Seth Price

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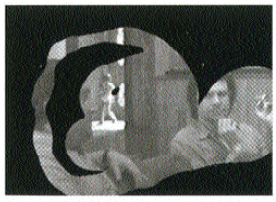
In his illustrated text *Dispersion*, 2002—which appeared in the catalogue of the 2003 Ljubljana Biennial and has since been taught in art and critical-theory classes at Columbia, Yale, NYU, and MIT—New York–based artist Seth Price re-poses Duchamp's question "Can one make works of art which are not 'of art'?" He rehearses some of the well-known problems that have attended efforts to answer this question—in particular, Conceptual art's tendency to be institutionally recouped as portable, saleable documentation. Taking up this line of thinking, Price's show at Reena Spaulings in New York last fall included a melancholy yet hilarious bit of haute-Conceptual "documentation," a grainy, grayed-out video titled *Digital Video Effect: "Spills,"* 2004, playing on a monitor in its original box on the floor. Its footage, shot by Joan Jonas in the early '70s, shows Richard Serra, Robert Smithson, and dealer Joseph Helman discussing art and money in somebody's sunny living room. Playing paterfamilias to an excitable Serra and a phlegmatic Smithson, Helman tries to wise up the young idealists: "Bischofberger isn't paying that price because he wants Bruce Nauman to be happier!" Meanwhile, little children run in and out, and the camera cuts away to Nancy Holt, quietly watching the conversation. It's a '70s *Déjeuner sur l'herbe*, except that Price has introduced an animation, the creeping black "spill" of the title, which washes over the scene in amorphous blobs, occasionally obliterating it entirely with the exception of some pointed detail like a Warhol silk screen on one wall.



In light of *"Spills,"* much of the rest of Price's show read as a motley homage to some of the failed or half-fulfilled promises of the art of the '60s and '70s. A sheet of cracked, greenish safety glass was folded like a piece of fabric over an old garment rack, and four slabs of what looked like silver-veined black marble (but which turned out to be enlarged scans of sliced bread archivally printed and face-mounted to glass) leaned against a wall: a wry twist on the raw materials of Smithson's displacements? There were also rectangular sheets of white, flesh-toned, or blue vacuum-formed plastic from which protruded the embossed forms of fists or breasts. Tacked to the wall and literally rough around the edges, these objects, which hovered somewhere between painting and sculpture, reiterated Pop and Minimalism's shared seriality and mimicry of mass-production techniques—though in what seemed a deliberately downgraded, off-kilter way, like Xerox copies several generations removed from their originals. (Some of these works, and similar ones that feature castings of crumpled bomber jackets, are currently in "Greater New York 2005" at P.S. 1).

But Price is not an elegist of art history; in *Dispersion*, he calls for an art that may give Duchamp's question "new life" by positioning itself "within the material and discursive technologies of distributed media. Distributed media can be defined as social information circulating in theoretically unlimited quantities in the common market, stored or accessed via portable devices." At Reena Spaulings, examples of such devices—CDs—were on sale for ten dollars apiece on a table along with T-shirts and other merchandise, while more of them were stacked up on carousels and used as minipedestals supporting the scans of bread. Unlabeled and shiny black, they were like dark inversions of the gaudily packaged pirated movies spread out for sale on blankets in subways and on street corners. As the checklist disclosed,

In this ongoing series, writers are invited to introduce the work of artists at the beginning of their careers.

This page, top: **Seth Price, *Digital Video Effect: "Spills,"* 2004.** Installation view, Reena Spaulings, New York, 2004. Bottom: **Seth Price, *Digital Video Effect: "Spills,"* 2004,** still from a color video, 10 minutes. Opposite page, top: **Seth Price, *Painting Sites*, 2001,** still from a color video, 18 minutes. Bottom: **Seth Price, *24–7 What Should I Wear Today*, 2005,** high-impact polystrene, 51 x 36".

they contained footage of hostages being executed by Islamic militants; extracted from the Internet with the aid of an IT specialist, the footage had been formatted so that, when the CD is viewed, the image appears upside down. Sinister in their self-containment, they were the proverbial black box at the heart of the show, the unassimilable device whose inner workings are unknowable—the thing *not* to be looked at. If this was a proposition for an art "not 'of art,'" it was an extremely ambivalent one—and one that complicated the reading not only of *Dispersion* but of Price's video and sculptures.

"Title Variable," 2001–2005, a series of four CDs that Price has released, manifests a similar ambivalence, though one couched in less dire terms. Each zeroes in on a moment during which musical production technology was undergoing a significant shift: The first entry in the series, for example, anthologizes early video-game sound tracks, while the third revisits the moribund mid-'80s interregnum between punk and techno, with contributions from Ministry, Front 242, and other industrial acts. Using a new form, the digital mixtape, to ravish the faint charms of the recent past, the CDs seem designed to be folded into pop music's ongoing revivalist project, in which every style and movement, no matter how arcane, appears destined for rehabilitation. But, as if to confound the completist impulse that underlies this all-encompassing nostalgia, Price has released each compilation in various versions, adding or deleting tracks and rearranging their sequences in a process of perpetual revision, and also frequently changing the CDs' titles (*Industrial Fist*, one of the monikers given to the third entry in the series, being a pitch-perfect example). The project pushes the rationale of repackaging—in which products are recontextualized so that they can be resold—past the point of commercial utility: The complete "Title Variable" discography becomes a kind of impossible archive, ultimately inaccessible to consumers. It's a document that could exist in theory but not in fact.

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In addition to the pop songs of "Title Variable" and the hostage videos on the CDs at Reena Spaulings, Price has based a number of works around preexisting cultural artifacts. A partial list of these would include: Martha Rosler artworks (in the deadpan video *Two for One*, 2002, which simply presents a portion of Rosler's own video typology of mid-'80s commercials, *Global Taste, A Meal in Three Courses*, 1985); horrifically gory, possibly faked forensic photographs downloaded from websites (in the video *Digital Video Effect: "Holes,"* 2003); and paintings (both masterpieces and thrift-store monstrosities, combined in a montage in the video *Painting Sites*, 2001). But the neoappropriationist label risks reductiveness; it might be more apt to say that Price's practice constitutes a kind of limit case, one in which Nicolas Bourriaud's concept of the artist as a postproducer, promiscuously sampling and remixing culture, is radicalized and emptied of its redemptive implications. His mixtapes are antitaste; his videos are anticinematic, eschewing fancy camera footwork in favor of cheesy digital-editing effects. Working in an expanded range of media and subtly deranging the strategies of mass-cultural production (repackaging, piracy), he stakes out resistant, rather than recuperative, positions within the so-called space of flows—the partly virtual, partly physical field in which information, culture, and capital circulate under ever-increasing state and corporate control.

"Jihad and McWorld are the two sides of the same coin, Jihad is already McJihad," the philosopher Slavoj Žižek has proposed. Price's "samples" are fragments extracted from this collapsed, impacted cultural space. As he observes in *Dispersion*, the "slick production strategies" of the execution video produced by the Islamic militants who beheaded journalist Daniel Pearl "seem to draw on American political campaign advertisements." Proceeding from a cultural logic that erases categorical distinctions and transforms antinomies into collaborations, Price treats content as "content" in the commercial sense of the word—that is, as an interchangeable unit, a kind of shadow currency. Meaning is pushed outward centrifugally—dispersed, as it were—onto the interventions and transactions carried out not only by the artist but by viewers, critics, distributors, gallerists, consumers. In a sense, this is art for a culture in which all messages self-destruct. The mission, Price seems to say, is to find legibility in the negative spaces left behind. □

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