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Contemporary Art and Culture

Issue 118 October 2008

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# The Producer

**Seth Price's** exploration and manipulation of music, writing, publishing, plastic, curating, discursive performance, exhibition formats and video- and film-making *by Polly Staple*



'... the magazine [*Semiotext(e)*] was selling well, so I thought, why not publish the pure theory in the form of these books, the Foreign Agent series? This was around 1983 and I was familiar with several French theorists who hadn't been introduced in America – Baudrillard, Virilio, Guattari, even at that point, Deleuze. I went to a number of publishers who all laughed and said, that won't sell. So I did it myself. We came up with this format, this little black book that goes so nicely with the downtown, leather jacket, art crowd. We wanted them to be short, suggestive, hip, cool ... something you could just zip up in your pocket and of course it became a kind of fetish, or cult item. That's fine by me, as long as people don't fetishise the language that's in the book. I really don't care how someone first connects with theory, so long

as they connect. They open a book somewhere, read a page, see something that interests them and then maybe they go further and something happens to their mind. Their mind becomes energised by thought.'

Seth Price's recent solo exhibition at Kunsthalle Zurich included seven of his signature 'Vintage Bomber' pieces. Executed in a range of colours, each work consists of a sheet of vacuum-formed high-impact polystyrene bearing the trace of a bomber jacket and a mark of the year of manufacture; here 2008. Five of these works were presented in a line as a chromatic fade, from black to grey to silver to white. Hung high up on the white gallery wall, they looked chic and inert.

## Price links the current perception of the infinite potential of video and the Internet – its elastic materiality – to the development of plastic in Europe and North America in the 1950s.

Vacuum forming is primarily used for packaging mass-produced consumer goods. It involves melting a form of hot plastic around a solid object and then allowing it to cool into a rigid mass applied by vacuum to create a single form or a reusable mould. Although the synthetic material used by Price is contemporary, in terms of sculptural casting it's an old-fashioned process. A fairly laborious means of encasing unique and malleable objects such as the vintage jacket or – in other similarly formed pieces – the shape of a woman's breast, a clenched fist or a Gerbera flower.

In an accompanying video projection piece, *Redistribution* (2008–ongoing), Price presents himself discussing the vacuum-forming process and its aesthetic and cultural resonance. He is as precise and transparent about his artistic intention and theoretical methodology as he is about his symbolic use of materials and objects. *Redistribution* itself is encyclopaedic in reach and waywardly academic in tone. The video follows the format of, and is intercut with, visual footage from a public lecture that Price delivered on his work in 2007. This is edited together with examples of the artist's previous works and found footage. Unified by Price's narration, the display of images is set against infinitely spiralling abstract digital television broadcasting backdrops. Price's manipulation of material is seamlessly coherent and authoritative. The content and composition are, however, often idiosyncratically self-reflexive or descriptively florid, lending a note of earnest authenticity to a strangely hyper-real product.

Price weaves a narrative of his work's production – objects, moving image, music, writing, collaborative publishing and curating, spread across film, video, digital, print, live, discursive performance and exhibition formats – and of its distribution through myriad social and economic networks and audiences, from small-scale publishing or open-source Internet downloads to high-end commercial or public gallery exhibitions. This is set against a backdrop of historical and contemporary technological development, socio-economic shifts and materialist ethics.

You learn, for example, that Price studied film and video at school – liberal arts, semiotics rather than sculpture<sup>2</sup>

– and that in figuring out the art world (we're given to assume this is New York) he set about defining himself against what he saw as the two key strands of existing film and video production: namely, cinema and performance. Subsequently – and this is a very basic synopsis – through looking at and working through imagery from the Internet, Price recognized and sought to explore how video became just one material among many existing within this realm, on the same diagrammatic level as design and media.

Expanding on the theme of 'material' and 'plasticity', Price makes broad cultural links between the current perception of the infinite potential of video and the Internet – its elastic materiality – and the development of plastic in Europe and North America in the 1950s. The apparently boundless adaptability of plastic in the postwar era represented an optimistic expression of re-creation, heralding a new era of consumer choice. Of course, as Price points out, endless formal mutability or a plethora of choice can become confusingly open-ended, and, making the link with contemporary digital anxiety, he argues that the use of digital tools gives a plasticity to content with recorded material being constantly reused and manipulated. 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; the inability to do so indicates psychosis.

Returning to the development of his work, Price discusses his preoccupation with video and digital manipulation, expanding on the use, effect and circulation of images. Discussing the attraction and challenge of using found material, he draws parallels between the power of the insistent visuality of grisly photographs of accident scenes taken from Internet death sites used in his work *Digital Video Effect: 'Holes'* (2003) and the intimate home movie footage shot by Joan Jonas in the early 1970s of Robert Smithson, Richard Serra, the dealer Joseph Hellman and (a silent) Nancy Holt sitting around talking about the state of sculpture, money, art and economy used in his work *Digital Video Effect: 'Spills'* (2004). In both examples Price points out it wasn't a question of taste, morality or appropriationist ethics that made choosing to use this material difficult, but that the content of the material was so strong.

So how, then, as an artist do you deal with this material, make sense of a collision of registers at once so historically epic, momentous and banal? How do you address the anxiety of influence, for example, or the intensity of scopophilic desire and then communicate meaningful connections between the two?

Price's video *Digital Video Effect: 'Editions'* (2006) consists of a montage of six of his previously editioned video works – re-edited for low-cost, unlimited distribution – including *Digital Video Effect: 'Holes'* and *'Spills'*. *'Editions'* collages archival material with advertising, newsreels and digital computer animation effects. The aforementioned home movie footage of Smithson *et al.* discussing artistic control in the marketplace is juxtaposed with excerpts from Martha Rosler's video *Global Taste: A Meal in Three Courses, Element 1, 1985* (2002) – footage itself lifted by Rosler from television advertisements for nappies and Swiss cheese – including credits, reportage from the aftermath of Ronald Reagan's shooting in the 1980s focusing on the media scrum, stills from Internet death sites and a digital animation clip of a rolling synthetic black ocean played on repeat. There is an

### 'Vintage Bombers'

2008  
Vacuum-formed polystyrene, screen inks  
122×81 cm each

### Digital Video Effect: 'Holes'

2003  
DVD, monitor in packaging  
Dimensions variable

Installation view at Kunsthalle Zurich 2008

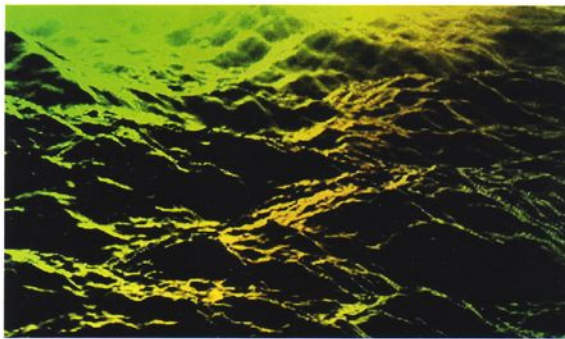




*Vintage Bomber*  
*(silver)*  
2008  
Vacuum-formed  
polystyrene, screen  
inks  
122x81 cm



**Within Price's exhaustive but beautifully constructed thesis, 'plasticity' becomes a conceptual point of departure and provides a framework for an understanding of the work he produces and the formats he engages with.**



the meaning of an exhibition – the exhibition's role as a knowledge-producer, say, or the artist's role as a deliverer, or rather perhaps distributor, of information and illumination – itself becomes a self-consciously discursive point of contention and engagement.

The objects that Price manufactures are unforgivingly blunt. Their materiality signifies a literal translation of ideas transmitted more fluidly through moving image, text or open-source systems. These objects are dependent on the historic and socio-economic context of the white cube. Here discourse is not provisional: it engenders a level of visibility and a weighting system of status and value requiring academic legitimization – endorsement or critique – and a market price.

Price has recently started producing large-scale wall pieces from natural wood veneer and acrylic. The material is cut to frame empty space, creating optically testing silhouette shapes conjuring simple action scenarios. For example, keys are exchanged, a contract is signed, a child is spoon-fed, a photograph is taken, something is whispered and a cigarette is lit. These oblique inverted images and their epic wall-mounted display create an odd cinematic aura. Empty Godardian gesture is here petrified in plastic. The present-tense narrative suggestion leads nowhere. It is the blank, generic quality of the images, originally sourced from the Internet and rendered here as negative space, that seems important.

The natural wood veneers are exotic and expensive – Walnut Burl, Ebony Makassar and Vavona Redwood. Covered in shiny diamond acrylic plastic, these pieces have the 'look and feel' of high-end design products. *Untitled* (2008), from Enamel and Router-Cut Dibond, depicts a man and a woman in tinted silhouette. The piece has a romantic allure and an elegance of form, but this is a brittle sophistication at once seductive and false. The images of contracts and keys being exchanged – repeatedly used by Price as a logo-esque device often printed in ink on small Dibond diamond shapes – smacks of corporate conspiracy theories or perhaps just



**Right:**  
*Redistribution*  
2008  
DVD stills



*How to Disappear  
in America*  
2008  
Book

the banality of real estate. The claustrophobic accumulation of artificial material achieves a certain resonance, a critical mass.

Price's illustrated essay 'Dispersion' (2002–ongoing) is freely available to download from his website, [www.distributedhistory.com](http://www.distributedhistory.com). The piece is a succinctly idiosyncratic assessment of distributed media, art production and the socio-economic forces shaping everything from the status of objects to the position of the audience. This essay, establishing a pitch and tone developed in more recent works such as *Redistribution*, is one of the most significant art works to come out of New York in the early 21st century.

Price has recently screen-printed 'Dispersion' in sections over a series of – again, now signature – high impact polystyrene knot pieces. Here rope knots are presented still encased in the polystyrene. The panels are titled *Essay with Knots*, p. 1 (2008), *Essay with Knots*, p. 4–5 (2008) and so on, to pages 16–17. This work is a chilling piece of visual styling and a stunningly corrupt act of redistribution.

*Title Variable* (2001–ongoing) consists of a series of music compilations, accompanying packaging and art work plus journalistic essays, all produced by Price: for example, *Video Game Soundtracks 1983–1987* (2001), *NJS* (2002) and *Industry* (2003). The soundwork is available to download as audio files from Price's website and UbuWeb. Print versions are available in a range of formats from CD hand-outs to limited art editions. The articles are placed in a number of music magazines.

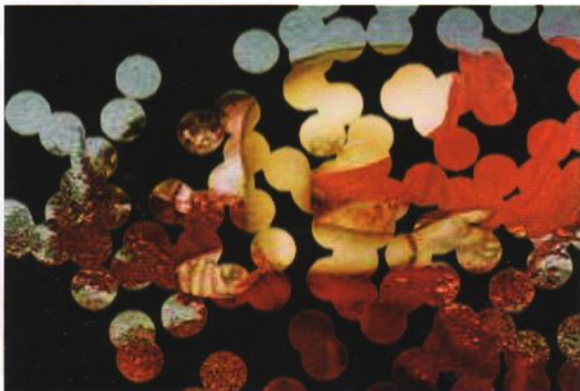
The sampling method and strategies for distribution of the compilations are fairly commonplace; it's the thoroughness and quirks, the strategic references in Price's approach, that give the project shape. The listening experience here is always analytical, never

immersive. The packaging has a succinct visual style aping the indie-creative-retro-high design of specialist hip music. The tone of the essays is informed, occasionally theoretical in reach and often creepily journalistic. The articles focus on subcultural resonance and how the development of production technologies defined the shaping of each musical genre. Again with Price you can't quite figure the position – somewhere between irony and well-researched authenticity or perhaps the odd combination of naivety and cynicism he has previously been accused of.<sup>4</sup>

In Price's essay 'Journalistic Approach to New Jack Swing' (2002) the pitch is, in fact, darkly reminiscent of the 'musical interludes' in Bret Easton Ellis' novel *American Psycho* (1991). Ellis' psychotic hero Patrick Bateman, in between bludgeoning another victim to death, describes with forensic enthusiasm his MOR appreciation – 'It's not just about the pleasures of conformity and the importance of trends<sup>5</sup> – for Huey Lewis and the News, Genesis and Whitney Houston. Price's musical range is obviously much more cultish, but the delivery and attention to detail are similar.

The opening sequence of the film adaptation (2000) of *American Psycho* leads you through Bateman's immaculately white designer modern apartment. It is here that many of the brutal killings later take place. The walls of the apartment are lined with 1980s' Appropriationist classics by Allan McCollum, Robert Longo, Richard Prince and Cindy Sherman. The apartment of a psychopath unhinged from society owing to excessive materialist obsession is perhaps a not inappropriate place for these acutely image conscious works to end up. A Price *Vintage Bomber* wouldn't look out of place here.

Price recently published a small, almost pocket-size, book: *How to Disappear in America* (2008). The text



**'Dispersion' is an idiosyncratic assessment of distributed media, art production and the socio-economic forces shaping everything from the status of objects to the position of the audience.**

*Digital Video Effect:  
'Holes'*  
2003  
DVD still



**Untitled**

2008  
Laser-cut mahogany  
and bird's eye maple,  
acrylic, inkjet print on  
Dibond  
Dimensions variable

has the intentional, ingratiatingly casual tone of a blog; it's both chatty and considered. It is, in fact, culled and rewritten from survival texts about how to drop out of society in a successful way. (The fact that dropping out these days can be done successfully or unsuccessfully is a moot point.) The text is peppered with typos and spelling mistakes, and there are sudden lurches in direction from New Age spiritual to military hard fact, from authority to Absurdism.

For example, methodical instructions on how to strangle a dog lead on to a rumination on contemporary technological surveillance devices that identify people through their consumer purchases. There is constant reference to 'the opposition' and descriptions of social types or cultural groups – motor-cycle hang-outs or punk bars – that may provide places of refuge from the mainstream. The fantasies of escape are romantically banal. The mythology of an American landscape – that you could submerge into infinite anonymity, drop out, build an alternative existence, find something true and authentic – is enduring.

The notion of disrupting 'the system' is curiously outmoded. There is no clear alternative, and there is no clear opposition. We have multiple styles and approaches now. There is infinite access to and collisions of meaning and value systems. There is a plethora of choices and a surfeit of images within the cultural logic of late capitalism. Here, defined by media, image becomes material. Price works in the realm of this new American Sublime.

What does it mean to have so acutely processed Andy Warhol, Conceptual legacies of the 1960s and '70s, the dematerialization of the art object, failed Utopias, the 1980s (in their entirety), MTV, Colin de Land's American Fine Arts, Metro Pictures, *Artforum*, Smithsonian's arrested

entropy and Serra's now spectacular weight, Feminism, semiotics, Baudrillard, global travel, terrorism, the turn of American imperialism and the right to freedom and self-expression? What does it mean to be seen to be the heir to the Appropriation artists of the 1980s, having directly lived through the relational aesthetics of the late 1990s? Where do these points connect with navigating the realm of contemporary image and media?

Price's work turns on a narrative reflecting in on itself. For all its up-to-the-minuteness, it becomes suddenly old-fashioned because America is strangely old-fashioned and nostalgic, reflecting in on itself, at once repressed, neurotic and primitive. Mythology is enduring, and Price works with the mythologies of art history, economics and style. He builds a narrative of production and consumption, value and meaning, strategy and reference. Critical discourse blends easily with aesthetic product. It's a fairly voracious but straightforwardly aspirational tale of free-market capitalism and cannibalism. This is what it means to choose to participate.

*Polly Staple is a contributing editor of frieze and Director of Chisenbale, London*

1 Sylvre Lotringer, from an interview with Matthew Collings published in *Artforum*, no. 88, September 1991, itself an edited version of an interview for the BBC's *Late Show* programme 'Theory in the Art World', subsequently broadcast in 1992.

2 From a conversation with Seth Price, New York, 28 March 2008

3 Ibid.

4 Gwen Allen, 'Interview with Seth Price', *Art Journal*, Spring 2007,

p. 82 (from Seth Price's website [www.distributedhistory.com](http://www.distributedhistory.com))

5 Bret Easton Ellis, *American Psycho* (1991), Vintage Books, New York, p. 343

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