars whiz by on the road. It is an eerie scene, but also sentimental. We have to leave the house at some point, it seems. But once we do, exposed and unmoored from cultural reference, it is not necessarily clear where we should go.

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Note
1. I refer the reader to Tom Holert’s incisive essay “Flaming Feature,” Artforum 38, no. 9 (May 2000), pp. 148–53, for a reading of the earlier film.

Murray Grigor, director
Vignette films for Between Earth and Heaven: The Architecture of John Lautner

Murray Grigor, director
Infinite Space: The Architecture of John Lautner

“What goes on in the windshield is cinema in the strict sense.”—Paul Virilio (1988) 1

Murray Grigor, director of over a dozen architectural documentaries, premiered his new film on the architecture of John Lautner (1911–1994) at the Palm Springs International Film Festival in January 2009. Its cinematography of Lautner’s spaces opens up key questions concerning the expected relationships between architecture and cinema.2 Of course, buildings and cities are frequently depicted on screen. And elaborate environments are often built for films; sets designed for the films of Fritz Lang, Alfred Hitchcock, and Jacques Tati are some “architectural” favorites. However, it seems less common for buildings themselves to operate overtly as vision apparatuses. This is precisely the impulse of Lautner’s architecture; his buildings are more about framing than posing, more like cameras than photographs. But they are also eminently photogenic, having appeared as primary backdrops in numerous blockbuster Hollywood movies.

Grigor’s film is not the first on Lautner’s architecture; Bette Jane Cohen directed a feature-length documentary with Lautner’s cooperation in 1991.3 Film also played a prominent role in the recent John Lautner retrospective at the Hammer Museum, but photographs were practically absent from the exhibition. This is partly because curator Frank Escher blames the spectacular quality of published photography for damaging Lautner’s reputation. The “glossiness” of these images, he argues, focused attention on the superficial and sensationalist aspects of Lautner’s projects and drew it away from his guiding spatial ideas. The only major photographic component of the exhibition was located in a darkened room at the gallery entrance, where fourteen of his own travel slides were projected in a continuous, luminous loop. These images were intended to offer glimpses of what inspired him: cumulus clouds, desert terrain, ocean surf, and so forth. Indeed, Lautner obviously loved these natural environments, but their implied role in his design process is problematic. One might assume that an admitted “organicist,” who apprenticed with Frank Lloyd Wright at Taliesin for six years (1933–39), might attempt to isolate certain geological and meteorological patterns for experiments in bio-mimicry. Lautner did sometimes describe his projects using natural metaphors—comparing the Elrod house (1968) in Palm Springs to a desert flower, the Stevens house (1968) in Malibu to ocean waves, and the Sheats/Goldstein house (1963/89) in Los Angeles to a primeval forest. But this rhetoric clouded—and continues to cloud—one of Lautner’s...