

# SETH



# PRICE

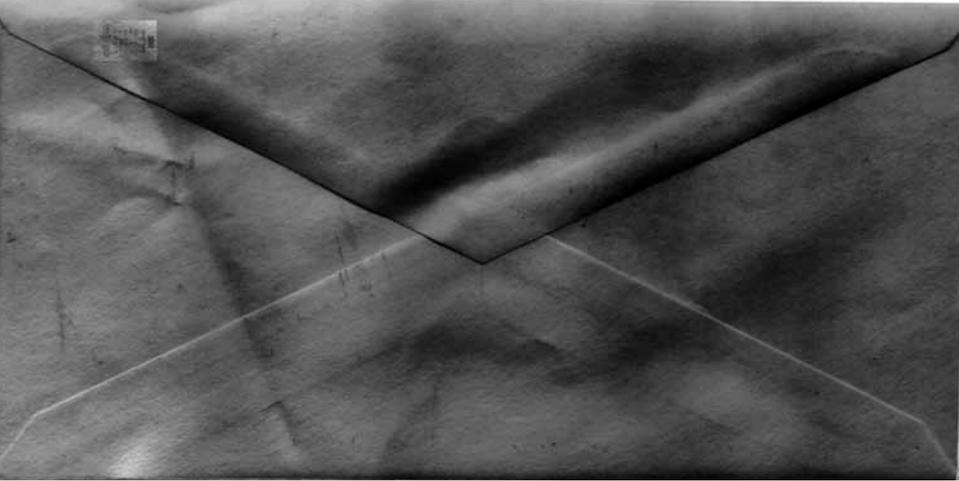
# SETH PRICE

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DESTE Foundation for Contemporary Art

# 2000 WORDS



# SHORT CIRCUIT

Chris Wiley

While trolling the Internet looking to dredge up everything I could about Seth Price, I found myself bounced from his main site to a separate blog with the blandly self-evident domain name [sethpriceimages.com](http://sethpriceimages.com). The site is one of those image-based, infinitely unfurling affairs, where just when you think you've scrolled to the terminus, more content magically appears, lending the site the feel of an inexhaustible font of imagery and information, a kind of synecdoche of the Internet itself. It proved very helpful to my search: a vast collection of images, stretching back across the whole of Price's career, all in one convenient place. A researcher's dream! But then, an undermining kick in the ribs. Floating in the upper left corner in light gray type, invisible at first against the blog's identically colored background, hangs the flippant phrase "FUCK A CATALOG." Well, shit. Doubt bubbles to the surface: is this book necessary?

I've discovered that stumbling blocks such as this one are a common occurrence when attempting to unpack and subsequently repack the dense storehouse of Price's work from the last decade or so, during which he has established himself as perhaps the key forerunner of a generation of artists who have imported the logic, look, and tools of

the Internet age into their art. In part, this is because his work is wildly peripatetic and complex, even for our post-medium-specific age. Price has made sculptures and videos; prints and books; music, music videos, and music compilations; wall pieces made of vacuum-formed plastic, iridescent Plexiglas, and a host of other industrial materials; and has created performance pieces and even helped to design a line of clothing. Primarily, however, the difficulty in conquering these stumbling blocks lies in the fact that Price has emerged as the single most erudite interpreter of his own work, expounding on its meanings and methodologies in both his highly influential writings, and a shape-shifting artist's lecture-cum-artwork that has appeared in various permutations under the title *Redistribution* (2007–). Doubt bubbles to the surface: is this essay necessary? Fuck a catalog essay.

And yet we soldier on. But how, exactly? How do we avoid performing scripted expository pratfalls and regurgitating past shibboleths? Perhaps it is best to take a cue from Price himself, and rather than pass his works directly under the critical microscope, as he and others have done, try instead to look at them askance, to examine how he has

designed them to function in the world. As a result, it might be possible to gain a better understanding not only of his work as a whole, but of his sense of where our culture is headed (or has already wound up) as a result of the massive technological upheavals that have attended the period of its production.

Not coincidentally, this approach falls in line with what is undoubtedly Price's most well-known and influential essay, *Dispersion* (2002).<sup>1</sup> Often misconstrued as a manifesto in the Modernist vein, the text is in fact more of a tentative proposition concerning the possibility of creating a new kind of nominally public art, one that eschews the site-specific nature of the genre in favor of creating publicness by way of a work's dispersal through channels not normally associated with artistic production, effectively hijacking these ready-made structures for artistic ends. In this way, it is part of the perennial call for the blurring of the boundaries between art and life (or art and mass media, which has staked a claim over much of life), though one that is not so much concerned with the destruction of the ivory tower of artistic autonomy, rather one that is tinged with anxiety about the possibility of art speaking at all—whether to elites or others—in an environment glutted with

corporatized media of all varieties, whose techniques of circulation have all but left art in the dust.

Another stumbling block: more often than not, Price appears not to take his own advice. After all, a great majority of his work takes the form of traditional art objects and limited-edition videos, which circulate solely within the museum and gallery circuit. Even those works that hew more closely to the model outlined in *Dispersion* are limited successes in terms of proliferation, often seemingly by design.<sup>2</sup> How widely marketable, after all, is a compilation of mid-century academic electronic music (*'Akademische Graffiti'/'Unique Source'* [2005]), and how ready-to-wear are the high-concept clothes he made with the designer Tim Hamilton, which marry military aesthetics with latter-day Dapper Dan logo mania, only with finance giants like FDIC, PayChex, and UBS in place of Gucci, Louis Vuitton, and Fendi? What's going on here?

A stab at an answer: let's talk about packaging. Some of Price's most iconic works are his pieces in vacuum-formed plastic, which he first exhibited at Reena Spaulings Fine Art in 2004, and has continued to produce in various permutations ever since. The vacuum-forming

technique was developed in the 1950s in the wake of the explosion of industrial plastics that would become a defining hallmark of that era's consumer boom. The technique is most frequently deployed in the making of packaging for all manner of consumer goods, coddling them in protective cavities molded to their contours. Price, however, has used the technique to create ghostly impressions of commonplace subject matter—faces, fists, flowers, breasts, rope, bomber jackets—packaging signifiers as if they were products. Which, of course, they are: "Image is everything."<sup>3</sup>

In this case, however, image is also nothing, or next to nothing. In *Redistribution*, Price comments on the generic nature of the first vacuum-formed works, saying, "It seemed like the fist and the breast were both conservative enough motifs for sculpture, they were stripped down enough that they might start to open out again. They were kind of appealingly blank."<sup>4</sup> This blankness, which is a kind of willed dumbness, in both senses of the word, renders the vacuum-formed pieces into something like charged voids—bristling with a suggestion of meaning, but ultimately meaningless. They are all packaging, no product.

But their packaging is itself packaged

within the structures of the art world—its white box galleries and museum spaces, its publications, its nearly unregulated flow of capital—where it is also, of course, a product. And what excellent products these packages hold: iconic, iterative, and fungible, they come in a wide array of colors and patterns, sizes and textures, begging to be bounced around the marketplace, and perhaps matched to your interior décor. There is a hilariously tongue-in-cheek caption that accompanies an image on Price's blog that depicts a work from his series of "paintings" of the backs of sealed envelopes. The piece is hanging in a collector's apartment, where it has been matched to their couch pillows; the setup buoys this reading by Price: "Nice match with the throw pillows . . . consider the colorways."<sup>5</sup> It is almost as if these pieces were designed for this, optimally contoured to be slotted into the packaging of the art market, in order to function as its spectral image.

Thinking this way, the aforementioned works laid out in the *Dispersion* model begin to make more sense. Each of them, in its separate way, appears to have been pointedly packaged as a reflection on its specific context: his music compilations have been released on limited-edition vinyl (for the

audiophile), cassette (for the middle-aged nostalgic), and made available to stream online (for the digital native), and mirror the simultaneously fractured and fetishistic ways in which we now consume sound. *How to Disappear in America*,<sup>6</sup> collaged primarily from texts pulled off the Internet but sold as a hardbound book, can function almost as a joke about the redundancy of publishing in the digital age ("FUCK A CATALOG," indeed). His music videos handily ape the aesthetic of amateur Internet videos, while simultaneously pointing to their possible overlap with the work of video art pioneers like Dara Birnbaum. His fashion line is jumbled with the type of highly charged, easily read signifiers that the industry thrives on, ham-fistedly arranged according to the critical mode expected of the contemporary artist ("All-in-one ideological critique," Price has said of the collection, "too dumb to even propose."<sup>7</sup>).

In fact, this assiduous consideration of context even appears true of Price's texts, which interweave reasoned arguments with gnomic declarations, stock phrases ("What a time you choose to be born!" "This is the lake of our feeling," etc.), and suggestive nonsense, cannily reflecting expectations on the form and tone of quasi-academic artists'

writings.<sup>8</sup> In their periodic obscurity (a characteristic that Price relates to poetry in a number of interviews), they also function in a fashion similar to his signature “silhouette” works, each of which is comprised of laser-cut chunks of laminated wood that, somewhat like Rubin’s vase, delineate the negative space of an absent picture: the gaps are filled in by the viewer or the reader, while the definitive picture or interpretation remains elusive. Price alludes to this state of affairs in *Uptight World*, which is published in this volume for the first time, in which he (seemingly ironically) extols the virtues of “seeming” rather than “being,” of the calculated, empty posture that is the essence of the “cool” as well as the “professional.” Perhaps, then, everything written about Price’s texts can be seen as a performative extension of the texts themselves. Doubt bubbles to the surface . . .

However, perhaps this indeterminacy in fact points toward the heart of the matter. Insofar as Price’s works engage with specific contexts, or more accurately, specific distribution flows, he always takes pains to disrupt them, to pervert them, to render something about them alien, incomplete, or incomprehensible. As such, the whole of his project can perhaps be seen as a schizoid

embodiment of our present, the texture of which has come to be defined less by discrete events than by the constant careening swarm of coded signifiers and mute intensities, ricocheting off one another and shifting meanings with dizzying rapidity.

Price has made comments about this state of things, and, unsurprisingly, they are contradictory. On the one hand, Price puts forward a tentatively optimistic evaluation of the digital melee: “Frenzy might in fact be homeopathic, its anxiety-producing presence a spur, although rather than encourage the articulation of meaning, it encourages existing chains of associations to fold in a strange and unanticipated way, aligning incompatible ideas and holding them in awkward proximity.”<sup>9</sup> Indeed, the latter half of this statement could be put forward as a viable model for art in general, and Price’s practice in particular. Elsewhere, however, Price is less sanguine: “Anything today that is recorded immediately becomes material that is used, reused, worked over. When the tendency is for everything to open out in all directions at all times, the problem is trying to establish a meaningful relationship between any two things. You might ask: ‘Isn’t that what we would all want, to endlessly open in all directions?’

But the problem is that if we can't establish a basic relation between two points, we're on the road to psychosis."<sup>10</sup> This negative epiphany, the loss of the thread of meaning in the winding labyrinth of endless possibility, is perhaps most potently manifested in works that engage with images of violence. For instance, *Digital Effect: "Holes"* (2003), makes use of grisly photos of dead bodies sourced from the Internet and the collection of works that reference or appropriate images from videos depicting Jihadist beheadings, particularly the infamous Daniel Pearl video. Unlike Thomas Hirschhorn, who makes use of such images as a means of political agitation, Price deliberately makes use of these images as a kind of raw material, useful only for their affective intensity. This could be a model for the image in the Internet age: headless, free floating, severed from meaning.

1 Seth Price, *Dispersion* (Seth Price, 2002; New York: 38th Street Publishers, 2008).

2 For example, Price's ongoing collection of compilations of obscure or extinct musical genres, *Title Variable* (2001-), which was sold in record stores and made available to stream online, or his remixed and rewritten collage of texts on dropping out of mainstream society, *How to Disappear in America* (New York: The Leopard Press, 2008), which was released in bookstores, or his series of music videos for his own electronic music, created from found footage and appropriated stills and released on Vimeo and YouTube, as well as shown in a gallery context, or the fashion line he created alongside the designer Tim Hamilton, which has been sold in high-end stores.

3 Though it has now come to be a standard quip connoting the triumph of style over substance, "Image is everything" originally achieved catchphrase status when it was suavely uttered by tennis star Andre Agassi in a 1990 advertisement for Canon's EOS Rebel camera. Further proving this statement's truth, Agassi later revealed that by the time of the ad's production, his trademark mane had begun to thin so drastically that he was forced to wear a wig.

4 Seth Price, *Redistribution* (Seth Price, 2007-).

5 Seth Price, [www.sethpriceimages.com](http://www.sethpriceimages.com) (accessed October 2013).

6 Seth Price, *How to Disappear in America* (New York: The Leopard Press, 2008).

7 Seth Price, interview by Chris Bollen, January 2012.

8 This calls to mind a conversation recounted in a lecture at the University of California, Berkeley by the analytic philosopher John Searle that took place between Searle and his friend Michel Foucault, in which Searle inquired why the eminent French thinker chose to write so poorly when his lectures were so clear and cogent. Foucault responded: "In France, you must be at least 10% incomprehensible, otherwise people won't think it's deep, they won't think you are a profound thinker." Searle claims to have later relayed this conversation to the similarly prominent French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, who put the figure closer to 20%.

9 Seth Price, "Teen Image," *Art Fag City* (2009), <http://www.artfagcity.com/2009/10/22/img-mgmt-teen-image/> (accessed January 2014).

10 Seth Price, *Redistribution*.