

WORDS BY

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# Deep Cuts in Love



Seth trying out muslin prototype of wall-hanging garment/  
envelope sculpture destined for dOCUMENTA (13), Kassel, 2012.  
Photography by Ben Morgan-Cleveland

The storefront we rented had shuttered during the financial crisis and had been empty for a few years. Eventually the galleries would discover this neighborhood below Canal Street, but for now, entire blocks were vacant. The room was tawdry and melancholic, like a nightclub glimpsed in the light of morning. We planned to change that. We were going to bring a fug of dry ice, and the tang of cigarette smoke and pizza grease. There would be a PA for launching extreme sounds to clatter off the sheetrock walls, vinyl floors, and steel ductwork. There would be a trio of Trinitron cube monitors set on their own road cases displaying a video of Reagan getting shot. There would be a squad of impressively clean people barely out of puberty who would clown like high schoolers right up to the moment they turned into grim soldiers flying the banners of AmEx, Paychex, and the FDIC. I'd play ritual industrial music, Belgian new beat, and occult darkwave, all cut with classic acid house, plus five minutes of nothing but the sound of growling, slaving Rottweilers. Hopefully, all of this would get the attention of the buyers.

Sometimes you bend down for a closer look and tumble into another world. It was 2011, and I was taking a break from art—there was a baby to care for—when the designer Tim Hamilton invited me to play a video during his New York Fashion Week presentation. I proposed that we instead make garments together. I had convinced myself—and, more importantly, the woman who needed my help with the baby—that playing a video in a room was my job, and I was on break, and playing around with clothes would be—what? A diversion? I was deluded, of course. No hobby exists that can survive the artist's drive to claim everything for art.

In that respect, my own drive sensed newish territory. Artists were always working with fashion but that usually seemed to mean putting a picture on a handbag—I hadn't heard much about artists getting into the design process. I suggested to Tim that we produce military-inspired jackets covered with logos, in part because I was known for plastic sculptures of bomber jackets, and partly because I'd been hand-making and sketching torn and flattened envelopes. Imagine a business envelope you can wear, I explained. Tim is a curious and generous person, and we started on our capsule collection.



Dress Rehearsal for Folklore U.S. SS12 fashion show.  
Photography by Seth Price

I was put in charge of music for the presentation. For years I'd been making mixes "as art," mostly for an ongoing project called *Title Variable*, and some of those cassettes and discs had found fashion world popularity. But that project was about sending sounds and writing into the world and letting them fend for themselves without the protective frame of art. A fashion show is different because it lends music a frame. This is, to be sure, a very particular frame—a bespoke, niche frame. The music at a fashion show will never have the primacy it has in a club, where it's totally embodied. It's never going to meld with the action, like in a movie. It's



Gearing up for the show, Hugo Villard (makeup) at center, Martin-Christopher Harper (hair) at right.  
Photography by Seth Price

not really going to be part of a *gesamtkunstwerk*, as in theater and performance. Yes, a fashion show is full of art and theater, but it's also a sales pitch. The music has to harmonize the beauty and risk of the designs with the humdrum reality of branding. Music is part of the razzle-dazzle. It doesn't matter how much you turn it up, because fashion is an instrument for engaging the absolute present, and the loudest thing in the room will always be the roar of the now. There's no point making the music long and complicated because runway shows are brutally quick: after the models hit the floor, you've only got a few minutes. The music functions more like a processed, filtered, and implicitly commercialized narrative about some other era or way of life. It's a rumor of community and desire. The trick is to aim and refract it so as to light up the whirl of the absolute present, the way you might tilt a reflector to bounce light off a model.

I was backstage at a show recently, and the models came to work dressed like Soundcloud rappers, in Balenciaga and rare tees. At the presentation we did in 2011, the models showed up in mall brands like American Eagle and Hollister, and maybe American Apparel. It was the Obama years, before social media swamped the landscape. Fashion was changing. The high was just beginning to eat the low, or else it was the other way around, I can't remember. Sneaker culture was revving its engines, but it would be years before the term *athleisure* was widespread enough to make the dictionary. People were reblogging street style Tumblrs, and there was a new hashtag, *#menswear*, that had industry people excited—they took it as a sign that the elusive straight male wallet was about to finally open. Mainstream guys—men who perused the gentlemen's lifestyle magazines of the aughts, men who referred to themselves as *guys*—didn't know it, but they were about to start tracking drops. After that, they'd start tossing around words like *sprezz*. Before long, they'd be copping mad crispy deadstock Japanese sel-vage collabos to rock with some triple monks at Pitti.

When I say I made mixes "as art," it sounds ridiculous, but in fact it's a common tactic. Artists are always writing novels "as art," or cooking meals "as art." You'd think art is so insecure that it has to annex more robust territories, territories that nonetheless repel the invader as easily as you'd shoo a fly. The move is characteristic of many artforms, not just the most invisible and transient—plenty of people daub random marks on canvas "as art"—but the reason artists propose all sorts of cultural activities as art is that the frame can endow them with an absurd, fragile beauty.

That beauty can fade, though, as I discovered. I made an eight-hour, continuous edit of dance music from three decades, burned to CD-R, a soundtrack intended not for fashion but for labor and consumption. 8-4 9-5 10-6 11-7, I called it. The numbers represented eight-hour shifts at various jobs: a construction site, a Midtown office, an art gallery, and a boutique. Wherever people make things, there's music playing, and the same goes for places where those things are sold. All commerce, not just fashion, likes a rumor of community and desire, so I figured that a mix might provide the perfect camouflage for art to enter a workplace, unnoticed. Would it be taken for innocuous background music? Of course. Might there remain some intriguing excess, even if perceptible only to me and a few others? That was a question I hoped to answer.

When Art Basel invited me to contribute to an initiative to put sculpture in public space, I sent six copies of the mix and told them to play it in local hair salons for the duration of

the fair. The documentation they sent—an exterior shot of a low, shabby, storefront on some backstreet—had the opaque charm of conceptual photography but didn't answer my question. Later that year, though, I walked into a vintage boutique in New York that was playing my mix, and—*woah*.

There are the ideas you have when you're musing about art, and then there's the art. Making the piece had filled me with notions: *Music happens inside time, and work eats time, and time is money, and labor is something or other, and experience is something something, and something something History...* All of that vanished the moment I entered the boutique, realized what was playing, and simply *experienced*. We deliver to commerce all manners of culture—in this case, woozy space disco, ecstatic R&B, gleaming Italo, Adult Urban Contemporary, postpunk, EBM, NDW—then watch as the hand balls it up and squeezes, and when the fingers open there's nothing but a bit of costume jewelry. I'd been hoping all that pressure would make a diamond—yeah, right!



Top: Seth Price Fashion, soundtrack to 2011 Men's fashion week show (New York: Distributed History, 2011). Photography by Ron Amstutz

Bottom: Folklore U.S., soundtrack to 2012 dOCUMENTA (13) fashion show (New York: Distributed History, 2012). Photography by Ron Amstutz

Stunning, massive, crazy life is handily turned into a mild incitement to browse vintage blouses, get your hair blown out, and make it through an eight-hour workday.

*Eight-hour workday*. That sounds quaint, doesn't it? Many aspects of the piece seem like relics, because this was 2007, a hinge moment for music and technology. The peer-to-peer threat was neutralized, but streaming hadn't solidified. Bandwidth was up, and DJs were beginning to post sets, but social media wasn't really there yet. The brand-new iTunes store was pushing celebrity playlists—forget *mixtapes*, yeah?—a new form that was rapidly becoming a marker of taste for the times.



Folklore U.S. SS12 garment collection for sale in SinnLeffers department store, dOCUMENTA (13), Kassel, 2012. Photography by Seth Price

I wanted to play around with all of this, but when you try to engage the absolute present you inevitably find yourself a little ahead or a little behind, and sometimes both at once. It turned out that eight hours of music was too much for audio editing software, so I had to use a video program. The file was too big to host online, so I had to release it on disc. Discs made for CD players can't hold eight hours of music, so I had to encode it as a data disc, for computers. And then they stopped making computers with disc trays. I'd produced something that was destined to be inaccessible as art, unless you were okay putting it on a shelf, like the relic it was. It did manage to circulate for a little while, especially among art and fashion people, and I suppose that's why Tim trusted me with the music that night.

The experience making garments was a lot of fun, and I started thinking about how to mutate it—how, in other words, to claim the hobby for art. Also, it could possibly solve a problem: I'd been invited to contribute to the international art show *documenta 13*, slated to open in Germany

that coming summer, and I had no ideas. In the fashion world, I mused, it would be entirely normal to showcase your work for a specialist audience in the fall, iron out the kinks over the winter, and release it to the public when the weather turned nice. I told the curators about the garments, assured them I had a plan, and received their blessing.

The runway show staged at documenta that summer “as art,” was bigger and more ambitious than the one prepared for Fashion Week. The models were cast in Cologne, the stylist and hair came from NYC, and the makeup team was Parisian. The venue was a subterranean parking garage, a cool, dry cave that smelled of motor oil located directly under both the main exhibition hall and the department store where our clothes would be sold. In a hall around the corner, I installed wall-hanging garment sculptures. The plan I had developed over the winter was to send to Germany two bodies of work that shared materials and themes—military styling, all-over security envelope logos, the “blank canvas” of white linen—but which traveled via the divergent routes of fashion and high art. The works sent through the fashion industry were designed to be wearable, of course, and were fabricated in an industrial network that included China, Japan, and Italy, and were consigned directly to the department store for retail sale. The pieces that took the high road of art were crafted in New York’s Garment District couture shops under my supervision—I drew on what I’d learned through working with Tim—then consigned through art shippers and galleries, and came to rest on plinths and white walls, where they were recognizably sculpture. The show in the garage would serve to advertise both bodies of work.

*Seth’s doing a fashion show? Why?* That’s what one European curator said (I heard similar things from friends, including artists who—bless them—would, years later, do high-profile LVMH collaborations). It did feel, that night, as if the 2012 art audience was indulging in a guilty pleasure. I was told that a well-known artist had advised the curators to sign off on my fashion show because the exhibition “could use a little sex.” An art audience also likes punishment, of course. Happy to oblige, I stocked the soundtrack with harsh, abrasive tracks by bands like Women of the SS, Front Line Assembly, and Severed Heads, tempered with the floatier sounds of composers like Franco Battiato and Alice Shields. The typical runway tempo was slowed way down, and the direction of the gazes was reversed. The models fanned out along a circular, elevated runway, halted, and held position for an inordinately long time, watching the audience, who milled around to the sound of tracks with names like “Succubus Circle,” “Murderous,” and “Dry Lungs.” At a cue,



Look from Folklore U.S. SS12 fashion show.  
Photography by Leon Reindl

the models turned their backs to the audience and held the pose again, while “Death Posture” and “Something Scary” played. When the models filed out, an aria by Webern wafted over a jackhammer bassline by Laibach, and everybody went home with a screen-printed tote containing a poster and a CD. You’ve got to give the audience a little something.

What do I mean when I say that I love art, I love music, I love fashion? I love the nebulous wash of feelings. I love the shimmer of memories and masks that emanate from an old space disco single, or a felt panel draping to meet a hardwood floor, or the growl of an attack dog as Reagan is gunned down and a 24-year-old smirks through the haze. When I say I love all of this, it’s an arbitrary affirmation of my own experience. Does that mean that what I love is really just my own experience? It’s true that the roar of days can obscure our fundamental love for experience itself—the loose joy of the present, of being a body in the moment—and art, when it touches us, returns that sense to us. Maybe when I say that I love music and fashion and art, I’m saying, “I love experience,” or even, simply, “I love.” ●