Seth Price

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ARTFORUM


THE SCREEN AGE: VIDEO'S PAST AND FUTURE

WHAT WAS VIDEO ART? On the occasion of "Signals: How Video Transformed the World," a major survey at New York's Museum of Modern Art (on view through July 8), *Artforum* considers a medium whose novelty—its "promise of the new," as **Alex Kitnick** writes—once electrified artists and theorists. Today, video has colonized every facet of life and demands new approaches. In the following pages, a group of distinguished contributors chronicle the ways artists have mobilized the screen, whether by wielding it as a weapon in an asymmetrical war with mass media, jamming its conventions to antagonize the banalities of content, or cultivating its capacities for liveness, immediacy, and feedback.

For the issue's keynote essay, Kitnick charts a genealogy of video art's elusive past and tenuous future, tracing artists' engagements with the ever-shifting target of the now. Three contributors examine video through the lens of recent exhibitions: **Tina Rivers Ryan** offers her take on "Signals"; **Erika Balsom** weighs in on "People Make Television" at London's Raven Row; and **Anna Lovatt** considers "I'll Be Your Mirror: Art and the Digital Screen" at the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth. Finally, four artists—**Seth Price**, **Martine Syms**, **Tiffany Sia**, and **Cory Arcangel**—share video works that have shaped their practices.

MAY 2023 **129**

New Red Order, *Culture Capture: Crimes against Reality*, 2020, two-channel HD video, color, sound, 9 minutes.
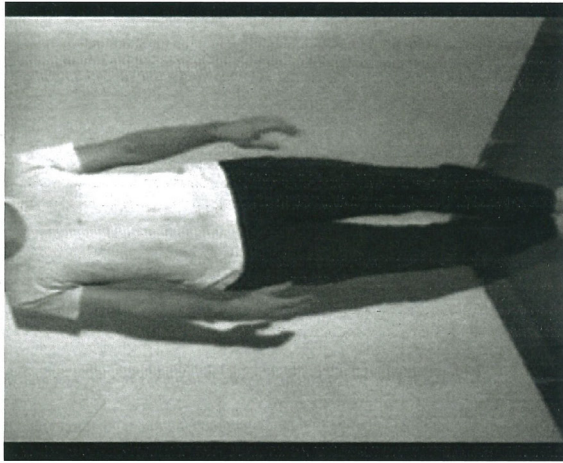
Bruce Nauman, *Bouncing in the Corner, No. 1*, 1968, video, black-and-white, sound, 60 minutes.

SETH PRICE

WHEN I WAS IN MY LATE TWENTIES, I worked at Electronic Arts Intermix in New York duplicating tapes and DVDs of video art. I had avoided art school, so those weekdays spent in a dim room illuminated by a spectrum of artistic positions were my education. One day, Bruce Nauman was up on the monitors doing his thing. The performance tapes Nauman made in the 1960s are rightly celebrated as classics of video art, but I had no patience for him. Duping certain tapes reminded me of when great novels were assigned in school: Regardless of the material's quality, or because of it, I brought to the task a certain loathing and resistance. I had pursued this job mainly to have after-hours access to editing equipment for making my own videos. I pointedly did not call myself an artist and felt only disdain for the art world and its products. I now see, without fully understanding, that I must have adopted these extreme postures precisely because art was so immensely important to me.

I can't recall what slight and senseless movement Nauman was engaged in, but it was extremely repetitive and it lasted an hour. There I was, sullenly doing what was required, and meanwhile this supposedly canonical performance was marking my time on the clock with quiet, absurdist force. I said something to a passing coworker about how I'd been watching this thing for forty minutes now and I couldn't wait to see how it ended. He said, "I know, isn't it *amazing*?" Being mistaken for sincere is like when your foot takes a phantom step at the top of the stairs, and I had to reevaluate. Someone thinks this is *amazing*? So amazing that he literally can't hear my scorn? Clearly, the work is grating and stupid. On the other hand, is it possible it's both grating and stupid *and* amazing? How does an artwork draw you in at the same time that it forces you out? For me, this was the start of a whole new chapter. □

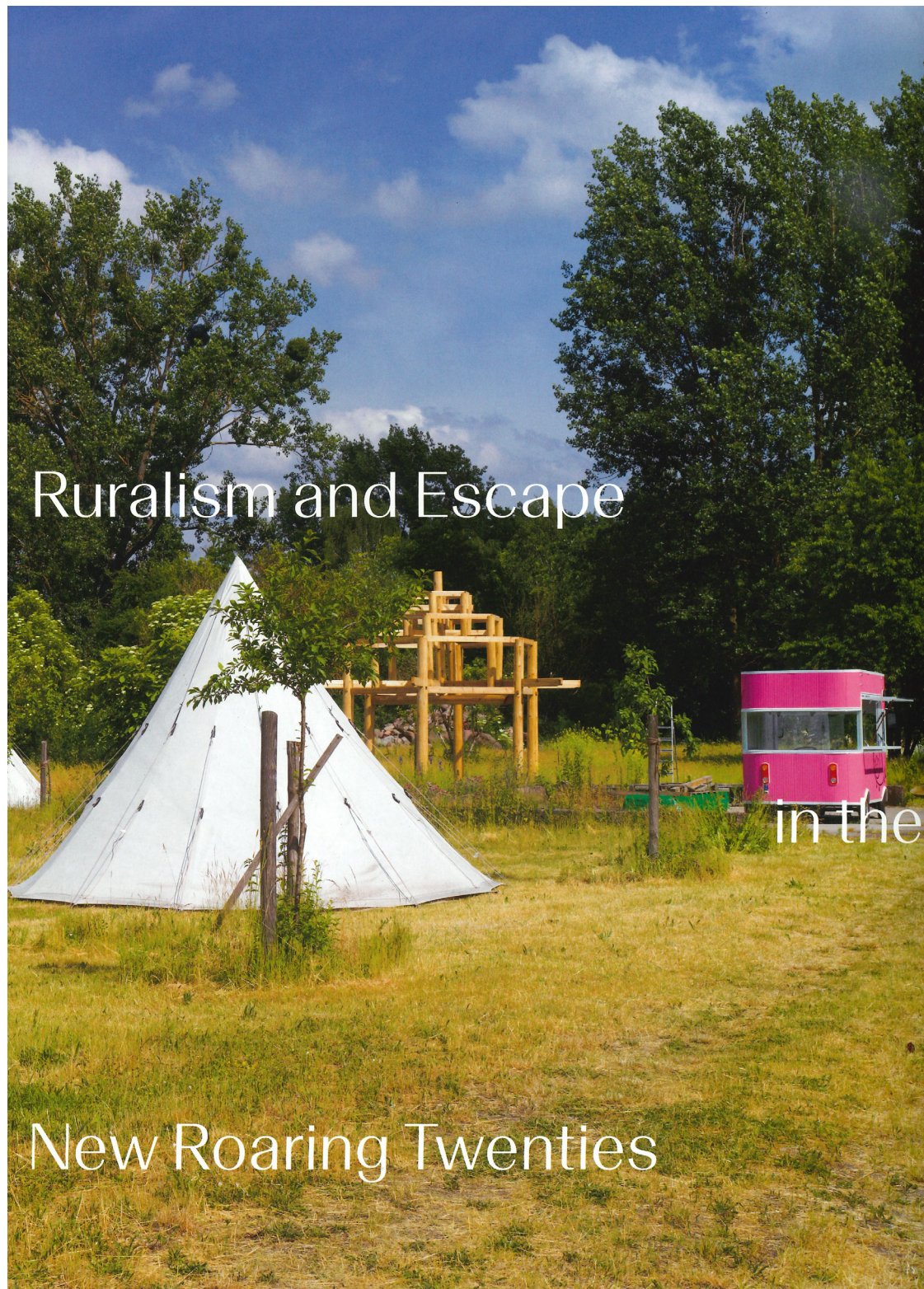SETH PRICE IS AN ARTIST BASED IN NEW YORK. (SEE CONTRIBUTORS.)

MOUSSE

Anywhere,

Out of the World:

BY Pablo Larios

Danh Vo, *Güldenhof*, 2021. Courtesy: the artist. Photo: Nick Ash   178

Ruralism and Escape

in the

New Roaring Twenties

Mousse Magazine 77

Artists are leaving cities. Whether they are decamping for alternative communities, homesteading farms, or temporary cabin retreats, nature is being reoccupied. Something more than a lifestyle choice and less than a movement, this rural turn has implications for how and where culture is made and shown. In the first of a three-part essay, PABLO LARIOS speaks to artists about pastoralism, self-sustenance, and escape in this strange new decade.

PABLO LARIOS is an author living in Berlin.

Seth Price doing duties at the 2021 Souvla, Price's Rural Community, Connecticut, 2021. Courtesy: Seth Price   182

Pablo Larios
Anywhere, Out of the World: Ruralism and Escape in the New Roaring Twenties
Mousse Magazine, N°77, November, 2021, p.178-191.

Pablo Larios
Anywhere, Out of the World: Ruralism and Escape in the New Roaring Twenties
Mousse Magazine, N°77, November, 2021, p.178-191.
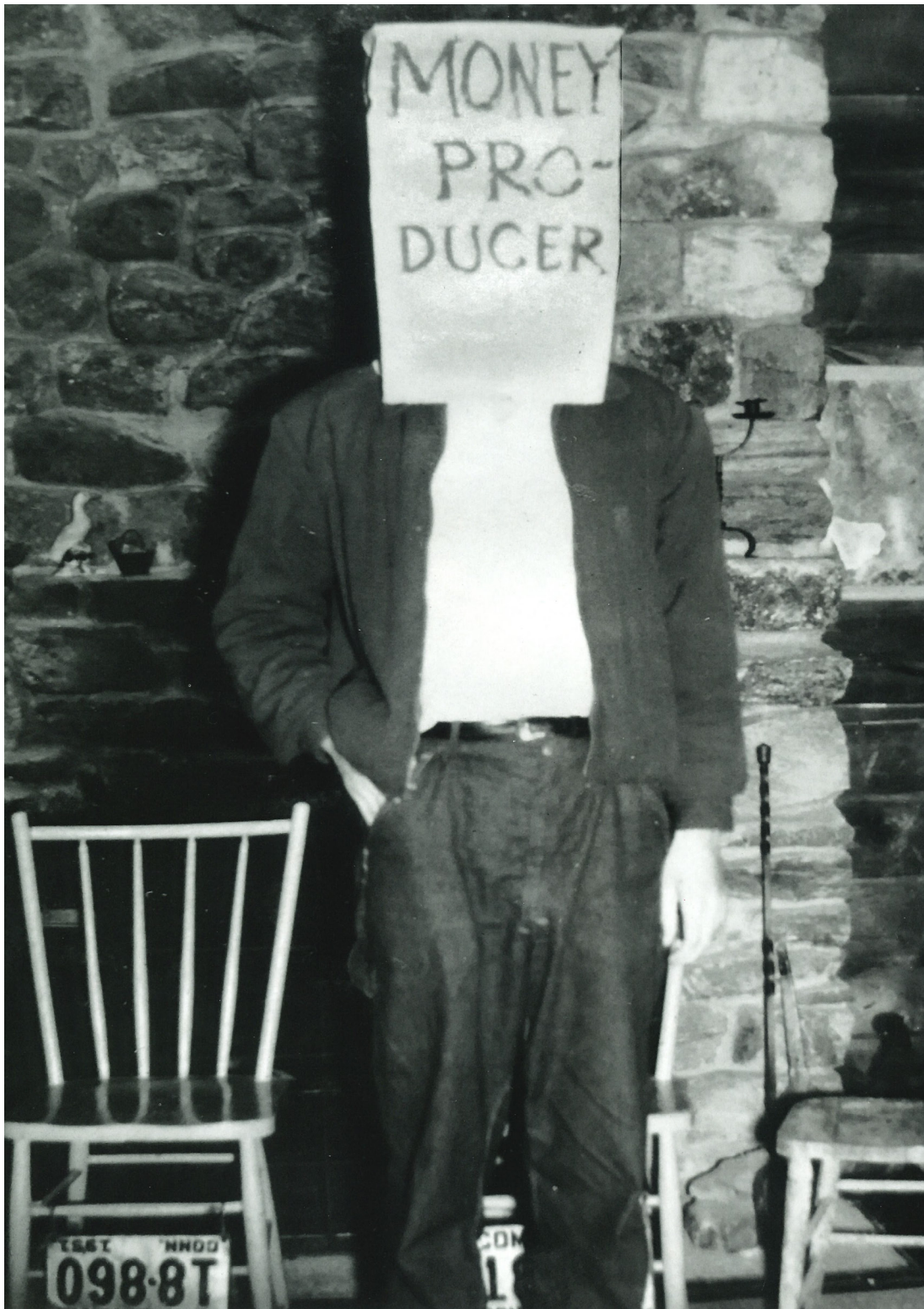
"Technological Man" Community Performance at the Commons House, Price's Rural Community, Connecticut, 1958. Courtesy: Seth Price   184

Pablo Larios
Anywhere, Out of the World: Ruralism and Escape in the New Roaring Twenties
Mousse Magazine, N°77, November, 2021, p.178-191.

A woman, her hair down, stands in a field of mustard-gold wheat. It could be rural Kansas or Wyoming, Sardinia or Poland. The photo's background reveals her to be in a city. Behind her are green, oxidizing, art deco rooftops, a landfill, and ugly brick office buildings. She is in Battery Park, at the very southern tip of Manhattan.

Agnes Denes's Land art project *Wheatfield – A Confrontation* (1982) is a two-acre wheat field, planted by hand and weeded and fertilized over four months before being harvested in August 1982. When images of the action began re-circulating in late 2019, it was in anticipation of the environmental artist's upcoming retrospective at The Shed, New York. The multipurpose arts center in Hudson Yards had just launched—only to shut, a few months later.

We couldn't know what else the year would bring as the pandemic catalyzed the first-ever coordinated global collapse of travel, services, gathering, events, and labor. As cities emptied themselves of all but anxiety and death, the culture-event-tourism complex receded into the background. Triumphalist, monolithic ambitions of urban-capital tourist driving such as The Shed began to seem unimportant, if not ludicrous.

Over the next months, as the horror unfolded, those who could, escaped. It was the most privileged who first left the cities, many of them stepping in the shit of shameful self-performance. Political advisor Dominic Cummings memorably flaunted stay-in-place restrictions and drove across the United Kingdom, reportedly in order to visit his optometrist. Novelists Marie Darrieussecq and Leila Slimani were maligned on Twitter as neo-Marie Antoinettes for leaving Paris for their second homes in the country while the rest of France was locked indoors.[1] Meanwhile, the mega-rich, still barred from entry to Positano or Antigua, took to their superyachts, coursing in circles. The most conspicuous left Earth entirely. All across the United States, UFO sightings increased, prompting the US government to issue, in 2021, the Pentagon's first-ever report on unidentified flying objects.[2]

In 2021, fantasies of escape are elsewhere. Pastoral art forms were always a response to city life; the classical bucolic genres of landscape painting, literature, and song were reinvented in Late Modern Europe, notably by the Romantics, as a direct response to industrialization. Pastoral art presumes an "outside," an exteriority into which to escape urban blight, structures of class or governmental control, or alienated industrial labor. But in the post-anthropocentric age, we can no longer see nature as untouched. Today's pastoral imaginary encompasses the urban-rural confrontation of Denes's wheat-field action; fantasies of self-sustenance or disconnection; and even supernatural confrontation (from astrology to aliens). But most tangibly, artists are leaving cities, the traditional sites of artistic visibility and networks.

It is tempting to speak of a technological disconnection, but in the Zoom age, that's not what's happening. Artists are not avoiding connectivity so much as finding more specific, targeted, and limited arenas for it. Many are saying no to the pressures of globally connected, always-on life, so rifted by the toxic habitus of social media and its untransparent algorithmic sifting of data, images, and information. Ten years ago, MIT's Sherry Turkle warned in her book *Alone Together* (2011) of the socially corrosive effects of always-on connectivity.[3] Cue the autocrats, misinformation wizards, fomenters of social distrust, Reddit incels, anti-vaxxers, conspiracy theorists, and insurrectionists

at our doorsteps. It's like we opened Pandora's box to find the demons inside not only ugly and broken but dangerous, and we are unable to shut the door again.

Over the past decade, having witnessed the utopian thrust of social media after the Arab Spring and Occupy Wall Street, and sensing the increasing importance of image-sharing networks, I began to think that artists would increasingly work *against* these platforms, setting up temporary communities of specific, limited visibility. Artists, naturally concerned with representation, would find ways to use, or hack, preformatted instant image circulation. Yet with the introduction of algorithmic valuation systems for content such that control no longer rests with the user, social media ceased to be artistically generative. Simply put, algorithmic channels are too unpredictable to serve as artistic form. Representations are inevitable but constricting, yet the pressure for self-representation is high in the identity age. Now, artists, facing what I termed "network fatigue," would surely begin to find ways of circumventing the rigged imperative to "share."[4] They would do this through resisting image circulation entirely, or by making work that was scarcely documentable, or by operating in collectives wherein the representation of labor and authorship was diffuse, or by espousing anonymity. Each of these activities shifts what Rey Chow terms a "relation of exteriority," a refiguring of the relation between inside and outside.[5]

My prediction was largely borne out, albeit in piecemeal ways. The content system doesn't loosen its grip; artists are now joined by trolls as operators in stealth. Some, like the artists in Martin Herbert's study of artistic refusal, *Tell Them I Said No* (2016), say no to participation altogether.[6] It's no surprise that in a world where self-externalization is currency, the artist seeks a loophole out of this constricting matrix of visibility, loath to become yet another influencer.

What does this have to do with ruralism? The next logical step of this technological pastoralism is to move away from cities entirely. For years, despite the mounting costs of gentrification, there was nonetheless usually some cheaper, easier city to move to—if not Berlin then Mexico City or wherever else the hive migrated. But the pandemic gave concrete form to the refrain of escape that I increasingly hear murmured in the arts. Escape from the city, always expanding, cancerously; from extractive or precarious work; from social congestion and eventification; from the bullshit factor so conspicuous in mega-galleries and art fairs, what artist John Kelsey terms "discussion island."[7] It is as though, fatigued from imperatives of participation, keeping up, data hoarding, self-promotion, or hashing out industry gossip, the contemporary artist-subject simply wants to leave.

"I took a year's hiatus from the art world, trying to figure some things out. I shut down the studio, stopped making saleable works, said no to shows. I didn't stop working, though," wrote Seth Price in an essay published in his recent book *Dedicated to Life* (2020). "I can only explain it in terms of discomfort with the way artists are conditioned to seek visibility not only for their work but for their persona. The contemporary mandate is to know everyone and be known to all."[8] In September 2020, as Germany exited the first wave of the pandemic, Price opened a solo exhibition at Galerie Isabella Bortolozzi in Berlin. The show included new lamps, paintings, sculptures and drawings, and a new book of poems and writings from the past six years.

Dump duty using the community truck, Price's Rural Community, Connecticut, 1971. Courtesy: Seth Price   186

Pablo Larios
Anywhere, Out of the World: Ruralism and Escape in the New Roaring Twenties
Mousse Magazine, N°77, November, 2021, p.178-191.

Kids' work crew adding a room (Seth Price at top), Price's Rural Community, Connecticut, 1984. Courtesy: Seth Price

Pablo Larios
Anywhere, Out of the World: Ruralism and Escape in the New Roaring Twenties
Mousse Magazine, N°77, November, 2021, p.178-191.

The paintings, depicting bones and tools, were like X-rays of an emptied-out or torn-apart social body. Poems on the wall spoke of caustic gardens and a disintegrated commons—what Price described to me as "vines taking over the postapocalyptic city." A sculpture, *Vitis / Ecstatic Writing* (2020), occupied one of the gallery's middle rooms. Almost but not quite functional, the work is a kind of hairy natural object made by two grapevines conjoined and spinning into each other, like a contorted or melted ladder. It was a rustic, somehow ugly natural artifact of a contorted, confined year.

When Price and I subsequently spoke over Zoom, I peered into a Quaker-inspired cabin built a hundred years ago in rural Connecticut, where Price was living out the pandemic with family. In that planned community, "land ownership and decision making are communal, with everyone volunteering for different organizational roles," inspired by past members such as feminist architect Ruth Maxon Adams and anthropologist Dorothy Lee. There, he made the sculpture from grapevines, harvested just as his family once harvested grape leaves for food from the same fields.

Price, through his career, has put on many hats, inhabiting languages of specific traditions, from fashion to abstract painting to furniture design. He told me that during the pandemic, he "tried to figure out how to make art without the services [available] in New York." He arrived at a kind of "rustic, primitivist furniture" inspired by the New York Adirondack tradition and the Southwestern tradition of using bone. The grapevine sculpture, he said, was directly inspired by the twisting, vine-structured *Natursessel*, or "nature chair," owned by Harald Szeemann and made by Karl Gräser, an early participant at Monte Verità, a socialist, vegetarian living experiment founded in Ascona, Ticino, about a century ago. Then, as now, people sought to reorganize along new moral alignments. For many, this meant building smaller, self-organized communities such as Monte Verità, or the one that Price returned to in Connecticut in 2020.

Price continues to live part-time in New York, but his recent work, so informed by rural communitarianism, exemplifies the sense of an exit that hovers over art today. This is an exit as much from algorithmic connectivity as it is from contemporary art as an industry that seems to have conquered the planet. I ask him if his turns—toward fashion, toward design—have been exits from the self-representation required of artists. He corrects me, saying he is rather seeking a way to evade "inherited structures of history and naming." It seems that this artist would like to slow down signification itself, the imperative to make something and represent it by flinging it into the whirlpool of attention and approval. Approval, he adds, is just the other side of shaming, and both are tied to the "Western, Calvinist-descended shameful interior" that social media so cannily extracts. How to make, while avoiding the mandate to remain visible in a system that turns art into reproducible *content*: as another hashtag, another storm on Twitter, another JPEG for the cloud? For Price, exiting is not a question of whether but of how: "For me, the question is about *how* you exit, how you diffuse this exit into your everyday practice."

Price's work, so interested in communicative structures, is marked by a skepticism at the structures of affirmation and attention on which it, of course, also relies. (As he notes: "It turns out, if you don't sign artworks and don't do PR, no one gives a shit.") Equally, he is aware of the position of privilege that such self-removal is predicated upon. But, always dialectical, Price does not seek an arcadian, free realm of pure signification away from the realm of marketized visibility. He knows that an atavistic return to the "handmade" is precisely the same inversion that capital adopts as a cozy, faux-natural subsumption of authenticity—the hallmark of heritage cocktail-bar interiors and natural wines amid hyper-capital. This is why "nature" is staged by his work so self-conspicuously, as if always already in scare quotes.

The poems in the book, heavy with imagery of nature and gardens, are responses, he said, to the luxury boom of New York, and "the visibility economy and the idea of authenticity" in the Bloomberg years. "New York City felt like decadent umami garbage," he writes. If the city is a cipher for "luxury run amok," as he described it to me, and for the cleverly disguised hyper-accumulation of capital, then Price's works play with the handmade as well as the artifice or patina of "nature," not to escape but to usurp. Writing of "Gaia reasserting herself / in the post-apocalyptic city," as one of the poems goes, Price's is a highly ironized urban pastoral that sees neither refuge nor safety in place. The only way out is to hack, to skillfully manipulate various conduits of communication: "do not transcend, / Cannibalize."

In Deborah Levy's recent auto-fiction *Real Estate* (2021), the narrator, who has long lived in London, bounces from city residency to holiday island, seeking a home in the country in which to live. A friend asks her: "I just don't get why you want a house in the wilderness. You are a cosmopolitan sort of person, you like dressing up and going to parties . . . so why have you gone rural?"[9] We could ask the same of Danh Vo, Ryan Gander, Grace Ndiritu, or Kai Althoff, some of whom are embarking on ambitious real estate projects, refurbishing barns or schools outside of cities to make quasi-autonomous, self-organized communities.

These extra-urban projects, such as Ndiritu's *The Ark* (2017), vary in intention and duration. As Ndiritu writes on her website: "In 2012, Ndiritu took the radical decision to only spend time in the city when necessary, and to otherwise live in rural, alternative and often spiritual communities."[10] Her artistic research has taken her to Thailand, Tibet, New Zealand, Argentina, Nevada, and Scotland, where she has engaged in community life and organized shamanistic and group meditation, as in the project *Healing the Museum* (2012–ongoing). Her attempts to self-organize as a form of collective healing are grounded in ruralistic and extra-urban ways of living. Even if the specific visibility afforded by museums and galleries still occurs largely in cities, what is becoming clear is that, as the architectural critic Niklas Maak proposes: "Could it be that the contemporary big city center appeals mostly to wealthy retirees and tourists? Could it be that we're the last generation to see the big city as a promise? . . . Could the countryside become a space of freedom, experimentation, and self-responsibility?"[11]

For these artists—whether Ndiritu, or Danh Vo in a farmhouse in Brandenburg, or Andrea Zittel in her long-term living-working project in Joshua Tree, or Ryan Gander in his Kunsthalle-like space in Suffolk—a new, rural, hybrid peri-urbanism is taking root. "I was wasting five hours a day living in London," Gander said to me in a recent conversation. Driving these artists is a combination of factors: pragmatic ones such as the sheer expense and increasing inconvenience of living in cities, but also political and

Ryan Gander at Solid House, Suffolk, 2021. © Ryan Gander. Courtesy: the artist. Photo: Ryan Gander's Studio

189

Pablo Larios
Anywhere, Out of the World: Ruralism and Escape in the New Roaring Twenties
Mousse Magazine, N°77, November, 2021, p.178-191.

Simon Newby, *Bird* and *Bear*, 2021, installation view of *Flat Work*, curated by Ryan Gander at Solid Haus, part of Solid House, Suffolk, 2021.
Courtesy: Solid Haus, Suffolk. Photo: Ryan Gander's Studio

190

Pablo Larios
Anywhere, Out of the World: Ruralism and Escape in the New Roaring Twenties
Mousse Magazine, N°77, November, 2021, p.178-191.

ecological awareness and the perceived "moral authority of nature," to borrow historians of science Lorraine Daston and Fernando Vidal's term—the desire to have a more transparent relation to food, labor, and social relations.[12] The artists I spoke to seek to realign socially in groups of non-extractive communities, or carve out alone time, or disengage with structures of visibility and self-performance that increasingly muddy artistic production and our senses of self. If it keeps up, this new rural impulse could reformat the sites of artistic production much like the white cube or gentrification once shaped the discourse on the sites of creative work.

"The inevitability of total urbanization must be questioned, and the countryside must be rediscovered as a place to resettle," Rem Koolhaas writes in his manifesto-cum-exhibition *Countryside, A Report* (2020–21).[13] The biggest territorial re-formations on Earth, this show argued, are occurring in the planet's rural zones. All but ignored in the past two decades, such zones are where the world's key issues are unfolding, from food insecurity, political polarization, and economic recession to agri-tech developments like pixel farming, sustainability work, and experiments with basic income. Contemporary artists are not only following but possibly now leading the way out into the field.

1   Alison Flood, "French Writers' Coronavirus Getaways Prompt Backlash," *The Guardian*, April 6, 2020, https://www.theguardian.com/books/2020/apr/06/french-writers-corona-getaways-prompt-backlash-leila-slimani-marie-darrieussecq.
2   See https://www.dni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/assessments/Prelimary-Assessment-UAP-20210625.pdf.
3   Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other* (New York: Basic Books, 2011).
4   See Pablo Larios, "Network Fatigue," *frieze*, no. 14 (September–November 2014): https://www.frieze.com/article/network-fatigue.
5   Rey Chow, "Introduction: Rearticulating 'Outside,'" in *A Face Drawn in Sand: Humanistic Inquiry and Foucault in the Present* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021), 3–36.
6   Martin Herbert, *Tell Them I Said No* (London: Sternberg, 2016).
7   John Kelsey, "Escape from Discussion Island," in *Rich Texts: Selected Writing for Art* (Berlin: Sternberg, 2010), 87.
8   Seth Price, *Dedicated to Life* (Berlin: Isabella Bortolozzi, 2020), 15, originally published in *Texte zur Kunst*, no. 106 (June 2017).
9   Deborah Levy, *Real Estate* (London: Penguin, 2021), 62.
10 http://www.gracendiritu.com/.
11 Niklas Maak, "Eurodrive: Population Utopia," in *Countryside, A Report*, ed. AMO / Rem Koolhaas (New York: Taschen, 2021), 40.
12 See Lorraine Daston and Fernando Vidal, eds., *The Moral Authority of Nature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).
13 Rem Koolhaas, *Countryside, A Report*, 3.

MoMA

What NFTs Mean for Contemporary Art

Artist Seth Price talks with curator Michelle Kuo about Beeple, collage, finance risk culture, and where immaterial art is taking us in a material world.

Michelle Kuo: The NFT craze—which erupted with the $69.3 million sale of the artist Beeple's _Everydays: The First 5,000 Days_ last month at Christie's—clearly touches a huge nerve within the art world, even though there's still so much confusion about what NFTs even are. The initialism stands for "non-fungible token": a unit that is totally unique as a digital asset, registered or certified as such on a digital ledger, or blockchain. An NFT can't be exchanged with a like entity (the way one dollar bill is equivalent to another, or one bitcoin has the same value as another). So it can be used to digitally codify ownership of things like art. The idea is actually straightforward, but it's provoked so much angst.

In fact, much of the response seems to be about taking down Beeple and his art, which to my mind misses the point. It's like making a full-throated critique of Justin Bieber: I don't think our existing models of analysis really apply. At the same time, there's a lot of hand-wringing about NFTs signifying the total conversion of art into a speculative financial instrument. Or you hear the rhetoric of liberation: This will free art and every human along with it. So, as usual, there are the Cassandras and the utopians. Part of what I'm hoping to chat about today with you is a different approach.

Seth Price, Michelle Kuo
What NFTs Mean for Contemporary Art
MoMA, April 29, 2021.
https://urlr.me/fx6Vhz

Seth Price: First of all, as soon as they print a coffee table book of the *Everydays*, I'm buying it. I think that work is going to be a pretty great record of this moment. I mean, it sucks, but it would make a good book.

MK: Yeah!

SP: I'm also interested because Beeple [Mike Winkelmann] uses a software package I use, Cinema 4D. I've been using it for five years to make large, printed works, and he's also using it for still imagery, and it's not really suited for that. It's a 3D movie-making program, essentially; it's used a lot for gaming. So it's a use of this extremely complex tool in a very dumb way, and it can be interesting when you misuse a tool.

MK: It's a time-honored avant-garde strategy. And you're both using or misusing the same tools, to very different ends.

Now I'm doing the thing I swore I wouldn't, which is some sort of close reading of Beeple's artwork. But there's something about the insanely high resolution or high definition of these images that is part of their popularity, or the value being conferred onto them. And yet I was struck by a quote by the purchaser of Beeple's *Everydays*, Vignesh Sundaresan, who goes by MetaKovan, saying that the reason *Everydays* is worth a billion dollars is not because it represents a high degree of skill or technique. It is about the sheer amount of *time* the artist spent on this work. In this sense, MetaKovan is exactly (if unknowingly) describing deskilling: deliberately removing technical mastery from the making of art, to question mastery and structures of power in the first place. So strange alignments start happening when you look at the reception of *Everydays*. When you look at the work itself, it's a simple misuse of a high-end, moving-image program that weirdly chimes with Conceptual art strategies of deskilling. But it leads to images that somehow look as if they actually did take a lot of time and skill and refinement to make (even if they didn't!).

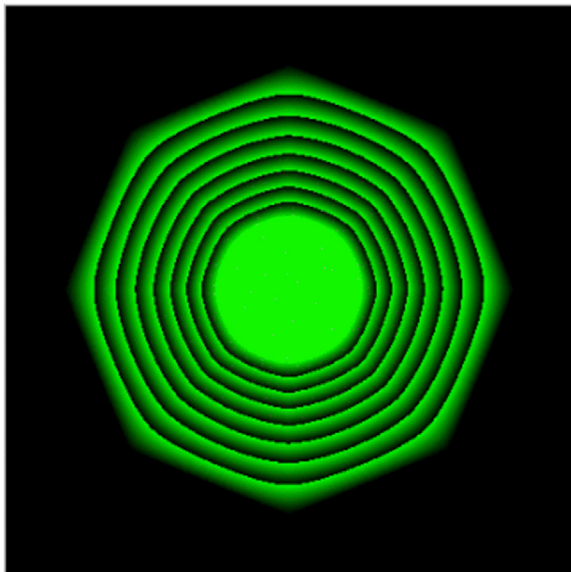## The NFT is the triumph of a kind of hedge-fund thinking.
Seth Price

SP: It's interesting because Winkelmann buys CGI elements made by other people, and puts them into compositions. It's <u>collage</u>, if you want to put it in the frame of art history. So he definitely put in a lot of work, but the piece actually represents hundreds of different people's labor. Which MetaKovan probably appreciates, because it makes it into, like, capital accumulation.

But the most important thing to know about NFTs is that NFTs themselves are just contracts. NFT artworks, unlike most traditional artworks, depend on being two things at once: the contract, and the thing the contract refers to. That could be almost anything, but in the case of a lot of NFT art, it's an image. Because images are the way you turn people on to this idea. NFTs have existed for years, but in this boring form. They were engineered to more or less solve the problem of signing PDFs. So you need an image to sell it. It can't be an image from the world of contemporary art, because it would be illegible to most people. That's how somebody like Winkelmann can break through: his work draws on aesthetics we all know already, from Marvel, and memes, and ads. And then you want that image to be as ubiquitous as possible, because that's the social media model: you legitimate something through repetition and representation.

MK: It's this curious conjunction of the contract, the mathematical singularity, and then the JPEG or GIF or whatever. This makes me think of your essay/artwork *Dispersion* (2002), in which you wrote that as a work becomes more dispersed and reproduced, it approaches zero in value. And of course, what we have here is the opposite direction, which is the greater the accessibility, the greater the value.

The first NFT ever created: Kevin McCoy. *Quantum*. 2014

Seth Price, Michelle Kuo
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https://urlr.me/fx6Vhz

SP: Yeah. *Dispersion* is 20 years old, but that was a hinge moment. We were diving into a new period where we had to deal with the breakdown of traditional relationships between the material and the immaterial. That was one of the big questions of the last two decades. It's a big theme in my own work, the tension between material life and dematerialized life. I think in the last 20 years— even going back 40 years—there's been a trend of increasing abstraction. This is a social trend, but it's based in part on growing abstraction in finance, the distancing of technology, and the effects of digital tools. Social media accelerates that, and moves it to the realm of the self, where we're being asked to live in the material and immaterial realms at the same moment. It's basically a widespread, forced adaptation to the kinds of tradeoffs that traditionally matter to investors, because now everyone is supposed to be comfortable with alienating levels of abstraction and distance, massive levels of risk and precarity, and a kind of gamified way of moving through the world. In this climate, it makes perfect sense that every 24-year-old should have a trading app on their phone. It goes toward a Silicon Valley libertarian ideal, which is that everybody becomes an investor. That is the goal.
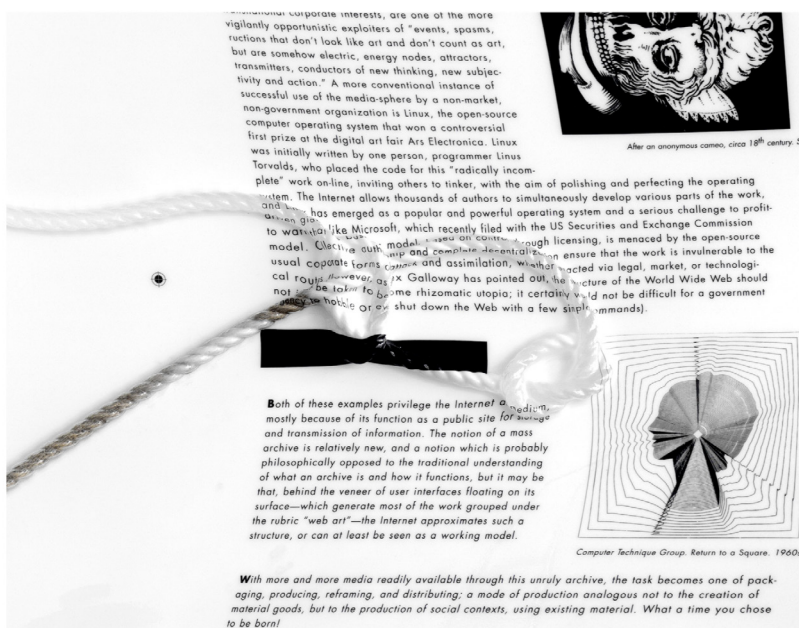
Seth Price. *Essay with Knots* (detail). 2008

MK: Everyone is a speculator. Ownership is being totally redefined.

SP: Yeah. In the case of software and music, there was this huge crisis, and eventually people came up with streaming and subscription models. What's developing now with NFTs is, in a way, the next step.

Seth Price, Michelle Kuo
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https://urlr.me/fx6Vhz

NFTs are definitely being sold as ownership. In the social media, Web 2.0 model, which is the old model, you're not an owner of your own content, the platform is. Streaming, Kindles, Instagram, none of it belongs to you. So we have a generation of people who are coming around to this idea that they've been disenfranchised. The NFT model says, "Here we are, to the rescue. Now you, as a user, can actually own the token, and nobody can take it away from you." And this is where you get this creeping Silicon libertarian thing. That idea is to essentially get rid of regulation, with the exception, possibly, of contract law and property law, because they want to be able to protect the individual's right to accumulate as much shit as possible. And the NFT is a way to sever that: now we don't even need the government for contract law, we can put it in the cloud. Essentially, the NFT is a contract with no oversight. Which makes it risky, right? If someone hacks your wallet, you can't litigate it. You can't appeal to a bank to bail you out. It's irreversible. Again, this is the triumph of this kind of hedge-fund thinking, for lack of a better term, where you're comfortable with extreme risk and extreme abstraction or alienation, if it leads to growth.

MK: The contract is literally encoded into "the thing." And that is new. I mean, that is wild, because that was in fact the liberatory promise of the distribution of social media, of your persona, of your content. It's free for all. It's democratization. But now, suddenly, it's, "Wait, actually, we want to take back ownership of this thing that got distributed."

Seth Price. Garments from *Folklore U.S.*
SS12 collection (designed with Tim Hamilton)

Seth Price, Michelle Kuo
What NFTs Mean for Contemporary Art
MoMA, April 29, 2021.
https://urlr.me/fx6Vhz

In the context of art, it's tempting to say, well, NFTs are just the logical conclusion of Conceptual art.
Michelle Kuo

It represents a sea change in what identity is, right? Going back to this question of the digital signature, a marker of identity used to be based on visual similitude, like a signature that was only yours or a seal or an emblem or stamp. That changed, when the marker of identity became algorithmic or cryptographic instead of visual. Now you use a code or a key to define identity. And NFTs are the apotheosis of that shift. But in the context of art, it's also tempting to say, well, this is just the logical conclusion of Conceptual art—what an artist like Lawrence Weiner or a curator like Seth Siegelaub set out to do with the Artist's Reserved Rights and Transfer Agreement, the legal document that Siegelaub and the lawyer Robert Projansky drew up in the 1970s to protect how artworks circulate. Now, we've finally figured out a way to truly define—and sell—the work of art as a code or a contract.

SP: Right. NFTs would be the first way you could get 10% on every resale, forever, as an artist. It's crazy, because the art world has always been so wildly unregulated, at least for the amounts of money flowing through it. It is not an area with a lot of contracts and oversight. So it's an interesting irony, because the blockchain is a permanent record. I can see old-school speculators and movers and shakers thinking, "I don't know if I want my purchases visible forever," because, you know, it's anonymous, but who knows? Some places, like New York state, are making it almost impossible to be anonymous, unless you use a VPN. It potentially makes it harder to operate in the gray market.

MK: Totally. On the one hand, it seems like these older models of ownership still hold sway in the art world, and yet artists have always been at the forefront of posing experimental new redefinitions of autonomy and ownership. Some of them got put into practice—for example, Tino Sehgal figured out how to edition and sell his performances—but others didn't get traction and there are still archaic forms of trade or exchange, as well as incredibly opaque markets. So that's the other interesting contradiction—or maybe the crux of the issue—which is that crypto promises decentralization and transparency. And at the same time, people are now figuring out how to leverage it back into opacity, to create singularity and scarcity and ownership in a platform that was designed precisely to get rid of all those things. And I don't think we know what will happen next.

The craziest thing is that these contracts are autonomous, in the sense of autonomous vehicles: no humans are needed. The smart contract isn't protected by human lawyers, but by cryptography. The powers that be will find a way to make this antidemocratic, I'm sure, but no one quite knows how, yet. (Will galleries be replaced by programmers, or even just *programs*?)

SP: Do you know Balaji Srinivasan? He's this big investor, big crypto guy. He said that the Internet represented "programmable information," but crypto represents "programmable scarcity."

MK: It's perverse, because they've figured out how to program scarcity and, therefore, scarcity is suddenly invented via a system that is supposed to eliminate scarcity. And then on the flip side, ubiquity is also encoded into the value of an NFT. Everyone can have exactly the same experience of an NFT, but there is only one owner. And that can lead to an arrangement that is very different from, say, a limited edition.

SP: Yeah, but that's been the case with video art for years now: the edition's for sale, but it's online, too. Or fashion: does the collector with the Gucci bag give a shit about the knockoff bags on Canal Street? No.

MK: Before, though, there was usually a difference in material, or resolution: most video art still ended up with higher-res editions and lower-res versions circulating for free. And there is a huge difference in scale. The Nyan Cat meme is everywhere, and only as low-res 8-bit GIFs, unlike the Vimeo version of a video artwork that comparatively few people see. Which is a difference not only in degree but in kind. NFTs make something that's inherently unownable—because it's everywhere and owned by everybody, like a meme—ownable by one person. They make possible the final erasure of any distinction between owning the set of masters, and then the copies. And the final erasure of that distinction between uniqueness and atomization.

SP: For me, I had a realization back in 2000 or so, like, "Oh, right, we can do this. We can have the thing available everywhere, and in this other place." With some of the videos and more conceptual things I was doing, I started thinking about redundancy, and different platforms. Like *Dispersion*: it was a PDF, and then a $10 booklet, and then *Essay with Knots* (2008), the piece that's up at MoMA right now.

MK: Your work has so brilliantly pointed toward all these limit cases, exploring all the variations and manifestations of an idea or a file, but also portending this kind of collapse or disintegration. With NFTs now, I'm also thinking of artists like Eve Sussman, who has minted a previous work of hers as many NFTs, breaking it up into fractional ownership. Or Casey Reas, who's started Feral File, an alternative platform for NFTs, generative art, and other formats.

SP: I think this will be a weird hothouse moment, in retrospect, this entanglement of NFTs and CGI-based JPEGs. It won't take long before people realize, and they already have, that the NFT can refer to an oil-on-canvas painting, or whatever else, and we don't really need to mess around with memes unless we really want to.

MK: Is this something you might explore in your own work?

SP: I don't know. My interest in it is as a kind of symptom of these trends that my work has always looked at: increasing abstraction, the alienated self, all the weird ways that material and immaterial go back and forth. So, to that degree, yeah, I'm really interested. As far as using an NFT contract specifically in my work, I'm not opposed to it. It just hasn't suggested itself.

I think the essential thing with NFTs is, nobody really understands what the hell is going on. There's only, like, 200 people worldwide who know how to develop for Ethereum. But this is exactly what allows this kind of investor mindset to come in, like, "That's fine, we don't need to understand any of this. No one does. All you need to understand is, what's the margin, what's the percent." I'm suspicious of the idea that we need to make everyone an investor, and program scarcity. But, to play devil's advocate, there's a view that says everybody should become an investor, because that's collectivity, and we're all in this together, in this new project. When Mike Winkelmann made all this money, he immediately converted all that Ethereum into US dollars, which is the smart thing any normie would do, right? But a lot of crypto people were like, "Nooooo! Why would you sell out our utopian project? The whole point is to keep value in the crypto space."

So this collective desire to build something new here is compelling. MetaKovan put out a statement where they said, "The point was to show Indians and people of color that they too can be patrons, that crypto is an equalizing power between the West and the rest and that the Global South was rising." This idea of, "Fuck the gatekeepers."

I think the essential thing with NFTs is, nobody really understands what the hell is going on.
Seth Price

MK: That really turns everything on its head, to connect the rise of the NFT—which is usually criticized as a bubble that will only somehow serve the gatekeepers, not to mention a full-blown ecological disaster—to this argument about the Global South and decolonization. And the collectivist urge you're talking about is exactly like the GameStop situation, where all the individual investors were like, "Do not sell. Do not sell…. We are in this together. Do not sell." It was this mantra: "Diamond Hands," two hands with the diamond emoji, to indicate collective strength. 💎🙌 Why is this so disturbing to so many people?

SP: It's interesting that MetaKovan used the word *patron*, because it's such an old-world name for somebody who's basically propping up the useless cultural class by spending money on it. The reason that art is used here is because it, itself, is a good tool to further the larger project, which is developing these new forms of trading, speculation, circulation. Art is just a useful idiot in this scenario.

MK: I think we just don't know what other uses or formats are going to come along. There are still really interesting implications of this "innovation," which is somewhere in between the economic, the legal, and the philosophical realm. And things could come out of it that have nothing to do with any of our received notions.

SP: Yeah. For sure. That's what excites somebody like Peter Thiel, who—on the one hand you can say, here's someone who believes that the world runs on competitiveness and scarcity, and he's willing to bet on it. But I think you can also join him in saying, "We don't know what's going to happen when you get the old gatekeepers out." People are working hard to predict that, because there's a lot of money to be made. But for people like you and me, it's enough that it's unknowable.

MK: I'm thinking about the role that art has often played, which is either as a kind of early warning system, mapping out strategies of behavior, or resistance, or new modes of experience that are then usually co-opted by the culture industry. Or they point to futures or certain paths that don't get realized, but nevertheless remain as part of our collective archive. And so these paths not taken, these little glimmers of possibility that existed for a second, are still somehow there for us as a cultural and historical form.

SP: The artists I admire are often very sensitive instruments that pick up on stuff happening in the now. If you are present, and notice what's happening around you, you look like a prophet. Because most people are not necessarily present with what's happening. I'm not sure, though, that with crypto, art is ahead of anything. Art is maybe a good way to get the word out. Though, to use your analogy, the early warning usually only gets heard years later, when the histories are written, or the retrospective goes up.

GALERIE
CHANTAL CROUSEL

MK: Definitely. We just can't keep up. And the market is always fastest
to respond. But belatedness isn't always all bad, in relation to what art is
or does or can be. Belated understanding, or deferred action, can revive
and warp and transform old, dead forms of art into something different.

SP: You were talking about getting at some idea of what art is, or how it
behaves. Actually, there is one way that contemporary art is kind of the
perfect vehicle for NFTs. A financial instrument is a contract between
people. That's literally all it is, a highly abstract agreement. And that's
what art is, too. There's a weird consonance there. Art has no consistent
agreed-upon value, there's no common definition of what art even is. So
an NFT artwork is a pretty complex social agreement that, first of all,
this is art; second of all, it has value; third, we'll transfer it into this even
more crazy realm. All of this transformation is a kind of suspension of
disbelief, or a kind of magic. It's like, the more we dematerialize
everything, the more potential material we can get. We don't really have
a cosmology that can hold all these weird contradictions we're making.
That's the paradox of the moment we're in.

Seth Price. *UnQuantifyWorld*. 2018. Mixed media

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Pioneer Works

The Object Talk: Seth Price

In the latest installment of The Object Talk, Emmanuel Olunkwa sits down with multidisciplinary artist and writer, Seth Price, to talk about his practice, fashion, art-cum-theory, and his latest book of writing, Dedicated to Life.

Seth Price, Untitled (Ariana's Elbow), 2015-19, Dye-sublimation print on synthetic fabric, aluminum, LED, 53 x 92 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Petzel, New York.

When artists make good work (*magic!*) they're often asked questions about their "process"—you know, reasons why they made the work, what they were thinking about, and what the work means to the *community (market?),* or some larger context beyond the gallery or museum. A month or so ago, I was sitting in my apartment on the sofa trying to give myself some purpose, something to do other than what I was supposed to be doing, when I woke up my computer and ordered *Fuck Seth Price: A Novel by* Seth Price. A friend had mentioned him for years—he'd come up in conversation from time to time—but I never dove in.

Seth is a materially-focused artist. He's what I would call a compressionist; he processes the world by collecting its varying shapes and colors and then produces objects or stages experiences that play with the intended function of the material or technological. For instance, in the fall of 2004 at one of his shows for Reena Spaulings in New York, he showed *Digital Video Effect: "Spills," (2004),* which features a bulbous television, face-up, packaged in its original box. It was plugged in and playing grainy footage captured in the '70s by Joan Jonas. The video features Richard Serra, Joseph Helman, and Robert Smithson sitting in a room in conversation about art. The piece dances the line as a videoed sculpture or installation piece.

While reading *Fuck Seth Price*, one doesn't have to know how the artworld works to "get" how the artworld works—he shows you what to pay attention to as you navigate the pages with an unnamed and placeless protagonist. On this very infrequent occasion we get to ride on the back of someone who knows where they're going, and what to steer clear of, so buckle up. Re: questions artists are asked when they do make good work, I did ask Seth a lot of those questions because I really did want to know what he's been thinking about to really just live in the interiority of the *seth-price-world-space* and all the things that have consumed him over varying stages of his career. We talked about fashion, art, and a bit more about this theory stuff.

Welcome to The Object Talk.

EMMANUEL OLUNKWA

I was talking to Dan [Graham] yesterday and he was saying that in the '60s everyone was so focused on or had the desire to be called a writer. Anyone and everyone could call themselves an artist but so few people had the talent or pedigree to be a writer. What does writing take from you? Is it a diaristic practice?

SETH PRICE

Yes, it's a practice with a diaristic dimension, absolutely.

EO

Do you have a routine and are you regimented?

SP

I did that once, in order to write a novel, which became Fuck Seth Price. I cleared my plate so I could just sit down and be a writer. So yes, then I felt like a writer. Usually, it's just random diary time.
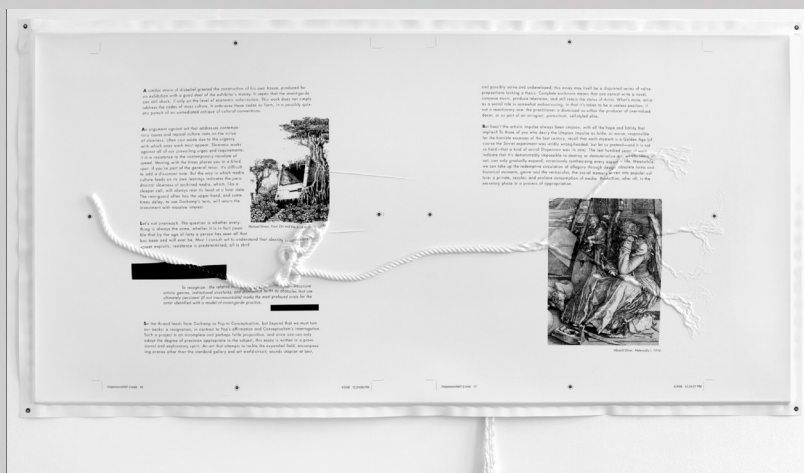
EO

Do you think of yourself as a compressionist?

SP

What's that?

EO

It's like the saying, "all the best artists are the greatest thieves," which is to say that you're an extractionist; someone who is taking bits and different influences and putting them in the bowl and mushing them together and putting it through the meat grinder and producing a "Seth Price" work.

Seth Price, Essay with Knots, pp. 16–17, 2008, Screenprint on polystyrene vacuum-formed over rope, 48 x 96 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Petzel, New York.

SP

I have worked like that at times. It's interesting that you use the term extraction. I've been thinking about extraction, and how it's linked to the digital, and the processes of how digital technology works, what it's supposed to do in this economic regime. It has this brutal, extractive logic to it, and you can feel the violence there, in digital production and communication, or in artworks produced with digital tools. Everything has to be reduced to the same plane, in order to be transacted. It's something people have noticed with my work, when they talk about violence, or coldness, or alienation.

EO

Let's talk about Organic Software, (2015). The website that you made is a perception tool for artists to browse to search collectors and art investors who buy their work, where you can also see their political affiliation.

SP

That piece started in a personal way. I found out that an artwork of mine from a show I'd done had been sold to a client I felt uncomfortable with. I found out only after the sale. I was happy to have sold an artwork, but I was also trying to examine my feeling of discomfort. And I started to think that it was bigger than what I was feeling, because, I mean, where does any of the money come from? Once you really look, it can start to get disturbing. So I thought, well, what if we had this resource?

EO

Have you ever made works for the market? Do you think about the market when you're making work?

SP

No, because when I'm making something, I can't usually conceive of the end result. I'm not that kind of artist. To make something for the market would mean thinking about what the market wants, in relation to what you have to offer. There's nothing wrong with that, because art is also a marketplace: on one level, I sell objects to rich people. It's not the only level, but that's the way it is, and it's good to remember that, as an artist trying to make a living, you're a business. But the market likes predictability. It's hard for me to conceive of something and then execute it. I try, but I always get waylaid. I mean, I would love to paint oil on canvas, but I just can't seem to get there, somehow.

EO

Really. Why not?

SP

I always wind up with this weird, other thing. I just get kind of carried along in this process of forces and materials acting on each other, and chance, and changes in direction. It's not unintentional, it's exactly what I love about art, that it's about change, and transformation, and the unexpected.

EO

What's your relationship to materiality and materials?

SP

All of the works are very material. It's practically the first thing I'm working with, when I'm trying to figure out what I'm doing. The quality of the material, the way that it feels, the desire to want to touch the object, this is all very important. It's something that doesn't come across in a lot of the photographs, because I'm also interested in flatness. But it's of the utmost importance to me that you can stand in front of the work and just feel it.

Installation view, Seth Price: Social Synthetic, Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, 2017. Courtesy of the artist and Petzel, New York.

EO

What do you think the disconnects of your practice are generally?

SP

There was a time in the 2000s when me and my friends were being called appropriation artists. With a few exceptions, I don't think it was accurate. Certainly not for me. I think it came out of the fact that we were using digital tools, which are about taking, and manipulating, and recontextualizing. People weren't used to that, there hadn't been so much digitally-made art. I made 'Painting' Sites; I don't know of any other artists who were making art with internet searches at that time, in 2000. People would be like, "You're a computer artist, you're an internet artist." So are you, you just don't know it. Within a few years, they're like, "I put a filter on my face." "I scanned my signature and squashed it to fit the document." People launder their whole life through their phone. I think the issue is, the logic of the digital wants to pull things out of context and manipulate them, and quantify them. That suggests appropriation, but it's a very different mechanism from the art historical idea of appropriation.

EO

How do you relate to the term appropriation in its current context and cultural reception, having been assigned that label in the early aughts?

SP

I remember talking to some of my friends about it at the time, and our general feeling was like, a shrug. We felt like, from now on everything is appropriation. Ignore it, proceed as planned. I still don't like these terms, because if we were to speak in an art historical way, using the term as it was defined —it's the same with "conceptual," which people also were calling me, for a while. As an industry, we end up with these terms floating around in a very loose way. For a lot of people, "conceptual" just means they kind of suspect there's more to it, but they don't know what it is.

EO

What is your relationship to fashion?

SP

The industry? Excitement and confusion, in equal measure. You look at someone's collection that's good, and you feel excited, and uneasy, and it's all whirling around in your mind, and that blend of discomfort and desire is what keeps you coming back.

EO

Can you speak about the collaboration in the early '10s?

SP

That started Fall/Winter 2011, with a collection I did with Tim Hamilton that debuted during Men's fashion week. We rented a vacant storefront downtown, on Walker or something, and did a presentation. All the buyers put in their orders—

EO

Really.

SP

[laughs] I'm joking, no one wanted to buy it. But I debuted it in another way, the following summer, at Documenta.

Seth Price, Design for Multiethnic Streetwear Envelope, 2015, Screen inks and pigmented acrylic polymer on wood, 47 x 27 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Petzel, New York.

EO

Kara Walker has this studio approach which she calls "retinol detachments," which is about having heavy non-presence, where she enters the studio and then "conceptually" peels her skin and then enters into a space where she isn't raced, isn't gendered, but she is embodied. When you're in the midst of working do you have to enter a dissociative or possessed state to churn out the work?

SP

Yes, yes, absolutely. Often, when I get home, I'm still in this other realm. I'm not easy to be around, or talk to. Not, like, in an evil, nasty person way, more just like, I'm not in the realm where human interactions come easily. I enter a kind of floating mind space, when I'm working. I like to have a lot of different things going at once, to be able to give in to — I wouldn't call it distraction, but drifting, taking sudden forks in the road. I like to drift in a non-goal-oriented way, in order to keep everything popping, and not get bogged down.

EO

I'm still not convinced on the fashion bit. What about the architecture of
the storefront? Why couldn't the project just exist as images or as a
staging of a catalog? Or something drawn out about the narrative or
story of the collaboration?

SP

Why make objects? I mean, that other stuff comes inevitably, anyway,
because art installations don't last. You're left with just the images, the
catalog, the story. That's the unfortunate part of art history, right? Pick
an artist you like and it's rare that you understand what a given gallery
show looked like, and felt like, what was the layout, what was there.

EO

Right.

SP

Because it's not the way we document these interventions and
phenomena. It would take a lot of work to reconstruct what all the
shows look like that Kara Walker or Dan Graham did. I think we all
know the experience of flipping through a catalog, and turning the page,
stumbling across a little black and white photo of a show, and being
like, "Oh my god, what? That's what the show looked like?" With the
fashion, it's always going to exist as a story, a myth, ephemera,
photographs. But there was something important in that moment, at
Documenta, of staging a shop window in this department store right
next to the main exhibition hall, and doing the fashion show in the
parking garage. Those were all amazing experiences, to enter into that
discourse, and that language. That was a huge part of the project for me,
entering into the vocabulary of making garments. At the time, it felt like
there was a lot of interest, obviously going back decades, a mutual
interest between art and fashion, but there tended to be two main
approaches from the art side. There were industry collaborations, where
artists were kind of giving some images to put on clothing or handbags,
and then there was an interest in fashion in a more generalized,
abstracted way that has to do with youth culture, and newness, and taste
— I'm thinking about Bernadette Corporation, for example, though they
made clothes, too. But I wanted to specifically get into the architecture
of the fabric, to design a line, to make sculptural pieces in that industry,
in those shops in the garment district, with pattern makers and
seamstresses and all that.

EO

Okay so, Bernadette Corporation and Art Club 2000, go!

SP

Right, yeah, it's all there. But we entered into a different era after the
'90s, in respect to luxury and branding. Fashion in the'90s was very
interesting to me, and a lot of people I knew, you'd go to the bookstore
and read the new Face, and i-D, but at the same time, nobody I knew
was actually wearing labels, that would have been really uncool in 1995,
with the people I knew. The people that were wearing, like, Prada were
—

EO

That fashion gworls?

SP

[Laughs] They'd be "euros," like, wealthy students from other countries,
where there wasn't a punk heritage that said you're supposed to look
scruffy. People here who wore labels were tribal, there'd be skaters
wearing Fuct, and ravers wearing Danücht or something, and club kids
from New York in X-Girl. This was before streetwear was something
everyone fucked with. People I knew were wearing unbranded stuff,
thrift store clothes. It was that Naomi Klein, "No Label" thing.

EO

That's my vibe. [Laughs] I don't fuck with labels.

SP

We all experienced this massive conglomeration of the industry, LVMH,
and all the consolidation. And then music, rap, all sectors of the culture
became interested in luxury, right? People were now interested in
Vuitton.

EO

Right, this obsession with the necessity of labels.

SP

Yeah, it's aspirational luxury, I think, if you have to use a phrase. I think that's a different approach to fashion than this slightly earlier generation of artists, not that someone like Bernadette Corporation wasn't going to fuck with luxury, because they definitely were, but luxury itself changed, the circuits around it changed. I think we consume culture in particular circuits, and that makes up kind of an affective relationship to the culture. In the '90s, it was magazine time.

EO

I saw in Dispersion that you write about magazines, and then when I was talking to Dan, we spent a lot of time parsing through his relationship to magazines as well. What's your relationship to magazines?

SP

I used to go to the bookstore and get a giant stack of magazines, and sit there for about two hours until I read them. These days, I just don't.
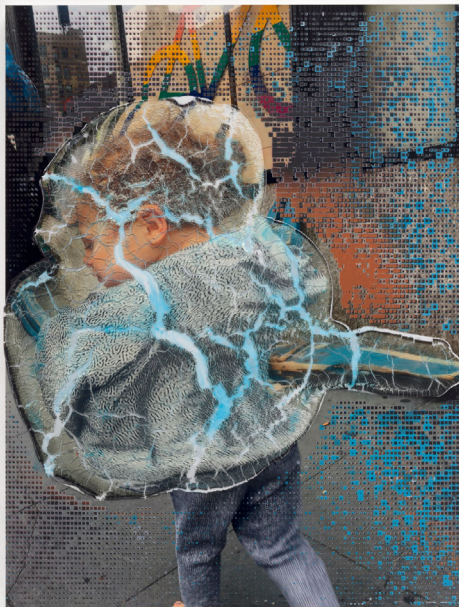
Seth Price, Social Space: Rainbow Signal, Cracked Police Barrier, Boy with Virus Pattern, 2019
Acrylic polymer, acrylic paint, inkjet on plastic, UV-cured inkjet, wood, metal, 55.25 x 42 inches.

EO

Right. What's your relationship to collecting? What do you collect?

SP

Stuff kind of accumulates. I'm constantly going through books and music, but I'm not a collector. I was just having this conversation with somebody, because I have a large library of music, but I've never collected records. I might buy something on Bandcamp, and I like to own files, because I'm not into the Cloud. But I'm not fetish-y about objects in a way that I would buy vinyl. I've never bought any art. I don't really collect anything, actually. You can make power objects without being a collector, you know. When I was little, I had traffic cones that I would steal off the street, and I would take hubcaps from the gutter, from accidents, and I collected rocks. I once nailed a Twinkie to my wall because I wanted to see what would happen, and left it there for a few years. Nothing changed about it, except there was a grease stain on the wall.

EO

Was this pre- or post-Maurizio Cattelan's Art Basel Banana?

SP

Oh, this was in 1983. [Laughs]

EO

You went to Brown [University], right? How did that inform your process and how you engaged with the world afterwards? Were you making work while you were there? What were you thinking about?

SP

I was making film and video work, and making drawings and things in my room. I didn't take any studio art classes, but I was doing a lot of thinking, and reading, and talking to people. I didn't have a plan of what I would do after school. I don't know if you can do that, today.

EO

What was your "focus"?

SP

It was in the Modern Culture and Media department. Which is still around, but much expanded now, more legitimate. This was the place in the university where you would find Postcolonial Studies, Post-Structuralism, Semiotics, Queer Studies, Cultural Studies, and Television Studies, which was a thing back then. All of this was very suspicious to a lot of people in the university community, because things like [Michel] Foucault were not yet being taught in the History department. In the mid-90s, it had this kind of circle-the-wagons mentality. My concentration was in what they called "Art Semiotics."

EO

What does that mean?

SP

It basically meant that you would read everything, and take part in seminar classes, but you also had to fulfill a production component. "Production." [Laughs]

EO

Right. [Laughs]

SP

Which in that department at that time could only mean film and video. Within that tradition, coming out of literary theory and feminism, film was seen as the exemplary art form, because it was discursive. So I did film and video. I studied video with [visual artist] Tony Cokes, and film with [avant-garde filmmaker and artist] Leslie Thornton.

EO

Oh, interesting…

SP

Yeah, those were my gurus, at an early age.

Seth Price / Tim Hamilton: SS12 Collection, Folklore U.S.; presentation during opening of
dOCUMENTA (13), in Friedrichsplatz Parking Garage, Kassel, June 17, 2012. Courtesy of the artist

EO

How did engaging with them as these embodied figures and people with
practices shape your worldview?

SP

Huge. They were doing unabashedly experimental work. And they were
just being themselves, showing this insane work in class, like, "This is
me—anyone have a problem with that?" And sometimes people would,
in fact, have a problem. They'd walk out of the class, because they came
to study independent film or something, based on a popular idea of what
independent, narrative film was in the early '90s, and this was explicitly
against that. For me, it was liberating. I remember, though, there was
still a split between video made in the art world and in the experimental
film world. The tradition at Brown had nothing to do with Independent
Film, but it also was not the art world. Leslie showed a video that a
British artist had made from the YBA scene, and people in class kind of
booed it. They hated it. It was someone in a public park, I think, making
strange noises. It made an impression on me, because it was such a
different approach.

EO

So, what happened when you graduated from Brown?

SP

I knew that I didn't want to go to art school, but I did apply to the
Whitney [Museum] Independent Study program.

EO

Why'd you apply to ISP?

SP

I wanted to be in New York, partly because my girlfriend at the time
already lived here. She's also an artist now, Chitra Ganesh. So I was
going to New York to live with her, and I applied to the ISP because it
would give me something to do. I did not get in. A friend of mine who
worked there told me the director thought I was being "crazy" in the
interview. But I needed a job, so that first year I worked in an office
stuffing envelopes, you know, linoleum floors and fluorescent lights. I
poured drinks on a private party boat that would go around the island. I
did film PA work. I worked at Maysles Films.

EO

Does drawing feel like something that you have to labor over?

SP

It's not labored, no.

EO

Is it something that you sit down to do or is something that you're
always doing?

SP

I'd like to be more disciplined about something like that, and say,
"Today I'm going to sit down and draw." I would like to be that person,
but that's never been how I've operated.

EO

Let's talk about your most recent project, Dedicated to Life. It feels like
a manifesto for living and an emotional and humorous guide of how to
live and experience culture. Who are your references?

Installation view, Seth Price: Social Synthetic, Brandhorst Museum, Munich, 2018. Courtesy of the artist and Petzel, New York.

SP

References? I don't know, some weird, self-published poetry book that you'd find in a bin somewhere. Again, that's an example of how I couldn't imagine that the book would be the product of this prolonged process of working. It was the result of many forks in the road.

EO

What were these forks?

SP

It started as the attempt to write a young adult book, which didn't work. Instead, I ended up writing Fuck Seth Price. But I had, like, 250 pages' worth of failed YA novel. I started pulling excerpts out and breaking them down into things that are structured like poems, in other words, they have line breaks. Sometimes when you just shift the context, or the frame, it can make things interesting to work on again. I never set out to make a book of poems and drawings. It kind of suggested itself as a frame for these other materials.

EO

How do you structure the writing? Do you write rhythmically?

SP

I think if I set out to write a poem, I would have been thinking about rhythm and structure and style much more. In the end, the process was pretty quick, it was more about treating the text as a found object. It had been some years since I had written any of that stuff, or even read it.

EO

How do you normally approach writing? Are you keeping tabs and writing down bits as you experience them? What's your relationship to memory?

SP

It's that kind of vibe where I have an idea, and write it down in Notes on my phone, and send it to myself, then put it in a Word document and slowly start to find connections, and work out some connective tissue.

EO

How did you approach making Dispersion an object, beyond being an object?

SP

You mean as a book? Yeah, so, it was first a PDF, and then a booklet—

EO

And then as a work?

SP

Right. It was a set of plastic panels, screen-printed, and vacuum-formed over knotted ropes. I wanted to have it exist as a constellation of things, not just the one thing. A painting can be self-contained. I wanted this to keep pointing to other things.

EO

Was that a retroactive decision or was it a driving desire?

SP

It was my interest for some years. It came out of thinking about someone like Dan Graham, who could write an essay called Rock My Religion, and also make a video called Rock My Religion. Or how [Robert] Smithson could write an essay, make a sculpture, and make a film, and call each one "Spiral Jetty." And the physical, sculptural work in the desert is the one that catches the imagination, and becomes the iconic image, it's the thing people mean when they say Spiral Jetty. But at the same time, it's the iteration that is least accessible to people. Whereas the essay and the film are probably most accessible, they're probably online right now. At the time, I was thinking of Dispersion as an artwork that would kind of enact its own ideas, by circulating in these different ways. There were some new economic possibilities and stratifications coming out of digital culture, you could work with redundancy. You could have a free version, in this relatively new internet economy, which would circulate endlessly, and then it would also be a book that was ten dollars at an art bookstore, and then you could also engage with the art economy, which is the gallery or the museum, with its own structure of prices and audiences. And the piece would spread out.

EO

In Dispersion, you wrote about Duchamp's concept that the artists of the future will be underground.

SP

Yeah, I think it's an important thing to keep in mind. This might seem romantic, but to be seen and named is great, it feels good, but it also makes it easier to quantify you in terms of value, and I don't just mean financial value, it can be critical value, social value, value for someone else. And those can be gilded chains. The more you are known, the more you are predictable and testable and constant, and can improve in value —

EO

How do you feel about being made into value?

SP

It's weird, for sure. I mean, if you're lucky enough to be made into value, you're in a good place. But it can be strange, it can be alienating. Although that's how it is for all of us, now: always being made into value. All these platforms are tools for changing material conditions. Just by using the tool, you're changing material conditions. Even if it's not happening for you, it's happening for someone. That's alienation, right there. I will tell you that we need to bring magic to materialism. That's my project.

Interview

Artist Seth Price and His Friend Joan Jonas Discuss "New Media" in All Its Mutated Forms

Sweater and Belt by Saint Laurent By Anthony Vaccarello. Pants by Dior Men.

Who is Seth Price? Or to bastardize the title of the artist's own 2015 novella: *Who the Fuck Is Seth Price?* It's a fair question. If you've ever wandered into one of Price's gallery shows and felt simultaneously fascinated and unnerved by the 45-year-old New Yorker's barrage of vacuum-formed polystyrene casts of, say, a crumpled vintage bomber jacket, a human fist, or coils of rope, you are not losing your mind. Many of Price's wall works consist either of a clever use of empty spaces and voids or a highly sheened, seemingly viscous surface suggestive of some embryonic goo. Price's output has never been built on stability. It might be easier to think of his pieces as hostile mutants capable of limitless transmutations and metamorphoses.

Early in his career, after a post-college job working at the influential New York media-art lab Electronic Arts Intermix, Price explored a range of unexpected, hard-to-categorize strategies and materials: electronic music mixes; computer screensavers; philosophical essays disseminated via the internet that would be expanded upon or abridged over time.

All of these experiments only loosely fell under the rubric of visual art. Price's great themes are circulation and distribution, and how they morph and change, grow or shrink or turn sideways, as they move through a system. To engage directly with Price's work, to nail down "what exactly he means," is to risk building a house on shifting sand. Case in point: He published a getting-off-the-grid survival guide called *How to Disappear in America* (2008), and yet his continual re-visitation and resurrection of works, concepts, and ideas refute the notion that permanent disappearance is ever truly possible. One of his more volatile art productions (often considered one of the most significant art works of recent decades) is his film "Redistribution" (2007–ongoing), a serious yet farcical, mordant yet uplifting, surrealist yet documentary-style down-the-rabbit-hole exploration of artistic adventurism that started out as a critique of "artist talks" at museums. The film has been recut and reassembled with new material eight times (last fall, a new version premiered at the Metrograph theater in New York). It is like a cinematic petri dish capable of ceaseless cell divisions and viral growth.

This winter, the Aspen Art Museum will mount an exhibition of Price's work that, in part, celebrates the trace of his own hand in his otherwise hyper-industrial surfaces. Entitled *No Technique*, the show includes his earlier knot-and-rope polystyrene reliefs interspersed with more recent work such as his "Social Space" series, where toxic chemicals are poured on CGI-images of scientific forms. Late last fall, while preparing for the new show, Price stopped by the SoHo studio of the artist Joan Jonas. They've known each other since the EAI days. In the intervening years, "new media" has only grown and mutated in unexpected ways.

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JOAN JONAS: What was the name of your show last fall in New York?

SETH PRICE: *Hell Has Everything*.

JONAS: I love that title. Hell is more interesting than heaven.

PRICE: Hell comes with the idea of somebody ushering you in and saying, "You'll love this. This place has everything." It's a kind of seduction, whereas heaven is airy and nothing but love and good feelings.

JONAS: Dante's *Inferno* is much more exciting than his *Paradiso*. Now, I want to talk about how we first met, which must have been more than 20 years ago when you were working at EAI.

PRICE: I started there in the summer of '98 and stayed about seven years, working on videos—yours included.

JONAS: And you used some of my video footage of Richard Serra and Robert Smithson talking at Joe Hellmann's home in your work ["Digital Video Effect: 'Spills," 2004]. That was an early piece of yours, wasn't it?

Joan Jonas
Artist Seth Price and His Friend Joan Jonas Discuss "New Media" in All Its Mutated Form
Interview, December 26, 2019.
https://urlr.me/AMhPcX

PRICE: Yeah, that was my first show in 2004.

JONAS: It had a lot of your signature elements, especially in terms of packaging. You put a monitor in a cardboard box and then you manipulated the video with what appeared to be a virtual pour of ink over its surface.

PRICE: Yeah. I poured a kind of viscous paint onto a glass that I balanced horizontally and filmed from underneath. I was thinking about that Jackson Pollock film by Hans Namuth [1951] and this whole idea of horizontality. Anyway, I recorded these pours and superimposed them on some of your video footage.

JONAS: You and I had such a good dialogue at EAI. I remember back then you were trying to figure out a strategy for making art, working with ideas of distribution and reproduction. And that's still the crux of your work.

PRICE: It certainly is. I started off by thinking about how things circulate and that led to a bunch of works using music and sound and packaging and writing—really anything that you could circulate and would capture that process of experimentation. It's funny—I've never had a line to describe my work. Some artists do and it's great to have that sense of clarity. But what I do is more a process of testing, thinking, researching, experimenting, and then the work comes out of that. And if you're into it, maybe you can go on that ride and it takes you somewhere. It's kind of similar to what you do in that your work encapsulates so many different elements and themes. It's never one thing. Sometimes even good friends ask me, "What is your work about?" And I really don't know how to answer that question. Not being able to answer used to worry me. Now I think it saves me.

Joan Jonas
Artist Seth Price and His Friend Joan Jonas Discuss "New Media" in All Its Mutated Form
Interview, December 26, 2019.
https://urlr.me/AMhPcX

JONAS: You don't like to ascribe meaning to your work, but that doesn't mean your work isn't about something. It reminds me of a piece I saw in the early 1970s by Bruce Nauman at his first show at the Whitney. It was a vitrine with a hole in the middle. I liked it so much because it didn't look like our idea of what sculpture was at the time. And many artists work that way—they push against the limits. Musicians have done this, too, exploring, for example, dissonance. Your work is a bit like that in my mind. And you might say that you are not trying to "make images," but you are still making images. I'm thinking of your work with rope. How were those created?

NOODLES, 2011. Photo by Simon Vogel. Courtesy of the artist and Gisela Capitain, Koln.

PRICE: The piece of rope is dropped by the machine operator onto a sheet of plastic. For insurance reasons I couldn't drop it myself. I could barely be on the factory floor. It's quite literally in the heat of the moment, because the plastic gets very hot and you have to drop it at just the right moment before it's vacuum-formed.

JONAS: It makes me think of Duchamp's "3 Standard Stoppages," where he adhered dropped threads to canvas. Was that the inspiration?

PRICE: I had to consider that work, of course. There are many artists who have used strings and rope. That history sits on your shoulder when you're working.

JONAS: Were you ever attracted to surrealism?

PRICE: There's something about psychedelia and surrealism and mutation that is very attractive in your late teens and early twenties. I turned my back on it for a while before coming back to it.

JONAS: I relate to surrealism more imagistically than you do, but also in its juxtaposing of disparate elements. Maybe that's where I see it in your work. You don't worry about things making perfect sense. You let them make their own sense.

PRICE: When I say I don't want the work to mean something, that doesn't mean I don't want it to mean something to someone. I want the viewer to make their own sense of things.

JONAS: You recently made light boxes with super-close-up images of skin. Skin is another one of your metaphors. It's skin, but it becomes an abstract work. And it's hard to talk about. You can talk about color and depth and feeling—although people tend to try to talk about imagery, no matter what.

PRICE: You can't avoid images. That's what makes them so compelling. But they're so often collapsed into the discourse around painting, and painting is so often reduced to an image—that's the overriding experience of the spectator. That's why I was wary of images for so long. They beckon you in one direction. I love painting. I love that they tend to come from a single point in time. But early on I was trying to do something that could be dispersed and distributed, and that risks losing the power that an artwork from a particular moment and place contains. But there's something exciting to me about risking this loss of power and instead scattering things.

JONAS: It's a different power—the power of, say, the internet rather than the power of a painting. Now, I know you are often grouped in with other artists who are your friends—people such as Wade Guyton, who also makes painting-like works through the use of machines. I wondered if you ever think about the artist Rebecca [R. H.] Quaytman, because I see similarities in the way she works with photographs in her paintings.

PRICE: Whether it's Wade or Rebecca or me, there's a question of how to use photography, whether it's snapped by a phone camera or taken by a Hasselblad. I've been doing a lot of 3D renders, which is another form of photographic technique. It's all a question of how you take a flat image with power and mystery, and use it in a way that's worthwhile.

JONAS: Since I mentioned it, how do you feel about the internet?

PRICE: I don't work with the internet as much as I did 10 or 15 years ago. Even for my film "Redistribution," most of that material I made or created on my own—either shot on camera or in animation programs with a team. There is some stock video footage that I bought and some segments I recorded off the television. Most of it doesn't come from the internet.

JONAS: Maybe it dates me to even ask about "the internet."

PRICE: People are now talking about "the digital," which includes the internet. And in "Redistribution," there is a cascade of different looks and feels that suggests the experience of the digital or the internet.

JONAS: Knowing that most of the images in your film were made by hand does make a big difference.

PRICE: I've run into this before where people thought something I've made or composed was downloaded off the internet. And that's fair because I did address the internet directly in my early work. That expectation really attached itself to my work.

JONAS: If I pressed you to describe for me the content of, say, those skin works, what would you say?

PRICE: Actual skin first suggested itself to me because it was so full and so empty as a concept. It's totally charged—it could mean so many things. Visually it's almost like terrazzo or sand. It's formed of so many details, but it resolves itself into a more bland totality. I liked that pull of two directions at once—it's bland and yet it's so charged. That's how I like to work, pulled in two directions. Then I had to experiment with the printing technology of skin, which is actually much more complicated than you might expect it to be. I'm thinking of bus ads or billboards that look great from a distance but turn to garbage close up. First, I hired a photographer with a high-end camera to shoot skin, but it didn't give me what I wanted. I kept thinking that there must be some sort of walk-in body scanner. A flatbed scanner just wouldn't give enough dimension. Eventually I found a startup outside of San Francisco with engineers who had built this very special robotic computer-controlled camera. They didn't even know what to use it for yet. So I went out to have a look and ended up renting it and had it shipped to my studio here in New York. It had a robotic arm with a digital camera attached to it. We had to spend a week just figuring out how it works and then we advertised for models on Craigslist and other sites. It turned out to be very hard work because you're asking someone to lie there for up to six hours while this mechanical arm reached all around you. It takes thousands and thousands of tiny photographs, which the software then stitches together into a coherent whole.

JONAS: I was also intrigued by the show you just had with the squid skin.

PRICE: Yes, we went down to Chinatown, got a squid, and brought it back to the gallery.

JONAS: A dead squid?

PRICE: Yes, and then we filleted it. They have these incredible cells in their skin. Squid skin actually does look like a terrazzo floor or an abstract painting. When you're looking at the work, you can tell it's organic and you might think, "That can't be human skin. But if it isn't, what is it?" I like that mystery to be in the work, and I like trying out new technology to make it possible.

HELL HAS EVERYTHING, 2018. *Photo by Ron Amstutz. Courtesy of the artist and Petzel, New York.*

JONAS: I mentioned your great show titles. There is a literary aspect to them, like the recent one you called "Left Behind."

PRICE: That was named after the Evangelical sci-fi book series about the Rapture. It came about because I had briefly thought of writing a sci-fi Christian novel as an artwork on dispersion after 9/11, but eventually I concluded I couldn't do it.

JONAS: Maybe just as well. But your "Left Behind" included those silhouettes pieces that you did that work like gestalt shifts where you see an abstract shape and then you see in the negative space a set of hands.

PRICE: I think that started around 2007 with all of these images of people circulating online and just experiencing so many images of people interacting, touching each other, and handing each other things, and these images flashing across the world and flashing through my eyes and back out again. The Image Search feature was still relatively new then, and maybe I was grappling with that explosion of visual imagery. Thanks to Photoshop, I could apply surgical tools to these images and turn them into sculptures. It's also about moving from the dematerialization to the material, which is something artists have always thought about. Social media and all of these digital tools have simply accelerated the question. We're all leading split lives, with our own selves being dematerialized in one part of our lives and material in another. Those silhouette works sort of snap between two realities—you keep flickering back and forth.

JONAS: It's like that famous double image of a duck/rabbit, duck/rabbit.

PRICE: Yeah. There are some people who can't see them both ways, even if I point out.

Joan Jonas
Artist Seth Price and His Friend Joan Jonas Discuss "New Media" in All Its Mutated Form
Interview, December 26, 2019.
https://urlr.me/AMhPcX

SOCIAL SPACE: RAINBOW SIGNAL, CRACKED POLICE BARRIER, BOY WITH VIRUS PATTERN, 2019.

JONAS: It can be hard to grasp negative space. A lot of words like "void" or "negative space" or "vacuum" get brought up when discussing your work. What comes to mind when you think of a vacuum?

PRICE: It makes me think about that old saying that "nature abhors a vacuum," which means that a vacuum is, therefore, unnatural.

JONAS: It's the fear of emptiness.

PRICE: Right, horror vacui. There's a horror and there's also an attraction.

JONAS: But then, right in "Redistribution," you show that Bruegel painting ["Kinderspiele," 1560], which is the opposite of a vacuum.

PRICE: I didn't take art history classes. The observation in the film about the pile of shit in the foreground of the Bruegel painting came from just looking closely at the detail of a child poking a pile of shit. It just so happened that I was in the process of remaking or adapting "Redistribution" for a new screening, and I thought, "This is perfect, I have the perfect box to put that in."

JONAS: It must have been all over the place in those medieval squares.

Joan Jonas
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Interview, December 26, 2019.
https://urlr.me/AMhPcX

PRICE: Hiding in plain sight. And as artists, I guess it's still our favorite game to poke something you shouldn't be poking.

JONAS: Another ongoing theme of yours is the idea of the "envelope." I wondered how that related specifically to your interest in fashion. You even did a fashion show with a Seth Price clothing line at documenta in 2012.

PRICE: Like everything, it started as research and I ended up basically making these wall hangings that were wearable envelopes. So I took it one step further, working with a designer in New York. Then even further, at documenta, I had a show of clothing that was made of the same liner print from the insides of envelopes. It was exciting. It was just collapsing all of my ideas into one. I didn't take the fashion line any further. I guess the next step would have had buyers making orders. The clothes actually were for sale at a department store in Kassel, Germany.

JONAS: This fashion question leads me to ask you if you have a persona. And by that I mean a Seth Price apart from the Seth Price sitting here in front of me. You do perform in public. When you read from your novel *Fuck Seth Price* at the Whitney, you wore makeup and a costume, and you had your hair slicked back. You were playing a role. What is the role you were playing?

PRICE: That took place in the Whitney amphitheater, which was very new and modern but also a little bit corporate with a plate-glass window overlooking the Hudson River. I felt a little like I was doing an art-world equivalent of a TED Talk, so I wanted to step into that by wearing these Alexander Wang black nylon pants and blinding white New Balance sneakers, and slicking my hair back. And makeup always feels good. I also asked them to videotape it from two angles so that I could use that in "Redistribution."

JONAS: Is that in the current iteration of the film?

PRICE: Yeah. Except I identified it as Singapore, not the Whitney. I called it a TechGnosis Conference. But don't you feel like you play roles in public? Do you pose for a photo?

JONAS: I do, yeah. One does have to, but I sense more often than not that you tend to put on a slight disguise.

PRICE: Just slight. A hint. Maybe you don't want fire, but you want a smoke screen.

Numéro

SETH PRICE

At the Galerie Chantal Crousel in Paris, the New York-based artist recently unveiled work that tackles the question of digital technologies. Combining shots stolen with a phone and macro-photography of skin, he recycles and redistributes the image flow of our era, and in doing so blurs the traditional boundaries of art, taste and culture.

Interview by Nicolas Trembley

Seth Price's professional website, www.distributedhistory.com, includes a link to his Wikipedia page, which begins thus: "Seth Price (born 1973 in East Jerusalem) is a New York-based multi-disciplinary post-conceptual artist." Which means everything and nothing all at once. For his big retrospective last year at Munich's Museum Brandhorst, the press release announced a show comprising just about everything possible in the creative domain: "sculpture, film, photography, design, painting, video, clothing and fabric, web design, music and poetry ..." Price is one of the most influential and prolific representatives of a generation of artists conceiving and

producing images in the digital age. His most recent exhibition at Paris's Galerie Chantal Crousel was a good example of the heterogeneity of forms in his work, which can sometimes disconcert in its complete eschewal of classic categories of good taste. As Price himself says, we're not used to such technological imagery, but it's still photography nonetheless. It was on the occasion of this last show, entitled *Self As Tube*, that Price agreed to share with *Numéro* some of the secrets of his working methods.

NUMÉRO: The invitation and poster for your show at Galerie Chantal Crousel feature a teenage self-portrait taken in the mirror.

What's your background and why did you choose this image to promote the exhibition?
SETH PRICE: My background? It's too boring Nicolas! But it was very supportive, and that was capital. That photo is me in my first year of high school, on an assignment for photography class. This poster was supposed to look like it comes from the world of photography: all the seriousness, the fetish of black and white, the composition, the hand-painted words. I did it because everything in the Chantal Crousel show is a photograph of one sort or another. There's the robot-controlled camera and software I used to take the macro-photographs of human skin. There are these inaesthetic quick shots I made with my phone, notes on people's fashion on the New York street and subway. And there's the CGI I used to make the objects in the paintings. I consider CGI to be a photographic system. 3D imagery means recreating the physics of light and optics. A lot of the apparently real objects depicted in, say, advertisements – phones, jewellery, cars – are created this way, but it's become so convincing that you can't tell. For a viewer, none of the three approaches in this show suggests photography, but they all are, and the poster was a way of claiming that.

Do you remember your first encounter with art? What made you want to be an artist?
There was no early encounter with art, I never had a moment when I decided I wanted to "be" an artist. I hated that idea. Drawing and writing were something I'd always done, they were part of me since before I can remember, but I didn't choose them. I was hostile to art, or what I thought art was: something constituted outside, by corny adults. The idea of "artist" as an identity, as something you aspire to and claim, had something to do with other people, and expectations, so I rejected it. It took

me a long time to accept that label for myself – it was only after my first show, in 2004. I had issues, obviously.

What were you looking at then and what are you looking at today?
At the moment I took that selfie, I had a Hans Ruedi Giger poster up in my bedroom, and a life size poster of Ronald Reagan on the door, from one of his 1950s movies, with a gun and a cowboy hat. During the 1980s ninja trend, me and my friends would hurl ninja stars at him. It totally fucked up the poster, and the door. I had some little homemade posters for bands I was listening to, Einstürzende Neubauten and Throbbing Gristle, stuff like that, plus a lot of rap. I was into computer graphics, so I had pictures cut out of computer magazines taped up. What am I looking at today? I don't know. I'm trying to figure out what imagery of the early 2000s was. I just got Vinca Petersen's latest book. It's hard now to say what is to be looked at, when there's so much addictive looking.

You seem very comfortable in different media. Is there one you prefer?
I don't feel strongly about one or another. But some are certainly easier, in terms of the framing, the givens of the medium. In that sense, I envy writers. Their tools are cheap and minimal, and universally available, and they can do their thing all by themselves, anywhere, anytime. It's like neurotic, survivalist boot-camp art. Drawing is like that too. Stories and lines. That's also what I started with. Art that could happen after the end of the world.

Your work involves complex technological processes. Can you explain your interest in synthetic reproductions?
It's not about complexity, it's that it's unfamiliar. A traditional photographic print also depends on a lot of

197

complex technology and reproduction, but you don't think about it, because it's so familiar. But sometimes you're chasing an image or a feeling that demands unusual methods, and you have to get synthetic, as you say. Like this macro-photography. I wanted to produce an image at a large scale and high resolution, because we never see that. In the commercial world, no one wants detail at a grand scale, it's not worth it. When you approach an ad on the side of a bus, the image breaks apart into low-resolution garbage, and who cares? So there aren't tools for making those images. I had to work out something a little unusual. But unusual methods give you an artwork that feels different. And ideally the technology isn't visible or present, just the feeling.

How do you consider archival images and found footage in your practice? Is the question of appropriation still valid?
Everything is valid. I'll use whatever works. I will say I don't think appropriation was particularly interesting, at least by the time I came on the scene. Anyway, I never did much

appropriation. Seth Price as an appropriation artist was a misunderstanding. It was part of a sloppy way of labelling a group of artists.

Is the way your work is displayed important for your message?
I'm trying to keep it interesting for people, and for myself. It sounds simple, but once that's the rule, you find yourself going through all kinds of silliness.

How do you choose the titles of your pieces?
At the last minute. It was when I was putting together the checklist, the week before the opening, that I realized these works constitute a kind of investigation of "social space." That became important to the show, and it only emerged through considering the titles all at once, in a rush.

How did your series of works with macro-images of bodies begin?
Back in 2015, I wanted to make extremely detailed images of human skin. Different ages, races, genders. Skin seemed banal and familiar, and at the same time uncanny and provocative and strange. I like things that

are both empty and full. I showed the first photographic light boxes at 356 South Mission Road, in 2016, and then at the survey shows in Amsterdam and Munich.

Certain images from the *Social Space* series deal with more classical figurative photography, the image of a child in the street for example. How do you negotiate that oscillation between abstraction and figuration?
There's no oscillation. The show is all representational photography. At the same time, everything has been abstracted. Social space itself is both figurative and heavily abstracted. You can point to something apparently concrete and say, "Here it is, we all agree, that's all it is," but at the same time it will never be fully understood.

The exhibition is titled *Self as Tube*. What does that mean?
That was also kind of last minute, so let me try to figure that out... People are tubes, for one thing. Physically. You are a dark, wet, coiled-up tube, with openings at the ends. A camera is a tube, in a way. I'm a tube: material enters and is warped by its passage

through this filter. And when I take that old selfie and put it on the poster, and connect it to this new body of work, there's a temporal tunnel, a tube through time.

Is there anything you would like to make people conscious of through your art?
Unusual feelings.

What's your next project?
For five or six years around the turn of the millennium, I was serious about photography. Not as art, I just had a point-and-shoot with me all the time, capturing New York City and the people I was with. They've been in a box for years. These last three months we've been scanning a few-thousand negatives and slides. I want to use it, to treat it like a ready-made glance at the late 90s, at the switch from analogue to digital, at the introduction of new technologies, at 9/11-era New York, at the exhaustion of the 20th century. Because no one knows what happened yet, and it's been what, 15 or 20 years? In what other period in art history could you look back that far, and still have no official narrative about what even happened?

Nicolas Trembley
Seth Price
Numéro, N°205, August, 2019.

Flash Art

Seth Price *ICA / London*

① 2 3 4 5

Seth Price, Digital Video Effect: "Spills" (2004) Installation view at Institute of Contemporary Arts London. Courtesy the artist. Photo by Mark Blower.

"New strategies are needed to keep up with commercial distribution, decentralization and dispersion. You must fight something in order to understand it," wrote Seth Price in 2002, in his pivotal essay "Dispersion." Ahead of his time, working fluidly with video, sculpture, sound, fashion, web design and written texts, Price engages with issues of production, post-production and contamination, investigating how culture is generated and distributed in a highly mediated present.

The survey "Seth Price Circa 1981" — the first show at ICA London under Stefan Kalmár's directorship — focuses exclusively on the artist's film and video output, and is installed across the entirety of the Institute of Contemporary Arts building. Upon entering, viewers are introduced to Price's practice by the longest iteration yet of *Redistribution*, (2007–ongoing), which documents a lecture-performance delivered by Price at the Guggenheim Museum in 2007. The work is always rendered anew, adapted and updated each time it is exhibited.

1 (2) 3 4 5
Seth Price "Redistribution" (2007–ongoing) installation view at Institute of Contemporary Arts London. Courtesy the artist. Photo by Mark Blower.

1 2 (3) 4 5
"Seth Price Circa 1981" at Institute of Contemporary Arts London. Photo by Mark Blower.

The ground floor has been transformed in a long, multi-screen cinema: six projections play loops of films produced between 2000 and 2003. Made during the time Price worked as technical director at Electronic Arts Intermix (EAI), New York, these works stand as an exercises in visual culture, explorations of the infinite potential for image research, appropriation and fragmentation. As this admixture of found and shot footage, images, texts, computer graphics and web design rhythmically mesh and transition, the viewer's gaze zooms from one screen to the next, indulging in the density of information.

The architectural setting lends itself to the theatrical; distorted images from key global events bounce across the building, creating unexpected links and a kaleidoscopic view of recent times. In the film *Rejected or unused clips arranged in order of importance* (2003), the phrase "a tremendous sadness that life is the way it is, and not the other way" introduces an aerial view of the Twin Towers shot by the artist before 9/11; while on the opposite side, laying on the floor, a curved monitor displays *COPYRIGHT 2006 SETH PRICE* (2006), adding a sculptural layer to altered news images of the attempted assassination of Ronald Reagan in 1981 — history liquidly deformed.

The show, comprising more than thirty works and almost impossible to see in its entirety, intentionally embodies characteristics of the work presented. It is rigorous in its selection but promiscuous, affected and mediated in its presentation, dancing between context, content and display. The result is a focused perspective on Price's pioneering work.

1 2 3 ④ 5
"Seth Price Circa 1981" at Institute of Contemporary Arts London. Courtesy the artist. Photo by Mark Blower.

1 2 3 4 ⑤
"Seth Price Circa 1981" at Institute of Contemporary Arts London. Courtesy the artist. Photo by Mark Blower.

Attilia Fattori Franchini
Seth Price ICA / London
Flash Art, December 5, 2017.
https://urlr.me/DtxYkh

ARTFORUM

Seth Price

STEDELIJK MUSEUM, AMSTERDAM

Gregor Quack

WHEN THE STEDELIJK MUSEUM in Amsterdam and the Museum Brandhorst in Munich decided to jointly organize "the first comprehensive retrospective of the work of Seth Price," they brought up fundamental questions about the art world's favorite form of hagiography. If retrospective exhibitions are, by definition, exercises in containment and summary, how can they deal with an artist as notoriously slippery as Price, who first received significant attention for a PDF calling for art's "dispersion" beyond and outside the institutions of the art world? If Price used that early document to advocate for an "aesthetic program" that "does not function properly within the institutionalized art context," can a museum exhibition be the proper lens through which to look back at his work?

For the first iteration of "Seth Price: Social Synthetic," curators Beatrix Ruf and Achim Höchdorfer, together with the artist, sought to address this seeming incompatibility with a spatial layout that reflected the dizzyingly hyperlinked architecture of Price's oeuvre. Fourteen galleries of the Stedelijk's top floor were packed with often expansive works, including "sculpture, installation, 16-mm film, photography, drawing, painting, video, clothing and textiles, web design, music and sound, and poetry." On the floor of one gallery, a lone flat-screen monitor emitted the televisual glow of COPYRIGHT 2006 SETH PRICE, 2006, a thirteen-minute video of appropriated news footage of the attempted assassination of Ronald Reagan in 1981. A few rooms on, the same footage turned up again, only now screened on cheap portable media players and set to a lo-fi piano soundtrack (Digital Video Effect: "Chords," 2007). Price's signature materials and techniques recurred in relentlessly mutating constellations throughout the space. The transparent polyester film that was formed into a cylindrical sculpture bearing prehistoric horse drawings in Double Hunt, 2006, reappeared elsewhere in scrunched-up tapestries carrying altered video stills of a jihadist beheading ("Hostage Video Still with Time Stamp," 2005–). In another work (Addresses, 2006), Mylar ran across the walls of an entire room and continued into the next, now populated with darkened, pixelated reproductions of an older beheading image, Caravaggio's David with the Head of Goliath.

Similarly plentiful were the so-called "Vacuum Forms," 2004–2009, a series of polystyrene sheets that Price vacuum-molded to take on the shape of whatever object (knotted ropes, bomber jackets, casts of human body parts) he had placed underneath them. At the Stedelijk, these pieces took center stage. They filled immense vitrines, covered walls or leaned against them with a studied nonchalance that seemed to mock the presumably stratospheric prices once paid for them by their often anonymous lenders. Though Price has stopped producing such pieces, which risked overshadowing other aspects of his practice, the exhibition was not shy about making use of the undeniable visual allure of their dance in the uncanny valley. Of the more than 140 pieces on display, a small vacuum mold of what looks like a generic plastic mask (Untitled, 2008) was not only the first piece visitors encountered, but also the most hauntingly memorable one.

The curators' decision to privilege diffusion over concentration extends to the show's excellent catalogue. On the one hand, its contributors make no attempt to hide

Left: View of "Seth Price: Social Synthetic," 2017, Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam. Photo: Gert Jan van Rooij. Below: Seth Price, Untitled, 2008, enamel on vacuum-formed PETG, approx. 21 × 17 × 2". Opposite page, from left: View of "Seth Price: Social Synthetic," 2017, Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam. Clockwise, from top left: Untitled (Bomber) (diptych), 2006; Vintage Bomber, 2008; Untitled, 2006. Photo: Gert Jan van Rooij. Seth Price, Addresses (detail), 2006, ten etchings and oil monoprints on paper, each 44½ × 30". Three stills from Seth Price's Redistribution, 2007–, video, color, sound, this iteration 44 minutes 15 seconds.

the fact that some of Price's early followers were non-plussed when an artist who had once pioneered ways of evading the structural elitism of the art market eventually found considerable commercial success with almost conventionally beautiful sculptures and wall pieces. As Cory Arcangel quips in his short essay, "Seeing Seth's work is

Price's early work is linked to a time when an exclusive focus on the technologies of circulation made emotional or ethical reactions to images seem beside the point.

always a massive WTF." On the other hand, the essays are unanimous in their insistence that Price's work is too complex and too clever for a notion as black-and-white as "selling out."

Above all, however, the catalogue conveys a sense that no matter how many hours we spent at the Stedelijk, we still couldn't come close to knowing the whole story, because the full range of Price's interests and activities is impossible to grasp. Did we spend enough time on the

iPads in the reading area studying Price's algorithmic art-market data-gathering project, *Organic Software*, 2015? Do we know about the idiosyncratic collections of early video-game soundtracks and academic electronic music Price compiled in the 2000s? How about the four versions that preceded the most recent iteration of Price's programmatic art-lecture video *Redistribution*, 2007–?

In the exhibition, as in the catalogue, the effort to do justice to the sprawling intricacy of Price's oeuvre had two effects. First, it successfully presented Price as one of the most versatile artist-thinkers of the past two decades, not only in terms of how his work more than holds a candle to the sophistication of his much-quoted writing, but also with regard to his nimble use of an immense arsenal of materials and media. Second, it also made much of Price's work appear intensely dated. If the same production techniques, materials, and even images crop up again and again in otherwise unrelated areas of Price's work, this is because, for him, the artist's task has not been to explain or even understand, but simply that of "packaging, producing, reframing, and distributing." The emphatic sense of impartiality Price maintained even while appropriating imagery as charged as stills from the video of the 2002 beheading of the journalist Daniel Pearl links his early work to a time when an exclusive focus on the technolo-

gies of circulation made emotional or ethical reactions to images seem beside the point.

In our own historical moment, when no corner of the internet seems safe from the twin evils of Trumpist misinformation and meme-wielding white supremacists, such unfailingly neutral and detached approaches to digital-image production have begun to feel idealistic and insufficient. Price knows this, of course, as well as anyone. Regarding some of the most recent works in the retrospective—immense, close-up photographs of human skin, installed in light boxes—he has commented on how some raw materials cannot be "uncharged." Perhaps reflecting on Price's past work, the narrator of his 2015 novel, *Fuck Seth Price*, ruminates that it seemed "easy and even commonsensical" in the early 2000s to turn violence from a political problem into a media-theoretical one—something that operated primarily on the level of images. He then promptly admits that "in reality . . . all the same human pain persisted, lurking on the other side of the curtain. It hadn't changed and it wasn't going anywhere." Price's first midcareer retrospective leaves us to wonder what effect this new awareness will have on the next decades of his work.

"Seth Price: Social Synthetic" travels to the Museum Brandhorst, Munich, October 21, 2017–February 18, 2018.
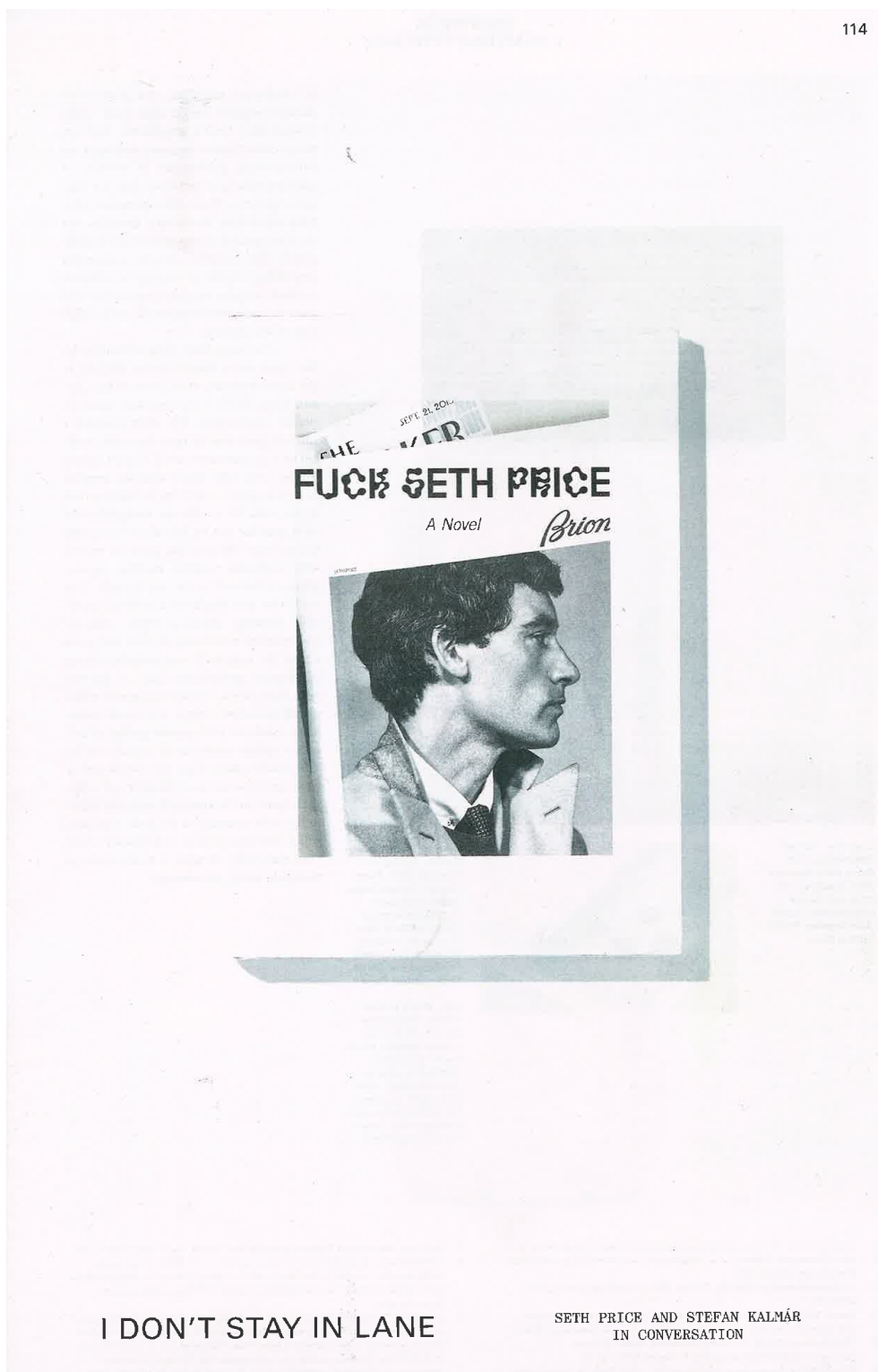
GREGOR QUACK IS AN ART HISTORIAN BASED IN PALO ALTO, CA, AND BERLIN.
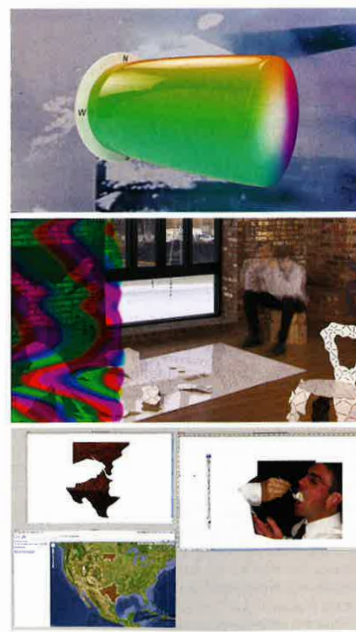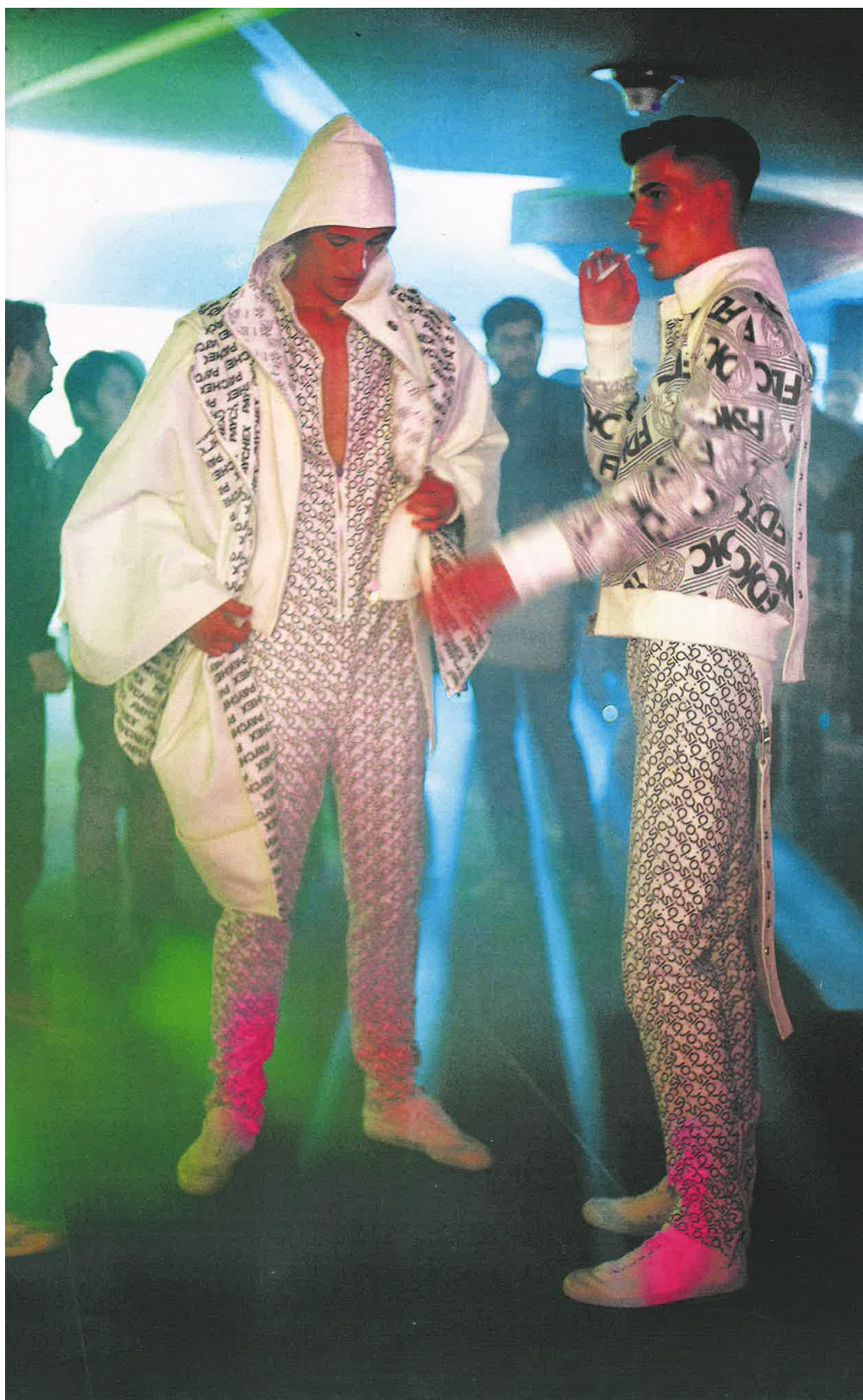
MOUSSE

I DON'T STAY IN LANE

SETH PRICE AND STEFAN KALMÁR
IN CONVERSATION

Stefan Kalmàr
I don't stay in lane
Mousse, N°59, Summer, 2017, p.114-131.

Stefan Kalmàr
I don't stay in lane
Mousse, N°59, Summer, 2017, p.114-131.

On the occasion of Seth Price's survey exhibition at the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, this exchange between the New York based artist and the director of the ICA London, Stefan Kalmár, touches on some of the themes and ideas that have animated Price's almost twenty-year-long career.

STEFAN KALMÁR
One thing that surprised me in your opening speech to your exhibition at the Stedelijk was how you described your works as scattered particles.

SETH PRICE
I don't remember that. I know I said it had always seemed to me like a trail of wreckage, of unrelated debris. "Particles" sounds better.

SK "Debris" is a term that I am quite fascinated with recently, as "fragments" might be more appropriate for a 1980s or 1990s postmodern discourse, but "debris" captures much better the mood, the culture, of whatever we call this period after 2000 till today. "Debris" also connotes destruction, or at least an impact of sorts. Debris of course can have particles as its smallest unit.

SP "Fragments" makes me think of cinema, and where montage went with the move from film to video in the 1980s and 1990s.

SK Or archaeology, like Allan McCollum's surrogates. What I find appealing about the term "debris" is its violence, the silent elegance, of floating plane wreckage or building dust.

SP Right, you couldn't ever put it back together. "Fragments" implies a whole that could possibly be reconstructed.

SK Wars create debris, not fragments. Juan Gaitán, from the Museo Tamayo in Mexico City and I have this back-and-forth of what an exhibition entitled *Debris of Civilization* might look like.

SP That's your first-person shooter. How would you install a show like that?

SK Maybe it's just a soundtrack.

SP A soundtrack encoded on a USB stick inside a vitrine.

SK *Music for Airports* on a USB stick in a vitrine. Which kind of is what you do, a bit like a black hole. Traces, speculation, narratives, maybe traps.

SP Sounds frustrating when you put it like that.

SK No, not at all. Like a walk through a dystopian landscape that's not frustrating, but reality, into which traces of narratives are folded.

SP But dystopian?

SK Walking the line of uncertainty, for sure. Your fashion show in Kassel was dystopian—not without complexity, fascination, and apocalyptic beauty, and of course possibility.

SP I was thinking how funny it is that the infrastructure of our communication environment, meaning social media really, was basically created by men in their late teens and twenties. So all of the anxieties of these young dudes are coded into the culture. Insecurities around courtship, mating, status, fear of missing out, bragging, and bullying: this becomes the constant state, for vast numbers of people. Can you imagine if all the social media platforms were built and managed by people in their sixties?

SK "Young man" and military bragging and insecurity, I guess. But then again what would *unsocial* media look like?

SP I'm over in antisocial media, myself.

SK Yep, either all media is social in one form or another or its actually propaganda—the "social" seems like a commodifiable surplus, an extra asset. So there is media and there is "social media."

SP I can't deal with social media. It's not addressed in any of the work in Amsterdam. Maybe only in the organic.software website.

SK But yet when it comes to art writing, your work allegedly is built around social media as one of its core reference points.

SP Maybe there is a kind of work that people make with social media in mind, thinking of its own status as a replicated distributed image. Or maybe it approximates, in its effects, the way that phenomena online must stand out, grab your attention, demand to be discussed, hated, or loved. This can be done well in an artwork, and it also runs the risk of contorting itself with insecurity.

SK And then there is work that comes out of this very particular cultural coil that is the past seventeen years that I think we all are still trying to grasp and make some sense of.

SP Yes, no one has yet formed a coherent idea or story about this period. I wonder if art history has ever gone so long without the stories fully coagulating.

SK Your work in itself inevitably carries the traces of that period and its particular logic. It is part of it—and so am I and so are you. No "outside" there. This is why Amsterdam was so remarkable, because it is the closest I ever saw of what formed—to use your own words—a replica of that condition, and it seemed it "did" itself, as if you were in another room or universe and hadn't touched a thing. If that makes sense. Not sure I can explain it, but I am fascinated by it. It is a good, a very good thing.
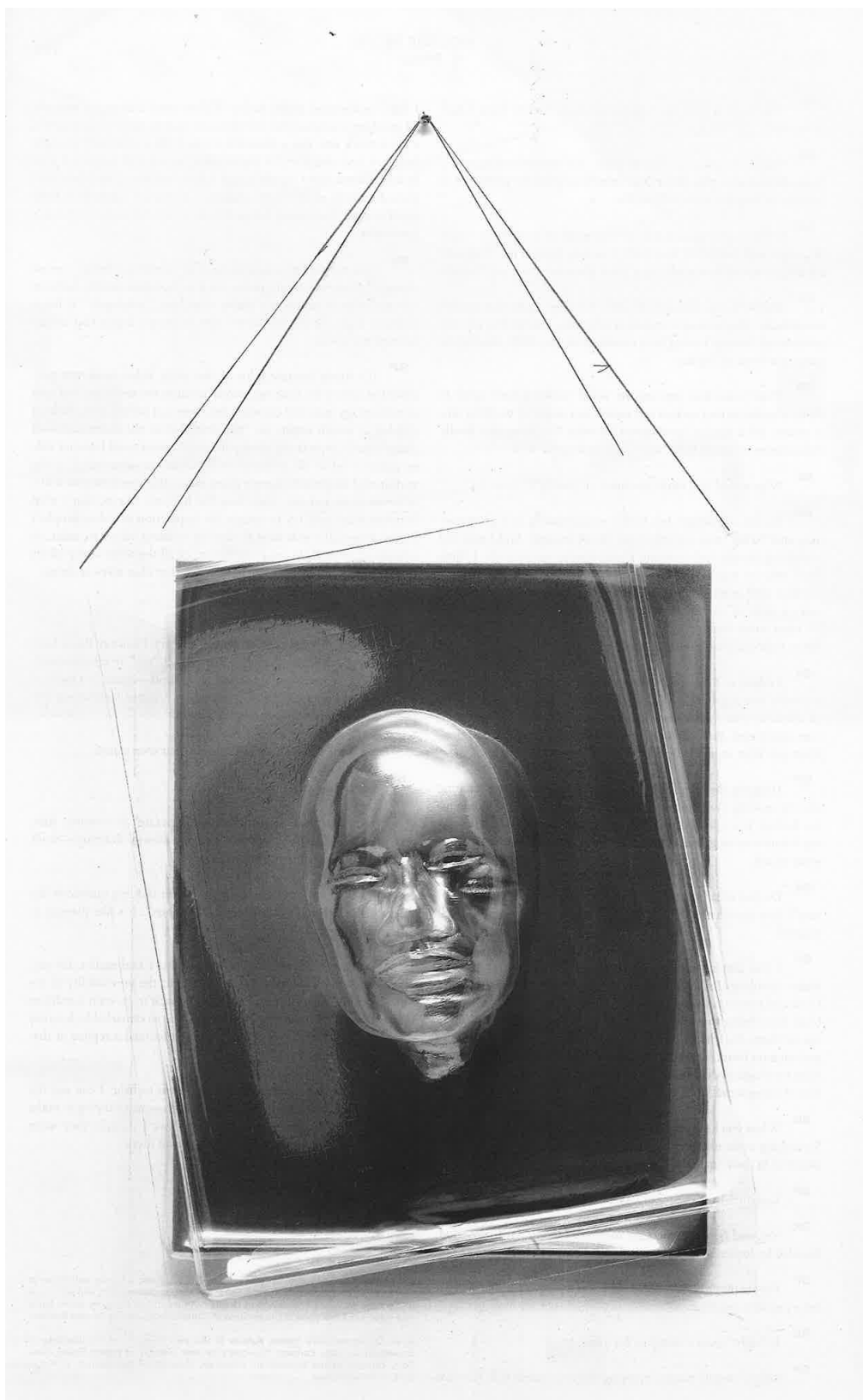
SP You mean it gave the impression of an outside from which to survey?

SK Maybe to grasp a complex logic and understanding and a form of relating to this reality that otherwise could be perceived as bonkers or simply incomprehensible.

SP I want to contain and redirect that sense of bonkers. A couple of people told me that if they hadn't already known my work, the exhibition would have made them think the artist was a psychopath.

SK Maybe it was a toolkit of sorts. But then again that sounds too didactic. Maybe more a texture, a structure, a script that we only understand through having been conditioned post-2000, sharing the same new form of literacy.

SP That's nice that you use the word "tool." I have come to think of artists as tool makers and myself as a maker of tools for other artists. It's a kind of justification for what I'm doing that finally makes sense to me, or that I'm not uncomfortable with.

SK Why would you think you need to "justify"?

SP To me, art always felt totally embarrassing as a phenomenon, and "artist" was a corny thing to call oneself. And I still find something deeply embarrassing about making an artwork. I think that's why so much of my work makes something from nothing, or plays with immateriality, flatness, image. Since to go ahead and make a piece of volumetric sculpture sitting in a gallery would be the most corny thing imaginable, I'm kind of hugging the margins rather than jumping into the pool.

SK I relate, as I often feel like the joke that starts with, "A curator walks into a gallery..." But then again, I also know that art has afforded me exactly the knowledge of self-reflexivity, of knowing I am implicated. But then again it's hardly "hugging the margins" when you have an entire floor at the Stedelijk, right?

SP Hugging the margins formally, I meant, rather than jumping into the making of definitive "Sculpture." Anyway, it's my own inner feeling. It's a justification that allows me to proceed with making a statement as grand as that exhibition and still keeping intact a sense of self.

SK Do you recall the moment when you made your first "sculpture"? Not that film can't be a form of sculpture. But what was that trigger?

SP I was playing around the summer before my first show at Reena Spaulings (in 2004), trying to figure out what to show, and I had a picture in my mind's eye of an ass coming out of a calendar. I had been doing these calendars, and then the body came pushing out of them. So I had to go and figure out how to cast and mold and vacuum form. But those sculptures were flat and hollow—they were topologically the same, just flat sheets with a slight redistribution of the material.

SK When you look at those works now, do they read differently? Something more uncanny that you weren't necessarily consciously aware of in their "making"?

SP Uncanny in the sense of *unheimlich*?

SK Yes, and how they became somewhat iconic for that period, haunted by its time.

SP People thought they were ugly. For a long time, that was often a primary response.

SK Is "ugly" even a category for you?

SP "Ugly" would mean I'm trying to synthesize it still. It means I don't understand it yet. Kelley Walker once told me he thought all good art was beautiful, which meant that an ugly work that was a good work was also a beautiful work. I did a screening at Light Industry, and afterward Ed Halter came up and told the crowd how he had always loved my films and videos and then I had gone and started making all this ugly sculpture. Everyone laughed. It feels good to make something that someone would call ugly, but I don't know why.

SK I get what Ed meant, because your "sculptural work"—even though I think we should never see it in isolation, simply because it is not done in isolation—seems more, say, "unhinged." It has a different logic, or maybe indeed tries to escape logics that others attempt to impose.

SP It's funny because a lot of that early video work was perceived as ugly at the time too, maybe because the aesthetics and uses of technology were not common yet, were not widely seen. Making a video of search results for "painting" before the introduction of image search, or making a compilation of compressed Internet video material before the existence of YouTube or video search or the widespread bandwidth to even share video. But then you give it five or seven years and the videos lose that ugliness. Maybe that's what happens when you try to escape the imposition of other people's logics. Eventually you have to face up to being called an artist, or a husband, or straight, or a vegetarian, or all the other corny labels that are about imposing ways of being, rather than ways of doing.

SK "Ways of doing"—I like that.

SP I mean that I recognize that I "do" art. I can say that I have made a lot of art. It's undeniable. But to say I "am" an artist is something else. It would be silly to deny it out loud—again, it's more of a feeling. At breakfast I was a vegetarian because I didn't eat any meat, but who knows what might happen.

SK As if they constantly undermine their own status.

SP Status update.

SK How do these modes that you "operate" in—music, film, text, sculpture, fashion, website, video, painting, drawing—work together? Is this just text, stuff, excess?

SP There are a lot of good terms now for tackling questions like that. "Lanes": I don't stay in lane. "Sandbox": it's like playing in different sandboxes.

SK Again let me rephrase or repeat what I said earlier: for me, your work carries the traces of today's logic, the inevitability of the now, like the Larsen Effect a visual feedback to its own condition that it is part of. This is why Amsterdam was so remarkable, because it is the closest that I ever seen in which it formed a replica of that condition.

SP Thank you Stefan, that's really great to hear. I can say the show was like a documentation of seventeen years of trying to make a painting or a sculpture or a video the way I thought they were supposed to be done, and never quite getting there.
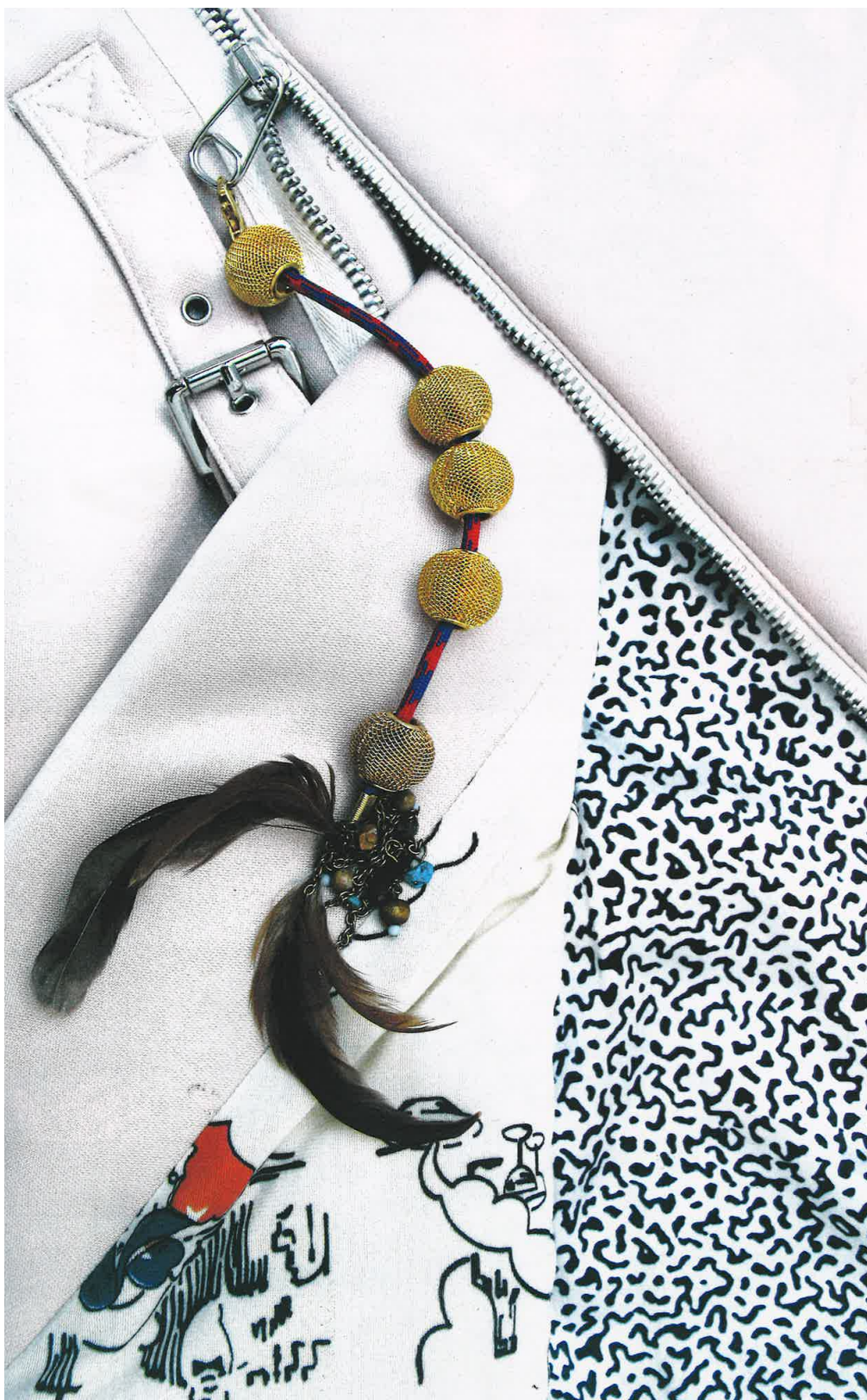
Stefan Kalmàr
I don't stay in lane
Mousse, N°59, Summer, 2017, p.114-131.

Stefan Kalmàr
I don't stay in lane
Mousse, N°59, Summer, 2017, p.114-131.

You are dead.
>Examine

Stefan Kalmàr
I don't stay in lane
Mousse, N°59, Summer, 2017, p.114-131.

Stefan Kalmàr
I don't stay in lane
Mousse, N°59, Summer, 2017, p.114-131.

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Mousse, N°59, Summer, 2017, p.114-131.

Stefan Kalmàr
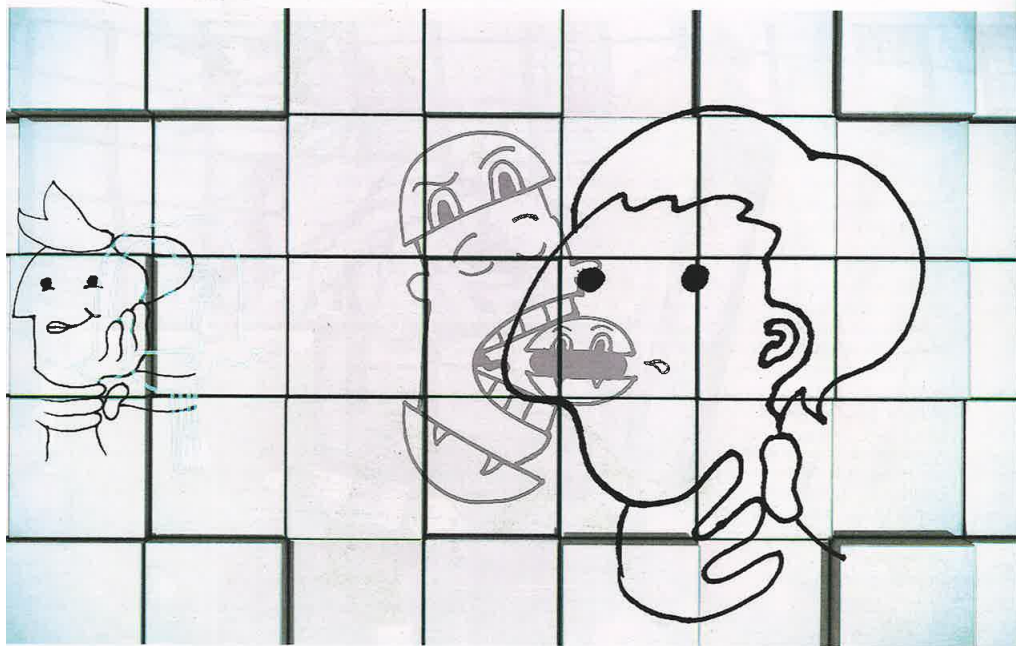*I don't stay in lane*
Mousse, N°59, Summer, 2017, p.114-131.

Stefan Kalmàr
I don't stay in lane
Mousse, N°59, Summer, 2017, p.114-131.

In order of appearance:
01 *Fuck Seth Price: A Novel* (New York: Leopard Press, 2015; 2ⁿᵈ ed., 2016). © Seth Price. Courtesy: artist and Leopard Press, New York. Photo: Ron Amstutz
02 *Folklore U.S.* SS12 fashion show staged during the opening of dOCUMENTA (13), Kassel, 2012. © Seth Price. Courtesy: the artist. Photo: Henrik Strömberg
03 *Different Kinds of Art* (detail), 2004. © Seth Price. Courtesy: the artist. Photo: Ron Amstutz
04 *Big Screw*, 2004. © Seth Price. Courtesy: the artist. Photo: Larry Lamay
05 *Mesh Bag with Virus Pattern*, 2013. © Seth Price. Courtesy: the artist. Photo: Ron Amstutz
06 *Street Style Print Test*, 2015. © Seth Price. Courtesy: the artist and Petzel Gallery, New York. Photo: Ron Amstutz
07 *Art History*, 2003. © Seth Price. Courtesy: the artist and Museum Brandhorst, Munich. Photo: Ron Amstutz

08 *Untitled*, 2008. © Seth Price. Courtesy: the artist and Reena Spaulings Gallery, New York. Photo: Ron Amstutz
09 *Social Synth*, 2017, *Social Synthetic* installation view at Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, 2017. © Seth Price. Courtesy: the artist and Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam. Photo: Gert Jan van Rooij
10 *Social Synthetic* installation view at Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, 2017. © Seth Price. Courtesy: the artist and Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam. Photo: Gert Jan van Rooij
11 *"Painting" Sites* (still), 2000. © Seth Price. Courtesy: Electronics Arts Intermix, New York
12 *Industrial Synth* (still), 2000. © Seth Price. Courtesy: Electronic Arts Intermix, New York
13 *Waste Piping*, 2016. © Seth Price. Courtesy: the artist and Petzel Gallery, New York. Photo: Brica Wilcox
14 *Folded Heart on Table*, 2016. © Seth Price. Courtesy: the artist and Isabella Bortolozzi Galerie, Berlin. Photo: Ron Amstutz

15 *Rotating Sawtooth Pattern Bag* (detail), 2012. © Seth Price. Courtesy: the artist and Petzel Gallery, New York. Photo: Kat Parker
15 *Exploded Dry Erase Board with Pieces*, 2015, *Wrok Fmaily Freidns* installation view at 356 S. Mission Rd., Los Angeles, 2016. © Seth Price. Courtesy: the artist. Photo: Brica Wilcox
16 *Crystalline Spill Lattice*, 2017. © Seth Price. Courtesy: the artist and Petzel Gallery, New York. Photo: Ron Amstutz
17 *Fwee9u&LL*, 2017. Courtesy: the artist
18 *Loser with a Tattoo*, 2017. Courtesy: the artist
19 *Nailed to the Wall*, 2006. © Seth Price. Courtesy: the artist and Capitain Petzel, Berlin. Photo: Simon Vogel
20 *Redistribution* (still), 2007-ongoing. © Seth Price. Courtesy: the artist
21 *Redistribution* (still), 2007-ongoing. © Seth Price. Courtesy: the artist and Petzel Gallery, New York

Flash Art

Seth Price

Stedelijk Museum / Amsterdam

A monumental rear-projected video hovers horizontally over the Stedelijk's iconic staircase leading up to its first-floor galleries. In a slow, silent, panning movement, the surface of what turns out to be the chromatophorous skin of a squid has been scanned up close.

Social Synth (2017) was specially commissioned by the museum for the exhibition "Social Synthetic," and it might function as both a prologue to and emblem of the largest Seth Price survey to date, organized in collaboration with the Museum Brandhorst in Munich. Spanning more than fifteen years of the artist's career, these works have contributed to an influential discourse on the impact of digital culture on artistic production, authorship, and our general sense of self within a changed world.

Spread out over fourteen galleries, the pieces range from Price's Mylar sculptures (2005–08), "Knot Paintings" (2009–12), "Silhouette sculptures" (2007–10) and "Vintage Bombers" (2005–08) to his YouTube videos, notebooks, clothing line, textile pieces, texts and drawings. Highlights include key early works like *"Painting" Sites* (2000), his more recent anthropomorphic aluminum furniture designs (2016–17) and the latest version of his lecture-performance *Redistribution*, ongoing since 2007.

Fitting this hybrid, temporally fluid body of work into the unavoidable linearity of a museum space might seem a matter of paradox, yet "Social Synthetic" refutes this assumption with impressive results. Although work is arranged in a roughly chronological manner, and loosely clustered per series, singular elements throughout the exhibition continually throw one off-kilter — establishing numerous cross-connections and undermining any simplified overview.

The three-dimensional exhibition space, itself embodying a complex network, seems now almost digitized, allowing visitors to amble through the unflattened layers of Price's eerily beautiful, unsettling yet familiar universe.

Suzanne van de Ven
Seth Price
Flash Art, Volume 50, N°315, Summer, 2017.

ARTFORUM

Seth Price, *Untitled*, 2016, UV cured print, acrylic, and synthetic polymer on board, 60 × 60 × 5".

"SETH PRICE: SOCIAL SYNTHETIC"

Stedelijk Museum
April 15–September 3
Curated by Beatrix Ruf, Leontine Coelewij,
and Achim Hochdörfer

In "Dispersion," his influential open-ended essay begun
in 2002, Seth Price poses a question animating his long-
standing preoccupations with technology, digital cul-
ture, and the rituals of consumerism: "Suppose an artist
were to release the work directly into a system that
depends on reproduction and distribution for its suste-
nance, a model that encourages contamination, borrow-
ing, stealing, and horizontal blur?" Featuring more than
150 works produced between 2000 and the present,
Price's Stedelijk retrospective will showcase the multi-
disciplinary range of his responses to this prompt, which
include vacuum-form plastic reliefs, photography, digi-
tal paintings, drawings, clothing, and video. The cata-
logue features a superb roster of contributors, among
them Cory Arcangel, Ed Halter, Achim Hochdörfer,
Branden W. Joseph, John Kelsey, Michelle Kuo, Rachel
Kushner with Laura Owens, and Ariana Reines. *Travels*
to the Museum Brandhorst, Munich, Oct. 12, 2017–
Mar. 18, 2018.

TEXTE ZUR KUNST

HEY, MOTHERFUCKERS – HERE IS YOUR GENERATIONAL NOVEL
Tobias Madison über Seth Prices Roman „Fuck Seth Price"

Der zeitgenössische Künstler als von seinem Körper entfremdeter, stets alles analysierender Geist: So stellt ihn Seth Price in seinem neuesten Roman dar. Ein Buch über Kunstgeschichte und Markt, über Karrierebedingungen und Ausschlusskriterien, über Netzwerke und Technologien, und nicht zuletzt über all die visuellen und sprachlichen Versatzstücke, die sich wiederum aneignen lassen.

Der Schweizer Künstler Tobias Madison, der sich in seiner künstlerischen Praxis selbst auf Aneignungsfragen – von Price bis Sturtevant – bezieht, hat das Buch für uns rezensiert. Im Folgenden denkt er über dessen Sprecherposition nach, über die Unmöglichkeit, in diesem „Selbsthilferatgeber-meets-Bildungsroman" die Stimmen von Autor, Erzähler und Künstler völlig voneinander zu trennen. Hat Price für seine Leser/innen wirklich stets das Beste im Sinn?

„He found himself carrying out strange and horrible acts: murder and abduction, most disturbingly, but also other furtive activities that he couldn't make sense of. Through all of this he was able only to watch, resigned to imprisonment in his physical machinery, his mind turning over slowly like an idle hard disk. This certainly afforded him plenty of time to figure out exactly where things had gone wrong, and he came to blame his obsession with ‚keeping up' – with technology, with the young, with the culture [...].["1]

Vor ein paar Jahren saß ich mit Peter Fischli in einer Bar und diskutierte hitzig die Arbeit von Seth Price. Unsere Euphorie wandelte sich mehrfach in Ärgernis und wieder zurück: Ärgernis über ein System, dessen scheinbare Balance und narrative Technologien den Betrachter verfüh-

Seth Price bei einer Lesung im Whitney Museum of American Art,
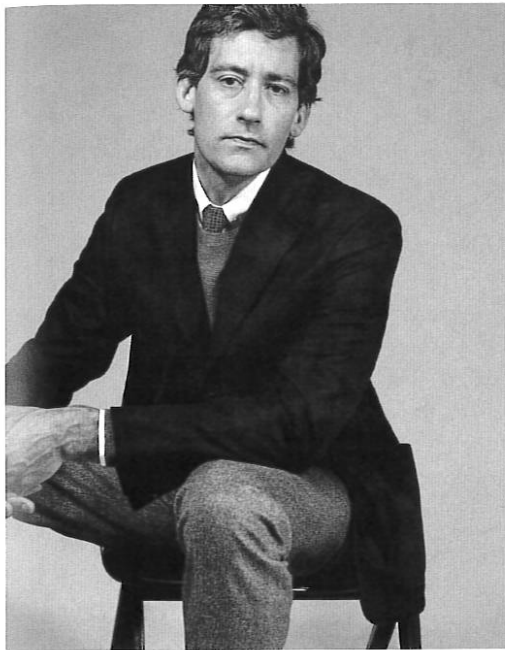New York, November 2015

entspringt. In die dritte Person deplatziert, reflektiert sie über die Bedingungen künstlerischen Schaffens: Doch statt der Möglichkeit autonomen Selbstausdrucks findet sie nur noch die komplette Immersion im Kapitalismus, in dem Form und Inhalt als Variablen ausgerichtet werden, die allein durch die Nachfrage bestimmt sind.

Der Körper ist größtenteils abwesend, seine Handlungen werden auf minimalem Raum formuliert, bevor die Erzählung in den inneren Monolog zurückdriftet: das Bedienen von Computerterminals, das Rasen über den Highway, doch auch diverse Einbrüche in verschiedene Räumlichkeiten, das Ermorden eines Stricherjungen. Die Handlungen sind nicht die typischen eines Gegenwartskünstlers, sondern dienen vielmehr dazu, die Stimmung eines Sci-Fi-Romans zu erzeugen, einer Ästhetik, die Price bereits oft genregetreu als Analogie zur Realität des Jetzt verwendet hat – auch um der Gefahr eines allzu „Sozialen Realismus" zu entgehen.

Price präsentiert den Protagonisten als neben sich stehend, als sich in seinem eigenen Denken drehend, als so brillant in seiner Analysefähigkeit, dass jeder Gedanke zwangsläufig aus sich selbst heraus den nächsten bildet. Und doch ist er dabei so orientierungslos wie der Kompass auf dem Buchcover, dessen Zeiger durch ein diffuses Farbfeld ersetzt wurde. Es sind dies Phänomene, die auch von populärwissenschaftlicher Literatur und zeitgenössischer Theorie als Auswirkungen von Technologie auf unsere Psyche beschrieben werden, was wiederum auch der Protagonist bemerkt. Und so wird sein Irrglaube, sich mit seiner eigenen Analyse desubjektivieren zu können, zum grausamsten Motiv des Romans.

Der Voyeurismus, der sich als Modus Operandi beim Leser einstellt, wird dadurch verstärkt

ren und das gleichzeitig ständig versucht, den Raum des Selbst zu dezimieren – eine Beziehung, die wohl die meisten von uns im neoliberalen Kapitalismus teilen. Schlussendlich einigten sich unsere gemischten Gefühle auf: „Weißt du was? Fuck Seth Price!", was ich mit Filzstift in einem Lampenschirm der Bar hinterließ und ging.

In seinem kürzlich bei Leopard Press erschienenen Roman „Fuck Seth Price" lässt Price seinen Protagonisten als von seinem Körper abgelösten Geist eines zeitgenössischen Künstlers auftreten. Diese Entität, die den Leser als Stream-of-Consciousness durch den Roman führt, lässt sich eher als Denkweise denn als Person beschreiben, eine Denkweise, die den Überlebensstrategien in New York unter den ökonomischen Verhältnissen zwischen dem 11. September und dem Crash von 2008

Seth Price fotografiert von Collier Schorr für Brioni,
Herbst/Winter 2015/16

dass der Text als autobiografische Erzählung Prices inszeniert ist. Was darin kulminiert, dass Price den Leser die Genese, das Wunder künstlerischer Schöpfung, quasi live miterleben lässt: etwa wenn der Protagonist die formalen Bedingungen für das Funktionieren eines Romans als Kunstpraxis reflektiert. Empathie tritt genau in dem Moment auf (oder wird gezielt als Special Effect ausgelöst), in dem man eine Korrelation zwischen dem soziopathischen Körper und dem Geist diagnostiziert. Es ist die gleiche Form von Empathie, die heute wie ein spukendes Gespenst über Sozialen Medien lauert, die gleichzeitig menschliche Nähe und räumlich/zeitliche Entfernung beschreiben und dazu führen, dass wir alles für „persönlich" halten oder zumindest versuchen, alles über den Umweg des Selbst zu verstehen.

Doch wem gehört diese Empathie? Oder anders gesagt: Wer fickt Seth Price?

Der Diskurs in und um das vorliegende Magazin hat sich viel mit dem figurativen Vatermord auseinandergesetzt, der Figur des Bad Dad, bei dem es sich, wie Caroline Busta in der letzten Ausgabe angemerkt hat, nicht zwangsläufig um einen Mann handeln muss[2]. Seth Price verhält sich mit seinem Buch als so etwas wie eine Bad Mom: als jemand, dem wir vertrauen wollen, der aber nicht zwangsläufig in unserem Interesse handelt.

Der Ödipuskomplex ist damit nicht weit: Die Psychoanalytikerin Melanie Klein lokalisiert ihn nicht zuletzt im Streben des Kindes, sich den Inhalt des Mutterleibes anzueignen. Price ist sich seines Einflusses auf eine jüngere Künstlergeneration, die ihn als Mutterfigur verehrt und ins eigene Denken einverleiben will, bewusst. So nimmt das Buch stellenweise den Duktus eines Selbsthilfe-Ratgebers für jüngere Künstler/innen an. Doch der daraus resultierende Identifikationseffekt dient Price lediglich dem Zweck, weiterhin an der Redistribution seiner Arbeit zu arbeiten.

Bei aller präzisen Selbstdiagnose Prices bleibt hierbei dennoch die Frage offen, wie er selbst sich zu seinen eigenen Mutterfiguren verhält, besonders angesichts der Tatsache, dass weibliche Figuren in dem Buch fast komplett abwesend sind. Dies könnte auch in der Entscheidung begründet sein, offizielle Kunstgeschichte einfach als die traurige Realität, die sie ist, widerzuspiegeln. Dennoch stellte sich mir beim Lesen ständig die Frage: Wenn das Buch z. B. die Pop-Art als Folklore innerhalb des amerikanischen Kapitalismus beschreibt – wo bleibt dann Sturtevant?

Schließlich ist es ihre Praxis, neben der Revision der Appropriation Art der 1980er Jahre, an

die Prices Arbeit selbst präzise anknüpft. Sturte-vant steht zu Price in einem ähnlichen Verhältnis wie die Kybernetik als eine von der Countercul-ture der 1960er Jahre verherrlichte Denkdisziplin zu der systemimmanenten Kraft, die sie heute darstellt und die sich gegen uns gewendet hat. Sprich: Price überträgt eine Praxis aus ihrem utopischen Kontext in die Dystopie des Jetzt, ähnlich, wie dies die Künstlerin mit ihrer letzten großen Arbeit, der Geisterbahn „House of Hor-rors" (2010), getan hat. Und so ist der magische Leerraum außerhalb des Zirkels zu der gähnenden Leere innerhalb unseres Selbst geworden.

Es wäre dennoch falsch, Seth Prices Praxis der zurzeit (wann nicht?) modischen Wendung des intellektuellen Horror Vacui zuzuordnen (Kunst über die „Leere zeitgenössischer Lebensstile") oder deren markttechnisch potenteren Kehrseite (leere Kunst für zeitgenössische Lebensstile). Wie oben bereits angemerkt, situiert Price seine Praxis innerhalb der Redistribution seiner eigenen Arbeit, wobei „Redistribution" auch der Titel eines seiner Werke ist (fortlaufend seit 2007). Doch zu einem Zeitpunkt, an dem eine Karriere so kanonisiert ist wie die von Price, bedeutet eine solche Redistribution, wie er richtig erkennt, vielleicht nicht mehr das Arbeiten über struktu-relle Zusammenhänge zwischen Bild und Text, sondern vielmehr die direkte Manipulation der Rezeption des Betrachters.

Und so deutet Seth Price seinen Bildungsro-man in etwas um, in dem Lehre wie Gift wirkt. Und vielleicht ist es wichtig, hier anzumer-ken, dass diese Parabel von Selbstreflexion und Psychose mit so unglaublich gutem Humor, mit jeglicher Kalkulation entfliehender Stilsicherheit und mit solcher Liebe für die Literaturgeschichte geschrieben ist, wie dies nur jemand tun kann,

der trotz seiner Liaison mit dem Markt, dem Betrachter und der Kunst, eben doch noch für den Erhalt seiner Autonomie schreibt. Demnach wäre das Außen, genauso wie Sturtevant dies bereits vorgeschlagen hat, etwas, das stets nur innerhalb unserer Selbst existieren kann.

„Fuck Seth Price" ist nicht der neueste Text von Seth Price, der laufend schreibt und veröffent-licht. Im Gegensatz zu vielen seiner Zeitgenossen, die ihre Werke mit Fußnoten versahen, verstand er es stets, seine Werke *als* Fußnoten zu seinen Texten zu verfassen. Oder genauer: als Pro-dukte, die stellvertretend für den Text als Werke fungieren können. Während die Präsenz einer Fußnote in der Regel suggeriert, dass die eigent-liche Auseinandersetzung anderswo (in einem anderen Text, innerhalb des Materials, innerhalb des 100-Meilen-Radius lokaler Farmproduktion) geführt wird, wird die Fußnote bei Price zum eigentlichen Textkörper. Und vielleicht liegt darin sogar so etwas wie eine Versöhnung von Körper und Geist.

Seth Price, „Fuck Seth Price", New York: Leopard, 2015.

Anmerkungen
1   Seth Price, Fuck Seth Price, a. a. O., S. 7f.
2   Caroline Busta, „Bad Canon", in: *Texte zur Kunst*, 100, 2015, S. 114–121.

Tobias Madison
Hey, motherfuckers — Here is your generational novel
Texte Zur Kunst, March, 2016, p.155-158.

TEXTE ZUR KUNST

SETH PRICE

LECTURE ON THE EXTRA PART

Seth Price, „Hostage Video Still With Time Stamp", 2005

If it can be said that Seth Price's work depicts, it is foremost the picture's own forces of dissemination, disintegration, and corruption that it shows. In preparing this issue, we asked Price about the role of the photographic (in its capacity to automatically generate images) in his art.

In turn, Price responded with a short history of magic, suggesting that photography's origins lie not only in occult or spiritual practices, but also in their attendant need to capture society as an image. As his essay further proposes, it may not be a coincidence that procedures of organization and institutionalization and their consolidation in the modern world evolved in tandem with technological innovations: photography as a matter of faith, photography as an instrument of control.

I was speaking to a group of peers who were interested and generally sympathetic, although there was also a degree of skepticism:

"Magic has been around forever," I said, "so let's start at the beginning. For the sake of this lecture, let's posit three ages of spirituality. The first age runs from the dawn of humanity onward, some x thousand years. We'll call it the Shamanic Age. During this period, virtually all human practices would have fallen under the rubric of Magic. The world was magic, and everything in it. The trees had will, the air had power, the fire told stories. Or, alternately, your will was fire, your stories were as the air, and human power was a tree. Because everything was interchangeable with everything else. Which is a primal state many of us wish to return to, and may yet, thanks to digital technology.

SETH PRICE

VORTRAG ÜBER DAS EXTRA

Was Seth Prices Arbeiten abbilden, sind, so könnte man sagen, vor allem die in den Bildern selbst wirksamen Kräfte des Weiterverbreitens, Auflösens und Korrumpierens. Wir haben ihn im Vorfeld dieser Ausgabe gefragt, welche Rolle dem Fotografischen, der scheinbar automatischen Bildgenerierung in seiner Praxis zukommt.

Prices Antwort in Form einer kurzen Geschichte der Magie lässt sich in diesem Kontext lesen: Sie suggeriert die Geburt der Fotografie nicht nur aus dem Okkulten oder Spirituellen, sondern auch aus dem wachsenden Bedürfnis, die Gesellschaft als Bild festzuhalten. Und auch die Verfahren des Ordnens und Institutionalisierens und ihre Festigung in der modernen Welt sind, so schlägt er vor, vielleicht nicht von ungefähr mit technischen Neuerungen parallel verlaufen: Fotografie als Glaubenssache, Fotografie als Kontrollinstrument.

Ich hielt den Vortrag vor Gleichgesinnten, die grundsätzlich interessiert und wohlwollend waren, doch auch ein wenig skeptisch:

„Magie gibt es schon seit Ewigkeiten", sagte ich, „lasst uns bei der frühesten Phase anfangen. Um meinen Vortrag zu strukturieren, setze ich drei Magie-Epochen voraus. Die erste beginnt mit der Entstehung der Menschheit und geht über x Jahrtausende. Nennen wir sie schamanisches Zeitalter; praktisch alle menschlichen Handlungen können in dessen Verlauf als Magie bezeichnet werden. Die ganze Welt war magisch. Die Bäume hatten einen eigenen Willen, die Luft war ein Lebewesen, das Feuer erzählte Geschichten. Oder anders: Dein Wille war ein Feuer, deine Geschichten waren Wind und die menschliche Lebenskraft baumgleich. Jedes beliebige Ding konnte sich in ein anderes verwandeln. Es gibt viele, die gerne in diesen Urzustand zurückfinden würden – dank digitaler Techniken ist das vielleicht bald möglich.

Dann folgt das heidnische Zeitalter, es endet mit Christi Geburt. Im Gegensatz zum kaum festgeschriebenen, ortlosen Schamanismus ist das Heidentum strukturierter, bildet Traditionen und Institutionen aus. Am Beispiel der alten Ägypter, Griechen und Römer lässt sich zeigen, wie hoch entwickelt diese Epoche war. Aber in den Jahrhunderten kurz vor Christus kommt es zu einem relativ schnellen, weltweiten Wandel: Die Zeit des Monotheismus beginnt. Die neuen Institutionen rüsten sich für die feindliche Übernahme heidnischer Konzepte. Man behält den strukturgebenden Rahmen bei, aber schließt Vielgötterglauben und Tieranbetung aus, und den Glauben an Naturkräfte belächelt man nur noch. Den Kult auf einzelne Propheten wie Christus, Mohammed oder Buddha zu konzentrieren, ist eine Form der Machtausübung. Die genannten Figuren bündeln wie ein Flaschenhals, sie ermöglichen es, das Begehren einer Gesellschaft durch eine Priesterschicht zu lenken, die in sich wiederum hierarchisch aufgebaut und gut zu beherrschen ist. Das ist der Moment, in dem Religion anfängt, ähnlich wie Fotografie zu arbeiten: Sie friert das Spirituelle gewissermaßen ein, verbaut es in eine Struktur, in der der Einzelne kaum etwas selbstständig machen muss, nur beten beispielsweise – den Rest erledigt das System.

Die Epoche, um die es hier heute geht, kann als *Gegenbewegung* zum Monotheismus bezeichnet werden. Man will nicht zum Schamanismus oder Heidentum zurückkehren, aber will sich auch nicht im Rahmen traditioneller Institutionen bewegen. Man interessiert sich für spirituelles Wachstum und Transformation, aber bleibt bewusst außerhalb der herrschenden Tradition. Man will autonom sein, nicht wahr? Man will eigene Bildsymbole entwickeln und sie nach eigenem Ermessen verbreiten.

Ich kann nicht über jede Strömung, nicht über jeden einzelnen Magier sprechen, der in den 2000

Seth Price, „Hostage Video Still
With Time Stamp", 2005
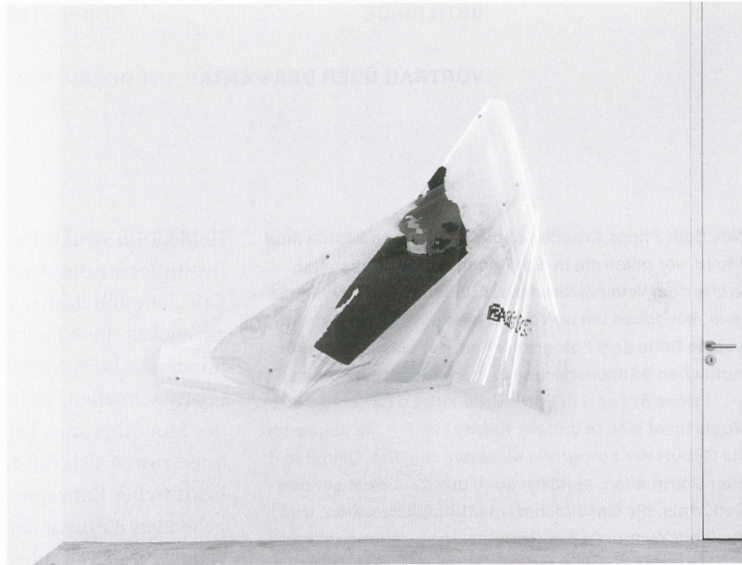
Next comes the Pagan Age, which brings us up to the birth of Christ. Where shamanism was a loose, scattered phenomenon, paganism was more structured, with traditions and institutions. And this reaches a pretty sophisticated state with the Greco-Romans and the Egyptians. But in the centuries leading up to Christ you get a relatively quick, worldwide transition to the third age, the Monotheistic Age. What happens is, institutions stage what amounts to a hostile take-over of pagan ideas. They keep the structuring frameworks, but they get rid of multiple deities, and animal worship is tossed out, and nature worship is frowned upon. This is all a power move, because now they're able to concentrate worship into singular prophets like Christ, and Mohammed, and Buddha. These guys function like bottlenecks, so that you can mediate a society's desires through a priest class, which is itself hierarchical and controllable. So religion begins to act like a kind of photography, a way of freezing the spirit image: you have only to remember one thing, like praying, because the system manages the rest for you.

The magical tradition we're discussing today can be understood as a *counter* to the Monotheistic Age. It's not that these people want a return to shamanism or paganism, they just don't wish to operate within traditional institutions. They're interested in the same concepts of growth and transformation, but they're intentionally operating outside of the dominant traditions. They want full autonomy, right? To create their own imagery, and distribute as they see fit.

I won't go into all the magical figures and currents that emerge during the two thousand years after Christ, but obviously it was a pretty bad time to be interested in these kinds of things. I mean, it could get you tortured, or executed as a public example. Instead, let's fast-forward through The Dark Ages and the Enlightenment to the late nineteenth century, which is when you get a *huge* resurgence of interest in all this stuff. There's a great occult reawakening. You get people like Madame Blavatsky or Dion Fortune, these mystical figures trying to develop systemic thinking, who consequently attract acolytes. These people are heralding a new phase of magic, and it's basically a Modernist phase, if you want to historicize it in academic terms. It's certainly contemporaneous with what we call Modernity: the development of photography and cinema, and the modern city,

Jahren nach Christus gewirkt hat. Nur so viel: Es war eine ziemlich ungünstige Zeit, ihnen drohte Folter, öffentliche Hinrichtung. Also spulen wir lieber ein bisschen vor, überspringen Mittelalter und Aufklärung und halten erst wieder im späten 19. Jahrhundert an, als das Interesse für Magisches plötzlich ungeheuer stark wiederauflebt. Das Okkulte kehrt mit aller Macht zurück. Mystische Persönlichkeiten wie z. B. Madame Blavatsky oder Dion Fortune versuchen, ein neues systemisches Denken zu entwickeln, ziehen Scharen von Jüngern an. Sie stehen für ein neues Zeitalter der Magie. Mit einem akademisch-historischen Begriff könnte man es „modern" nennen. Tatsächlich fällt es mit der Moderne zusammen: mit der Erfindung von Fotografie und Film, der Entwicklung moderner Städte, der Industrialisierung und mit dem relativierenden Denken Darwins, Freuds, Marx' und Nietzsches, sogar bis hin zu Duchamp. 200 Jahre früher hätte man die Genannten übrigens allesamt als Hexenmeister gebrandmarkt!

Die Magie modernisiert sich sehr rasch. Weitverzweigte, meist urbane Strukturen entstehen, die ironischerweise das kirchliche System nachahmen, obwohl man sich wahrscheinlich eher in der Tradition der Freimaurer verortet wissen will. In London wird der Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn gegründet, eine der einflussreichsten Organisationen, die es je gegeben hat. The Golden Dawn praktiziert keine abseitige Mystik wie zeitgleich beispielsweise Gurdjieff, sondern bildet institutionelle Strukturen aus: Eine Priesterschaft wacht über Initiationsrituale, die Anwärter durchlaufen müssen. Dann gibt es noch die sogenannten Secret Chiefs: namenlose allmächtige Individuen, die niemand je zu Gesicht bekommen hat, die womöglich *gar nicht existieren*. Jedenfalls können nur die Priester mit ihnen in Kontakt treten. Das funktioniert doch genau wie die Kirche, oder etwa nicht?

In dieser Zeit tritt Aleister Crowley auf den Plan, der selbst ernannte Antichrist, ein brillanter, höchst ambivalenter Mann. Man fragt sich natürlich immer: Glaubt er das alles wirklich, oder macht er es nur für die Macht und die Frauen? Solche Persönlichkeiten balancieren auf dem schmalen Grat, der Schamanen von Scharlatanen trennt. Ganz ähnlich ist es bei Künstlern wie Beuys oder Koons, sie *verführen* dich regelrecht dazu, ihrem Klimbim zu glauben. In gewisser Weise steht Crowley in der alten institutionellen

Seth Price, „Hostage Video Still
With Time Stamp", 2005
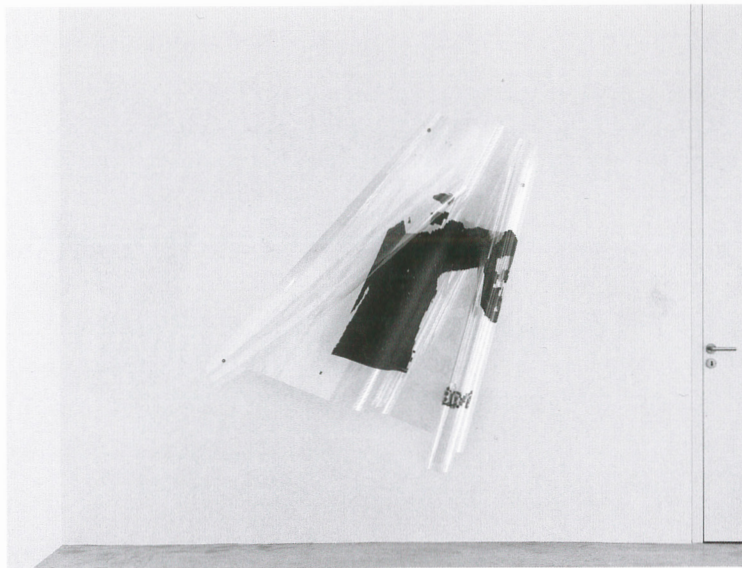
and industrialization, and all the great relativist thinkers: Darwin and Freud, Marx or Nietzsche, even going into Duchamp. All of whom, by the way, would have been condemned as warlocks just two centuries earlier!

So magic starts modernizing, and rapidly. That means the growth of complex, usually urban, systems. Of course the irony is that they're mirroring the church, though they'd probably want to trace it to the Freemasons. In London you get the Hermetic Order of The Golden Dawn, one of the most influential organizations ever. With The Golden Dawn, magic isn't about some weird nineteenth century mystic like Gurdjieff, it's an institutionalized structure, with a priesthood presiding over a series of levels that initiates have to ascend through. It has the so-called Secret Chiefs, who are supposedly these anonymous, all-powerful individuals that no one's ever met, who may not even *exist*, who only priests can communicate with. I mean, what is that? Church, right?

Around this time you also get Aleister Crowley, the so-called Great Beast, and he's this brilliant, ambiguous figure. You know: is he for real, or is he in it for the power trips and the girls? And that's always the tricky role to play, this kind

of knife's edge between shaman and charlatan. It's like Beuys, or Koons, these contemporary artists just *daring* you to believe their shtick. In some ways Crowley was still invested in traditional institutions, but the radical thing he introduces is the idea of *Will*. It's an ancient idea, but he basically promotes the notion that every Magician should follow his or her own Will, which is elevated to almost a religious concept. His main precept goes, "Do what thou wilt shall be the whole of the law." People who don't know any better always assume this is an exhortation to anarchy and chaos, but that's not true. There's disagreement on the implications, but the key thing is that Will shifts the focus from the system to the individual. And this is Crowley's real gift to Magic, or, as he spelled it, 'Magick' with a 'k'. *Will* is what people fastened on to, the stubborn creation of something from nothing, like spelling Magick with a K. And of course this is what makes him so appealing to artists.

Crowley dies in 1947, which is kind of a neat way to jump into the postwar era. By then you have the growing influence of Austin Osman Spare, who's a fascinating figure. He was only a little younger than Crowley but he was really part

Tradition, aber er führt eine radikale Neuheit ein: den *Willen*. Das Willenskonzept gibt es natürlich schon länger, aber er adaptiert es für den Magier, der stets seinem eigenen Willen folgen soll. Das hat beinahe religiöse Züge. Die zentrale Botschaft lautet: „Es gibt nur ein Gesetz: Mach, was du willst." Ahnungslose meinen immer, dieses Gesetz führe zu Anarchismus und Chaos, aber das ist nicht richtig. Über die Auswirkungen mag man streiten, der Punkt ist aber, dass der Wille das Individuum über das System stellt. Das ist Crowleys Geschenk an die Magie, die er „Magick" statt „Magic" schreibt. Am *Willen* kann man sich festhalten, er ist eine störrische Schöpfung aus dem Nichts heraus, vergleichbar damit, Magick eben mit „ck" zu schreiben. Das ist der Grund, warum Crowley eine so starke Anziehungskraft auf Künstler/innen ausübt.

Crowley stirbt 1947, was für uns einen geschickten Sprung in die Nachkriegszeit bedeutet. In dieser Zeit entfaltet Austin Osman Spare große Wirkung, ein beeindruckender Mann, nur wenig jünger als Crowley, aber deutlich einer neuen Epoche zugehörig. Er verkörpert den Umbruch. Crowley war zwar revolutionär, aber doch auch eine Figur des vergangenen 19. Jahrhunderts. Spare ist eine Art einsamer Wolf, ein kompromissloser Typ. Als Künstler nicht unbegabt, bleibt ihm eine künstlerische Karriere aber verwehrt, ähnlich wie Hitler. Bis zu seinem Tode beschäftigt er sich in seiner Dachkammer ganz allein mit der Magie. Aber er wird schnell zur Legende, weil er ganz für sich, kraft seines Willens, ein geschlossenes System entwickelt hat, das auch heute noch Verwendung findet.

Sein wohl größtes Verdienst ist die Neufassung der „Sigillenmagie". Man nimmt ein Wort, das auf etwas verweist, was man beeinflussen oder kontrollieren will – beispielsweise den Namen eines Feindes –, und formt aus den einzelnen Buchstaben ein grafisches Monogramm. Materie wird zu einem grafischen Zeichen komprimiert, in das man sich versenken, das man kopieren und weitergeben, wegschließen oder zerstören kann. In diesem kleinen Index verkörpert sich konzentrierter Wille. Es ist eine der Grundlagen der Magie, dass sie die gesamte Energie in ein einziges Bild bannen kann, richtig? Magie bannt die Willenskraft in ein Bild. Kunst funktioniert genauso. Und seit der Moderne befindet sich die Magie in einem andauernden Dialog mit neu entstehenden Bildtechnologien. Spare war der Ansicht, dass es in der Moderne immer schwieriger wird, die materielle Welt in reine Substanz zu verwandeln, dass Bilder diese Arbeit aber sehr gut für uns übernehmen können.

Spare ist ein waschechter Individualist. Er bahnt den Weg für eine der interessanteren neueren Strömungen, die Chaos Magick – Chaosmagie. Sie kommt zuerst in den 1970ern auf, eine Zeit, die man „The Me Decade" genannt hat, was sehr gut passt: Bei Chaosmagie geht es immer um den Einzelnen, Top-Down-Modelle lehnt man ab. Wenn man Crowley und die eben genannten hierarchisch strukturierten Gruppen als modernistisch bezeichnet, kann man die Chaosmagie postmodern nennen. Sie ist dezentralisiert, schizophren, flächig, sie weicht Hierarchien aus. Es gibt keine Priester, keine Anwärter, es gibt nicht einmal fest definierte Glaubenssätze. Der Chaosmagier darf heute an Jesus Christus glauben, ihm morgen abschwören und dem Islam beitreten. Exzentrik und Anarchismus werden befürwortet, was auf traditionelle Magier bedrohlich wirkt. Es ist kein Zufall, dass parallel Internet und Personal Computer entwickelt werden; man kann

of the new era, he marks a transition. Crowley was a man of the vanishing nineteenth century, even if he was a revolutionary. Spare, meanwhile, was this lone wolf, this uncompromising guy. He was a gifted artist, but one who didn't make the grade, kind of like Hitler. He just did his lonely magical thing by himself in a garret, until he died. But his legend grew, because all by himself, or through his Will, he developed an internally cohesive system that people still use.

Probably his most notable development was "sigil magic." Making a sigil means basically taking a word referring to something you want to control or effect, like, say, the name of an enemy, and compressing the letters into a kind of graphic monogram. It reduces material being to a compressed and graphic sign, which you can contemplate, or copy and distribute, or file away, or destroy. This little index becomes a concentrated expression of Will. And that's part of the definition of magic, right? That all your power and energy is compressed into a singular image. Magic is a kind of system by which Will gets poured into an image. Of course that's art, too. And you can think of Magic since Modernism as being in dialogue with the rise of image technology. Spare recognized that with Modernity it's the material world that's getting harder to substantiate, and that images can actually do that work for us.

So, Spare's a total individualist, and in a way he leads to one of the more interesting recent developments, which is Chaos Magick. This starts to appear in the 1970s, "The 'Me' Decade," which makes sense, because Chaos Magick is all about the individual, it's opposed to top-down structures. If Crowley and all these hierarchical groups are Modernist, Chaos Magick is Post Modern. It's decentralized, it's schizophrenic, it's horizontal,

it sidesteps the hierarchy. Not only is there no system of priests and initiates, there's not even a fixed belief system. You can be a Chaos Magician but also believe in Christ, and then you can disavow Christ tomorrow and declare your faith in Islam. Chaos Magick encourages eccentricity and anarchism, so of course it's threatening to traditional magicians. Now, not coincidentally this is the time when network technology and personal computing appears, and you can just picture all these bearded, programmer longhairs walking around MIT or wherever, toting little sigils, trying to will a new world into being." I stopped for a beat. "And you know what? They *did*."

To weak and obliging laughter I unscrewed the cap of my water, gearing up for the next part of my lecture. A small voice rang out from the back of the room. "I'm sorry, but haven't we left the monotheistic age? Isn't it possible we're already becoming something different?"

I considered the question. I found myself producing careful, almost defensive acknowledgments. "In one sense you're right," I said. "We live in an age when people cobble together a way of being that works for them, and it's not a monotheistic way. You go to Episcopal Church on Sunday, you visit your acupuncturist on Tuesday, you get your palm read on Thursday." I searched my conscience. Did I believe this? But the voice carried on as if I'd said nothing of consequence: "You also mentioned that digital technology might eventually allow us to return to a primal state."

"I did. But, and this is a big but, only by obliterating differentiation. But also we can say, with Nietzsche, that science amounts to simply another, newer, faith. The world of technology offers a scaffolding for the same old questions, the same blind subject positions. And beyond that, you can

sich die bärtigen, langhaarigen Programmierer gut vorstellen, wie sie, die Hosentaschen mit Sigillen vollgestopft, auf dem MIT-Campus oder so herumlaufen und mit reiner Willenskraft eine neue Welt erschaffen wollen." An dieser Stelle legte ich eine Kunstpause ein. „Und wisst ihr was? Es ist ihnen *gelungen*."

Zögerliche, höfliche Lacher aus dem Publikum. Ich griff nach meiner Wasserflasche, um mich auf den nächsten Teil vorzubereiten. Da hörte ich aus dem hinteren Teil des Raumes eine dünne Stimme. „Pardon, aber haben wir das monotheistische Zeitalter nicht bereits hinter uns gelassen? Ist es nicht möglich, dass wir schon dabei sind, uns fundamental zu verändern?"

Ich dachte nach. Sorgsam legte ich mir eine nachgerade defensive Erwiderung zurecht. „Irgendwie hast du Recht", sagte ich. „In unserer Zeit basteln sich die Leute ihre Existenz so zusammen, wie es am besten passt. Mit Monotheismus hat das nichts zu tun. Sonntags besucht man den episkopalen Gottesdienst, am Dienstag hat man einen Akkupunkturtermin, und donnerstags geht es zum Handleser." Im Stillen stellte ich mir die Frage: Ist das wirklich meine Überzeugung? Aber die Stimme ertönte wieder, als hätte ich nichts Entscheidendes gesagt. „Du hast außerdem erwähnt, dass die Digitalisierung uns vielleicht ermöglicht, in den Urzustand zurückzukehren." – „Stimmt. Aber nur dann, und das ist entscheidend, wenn alle Unterschiede ausgelöscht werden. Außerdem könnte man mit Nietzsche sagen, dass Wissenschaft nur ein anderer, neuerer Glaube ist. Die Technologien bieten Erklärungsmuster für die gleichen uralten Fragen an, für die gleichen unwissenden Subjekte. Zudem, das könnte man noch hinzufügen, gibt es Hollywood, Starkult und soziale Medien: Unsere Welt, aus

reproduzierten Bildern bestehend, hat längst ein neues Glaubenssystem errichtet." – „Nein, nein", antwortete es, „davon rede ich gar nicht." – „Wirklich nicht?" Ich unterdrückte aufsteigenden Ärger. „Du behauptest doch, dass es da ein *Wir* gibt, das in eine neue Zeit eingetreten ist, in der über ganz andere Kanäle neue Fragen gestellt werden. Ich glaube kaum, dass das der Fall ist. Ich sehe weder so eine Umwandlung noch irgendeine andere Welt." – „Schamanen berichten von der Reise in eine andere Welt. Doch das ist nur eine Vision." Stille. Als die Stimme wieder anhob, war sie nur noch ein Wispern: „In der Vision habe ich einen vollständig zergliederten Körper. Dann setzt er sich wieder neu zusammen. Am Ende kann ich wieder tun, was ich immer getan habe, nur dass mein Körper jetzt einen Zusatz bekommen hat, ein kleines Extra, eine Art zusätzlichen Knochen."

Auch wenn wir die Sterne am Tage nicht sehen, stehen sie doch über uns, und also stimmt es auch, dass wir den gesamten Tag lang träumen, nicht nur nachts.

say that we have Hollywood and celebrity culture and social media, and that our world of reproduced images is a new belief system."

"No, no," came the reply, "I'm not talking about any of that."

"Aren't you?" I said, suppressing irritation. "You're claiming there's a *we* that's entered some new era, where the questions are all different, and everything moves through new channels. I don't know if that's the case. I don't see that we've passed through any transition, or entered some other world."

"Shamanism does speak of a journey into another world. But this is a vision only." There was a pause. When the voice returned, it was a low whisper. "In this vision, my body is completely dismembered. Then it is reassembled. Afterward, I am able to go about my business again, only now my body has a small, extra part, like an extra bone."

Just as stars are hidden during the day yet hang above us still, it is true that one dreams all the day long, just as during the night.

ELEPHANT

COURTESY THE ARTIST AND PETZEL, NEW YORK

SETH PRICE

Like his gallery mate Wade Guyton, post-conceptualist Price—who staged a fashion show at DOCUMENTA in 2012—works in every medium conceivable (and even some that to most are inconceivable). Recommended reading: *How to Disappear in America.*

Is New York—so rich in myth and history, artistic and otherwise—an important context for your work?
New York is cool. Great for making art and showing art. But the old NYC isn't here any longer. Thank God. You make art that comes out of NYC, but it speaks in different languages, too. I mean, you also find yourself at the intersection of other matrixes. There's an axis that runs between Berlin techno and Brooklyn techno, for instance, and one that runs between New York food fetishism and Stockholm food fetishism. I don't know where I'm going with that one. I guess I don't think of my work in terms of New York history.

What does 1980s appropriationism mean to you at this stage?
Not much. I'm not so familiar with 1980s appropriationism. It's really just a form of repackaging, isn't it? I do like packaging. But I haven't appropriated much, in my own work. Most of the things that people think I've taken from somewhere else were in fact fabricated in the studio, from scratch, under time-consuming and laborious—not to say gruelling—artisanal conditions, with careful attention to detail and craftsmanship.

How important has your work with the collective Continuous Project been to your personal development as an artist and theorist?
Very important. Although, theorist! I'm really not a theorist.

Can you imagine what your practice would look like without the internet?
Cooler?

The Vintage Bombers *are among your best-known works, and recently you've been working with the designer Tim Hamilton. Why the fascination with clothing?*
I was just interested in investigating industrial garment construction as a sculptural language: can you make a sculpture by feeding an art concept through that particular commercial production system, that vocabulary, those labourers, et cetera?

You've written, published and (re)circulated materials on an impressive scale. Where would you advise someone coming to your work for the first time to begin?
I've written a novella, called *Fuck Seth Price,* that's due out this spring. It's not my 'voice' but it's close enough.

Seth Price *Container for Virus Plus Handmade Pattern,* 2013, blackened cork facing, neoprene shell, printed charmeuse liner, screen-printed Tyvek centre panel, zips, buckles, etc.

ARTFORUM

Seth Price
GALERIE CHANTAL CROUSEL

Seth Price's latest works explore the conceptual and visual construction of the standard business envelope, a motif the artist has examined across various media in recent years. The two new groups of work, part of an ongoing project called Folklore U.S., build on his contribution to Documenta 13 in 2012—a venture that included fashions inspired by

Seth Price,
Compatibility Mode,
2014, screenprint,
acrylic, pigmented
acrylic polymer, and
gesso on plywood,
47 ¼ × 83 ⅜ × ⅛".
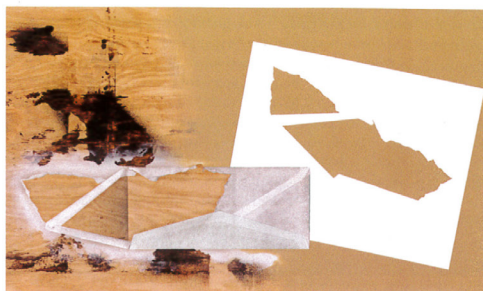
the patterns printed on the interiors of confidential mailers (a collaboration with menswear designer Tim Hamilton) and large-scale soft-sculpture envelopes. In this show, "Animation Studio," Price returned to a more traditional presentation of flat wall-mounted works.

Three screen-printed planks of plywood depict what the artist calls "exploded envelopes," ones that have been torn or folded open. They carry multiple, sometimes conflicting connotations. Their decrepit, rejected state evokes junk mail and the inanity of endless packaging wasted on worthless contents. At the same time, however, the emptied envelopes' irregular shapes seem to celebrate the utilitarian item's simple efficiency while acknowledging the imminent obsolescence of the postal system as a valid means of communication. Complicating the photorealism of the envelopes (and recalling the stenciled silhouettes Price has been making since 2007, in which negative space takes on a tangible, if inscrutable, presence), works such as *Medium* and *Compatibility Form* (all works 2014) also feature curious abstractions. Based on isolated sections of the torn envelopes, these extracted amorphous shapes cleave together notions of representation and abstraction. The material nature of these works presents yet another interesting dichotomy, as their low-tech salvage aesthetic is actually the result of a sophisticated fabrication process. The ostensibly cheap, Arte Povera–inspired supports have been custom-made for Price with a central ply of rigid, high-quality wood so that the planks do not warp when coated with the layers upon layers of acrylic polymer needed to create the smooth, porcelainlike surface onto which the envelope images are then silk-screened.

The nine other works that were on view are artist-framed silk-screens on fiber-coated wood panels. The horizontality of their four-by-eight-foot format immediately evokes a standard business envelope, blown up to gigantic proportions. Nodding to both Pollock's allover and Warhol's use of brands, Price evokes the security patterns intended to conceal an envelope's contents by repeating, on some of the pieces, a single corporate logo across the entire composition. The logos for Dropbox, Corbis, and Pixar have been selected not just for their visual appeal but also for the role those companies play in the dissemination of digital information: Dropbox enables file-sharing, Corbis licenses images through an online archive, and Pixar specializes in computer animation. By emblazoning his oversize envelopes with these particular trademarks, Price not only references pertinent digital-age issues of security and privacy but insinuates that these companies have something to hide.

A final work, perhaps the most complex on view, belongs to neither series but suggests a summation by combining elements of both. *Animation Studio*, a three-dimensional exploded envelope pasted on a screenprinted background above the word PIXAR, is a collage of actual and virtual. Here, as in all of these works, Price turns the envelope inside out, as it were, to send a message that we should look more closely at the producers and purveyors of digital information.

—*Mara Hoberman*

ArtReview

Fuck Seth Price

by Seth Price   Leopard, $20 (softcover)

Seth Price is really good at writing about art. I'm not so sure he's a particularly great fiction writer, though. In this work, subtitled 'a novel', the narrator notes that 'his oft-used strategy of "smuggling familiar materials into the realm of synthetic" made for a good description of the process of fictionalization'. He's right, because the good news is that this is basically a wide-ranging, insightful, *factual* essay examining the stuff being pumped out of studios internationally, with just an occasional needless Paul Auster-esque foray into melodrama (the odd murder here or there that is of such little consequence that telling you about it is in no way a spoiler).

The protagonist of the 'story', whom we can assume to be Price, is on the money, for example, in his analysis of the two defining strands of the hipper side of the art market: art that takes its cues from digital culture, and the new wave of abstract painting that is flooding art fair booths. For Price they are cut from the same figurative cloth, representing 'the digital process of abstraction'. This he adds is 'a direct, materialist portrayal of our historic moment, when the alien productions of computers and their apparent meaninglessness redefine all human values including expression itself'.

In Price's view, technology is an omnipotent presence. For art to have any effect, he states, it must play by tech's rules. He describes painting (which he has worked in) as being essentially formally anachronistic, regardless of the cues taken from digital culture in its subject matter: 'Painters could join a more or less continuous chat room hosting every painter who'd ever exhibited.' He concludes instead that sculpture is the medium of the future, because from the Bronze Age to the information age, it has been open to every new tech development thrown at it. While weaving together myriad themes (architecture, careers, labour), Price, in his conviction of art's dependence on tech, places the vanguard of culture not in the world's artist studios but in the start-ups of Silicon Valley.   *Oliver Basciano*

MOUSSE

Excerpt from Synthetic Piracy

Seth Price

It was easy to locate the moment of inspiration that had rejuvenated his painting career, making him rich but ultimately leading him to reject contemporary art. One day in the early 2000s, he'd been sitting in a new Italian restaurant, considering his supper. For decades now, he remarked to himself as he regarded a bowl of grated pecorino, Americans had possessed a sure idea of what Italian food was: what it tasted like, what it looked like, what it meant. For his parents' generation, and even within his own childhood, Italian food meant Italian-American food, an immigrant form, once alien but now ubiquitous in the kitchens of the majority of the populace, a way of putting dinner on the table, hardly a cuisine. Then the 80s happened, and everyone discovered real Italian food, food from Italy, and defiantly not Italian-American food, which consequently entered a kind of limbo. Spaghetti and meatballs: yes, everyone still liked it and cooked it, it still had its place, but that place was not a trendy restaurant.

Recently, however, which is to say in the early 2000s, shortly before he'd had his revelation, some notable chef had realized that spaghetti and meatballs was what people had wanted all along, and why shouldn't they have it? This chef understood that you could give diners what they wanted without abandoning culinary invention and the associated high prices. What you did was trundle out lowbrow recipes and thematize them, burnishing them for a new audience too young to remember why they'd been discarded in the first place. To use a mid-90s term, the old recipes were upcycled. Originally this had implied the redemption of waste material through canny adaptation, and was widely associated with environmentalism and Third World do-gooderism; no one had previously thought to apply the notion to the world of conceptual foodservice.

It was a runaway success. Customers were excited and relieved to plunge into the frisson of the old/new, and restaurants all over the city, and then internationally, adopted the formula. Soon came high-end tweakings of meatloaf, mac & cheese, donuts, PB&J sandwiches, chicken wings, and even Twinkies: all cherished comfort foods that no one had previously thought to rework as pricey lifestyle fare. It must have been the times, he mused, because something similar had also happened in the movie industry, which overwhelmingly pursued remakes of best-forgotten films, the crappier the better. We live in an era of expensive fetish food, he thought, but it's also an era in which poor, uneducated parents name their babies "DeJohn" because it sounds pungent yet sophisticated, unaware that these associations originated in a series of 80s television commercials for a style of mustard. But all this stuff—high and low, classic and contemporary, good and bad—was muddled and slippery, and everyone was equally clueless. When Grey Poupon actually rolled out a line called "DeJawn's" no one wanted it, not because it was marketed as "Da Street Mustard," but because it was widely considered "too 80s."

As he sat there devouring his bucatini con le polpette, he somehow made an associative leap and found himself wondering if abstract painting wasn't due for a spaghetti-and-meat-balls recuperation. After all, it had enjoyed a history similar to that of Italian-American cuisine. Both had appeared early in the twentieth century and were widely received with suspicion and derision (all that garlic!); both enjoyed a mid-century, early-adopter hipster appeal that inevitably subsided, though not before preparing the ground for a broader mass appeal, which precipitated a fall from grace in the perception of elites, who came to see these phenomena as boring and outmoded. Artists continued to make abstract painting in large numbers, more than ever before, but, as with cooks of spaghetti and meatballs, they were amateur or otherwise removed from the real conversation, not cutting-edge professionals in sophisticated contexts.

Someone, he realized, needed to come along and devise a painterly abstraction that embodied cultural sophistication and "nowness." It had to look classically tasteful, and refer to well-known historical byways, but it also had to be undergirded by utter contemporaneity, either of sensibility or production method. Upcycling was evolving as an idea, and was perhaps itself being upcycled: in the 90s it had promised to help the developing world redeem its waste; in the early 2000s it grew to encompass the food consumption of a smaller set of first worlders with extra time and money, and now it would take on an even more rarified realm of cultural production available to only the wealthy few: fine art. But he knew this was the way of all culture, all trends: a continuous flow from top to bottom and back again, as in a trick fountain.

He went directly home after dinner and drew up a list of working methods and materials, which he would dutifully follow in the months to come. His new painting would be abstract, he decided, because there was a broader audience for that since it matched all décors and lacked uncomfortable associations with real people, events, and political situations. Abstraction in and of itself was uninteresting, of course; the all-important twist here, the redeeming feature, would be the way in which this work was generated, which would expand in importance, endowing the abstraction with meaning. Here there was quite a bit of latitude. Most obviously the painting could be computer-generated, i.e. it might consist of Photoshop manipulations printed out on Belgian linen. It might also be based on chance, which obliterated traditional notions of composition and looked kind of punk: accidental stains on canvas, for example; maybe the oil-pan drippings of a FoxConn machine as it produced iPhones. But then he wondered, did machines drip anymore? Did anything run on oil? Wasn't everything becoming electric? Maybe this avenue was far-fetched. Perhaps the work might play with the medium's material conventions: a "painting" that was in fact composed of vacuum-formed polystyrene: stretcher bars, canvas, markings, and all. Perhaps it would be apparently abstract but actually full of charged referents that became clear only when you inspected the list of materials, i.e. "Coca-Cola spills on Nigerian mud cloth." Or you could hit all four possibilities at once: "FoxConn worker's accidental Coke spills on Nigerian mud cloth, scanned and randomly manipulated in Photoshop, printed on Belgian linen stretched over a vacuum-formed frame."

In truth, the production method hardly mattered, because whichever he chose, the results would look more or less the same: tepid compositions, hesitant and minimal in appearance, kind of pretty and kind of whatever, loaded with back story. The main thing to remember, both in executing this work and appreciating it on the wall, was to be knowing, just like the chefs who composed fancy renditions of red-sauce dishes, and the diners who paid top dollar, and the critics who wrote breezy acknowledgments.

The problem this solved was the persistent issue of taste in painting. In no arena of art-making did taste intrude so assertively and persistently as it did within the practice of painting. Unlike with installation art or conceptual art, where it was difficult to discern or comfortably judge the merits of a work without anxiety, with painting the problem of taste was always right on the surface, in the frame, so to speak. It was okay to point at a painting and assert "that's good" or "that's bad" without feeling like a complete idiot. You couldn't pull that off as easily when faced with a scrappy installation or a conceptual work composed of puns and feints. The problem was, while these artworks got to hover in the grace of doubt and inscrutability, there were far too many observers who were absolutely certain about their judgments as to what constituted good and bad painting, and the history of painting was therefore racked by cyclical surges of interest one way or another, now veering toward "bad" painting that indulged in tastelessness by way of excess, vulgarity, or prurience, now tacking back toward a more graphic, minimal style. Because fashions changed rapidly, a single painting might in twenty years traverse the spectrum of perceived value and then whip back again, and this variability made everyone nervous.

This new style he'd hit on, however, managed to finesse the taste problem by recourse to the old philosophical trick of playing being against seeming. In preparing the work, any number of methods or styles would do, so long as the result was "cool," insuring that the painting would seem classic and minimal, while emanating a vague awareness of rich historical struggle. To an observer it would seem tasteful, but in its apparent lack of concern for traditional skill or labor, its arguably cynical irreverence towards sincerity or depth, its dismissal of history, and its punk attitude, it would be tasteless.

Or perhaps it was the other way around? One couldn't really say, or rather one could, but only with a nagging feeling of insecurity. This instability was catnip to critics and journalists, and they wrote a lot about this new painting, bickering and bemoaning and celebrating. Collectors were thankful for those gusts of language in their as they blew through the auctions. Young artists and students were relieved to get back to doing what they'd secretly wanted to do all along, albeit under the powerful sign of a new contemporaneity. In short, the entire art system latched on to this revived style, much as restaurant-goers had fallen for the re-enchantment of chicken wings.

You could call it Post-Problem Art. It bore a clear if unacknowledged debt to the wonderful ad slogans of the period, like Staples' "That Was Easy," or Amazon's "… And You're Done." Done! An amazing word. Go ahead, have done with all the anguished historical debates over meaning and criticality and politics and taste. In a way, this development recapitulated some of Francis Fukayama's arguments in The End of History, which suggested that the postwar phenomenon of Western liberal democracy and the capitalist market system had established a kind of plateau, from which one could survey the bloody slopes below. It certainly was true that the system Fukayama described was responsible for the floods of cash that coursed through the art system in the first fifteen years of the twenty-first century, a surge that raised all boats high above the oceanic currents of issues. For better or for worse, everyone was in agreement that the market was the only indicator that mattered now. This climate, in which artworks would certainly sell, and the fact of selling was sufficient verification of their quality, made it officially okay simply to "like" a painting. It was no longer necessary to deem a piece interesting, provocative, weird, or complex, and it was almost incomprehensible to hate something because you liked it, or like it because it unsettled you, and all the other ambivalent and twisted ways that people wrestled with the intersection of feelings and aesthetics. You almost didn't need words any more: it was enough to say "That painting is cool," just as you'd say "This spaghetti is awesome." This was a radical development, forgoing any more complicated relationship with art; it was a tremendous ironing-out process. Before you knew it, you'd spy a Malevich and declare, "That guy's a total badass!" Or was it Marinetti who was the badass? On the other hand, wasn't the goal of art not to sharpen your critical knives but to be a fan, to unquestioningly follow your unplumbed desires and inclinations, even if they tended toward things that weren't unambiguously cool or fun, and in this process begin to untangle yourself, to learn from your relationship with art all about experience and history and emotion?

He later realized, once he was showing his new paintings and making good money off them, the genius was that a digitally generated abstract painting was not only leveling in terms of aesthetic taste, but also managed to be both abstract and representational, thus neatly resolving another longstanding problem. The painting was evidently abstract, since it didn't portray anything but an arrangement of computery markings, but at the same time it could be seen as representational: it represented only itself; it represented the digital process of abstraction. This was a direct, materialist portrayal of our historical moment, when the alien productions of computers and their apparent meaninglessness threatened to redefine all traditional human values, including expression itself. If you said these paintings were merely abstract, weren't you by extension implying something similar about every other item or lifestyle concocted by digital means? By playing with these questions, his paintings were capable of reconciling two opposed art-historical alternatives and synthesizing them into some weird, new, Janus-faced form that was capable of looking backward and forward.

These new artworks aroused accusations of cynicism, and he admitted that he was inviting that conversation. But what was cynicism? He defined cynicism as proceeding in a way that you knew to be harmful or morally bankrupt, for reasons of greed or cowardice. This definition handily described the activity of most politicians, bureaucrats, and CEOs. The question was, what if you found such compromised behavior complex and compelling? What if you believed that exploring the world of perceived or actual cynicism was a powerful way to understand our contemporary moment? What if you believed in not believing? Executives or world leaders entertaining this question would rightly be classified as sociopaths, but in the world of art these questions were okay, because suffering wasn't directly involved and any apparent cynicism was likely to be banal and venal, i.e. cashing in by provoking your audience with facile or puerile gestures. He didn't feel that his work belonged in this category. If his paintings were provocative, it was because they drew out acute and omnipresent cultural toxins: anxieties about cynicism and selling out, feelings that had everything to do with how fucked-up it was to live under neoliberal free-market capitalism. He found this exhilarating; he believed in it. And this tangle of contradictions was the greatest thing about art: it always meant the opposite of what you thought it meant, or wanted it to mean. Abstract versus representational; old versus new; pure versus corrupt; tasteful versus tasteless: all artistic values and categories were inherently unstable, and might suddenly swap places.

Recalling his breakthrough into digital painting a decade earlier, he suspected that the moment he'd grasped the fact that digital painting's genius was to reconcile all opposites was the start of his disenchantment with painting, and with "the digital" more generally, which was a condition predicated on reconciliation, leveling, and synthesis. Representational painting was just as banal and outmoded as its old foe abstraction, so why was it interesting to gesture at both of them at once? Who gave a shit? From the point of view of the painting-machine he'd set in motion, all these oppositions of taste and style were merely marketing factors to be coopted, the way Whole Foods might absorb a pair of rival local grocers, only to preserve them as themed deli-counters so as to snare all the old clientele. Either/or was irrelevant, save as a gimmick to capture market share. It was a deep irony that the mechanisms of digital culture were built on a binary fundament even as it sought to eradicate all opposition, contradiction, and friction on an ontological level, steadily reducing human variety to a kind of affirmative mush.

It was not a coincidence that his disenchantment with visual art occurred right around the time when making simplistic, often digitally formulated abstract paintings became suddenly passé, as was discussing them, critiquing them, even satirizing them. These paintings amounted to societal self-portraiture, and an age grows tired of its own face. Casting about for something to do, he found himself newly interested in writing, which, in comparison to art, offered delightfully fresh challenges. He recognized the peculiarity of this step: advanced painting since the Impressionists had jettisoned the aim of recreating a recognizable, narrativized human world and had plunged into abstraction, whereas writing had always remained in thrall to narrative and human psychology. Yes, there had been a Modernist rupture in literature, and the achievements of Woolf, Joyce, and Beckett had been followed by generations of worthies, but the majority of serious literary fiction, and all mass product, went right on pursuing the realistic concerns of "adult literature," in distinction to the serious art world, where there was really no going back to representational realism.

As MoMA's founding doctrine put it: "Modernism is the art that is essentially abstract." The field of contemporary art was activated by cataclysm and relentless progress, while contemporary literature remained relatively staid. This was because it was a mass form, he reasoned: who follows contemporary painting? The few. Who reads contemporary books? Everyone.

At this moment, however, he believed writing culture to be undergoing a tectonic shift and finally detaching itself from traditional narrative. No doubt this development was late in coming, trailing by a century visual art's own decisive mutations, but then again, for all that radical change, where was art now? Wallowing in hush money, patting itself on the back for having finally solved the evolutionary problem of how to be simultaneously good and bad, abstract and representational, popular and cutting edge, with the result that nothing was at stake but auction prices. Even much of the politically engaged work that positioned itself in opposition to "market art" was obsessed with finance, aiming its critical guns at Bitcoin, bank logos, credit-default swaps, and the mythical one percent. Ultimately, this neurotic relationship to the market was an impoverishment.

Writing, on the other hand, which had little connection to money and power, was only broadening its already considerable mass appeal, thanks to the proliferation of texting, tweeting, blogging, and so on, even as those same forces were emancipating writing from its longstanding narrative conventions. In fact, it was less apposite to say "Who reads? Everyone" than "Who writes? Everyone." Maybe this explained why writing was becoming at the same time more popular and more abstract. In short, writing was becoming just plain weirder.

In this situation, and in distinction to the problems of visual art, everything was at stake: "the novel" of course, but also "the field of literature," "the book business," "the future of the word," and communication itself. And no one knew what it meant. You could feel the charge of that anxious energy, a thrumming motor coursing through recent novels and columns and articles and blog posts. He imagined it to be a historical echo of the introduction of film, with all of that medium's looming ramifications for the image, and how odd that this contemporary upset concerned words!

He himself was not a writer, by any stretch. He'd tried it years ago, had even enjoyed success with some oddball critical essays that circulated in art-world contexts, but ultimately he'd dropped it. The problem with the art world was that you were expected to write uneven, eccentric, unresolved texts, it was like being a grad student in an "Experimental Writing" workshop. While many in the art world were wonderfully omnivorous, broad-minded readers, few were any good at writing, including most of the critics and curators, so it was easy to stand out.
Most people didn't even bother with critiques of art-world writing, and for good reason: if people criticized you for being lazy or obscurantist, you could assert that you were being "artistic," that what you'd intended was less lucid rhetoric, more Delphic poesy. Writing these texts was like making films where everything was "a dream sequence," and therefore immune to charges of illogic and sloppiness. At the same time, of course, nothing was at stake.

Excerpt from Seth Price's forthcoming book *Synthetic Piracy*, 2014.

MOUSSE

COMPATABILITY MODE
by Seth Price

Seth Price, *Compatability Mode*, 2012. Courtesy: the artist

Urgency is a wretched condition. I hate that. So it's hard to discuss it here. There are specific sorts of urgency that make sense to me. Familial exigencies, for example. Or, it's November and New York is getting cold, and there are increasing numbers of people without shelter or food, whom you pass every day as it grows colder. Or the opposite is true: it's freakishly warm for November, yet again. Urgency in "culture," on the other hand, seems to be tied to an anxiety about keeping up and not missing out. That mandate might be parsed like this: stay on top of work deadlines, while steadily shunting your worker-self in a direction you sense to be "upward"; maintain a passable grasp on current events; register technological shifts, debates of the moment, new books and movies; and follow the doings and opinions of people to whom you grant authority via steady drips of pictures and remarks. These are marketplace feelings. They're linked to the way desire and taste and identification are swapped and leveraged. This probably used to be more of a Western metropolitan thing, but digital culture has helped to transubstantiate the market into a gas, it gets to be some kind of Terran atmospheric condition. In terms of cultural urgency, the obvious forerunner was fashion, or what has become the global fashion system, which compels you to internalize subtle shifts in the atmosphere, and where seduction plus insecurity yields the sense of urgency. It's banal to observe that fashion is a "control structure," and that kind of phrase makes it sound doomy when it's also a source of pleasure and play, but there it is. Maybe urgency too often boils down to chasing fashion. Then there's digital culture, which is about staying abreast of new products and current updates, and also achieving the state of being able to tap into your shit at all conceivable times and in all possible places, in order to simultaneously render every facet of your selfhood as accessible and as secure as possible. Which is paradoxical, and more interesting for that. But these anxieties only end up calling The Cloud down upon us. The Cloud represents the air-tight control structure as platinum-certified MBA turd. The dream of the market is that if everything can be reduced to a common currency, i.e. binary code, this allows effortless transmission with no value lost in the conversion, with the aim that anything, virtual or material, may eventually be frictionlessly exchanged for absolutely anything else. But not by you. And then there's the art world. The urgency that we deserve revolves around knowledge and competition and the pursuit of intellectual trends, but sometimes it is just worrying over What Are The Wealthy Into, which is a dead end, or What Are The Youth Up To, which elicits a reaction along the lines of: "We're pleased to have the sinking feeling that they're up to something important but unintelligible." Crowded from behind even as your face mashes up on the out-door. I do believe that the urge to keep up with exhibitions and events, through travel and participation and trade mags, is ultimately a professional, or even a professionalizing, quality. But I don't see myself as a professional, and I don't think art is a job.

75

L'urgenza è una condizione maledetta. La odio. Per questo mi è così difficile parlarne qui. Ci sono tipi specifici di urgenza che capisco bene. Le esigenze familiari, ad esempio. Oppure, è novembre e a New York comincia a fare freddo, e man mano che la temperatura scende, si vedono ogni giorno sempre più persone senza tetto, né cibo. Oppure capita il contrario: fa un caldo inverosimile a novembre, di nuovo. L'urgenza nella "cultura", invece, sembra più legata all'ansia di stare al passo con ciò che succede senza perdersi nulla. È una missione che si potrebbe esplicitare così: rispettare le scadenze di lavoro e al contempo orientare la propria identità professionale in una direzione che deve essere "in ascesa"; mantenersi passabilmente informati sui fatti del giorno; registrare i cambiamenti tecnologici, i dibattiti del momento, i film e i libri in uscita; e seguire le azioni e le opinioni delle persone considerate autorevoli attraverso somministrazioni costanti di immagini e di dichiarazioni. È la percezione del mercato, che registra i flussi di scambio e acquisizione dei valori del desiderio, del gusto e dell'identificazione. Probabilmente in passato era un fenomeno più tipico del contesto metropolitano occi-

dentale ma la cultura digitale ha contribuito a trasformare il mercato in un gas, per cui è diventato una sorta di condizione atmosferica terrestre. Quando si parla di urgenza culturale, l'ovvia antesignana è la moda, o ciò che è diventato il sistema moda globale, che ci obbliga a interiorizzare i mutamenti sottili nell'atmosfera, e dove la seduzione sommata all'insicurezza produce senso di urgenza. Suona banale definire la moda una "struttura di controllo": è un'etichetta che la fa apparire oscura mentre è anche una fonte di grande piacere e divertimento, ma tant'è. Forse l'urgenza si riduce troppo spesso a inseguire la moda. Poi c'è la cultura digitale, che vuol dire stare al passo con i nuovi prodotti e gli aggiornamenti, e anche conseguire una capacità di connessione con le proprie menate sempre e ovunque allo scopo di rendere al contempo qualunque aspetto di sé massimamente accessibile ma sicuro. Il che è paradossale, e proprio per questo tanto più interessante. Ma queste ansie non fanno altro che richiamare la "Nuvola" su di noi. La "Nuvola" rappresenta la struttura di controllo ermetica in quanto stronzata certificata dalle massime istituzioni finanziarie. Il sogno del mercato è ridurre qualunque cosa a una valuta unica, per esempio il codice binario, per consentire una trasmissione

facilitata al massimo senza perdita di valore alcuno nella conversione, con l'obiettivo di rendere in futuro qualunque cosa, virtuale o materiale, interscambiabile senza difficoltà con qualunque altra cosa. Ma non direttamente da te. E poi c'è il mondo dell'arte. L'urgenza che ci meritiamo ha a che fare con la conoscenza e la competizione e il perseguimento di tendenze intellettuali, ma qualche volta vuol dire anche solo preoccuparsi di Cosa Piace ai Ricchi, il che è un vicolo cieco, o Cosa Fanno i Giovani, che suscita una reazione del tipo: "Siamo lieti di avere la spiacevole sensazione che stiano facendo qualcosa di importante ma incomprensibile". Spinti dalla folla che si accalca da dietro con la faccia ormai spiaccicata contro la porta d'uscita. Credo che l'urgenza di stare al passo con esposizioni ed eventi, attraverso viaggi e partecipazioni e riviste specializzate, sia alla fine una qualità professionale, o addirittura professionalizzante. Ma io non mi considero un professionista, e non penso che l'arte sia una professione.

OCTOBER

What to Do with Pictures

DAVID JOSELIT

> *"It's an amazing customer imprint," Mr. Ballmer
> said. "And Skype is a verb, as they say."[1]*

In 1967–68 Richard Serra prepared a famous list of verbs.[2] This compendium of actions—"to roll, to create, to fold, to store, to bend, to shorten, to twist, to dapple, to crumple, to shave," and so on and so on—implies matter as its proper "direct object." You can roll, fold, store, bend, shorten, twist, dapple, and shave lead, for instance, or crumple paper.[3] This litany of verbs also includes two sustained "lapses" into nouns, including many gerunds (whose grammatical function is to transform verbs into nouns): "of tension, of gravity, of entropy, of nature, of grouping, of layering, of felting . . ." If the infinitive verb marks a time outside of action ("to rotate" suggests a possibility that need not be acted upon), Serra's nouns imply the dilated moment of an unfolding event—to be "of tension," for instance, means that force is being or has been applied. Indeed, Serra's early sculptures might be defined as matter marked by the exercise of force.[4]

Serra's verb list furnishes a terse blueprint for post-Minimalist sculpture. But it also implies a general theory of transitive art—of art produced through the exertion of force on something, or someone. Since what counts in transitive procedures is not the nature of the material acted upon (such as lead or rubber) but the generation of form through action, Serra's list can easily be repurposed

1.   Andrew Ross Sorkin and Steve Lohr, "Microsoft to Buy Skype for $8.5 Billion," *New York Times* (May 10, 2011).

2.   The list was only published in 1972. See Richard Serra, "Verb List, 1967–68," in Richard Serra, *Writings/Interviews* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), pp. 3–4.

3.   On the other hand, "to create" seems an exceptionally general action smuggled into this list of specific operations: like the last verb in Serra's long list—"to continue"—it is a meta-procedure.

4.   Serra is by no means the first artist to propose a transitive model of art wherein force generates form. A modern genealogy for such practices could easily be established that would span the manipulation of readymades (where perhaps "inscription" takes the place of "force") to Jasper Johns, whose paintings index the residue of actions taken upon or "in" them, to the various practices of the late 1950s and '60s in which scoring movements or actions was fundamental, including Happenings and Fluxus. The particular virtue of Serra's list is how clearly, directly, and uncompromisingly it asserts a "transitive" position.

through a simple change of "direct objects." Relational Aesthetics, for instance, might be said to consist of learning how "to scatter, to arrange, to repair, to discard, to pair, to distribute, to surfeit" groups of people. Or, as I will argue below, the verbs "to enclose, to surround, to encircle, to hide, to cover, to wrap, to dig, to tie, to bind, to weave, to join, to match, to laminate, to bond, to hinge, to mark, to expand" may be applied to the behavior of pictures within digital economies. Such substitutions mark a shift from the manipulation of material (paint, wood, lead, paper, chalk, video, etc.) to the management (or mismanagement) of populations of persons and/or pictures. Under such conditions, "formatting"—the capacity to configure data in multiple possible ways—is a more useful term than "medium," which, all heroic efforts to the contrary, can seldom shed its intimate connection to matter (paint, wood, lead, paper, chalk, video, etc.).

Formatting is as much a political as an aesthetic procedure because the same image may easily be adduced as "evidence" in support of various and even contradictory propositions—determining a format thus introduces an ethical choice about how to produce intelligible information from raw data.[5] In digital economies, value accrues not solely from production—the invention of content—but from the extraction of meaningful patterns from profusions of existing content. As the term "data mining" suggests, raw data is now regarded as a "natural," or at least a naturalized, resource to be mined, like coal or diamonds. But unlike coal and diamonds, with their differing degrees of scarcity, data exists in unwieldy and ever-increasing quantities—it is harvested with every credit-card transaction, click of a cursor, and phone call we make. This reservoir of tiny, inconsequential facts, which is sublime in its ungraspable enormity, is meaningless in its disorganized state. Since such data is both superabundant and ostensibly trivial, what gives it value are the kinds of formats it can assume, which may be as wide-ranging as marketing profiles and intelligence on terrorism. Such a shift from producing to formatting content leads to what I call the "epistemology of search," where knowledge is produced by discovering and/or constructing meaningful patterns—formats—from vast reserves of raw data, through, for instance, the algorithms of search engines like Google or Yahoo. Under these conditions, any quantum of data might lend itself to several, possibly contradictory, formats.

The artist Seth Price has implicitly articulated—though never, like Serra, explicitly published—his own "list" of transitive actions appropriate to the epistemology of search. I will focus on three of Price's "routines"—or procedures of formatting—each of which lends itself to subdivision: "to disperse," "to profile," and "of effects." Together, they sketch an answer to the question: what to do with pictures?

5.   For me, one of the most powerful examples of the consequences of data formatting is Colin Powell's presentation of supposed evidence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq to the U.N. in 2003. The question of evidence and documentary truth-value has been a major one in recent art practices. For an important account of this, see Carrie Lambert-Beatty, "Make-Believe: Parafiction and Plausibility," *October* 129 (Summer 2009), pp. 51–84.

To Disperse

Price's best-known work of criticism is probably his 2002 book *Dispersion*, which, like many of his texts, is freely downloadable, making it a model of dispersion as well as a theoretical account of it. In a sense, the title says it all: to disperse is to shift emphasis from creating new content to distributing existing content. As Price writes, "Suppose an artist were to release the work directly into a system that depends on reproduction and distribution for sustenance, a model that encourages contamination, borrowing, stealing, and horizontal blur."[6] Several aspects of this passage repay close reading: first, for Price, dispersal diminishes rather than enhances a work's value. As he puts it in a subsequent passage, "what if [the work] is instead dispersed and reproduced, its value approaching zero as its accessibility rises?"[7] In fact, while it seems logical that scarcity should enhance art's value (and conversely, that accessibility would cause it to drop to zero), this presumption is incorrect when it comes to actual contemporary image economies (including the art market),

Seth Price. Dispersion. *2002–.*

6.   Seth Price, *Dispersion* (2002), downloaded from www.distributedhistory.com, n.p.
7.   Ibid.
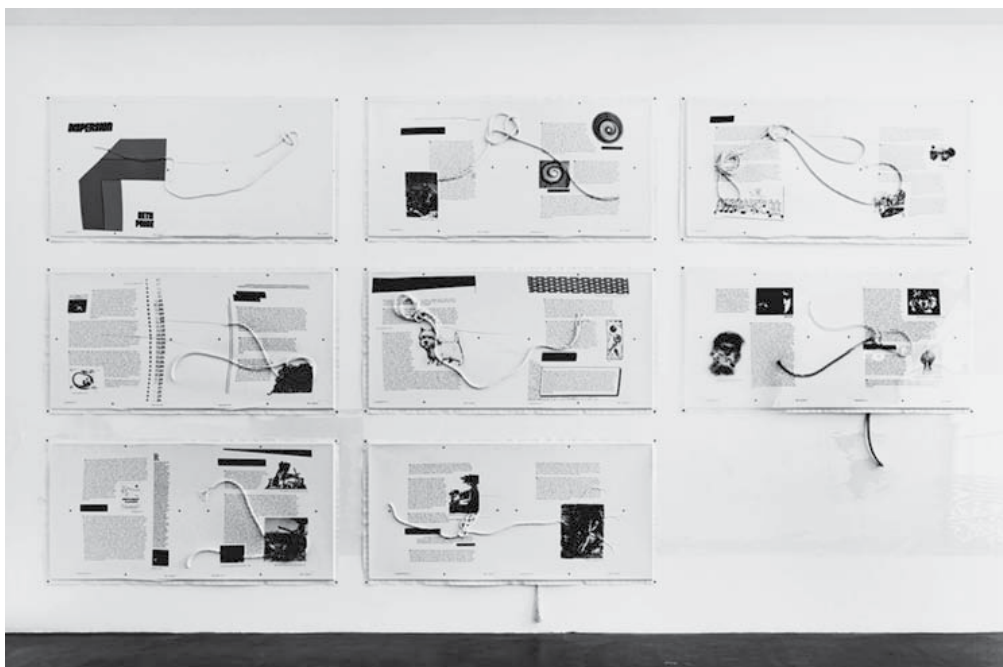
Price. Hostage Video Still
with Time Stamp. *2005–.*

where the massive distribution of reproductions—whether of the Mona Lisa or Lady Gaga—is precisely what confers value. As Price defines it, however, dispersion is a drag on circulation, a form of counter-distribution, where value is purposely diminished as opposed to accumulated through the dissemination of images.

A list of three transitive actions is included in the passage I quoted above: contamination, borrowing, and stealing. One possible pairing of these three refers to destructive events (i.e., contamination and stealing), and another indicates the illicit or licit transfer of property (i.e., stealing and its innocent twin, borrowing). According to these characterizations, Price sees dispersion as a mode of transfer whose poles are marked by innocuous exchanges (borrowing) and their virulent converse (contamination). As the latter term suggests, dispersion can also carry a biopolitical connotation. And indeed, Price declares it to be "a system that depends on reproduction and distribution for *sustenance*" (my emphasis). Networks, in other words, provide life support for the individual images that inhabit them; and as in the human body, failure of the circulatory system will lead to death.

Finally, Price introduces the condition of "horizontal blur." Blur occurs when something or someone moves too fast from one place to another for it to register optically as a bounded form, making it a privileged figure of transitive action. Price stages such blur spatially in an ongoing series of works begun in 2005 titled *Hostage Video Still with Time Stamp* made on unfurled rolls of clear polyester film, known colloquially as Mylar, upon which are silkscreened degraded reproductions of an image taken from the Internet of the severed head of the American Jewish businessman Nicholas Berg, who was decapitated by Islamic militants. In these pieces, the physical effects of dispersion are manifested in three ways: first, a computer file—the germ of an artwork, as in many of Price's pieces—is rendered nearly illegible, the result of several generations of reproduction, as Price digitalizes, compresses, downloads, blows up, and then screen-prints original footage. Second, while bolts of the printed Mylar are sometimes unrolled flush to the wall, at some point in their installation the material is twisted or tied into crumpled configurations that serve as a spatial metaphor for the ostensibly "immaterial" traffic of images online—as though successive screen views on a monitor had piled up continuously like a disorderly comic strip rather than being constantly "refreshed." Finally, third, the grisly and horrible physical violation of

Price. Hostage Video Still
with Time Stamp. *2005–.*

Berg is an explicitly biological form of "dispersion," in which a head is parted from its torso. The catastrophe of his decapitation results in the abject wasting of a body. It is the object of a perverse fascination for the artist (and the viewer) that verges on the erotic. As Price writes in another context, "Locating pleasure in benign decay is a perversion, for these structures are useless and wasteful, a spilling of seed, like gay sex, like gay sex."[8] While some gay people might object to this characterization (I am not among them), Price's romanticizing (and even caricaturizing) rendering of gay desire nonetheless asserts something important: a nonproductive relationship to distribution, the violence of which is aggressively expressed by Berg's decapitation.[9]

8.   Seth Price, *Was ist "Los"* [a.k.a. Décor *Holes*] (2003–05), downloaded from www.distributedhistory.com.
9.   In an era when demands for marriage rights have become the signature issue within gay activism, the characterization of "gay sex" as nonproductive feels a little nostalgic. I, for one, however, agree that one of the strongest political accomplishments of some gay and much queer activism is a critique of normative forms of *production* for which biological reproduction often served as a privileged model.

The normative goal of distribution is to saturate a market. Once the dissemination of an image reaches a tipping point, it sustains itself as an icon (celebrity is the paradigmatic model for self-perpetuating images). Price, on the other hand, represents the failure to saturate, a perversion of distribution he calls "dispersion." Dispersion is slow, while standard forms of commercial distribution are fast. As Price puts it, "Slowness works against all of our prevailing urges and requirements: it is a resistance to the contemporary mandate of speed. Moving with the times places you in a blind spot: if you're part of the general tenor, it's difficult to add a dissonant note."[10] Staging different rates of circulation is one type of routine appropriate to art in digital economies—it's a tactic for escaping the "blind spot" that results from moving along at the same rate as the market. Forms of critique that once would have been conducted through dissonant content are here reinvented as variable velocities of circulation. In other words, the core of Price's project has less to do with what he represents—even when that representation is inflammatory, as with the Nick Berg decapitation—and more to do with the transitive actions to which he subjects this content. In Serra's art, transitivity is expressed as force—the force necessary to mold matter. But, following an important distinction that Hannah Arendt makes between violence as the exertion of force and power as the effect of human consensus, we can recognize a difference between Serra and Price's transitive art.[11] The latter's object is populations of images rather than quantities of matter: he seeks to format (and not merely "reveal") image-power. One way he does this is to slow down the circulation of images[12]: in *Hostage Video Still with Time Stamp,* Price curbs the frictionless motion and instantaneous spatial jumps characteristic of navigation on the Internet and allows them to pile up in unruly masses; the gruesome decapitation he represents is also the figure of an acephalous media.

To Profile

There are few things more ubiquitous in contemporary life than profiles: some are composed voluntarily to be posted on social-media sites, but many, and perhaps most, are involuntary, like the data trails left by every purchase, cursor click, and mobile phone call one makes. Silhouettes have existed for ages, but profiling is modern—dating from the nineteenth century.[13] A silhouette is a bounded

10.   Price, *Dispersion,* n.p.
11.   Arendt makes this distinction in her important essay "On Violence," in Hannah Arendt, *Crises of the Republic* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1972). In this essay, she writes, "*Power* corresponds to the human ability not just to act but to act in concert. Power is never the property of an individual; it belongs to a group and remains in existence only so long as the group keeps together" (p. 143). On the contrary, "*Violence . . .* is distinguished by its instrumental character. Phenomenologically, it is close to strength, since the implements of violence, like all other tools, are designed and used for the purpose of multiplying natural strength until, in the last stage of their development, they can substitute for it" (p. 145).
12.   In my book *Feedback: Television Against Democracy* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2007), I refer to this as "slowing down the trajectory."
13.   On nineteenth-century forms of aesthetic profiling, see Allan Sekula, "The Body and the Archive," *October* 39 (Winter 1986), pp. 3–64.

shape that sharply delineates an inside from an outside: the information it carries lies entirely in partitioning a field. The verb "to profile" denotes the imposition of such a finite shape onto a set of perceived statistical regularities, as when scientists plot a straight line through an irregular array of data points, disciplining and abstracting inchoate (or sometimes merely imagined) patterns. The implicit violence of such projections is conveyed by the connotation of profiling in police work, where persons who belong to particular groups—be they organized by ethnicity, age, economic status, or gender—are believed to be more likely to commit a crime and consequently are more frequently treated as criminals. Profiling imposes a profile on populations of data (including visual data).

In his highly inventive practice, Price has developed two tactics related to profiling. In one, which is closely related to his strategies of dispersal, he makes large centrifugal works generated from small "icons" drawn from the Internet—each picturing a gesture of touching such as lighting a cigarette, kissing, or writing. These motifs emerge unsteadily, like optical puzzles, on blank expanses of wall bounded by several irregularly shaped "continents" of rare wood veneers laminated behind clear acrylic plastic. Because these giant puzzle pieces, which resemble landmasses in a wall map, are themselves free-form, it is not easy to recognize—let alone to remember— the motif they partially delineate (I admit that the first time I saw one, I failed to

Price. Untitled. *2008.*

recognize the generating kernel at all). Michael
Newman has beautifully described the effect of
these works as that of a "'frame' [that] invites the
viewer to project an image into the emptiness, and
this emptiness bleeds into the surrounding space of
the wall with an extension that is potentially infi-
nite."[14] As in Price's model of dispersion, where the
circulation of images is slowed down, in this series
of pieces the normative centripetal logic of profil-
ing (which is aimed, as I have argued, at
crystallizing a "concentrated" profile from an amor-
phous field of data) is opposed by a centrifugal
form of dispersal, where the possibility of generat-
ing an intelligible silhouette is interrupted, slowed,
and possibly even arrested. At the same time, the
appropriated "icons" upon which they are based—
all intimate moments of touching—deracinate
face-to-face contact by transforming tactility into
absence. Needless to say, this is precisely an effect of
digital communication.

Price's second approach to profiling seems
the opposite of his first in that it represents whole
as opposed to fragmentary objects. A series of vacuum-form works are molded
over things or human body parts (rope, breasts, fists, flowers, and bomber jack-
ets); sometimes they literally encase readymade lengths of rope that might spill
out below the vacuum-form surface. These illusionistic reliefs adopt the logic of
packaging, where a plastic shell molded to a commodity's contours both protects
that commodity and constitutes its seductive surface. But while these profiles may
be "whole," they are hollow—functioning as what Price likes to call a "hole." In
this sense, they resemble the wood and acrylic wall pieces, where form is orga-
nized around a structuring absence. Indeed, the "hole" for Price is precisely not
an absence, in the sense of a passive empty space, but an "event" within a rich sur-
face or field of data. A profile is simultaneously empty and full, a hole and a
whole. As he states in his largely appropriated book, *How to Disappear in America*:

> There is the possibility that in the future people may be identifiable
> by their purchasing habits. Granted the point-of-sale data collected by
> computers would need to be immense, yet eventually pattern-recogni-
> tion software may some day be able to provide authorities with per-
> haps 100 of the best possible "hits" on people matching your known
> buying habits. When—if ever—that becomes a reality, you can be sure
> you won't know about it until it's shown on cable television . . .

14.   Michael Newman, "Seth Price's Operations," in *Price, Seth* (Zurich: JRP/Ringier Kunstverlag,
2010), p. 44.

Price. Cherries. *2011.*
Opposite page: Price. Vintage
Bomber. *2008.*

So alter your buying habits. You need to discard as many predictable patterns as possible. One of the most common mistakes is maintaining old habits. If you're a smoker, stop. If you don't smoke, start. If you enjoy hot and spicy foods, stop purchasing those items and change to mild foods. If you frequent bars, stop. This may seem an unusual step but patterns are predictable. Break them.[15]

The theory of profiling is that human subjectivity is a pattern bereft of interiority. The unconscious is a hole.

Of Effects

In *Digital Video Effect: "Holes"* (2003) and *Digital Video Effect: "Spills"* (2004), Price frames found JPEGs and video footage with digital masking effects that generate autonomous "events"; a variety of "holes" (such as round paper punch-outs) open in a black ground to reveal pinpoint views of a horrific image that is only revealed in its entirety momentarily, when the different views fuse together for a split second. A video image spills onto black ground and is succeeded by black amoebic forms that spill back onto the image, rendering it a kind of liquid. The

15.   Seth Price, *How to Disappear in America* (New York: Leopard Press, 2008), pp. 37–38.

Price. Digital Video Effect:
"Holes." *2003.*

ultimate expression of this amorphous, aqueous (literally mercurial) sort of image comes in *Untitled Film, Right* (2006), an endless four-second loop of a wave purchased as stock footage that is nauseating yet mesmerizing. Tim Griffin has described Price's effects in the following terms:
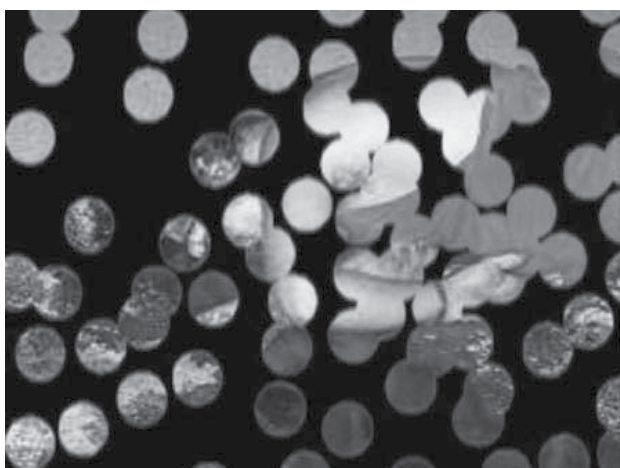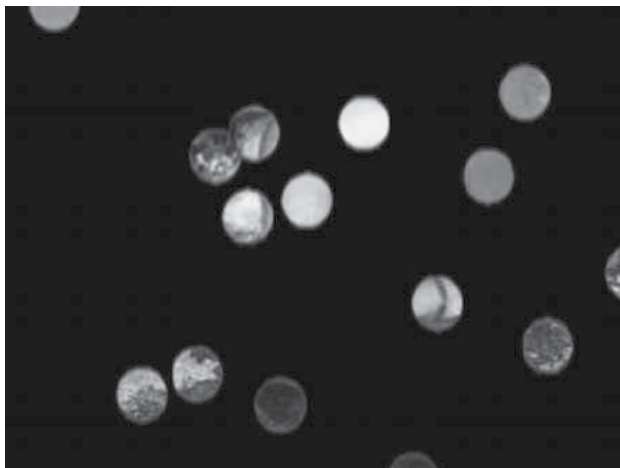
> as a simulation device, the "effect" posits a kind of chronology where there is none—suggesting some precipitant action responsible for the visual and aural phenomena taking place before the eye and ear. The "effect" creates nothing so much as a rhetorical hole in time, but only in order to fill that hole in advance with some false history or phantom memory for the individual viewer . . . [16]

Griffin's association of effects with an absent or invisible agency—a hole in time—is not only essential for understanding Price's work, it also points to a broader tendency in contemporary sculpture. In the open "scenarios" of artists such as Liam Gillick, Pierre Huyghe, and Rirkrit Tiravanija, who design environments that may or may not be activated through the presence of scripted or unscripted events, spatial structures are consecrated to hosting social effects. Such principles are also present in the new modes of sculptural composition exemplified by Isa Genzken and Rachel Harrison, where tangential connections between things reverse the centripetal effect of earlier twentieth-century montage and assemblage (to use terms I have applied already to Price), in favor of centrifugal tornadoes of divergent associations.

I wish to supplement Griffin's definition with two additional valences of effect. First, "special effects," as practiced by Hollywood cinema, render narrative as pure motion—often a virtually unbroken trajectory initiated in the opening scenes of a film and coming to rest only with the last credit. Blockbuster plots are

16.   Tim Griffin, "The Personal Effects of Seth Price," *Artforum* 47, no. 10 (Summer 2009), p. 288.

Price. Digital Video Effect:
"Holes." *2003.*

David Joselit
What to Do with Pictures
October, N°138, Fall, 2011, p.81-94.

Price.
Redistribution.
2007–.

David Joselit
What to Do with Pictures
October, N°138, Fall, 2011, p.81-94.

no more than conventional grids: what matters are the texture, velocity, and point of view with which spectators are carried through a standardized sequence of events. Such movies are not so much watched as navigated—like computer games where motion is frictionless, continuous, and defiant of gravity. The "effect," as Hollywood renders it, is almost pure transitivity in the absence of a direct object (unless that object is the spectator herself). Second, effects are literally a posteriori. They are, to put it plainly, consequences that cannot be fully anticipated during the phase of aesthetic production. And here, too, we may note a wider aesthetic shift. Artists like Price are primarily interested not in producing new content but in submitting existing pictures (moving and still) to various "ecological" conditions in order to see how they behave. This is why he can call *Redistribution* (2007–), a videotaped version of the kind of artist's talk given at art schools or museums, a work: in his practice, works are inextricable from their dissemination. It is also why he habitually reframes and remixes his texts, music, and

Price. Untitled Film (Right). *2006.*

images, as well as making many of them available online on his website. A contemporary art devoted to circulation, is, of course, a creature of a specific ecology: the market. But instead of either giving up or selling out, Price, like more and more artists, games the market by surfing it. This leads to all kinds of effects: variable velocities, catastrophic jamming, viral proliferation, etc., etc. [17]

17. This is the model of aesthetic politics I attempt to delineate in *Feedback*.

Coda: Image Power

If one subscribes to Arendt's definition of power as the effect of a public, then populations of images might possess their own species of image-power—by saturating markets, on the one hand, or "going viral" on the other. This implies a shift in how the relationship between politics and art is conceived. Indeed, significant changes have occurred in this critical relationship over the past century—from avant-garde modes of revolution in the early twentieth century to postmodern, or neo-avant-garde, critique in the late twentieth century, to what I would call image-power in the early twenty-first century (a time when divisions between commercial and fine-art images are more and more difficult to draw). This is an art devoted to seizing circulation as a technology of power: *to disperse, to profile,* and *of effects.*

ArtReview

Seth Price
Miam!

Chantal Crousel, Paris
12 March – 30 April

Thing in a Thing, 2011, UV-cured inkjet on
PETG vacuum-formed over rope, 114 x 118 cm

Miam! (literally 'yummy!'), Seth Price's first solo show in France, is a collection of a dozen vacuum-formed wall pieces (all works 2011), in which knotted lengths of rope are preserved in painted plastic. Most of these 'assemblage paintings' (if we shall categorise them as such; after all, they do hang on walls) present abstract bursts of colours or monochromes that were applied after the ropes were randomly thrown into the composition, except a few that display some figurative content – drawings of the artist that he digitally enlarged and printed on plastic sheets before the vacuum-forming packaging process, and that represent satirical sketches of characters eating, such as in *Shrimp*, *Indian Summer* and *Spago* (all works 2011). The show is completed by an audio piece, *Language Lesson*, a four-minute recording of a tale written and narrated by Price himself, and played continuously within the exhibition space along with projected subtitles (in French). The fable tells the story of a girl who falls under the spell of an evil woman in the middle of the woods and gets rescued by a man, who sets the witch's legs on fire. Incidentally (and this isn't as trivial as you may think within the broader context of the show), the lady's limbs happen to become some charred wooden stumps that sketch shapes and figures on the ground while she runs after the two fugitives.

For someone who isn't already familiar with the New York-based artist's body of works – which includes media productions with video and music, wall pieces using vacuum-form technology, drawing, performance and most importantly writing (his repeatedly revised essay *Dispersion*, 2002–), which has undoubtedly contributed to Price's great critical reception within the artworld) – his first solo show in Paris doesn't reflect much (at least at first glance) of the aesthetic challenge that his theoretical and plastic investigation of contemporary art and media distribution has presented since the beginning of his career. Nevertheless, considering Price's overall oeuvre, some recurrent aspects of his inquiry can be found in the interaction between the tale and the vacuum-formed assemblage paintings on show. What fuels his practice is seemingly the notions of boundless adaptability and recreation, which for that matter inform not only the elastic nature of plastic but also and more significantly our contemporary culture within the mutable form of web-based archives (where data can always be added, modified or removed). Accordingly, the fake or foolish origin that the fable suggests, by simple juxtaposition, for the sketches and colourful shapes spreading from one plastic wall piece to another finally strikes one as a sarcastic and brilliant irresolution.

In rejecting the notion of finitude, even the notion of authorship or clear origin (in this regard, his many collaborations with Reena Spaulings, the dealer/artist/gallery who represents him in New York, speak for themselves), Price systematically leaves holes (like empty packaging blisters) within his works that can be filled with false history over time through the spectator's experience or the evolution of the artist's thinking. Indeed, within the context of his show at Crousel, whether the drawings and tale originate from the artist himself matters very little, for only the continuing mythologies on which the artist's work is grounded must come forward. Leaving you with this thought: *bon appétit*! *Violaine Boutet de Monvel*

Violaine Boutet de Monvel
Seth Price, Miam!
ArtReview, N°51, Summer, 2011.