The Personal Effects of Seth Price

TIM GRIFFIN

THE VOLUME IS SLIM AND BLACK and, measuring just six by eight inches, clearly designed for portability. It would slip easily into a coat pocket or knapsack. And that, if the simple phrase adorning its cover is any indication, is precisely what the book is intended to do: *How to Disappear in America*, reads the title, whose throwback proposition, evocative of so many open-road, bohemian rambles and countercultural undergrounds—at once Emersonian and desperately on-the-lam in spirit—is only amplified by the presence on the dust jacket of a dancing figure that bears a vague resemblance to the logo for an American knock-off of that British purveyor of inexpensive classics the Everyman's Library. (Recall the fifteenth-century morality-play lyric that serves as the epigraph for each of the imprint's titles: "Everyman, I will go with thee and be thy guide, in thy most need to go by thy side.") Inside, passage after passage of this handbook is devoted to clearing any obstacle that a person might face in seeking to leave his or her public life behind, whether that warrants something so simple as changing the color of one's hair or, more ambitiously, opening a bank account offshore. And yet, after a few pages, a creeping sense of inconsistency arises. Over time, the prose accumulates contrasting tones and perspectives, moving from bureaucratic to colloquial phrasing and back again, and employing different vocabularies belonging to entirely different eras—pontificating about 401(k) plans and sophisticated satellite tracking systems at one moment, decrying "The Fuzz" the next. In fact, the text's increasingly skittish quality starts to prompt some skepticism about the character (or characters?) behind the book's various recommendations—that one should, say, destroy all photographs of oneself, or get to "know the people in motorcycle hangouts [and] New Age dance studios," or find some low-level job in data entry, in order to survive anonymously under society's radar.[1] Over time, that is, the presence of a puppet master directing things becomes increasingly palpable, but only as the absence of any firm, consistent program becomes clear. (Someone, it seems, is telling readers how to tell stories, forge false trails, or cover up old ones, but only while also telling stories, forging false trails, or covering up old ones—showing by doing.) Paradoxically, it is in the very act of "disappearing" that some figure in the background begins to come forward—or, more precisely, that readers begin to look for that figure, or to imagine one in its absence and then project that subjectivity onto the written word.

Opposite page: **Seth Price**, *Untitled* **(detail), 2009**, auto-body enamel on high-impact polystyrene, vacuum-formed over rope, 48 x 96". This page: **Cover and spread from Seth Price's *How to Disappear in America*** (Leopard Press, 2008).

The question of just who this narrator is inevitably circles back to the individual who ostensibly produced the book: the artist Seth Price. According to Price, the material in *How to Disappear* was actually culled from a handful of different sources, ranging from a decades-old mimeographed pamphlet to a contemporary text found online (and anonymously authored, he says), and edited together to produce the printed document—hence the disarray of voicing and vernacular under the cover of what would otherwise seem a single text. But even the slightest research into Price's own extensive writing—placing this volume in the larger context of his work, so to say—implicates him further, starting with this treatise's very first line: "As if with a twist of the kaleidoscope all would become clear, splinters join, new scapes heave into view."[2] These words, which might at first seem the cryptic utterances of some Virgil for the prospective fugitive, will instead prompt those familiar with Price's work to consider another of his essays, "Dispersion," which has to some degree catapulted him to the forefront of younger artists currently writing on art (and, more specifically, on its tenuous engagements with a broader culture radically impacted by new media).[3] Recalling in that earlier text previous generations who sought to elude the strictures of art and its institutions, Price argues that their attempts to find "alternatives to the gallery wall"—which often entailed moves into the circulatory and distributive systems of the mass media, whether in the open marketplace or specialized magazine—were nevertheless totally arid, demonstrating dry theories and critical postulates that were all too easily decoded and

reinscribed within the arcane realm of art by a highly sophisticated infrastructure of critics, curators, and historians. "And then," Price writes of the completed circle, "with a twist of the kaleidoscope things resolve themselves."[4]

What would it mean to give this optical instrument another metaphoric turn? One wonders whether it is the artist himself who is attempting some escape. And as a matter of fact, false trails and forked paths weave throughout Price's practice as he seeks both to mirror and inhabit the circulatory and distributive systems of his own time. Even this signature text, "Dispersion"—devoted as it is to an extended contemplation of contemporary information technologies as they provide artists with a new context (or "scape")—never remains totally the same. Rather, the artist continually returns to it, revising it, adding or subtracting ideas—always altering its potential meaning—as if in support of his assertion that every cultural endeavor is subject to perpetual permutation today, whether it is written about, photographed, printed, downloaded, forwarded and exchanged, filtered and animated, or bundled with so many other programs or files as to create an entirely new production out of the same material. Whether it is in the realm of Apple software or *K-Tel Greatest Hits of the '80s*, every individual act occupies merely one instant in the expanding continuum of its own perpetual rendering in changing contexts.

In this respect, *How to Disappear* is quite clear in its artistic implications. As its apparent narrator suggests:
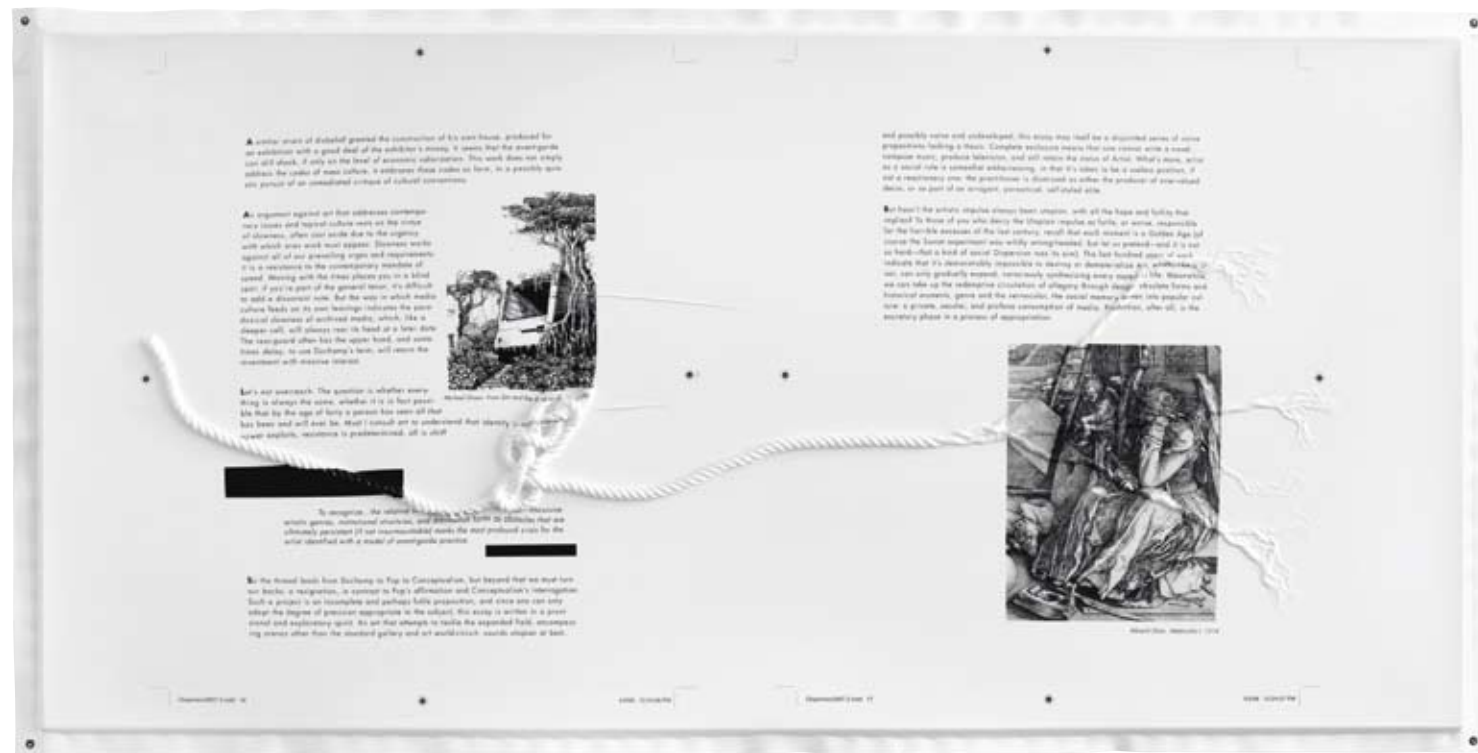
> Just as the fugitive senses how any step risks activating a whole field of surveillance, so the artist is likely aware of being continually measured against an existing record— whether his own or that of his antecedents.
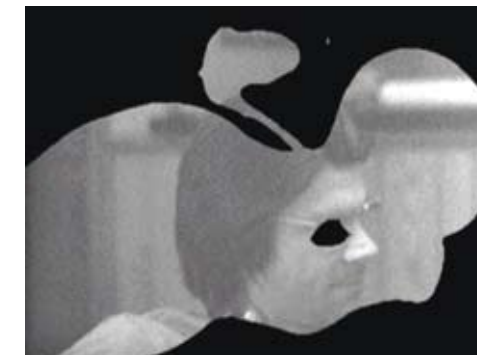
I'm like a person who makes things. You do it one after another, unending. It goes on for such a long time: *something new, and something else, and something*. Here come a lot of different varieties of strategies and arrangements, all interesting, all interlocking, *mutatis mutandis*.[5]

Here, in other words, what seems a variation on Jasper Johns's famous characterization of artmaking—"Take an object. Do something to it. Do something else to it. Do something else to it"—describes an operation in artistic practice that is bound to create a trail of bread crumbs, at the same time as it is subject (or linked) to a broader network and therefore, to some degree, inevitably also out of the artist's hands. And just as the fugitive senses how any step risks activating a whole field of surveillance, so the artist is likely aware of being continually measured against an existing record—his own or that of his antecedents—and should want to know how to avoid being assigned a fixed identity or history, as one almost invariably is in art. Past and future nearly always collapse into each other there (like the positive and negative of the same photograph), as the production and reception of each new work alters the way older ones are read, and as each new reading of an older work changes the terms for a new work's reception.

THIS WOULD, of course, hardly be the first time that themes of productive evasion—or, perhaps more accurately, catch-and-release—have arisen in Price's work. In one of his earlier pieces, *Digital Video Effect: "Spills"*, 2004, Price took up a homemade video by Joan Jonas (whom he met while employed at Electronic Arts Intermix) in which artists Richard Serra and Robert Smithson talk with dealer Joseph Helman about the role economic structures play in the very definition of contemporary art. Sitting casually together in a domestic 1970s setting—with children scurrying around the house (while a generally silent Nancy Holt and, off camera, Jonas sit nearby)—the trio speak to the various ways in which art under the sway of the dollar sign often manages to miss, or avoid, the crucial issues of the day. Once-vital artistic strategies ultimately give way to mannerist obfuscation, for instance, and financial value is all too often confused with real quality; the terms of any artist's public identity seem inextricably bound up with matters of the market and, more precisely, production as product. "For the rest of their lives they got fancy prices . . . even though their paintings were bad," Helman says of late Abstract Expressionists who lived off the historical legacy of a particular style (or personal brand), "simply because of what those early paintings traded at." Picking up the thread, a boisterous Serra points to the effects of financial success on artists working in the present: "Economic facility actually inhibits work from growing the way it could grow," he argues. "Most of our young artists are just ripped off at a very early age, because they get stuck knocking out the same products." (Here any viewer can easily imagine Price seeing this video for the first time, himself a young artist emerging amid an unprecedented boom in the market for contemporary art. Indeed, a suspicious glitch in the video interrupts Serra in midsentence, as if to mark the spot.) And Smithson, for his part, attacks the twin nemeses of portability and connoisseurship, since the former, he says, pays little mind to context and enables an artwork to accrue financial value as it passes from one collector to another, while the latter merely ratifies, or provides some rationale for, such valuation. "Nobody has any right to legislate or judge what I'm doing," he declares, in what might pass

for an outlaw's escapist fantasy were it not for the next sentence's rhetorical dud: "This whole idea of aesthetic taste is so much baloney."

In his treatment of the video, Price would seem to agree, but only while underscoring a sense of inevitability around the objects of Smithson's scorn. In fact, if Smithson seeks to evade their grasp, Price instead attempts to infiltrate them—performing a disappearing act of his own, perhaps, but only in the fashion of a purloined letter. For his work, the younger artist presents Jonas's video on a monitor turned upward and placed inside a box resting on the floor—literally "packaged," flaunting its commodity status and portability (while at the same time delineating its physical limits, since the piece can only be installed within a radius defined by the length of a power cord). More disarming and intriguing, however, is the way such qualities extend and translate into the realm of aesthetics here as well, since Price has introduced dematerialized swirling drips, splatters, and pools of liquid to the moving image. After making recordings of fluids being splattered and poured, the artist superimposed the contours of these "spills" onto Jonas's video, using an editing program to produce a paradoxical masking effect—sometimes revealing the underlying picture and sometimes obscuring it in a pool of black, generating a continual reversal of layers in a play of positive and negative, figure and ground. In effect, this fluid motif allows Price to project himself onto the discussion about artistic strategies' being emptied of their original significance. Yet what would seem a simple, even predictable impulse on the part of a younger artist is also something of a conundrum, since it is manifested pictorially as a kind of addition by subtraction—or, better, addition *as* subtraction. On occasion it seems that Price's contribution consists merely of "removing" himself from the picture. And this displacement is doubled by the work's sculptural dimension: It is the viewer him- or herself who is situated in the field of action, looking down at the looping image, placed virtually in the position of the active individual who would drip or spill material onto the ground. The work then enters ambiguous psychological territory, since ultimately the viewer's own perception stands to shape the image, giving it a sense of depth, establishing any relationship between figure and ground. (Is the liquid covering the image, or the image covering the liquid? Which came first?) And this pattern recognition even extends beyond the swirling and pooling of what is, after all, nothing more than pixelated light, since the viewer sees it not only as possessing liquid properties but also as having a kind of volition behind it (though the artistic intention may remain obscure). The movement is, in other words, made *believable*—endowed with the quality of human gesture behind the phenomena captured and rendered on-screen—only by and within the mind of the viewer. The technological trace depends on the individual watching—recognizing, identifying,

anthropomorphizing—to obtain lifelike qualities. And so, clearly, the spill "effect" deployed by Price is not merely an inanimate algorithm but an algorithm bundled up with affect, and so becomes crucial to our understanding of his work—and, moreover, of the artist's positioning of himself within it.

WHAT, AFTER ALL, IS AN "EFFECT"? The word is familiar enough. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, its earliest appearance, just antecedent to Chaucerian times, denoted either a "result" or "goods, moveable property." Other applications would soon arise, however, including a pair that seem directional opposites along a single axis of causality, pertaining to "a mode or degree of operation *on* an object" and, conversely, "the physical result of an action of force." Here the significance and usage, one imagines, were determined by context—by the grammar of a given situation. Yet all these different meanings are germane and even possess a kind of simultaneity today, when it comes to digital effects bought and sold in filter packages ranging from Adobe Premiere to Final Cut Pro. Indeed, they are tightly interwoven, production and product, dynamic and object, catalyst and consequence. For at stake in this specific contemporary context—where the effect is understood as "a visual or acoustic device used to convey atmosphere or the illusion of reality"—is an impression of naturalistic action or behavior rendered in what is, in fact, inanimate form.[6] Put another way, 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 (so that he or she encounters the world intact, and also anew). In this way, while the above examples of Adobe Premiere and Final Cut Pro are relevant, most aptly named is no doubt Adobe After Effects: After *what*? one might reasonably ask, uncertain of what could possibly constitute a "before."

These sorts of ambiguous impressions are everywhere in Price's work.[7] At their most literal, his effects consist merely of diagonal wipes and fades; waves rippling out from the center of a screen to make the image seem immersed in a pool of water; colorful strands of interweaving light in otherwise empty and abstract space; and slow, mechanical pans across still images. The way a viewer experiences these effects will inevitably be bound up with personal history, since they are apt to be familiar not only from contemporary software packages (from screen savers to slide shows) but also from decades-old mass-media programming where such "dynamic" visuals were first used to mark transitions from one image to the next. Here the effect of the "effect" in Price's work can be

vaguely comical, with audiences acutely aware of being subject to a kind of time warp—since these editing techniques, which were once considered futuristic, are now totally arcane, or else, in a blend of both, "retro." Of course, the very notion of retro is now on the verge of being retro, and occasionally this tragicomedy seems to carry with it none too subtle implications for contemporary art. In Price's *'Painting' Sites*, 2000–2001, such effects as wipes and ripples are perfectly suited to the dozens of painted images the artist has taken from diverse online sources, having used a simple search eng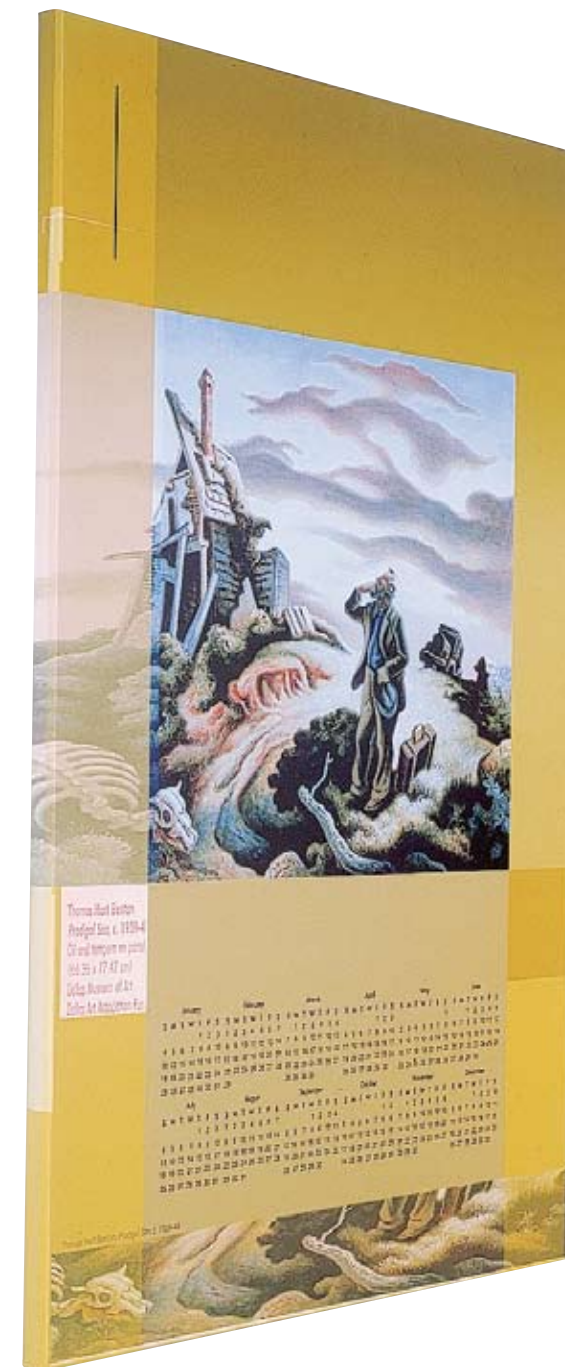ine (and the keyword *painting*) to make his selection: Just as the "effect" techniques seem no longer ahead of the curve, so Price's own "high art" seems at risk of being outmoded, swamped by a radical democratization of aesthetic practice—demonstrated here by, for example, the image of an old-master painting segueing to an image of Sigmund Freud engaged in conversation with a purple, squidlike creature. (One assumes the latter picture was composed by an amateur.)

More unnerving, on the other hand, are those occasions when the impression of an "effect" arises not through the actual filter package but rather through the artist's use of its model—when, in other words, Price himself makes work that seems composed of direct appropriations of preexisting sources, even when that isn't the case. For his Silhouettes, a continuing series of wall sculptures begun in 2007, for instance, the artist uses elaborate manufacturing procedures to create a flat wood-veneer surface under acrylic that at first glance is likely to seem readymade. (Indeed, while the production of veneer is a centuries-old craft, the synthetic look of the wood—generated by the Rorschach-like patterns and repetitions of the grain—lends it the automated air of a design technique. Some viewers may even view this material as "faux" wood, wherein something completely synthetic or premade is made to mimic a rustic naturalism.[8]) Similarly, Price's Calendar Paintings of 2003–2004 are likely to strike audiences as flat, unadorned representations (or manipulations) of so many elements from "found" calendars—featuring as they do generic compositions including landscapes, modern paintings, and home computers, along with jazzy fonts and abstract brushstrokes that recall low-end designer touches from the 1980s—when, in truth, Price assembled the imagery from multiple sources and designed the font himself. (The artist, no doubt aware of these works' strong resemblance to actual calendars languishing on the shelves at Wal-Mart or Rite Aid or populating office cubicles—becoming "retro" despite themselves—is fond of telling stories of collectors visiting his studio and failing to see the paintings.) And atonal music accompanying such works as Price's *Digital Video Effect: "Editions"*, 2006, will seem taken from esoteric recordings of midcentury modernist composers—endowing Price's use of footage from network-television coverage of John Hinckley Jr.'s assassination attempt on President Ronald Reagan or from Martha Rosler's *Global Taste: A Meal in Three Courses*, 1985, with a defamiliarizing, abstract air (more on the last example later)—when they are actually just so many notes stitched together loosely by Price himself. Price continually creates the impression of specific histories for images and sounds, histories they do not, in fact, possess. And so audiences cannot absolutely pin down any of these elements, even when it comes to something so simple as the painting of a horse that seems taken from the caves of Lascaux: In reality, Price took this image, which he prints on such synthetic materials as PVC, from the replica constructed by the French government to accommodate the legions of tourists whose presence in the cave would quickly lead to its destruction.

To best understand the function of such prompted misrecognitions in Price's work, however, one must take his Silhouettes into close account, particularly

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due to their curious relationship to time. For each of these pieces, the artist has, as mentioned above, furnished a flat surface of layered wood veneer and acrylic. But this material merely serves to render Price's manipulations of images he finds online, each one depicting two people in an acculturated exchange, public (shaking or holding hands; one person lighting another's cigarette or taking his picture) or private (kissing or breast-feeding).[9] The actual experience of seeing Price's finished work in the gallery setting, however, barely resembles that of looking at the original photographic image. Every figure has been completely removed, leaving only a material representation of the empty, negative space between the two figures. Anyone first encountering the installed work is apt to see only an abstraction, or what seem the ragged geographic contours of some unnamable continent, country, or state—until, suddenly, the figures are perceived, after which point one's grasp of the work gently and regularly oscillates between figuration and abstraction.

One model for describing this sequence of events may be found in Rubin's vase, where a form is alternately perceived as a vessel or as the space between two heads in profile—the point being, within the field of psychology, that no one can see both images at once (thus suggesting that we perceive scenes by constructing and positing, and then recognizing, specific patterns within them). Within the context of art, however, a productive comparison is to Jack Goldstein's *Two Fencers*, 1977. As described by critic Douglas Crimp in the original essay for his "Pictures" exhibition of the same year, the performance consists of two combatants dueling in dim light, seeming nearly apparitional until, all at once, the scene is shrouded in complete darkness. The audience is then left to recall the image of what's been seen; and, as Crimp puts it, each viewer becomes acutely aware of "the paradoxical mechanism by which memory functions . . . : The image is gradually *forgotten*, altered, replaced."[10] Price's work, by contrast, eliminates the image of its figures, removing that information embedded in the original, only to replace it almost immediately—in other words, performing the function of memory all by itself.

In this respect, the extent to which Price mirrors the logic of contemporary mass commerce—and its entwined strands of DNA, effect and affect—now reveals itself.[11] For if Crimp once argued that Goldstein's recollected image was necessarily a psychologized one—since it had become a matter of desire—the past twenty years of commercial culture have been devoted to choreographing similar scenarios in order to administer and instrumentalize such allure as seduction. Commercial forces, deeply invested in producing affective experience, similarly generate instances of defamiliarization in consumers, seeking to pass through that opening and guide consumers to specific perceptions, associations, and emotions—implanting, in that momentary pause, another kind of memory, another experience or history, before the pause, or opening, is even recognized as such. (This attribute of branding has been theorized most succinctly in the phrase "The consumer is the product." But lately commodities themselves have been formalizing this technique—whereby they generate and then occupy some "before," creating an empty space for memory before writing that specific history—in more literal terms: Witness the example of prewashed jeans or, more recently, the proliferation of cinematic "prequels," from *Batman Begins* to *Star Trek*.) Price's Silhouettes provide an elegant blueprint for such prompting and fulfilling of desire, since they continually replay a sequence of appearance and disappearance—reintroducing that moment of brief suspension and defamiliarization. They even might serve as a decoder of sorts for the logic of Price's own production. Indeed, the artist suggests as much by virtue of the Modern Library–like logo on the cover of *How to Disappear*: On continued
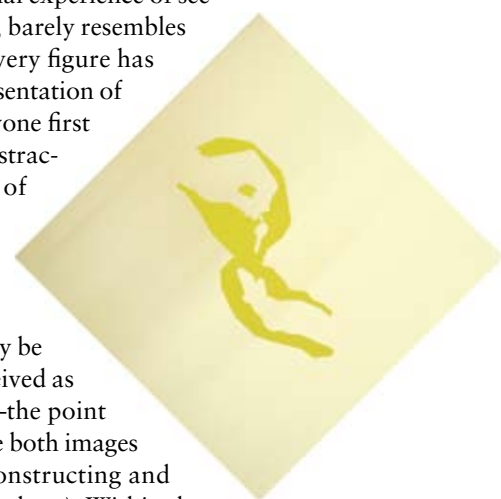
examination, the dancing figure reveals itself as two hands; a single key on a ring is passing from one to the other.

But it is with his interest in the valences of such ersatz affect that Price sets his endeavor apart from those of earlier generations of artists who engaged the distributive models of mass commerce. (As he says outright in "Dispersion," they mimicked administrative structure while ignoring the pursuit of subjects such as "desire.") Technology in the service of commerce has long aimed to get at the most intimate spheres of consciousness—to get one's exclusive attention and then negotiate the terms of desire. While the Internet implies the existence of a massive expanse, its operations depend on individual points of connection that create and then revolve around the unique space and social modality of a single person staring into a computer monitor, such that a completely mediated world rises toward the eyes while the physical one falls away. (One thinks of the famous psychology experiment where a bowl of milk is placed before a cat; the animal's attention is so consumed by the object that it literally no longer hears anything in the room.) Some of Price's earliest videos speak to the emergence of this unique space, featuring little more than banal recordings of the first adventure video games, which consisted of rudimentary textual interactions and raw digital renderings composed of individual pixels of dim green light; long, quiet hours of adolescent projection—a prerequisite for any verisimilitude to accrue to these crudely made pictures—are palpable. More recent

efforts are positively visceral when engaging this psychophysiological dimension of technology, as when certain of his videos feature a wave effect—the rising and falling ripples undermining any steady perspective, causing the viewer to continually recalibrate his or her sense of depth, inducing even a slight nausea. (To make *Film, Right*, 2006, Price purchased a roughly two-second digital rendering of a rising wave—usually employed by businesspeople as momentary backdrops during presentations—and subsequently looped this moving image, amplifying exponentially what had been a gently affecting ambience in the original clip.) And a similar queasiness is created by *Digital Video Effect:"Holes"*, 2003, in which the appearance of thousands of dots on screen—revealing and concealing images of horrible accidents (which Price, again, found online)—is accompanied by as many key strikes on a synthesizer whose notes sample the human voice. The resulting sound (in the tonality one possesses when a doctor employs a tongue depressor and asks you to say "ahhh") also induces a nausea.

The artist implies in many of his writings that this psychosomatic experience arises because the body begins to reject the uncanny: The synthetic has become "too real" in its instrumentalization, in other words. One needs distance—or a slight difference—from one's own technology in order to engage it. However, watching Price's *Two for One Piece, aka "Global Taste, A Meal in 3 Courses" Element 1, by Martha Rosler, 1985*, 2002, one becomes conscious of how alterations to a previous

Each of Price's Silhouettes eliminates the image of its figures, removing that information embedded in the original, only to replace it almost immediately—in other words, performing the function of memory all by itself.

This page, clockwise from top left: **Seth Price**, *Twine*, **2008**, ink-jet on protective film over iridescent mirrored acrylic, 96 x 48". Installation view, Kunsthalle Zürich, 2008. Reflected in image, from left: *Twine*, 2008; *Stencil*, 2008; *Vintage Bomber*, 2008; *Vintage Bomber*, 2008. **Seth Price, Gold Key, 2007**, UV-cured ink-jet on Dibond, 48 x 48". **Seth Price**, *Untitled*, **2008**, composite walnut-burl wood and diamond acrylic plastic, two parts, overall 62 x 74". Opposite page: **Seth Price**, *Untitled*, **2006**, still from a color film in 16 mm, 12 minutes.

work, removing some of its information—in this case, from Rosler's *Global Taste*—also might overstuff an audience. In Rosler's original, there are three channels, two presenting a long string of clips from commercials of the day, mostly for food brands and restaurant chains, and a third featuring chains of data pertaining to the activities and structures of global corporations trafficking in such goods and services. And yet Price, for his part, isolates the commercial imagery, leaving audiences to ingest one stylized (and, for some watching, nostalgic) depiction after the next of slowly dripping chocolate, thickly poured syrup, or melting pats of butter, accompanied all too often by tautological slogans such as the Denny's tagline "We cook the way America eats." The change of artistic framing brings with it a change in meaning: While Rosler's work puts forward a surfeit of information, Price zeros in on affective address—on the prompting and mimicking, in affect, of the consumer from within the monitor—and it is the appearance of the latter, at the cost of the former's disappearance, that makes for a visceral response in the consumer of products or, for that matter, the viewer of art.

PRICE OUTLINES HIS OWN MODEL of loss in art in the essay "Décor Holes," where he gives the example of Marcel Broodthaers's use of Mallarmé's poem *Un Coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard* as the basis for a 1969 artist's book of the same name: Broodthaers replicated the page layouts as arranged by the poet before him, but blocked out every lyric with a thick black line.[12] "Mallarmé's piece was emptied-out," Price writes, "reduced to seductive packaging" even as it "retained the striking look and feel of the work," and he subsequently compares the artistic operation to that of graffiti, which, he observes, "must preserve that which it seeks to destroy." A more incisive comparison, however, arises from the realm of digital effects and filters that he so clearly treasures: compression, whose algorithms (familiar from JPEGs and TIFFs) are devoted to removing information from a given image, clearing out memory, even while

making the picture seem intact to the naked eye—preserving the "look and feel," so to speak. Indeed, the model of compression would seem to offer an essential counterpoint to Price's theorization of his practice. If "dispersion" speaks to the dissemination of projects across vast and diverse expanses of culture—a continual copying and manipulation that describes the common movement of any cultural endeavor from, say, file to printout to CD to website—compression, by design, is intended to facilitate this movement, making it easier to send images and files from point to point. It creates the basic conditions required for such proliferation and mutability. And in this way, compression also suggests a crucial point of difference between Price's practice and those of "appropriation" artists who came before him, for his is a more algorithmic model: Whereas they forced the question of meaning's creation by deconstructing the image within a specific context (and teasing out the meaning implicit in, or embedded within, that image), Price looks at and mimics the ways in which meaning is both lost and produced with any change of context. He behaves as a kind of filter, continually reintroducing a sense of this loss in his work, this emptying of memory, in order to mine the effects and affects of such depletion.[13]

Of course, the extent to which this artistic activity reflects the operations of contemporary commerce raises the question of whether Price might also want to implant in his audiences some memory of his own devising.[14] And his most recent piece would, in fact, suggest as much: Titled *Redistribution*, 2007–, the piece forty-five-minute video consists largely of a lecture Price gave about his work roughly two years ago at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York, and so moves carefully from project to project as the artist dutifully recounts the points of inspiration for different works. As these reflections unfold, however, an intriguing pattern begins to emerge, since the work repeatedly cuts away from Price at the lectern—a video projection behind him, as would be the case in any such conventional presentation by an artist—and becomes more

episodic in character, adopting the style of a cine-essay in the mode of Chris Marker or Jean-Luc Godard, continually introducing documentary footage from different areas of culture (accompanied, of course, by Price's meditations on these other spheres). Here the video's audience is bound to feel a gap forming between Price's work and the discussions on-screen, even while a kind of depth is created as his continuing monologue provides content for his projects by association. At one point, for example, the artist speaks at length about the history and properties of plas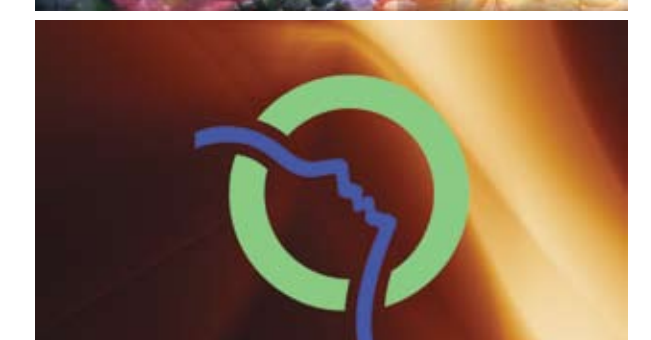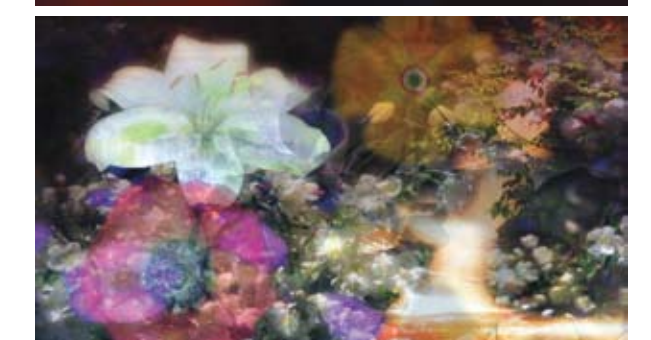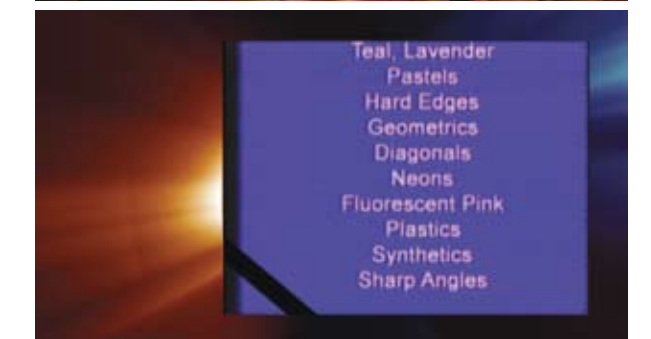tic, and it is all but impossible not to consider the synthetic material a stand-in for his own practice when he says that, given plastic's ubiquity, "all goods and concepts [are] subject to shifts in form and meaning executed as quickly and easily as the movement of a decimal point." Indeed, it immediately seems clear why Price so frequently produces sculpture using vacuum-form technology. If such plastic always adheres to the contours of that object of desire it is supposed to protect for the purposes of delivery into the hands of the consumer, it enables Price to present the veritable sign of such transformation and mutability and of the economic infrastructures that make such permutations possible.[15] And such work poses questions essential to artmaking today: To what extent are so many contemporary artworks empty vessels, merely diagramming—or, better, passively shaped by—the institutional, circulatory, and distributive systems of art, rather than, as Smithson and Serra would have it, confronting the existent conditions for their chosen media? To what extent, in other words, is so much art now a representation, an "effect," of itself? Yet all these implications arise only as Price funnels his practice through different contexts, prompting associative leaps, borrowing histories that fill, or provide new content for, the empty memory space of his work. (When this happens, audiences might feel a flash of understanding—of possessing the piece, as in the abstract sense of intellectual property.) And Price will, of course, continue to edit *Redistribution*, adding new passages and points of interest; as a container and circulatory device for these histories, the video will prompt a sense of new significance and changed identity, a sense of Price's writing his own history even while (or by virtue of) evacuating it.

An apt metaphor for this structure of parallel narrative is, as one might expect, also provided by Price in "Décor Holes." When speaking of sampling in musical compositions, he describes the repeated experience of a "phantom step at the top of the stairs": Listeners are cued to remember whole songs by single notes, such that the source material runs in one's head even while the contemporary track forges ahead with new music incorporating ever-increasing numbers of similar sampled tracks. In this regard, Price's model resembles nothing so much as Japanese Noh plays from centuries ago, in which every line contained an allusion to or quotation of the literature of earlier eras, so that the artwork perpetually brought the past rushing into the present, establishing a kind of continuum and continuity between ancient and contemporary times. (Interestingly, this model was embraced by Eliot, Yeats, and other modernist poets who sought an elite audience educated enough to recognize all such references. What does that mean in the cultural hour of Jay-Z?[16]) But Price describes these "phantoms" of the sampler differently, saying that the music rushes ahead, with the past never quite catching up to the present; and so too would he, I think, seek to introduce this perpetual gap, or lag, into his work. The irony is that in order to find some way forward, he does so only by heading in reverse, revising the references, implanting new memories and replacing others: only in retreat finding a way to advance. □

TIM GRIFFIN IS THE EDITOR OF *ARTFORUM*. *For notes, see page 364.*

If "dispersion" speaks to the dissemination of projects across vast and diverse expanses of culture, compression, by design, is intended to facilitate this movement.

Opposite page: **Seth Price**, *Twine*, **2008**, ink-jet on protective film over iridescent mirrored acrylic, 48 x 96". This page: **Seth Price**, *Redistribution*, **2007–**, stills from a color video, dimensions variable.