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Contemporary Art, Systems and the Aesthetics of Dispersion

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Introduction

Systems Everywhere! The Age of Dispersion

This is a book about two intimately related things, which, I claim, are best considered systemic and dispersed. They are art and the humans that make it. It borrows its title from Seth Price's essay from 2002, 'Dispersion.' But where Price was primarily considering media and in particular the distribution of images across those media, I want to consider social systems more generally. My central claim is that both contemporary art and humans at present can be best understood, not as fixed and stable objects with immutable identities, but rather as instances of *dispersion* across systems of distribution, communication and control. In other words, we might best understand both works of art and the people that make and experience them, not by looking at individual objects or people, but rather at the systems that they are situated within. This argument is supported by the accompanying claim (laid out in Chapter 1) that any understanding of what art is will be underwritten by an understanding of what it means to be human. A model of art depends on a model of subjectivity, and this dependency pivots around the hinge of technology.

The starting point for Price's essay was Conceptual Art which he identifies as an expanded field of practices spanning the 20th century that originate with Duchamp and the Readymade. These include: the Linguistic Turn of the 1960s; Institutional Critique; and the relational and collaborative practices that appeared in the 1990s. The importance of Conceptual Art, Price claims, is that: 'one of the ways in which the Conceptual project in art has been most successful is in claiming new territory for practice.'¹ The new territory claimed by Conceptual Art is, Price identifies, a space of: 'commercial distribution, decentralization, and dispersion.'² By dispersion Price means that art within the historical and discursive horizon of Conceptualism (from the 1960s) is now understood as not occupying a single and unique position in time and space. Instead, a work of art has an identity that is articulated through the different mediums by which it might be experienced such as photographs, texts and facsimiles. Another way of thinking about this condition is that art is no longer confined by plinths, frames or galleries as privileged sites of display but can now be not only considered as dispersed across different systems but also that this dispersed condition is part of its primary subject matter.

Price establishes the horizon for the development of Conceptual Art in the 20th century as the profound societal shifts brought about by the twin factors of technological developments, such as computing and telecommunications and the economic shift to late capitalism. Both of these brought into being a new world order that is best understood as a global system that operates through a logic of networks and distribution which I refer to here as the *Age of Dispersion*. The *Age of Dispersion* emerges alongside both the communication and computing systems of the 20th century and discourses including Cybernetics and Systems Theory that are developed with those technologies to study those systems. The global system of the *Age of Dispersion* creates a shared horizon for what might otherwise be identified as a diverse range of practices. They are all self-reflexive in considering this horizon, which is to say that they have all made the economic, social and institutional conditions of their distribution and display their primary subject matter rather than experiments with representational, formal or aesthetic content.

In the chapters that follow, I consider five paradigmatic contemporary artists that both work with and exemplify the conditions of dispersion in systems: Seth Price; Liam Gillick; Martin Creed; Hito Steyerl; and Theaster Gates. These artists demonstrate the formal diversity of contemporary art in 2022 in which traditional artistic mediums and practices have been replaced with systemic process in which artists use whatever systems of distribution and display are available to them. My claim is that these systemic processes are underwritten by the contemporary conditions of subjectivity in *The Age of Dispersion*. That is, like art, human subjectivity is similarly dispersed across systems of distribution, communication and control.

However, if, through acts of dispersion, contemporary art might exemplify contemporary conditions of subjectivity, then this exemplification runs the risk of serving as mere passive reflection in lieu of critique. To phrase this as a rhetorical question: what ways can artists respond to accusation that in celebrating dispersion they are complicit in the logic of neo-liberal market fundamentalism? Art can, all too often, can seem to be the R&D Department for late capitalism exemplified by the accelerationist Pop Art of someone like KAWS (Brian Donnelly).³ Contemporary artists face the challenge of how they can offer meaningful and effective critical engagement. Without this ability to facilitate critique, they risk appearing as mere compensatory or deflationary gestures in the face of the dispersion of subjectivity in contemporary society.

But whilst contemporary systems of dispersion feature in each of the examples I discuss, none of these artists merely accept or celebrate these conditions. Instead through techniques of abstraction, deflation or mischief, each artist offers aesthetic strategies for representing these systems and mimicking their functions whilst also offering the potential to disrupt them. Central to this disruption, I argue, are strategies of obfuscation, disappointment and misdirection.

Systems

Definitions of systems must, by necessity, be somewhat abstract as they can apply to a wide variety of instances. However, some basic principles can be identified. A system is a set of elements connected so they form a recognisable and coherent whole, and this connection performs some form of recognisable function. A system orders its world. Kenneth Boulding, the pioneer of *General Systems Theory* in the 20th century, called a system simply: ‘anything that is not chaos. We could turn the pattern around and define a system as any structure that exhibits order and pattern.’⁴ Systems reduce the complexity of their environments and by doing so become, somewhat, distinct from them. An ant colony, for example, just like a brain, is not reducible to its surroundings. They each have separate identities even if the physical borders are hard to discern. To understand a system means to understand what it does. An economic system, for example, reduces all of the messy complication of the world into the abstractions of financial transactions. Systems have functions, which are particular to themselves. The trick is in working out what, exactly, those functions might be.

If you look at the world through the lens of systems, you will find them everywhere. This is what the systems-theorist Stafford Beer meant when he said ‘a system is not something given in nature’;⁵ that is, systems are defined and then observed by us as a result of our interactions with them. That said, people who think about systems tend to talk about them in one of two ways.

On the one hand, systems might be used as metaphors to describe and explain our complex world and the behaviours and patterns that seem to occur within it. Gamblers may have a system by which they imagine they can place winning bets. Ikea has a whole range of shelves, draws and cupboards that they describe as Storage Solution Systems on their website:

IKEA storage systems are designed to help you keep all your things organised throughout your home. Each system has parts, such as shelves, frames and cabinets that you can put together in unique combinations to suit your space and needs.⁶

In his early March 2021 interview with Oprah Winfrey, about his relationship with the British Royal family, Prince Harry made the following observations: that his brother and father were

trapped within the system’ of the Royal Family; that it was ‘really hard because I am part of the system with them, I always have been’ and was ‘very aware’ that his brother Prince William ‘can’t leave that system but I have.

It seems that Harry is using the word system here in a metaphorical way to describe relations rather than physical infrastructure. He wasn’t literally

'trapped' by being locked up but rather felt compelled to behave in certain ways because of the history of his family. In the same way, Ikea's shelves are not literally systems but rather collections of interlocking parts; they are not, in the formal vocabulary of Systems Theory 'Autopoietic,' that is dynamic and self-organising in the way an ant colony is.

In these cases, system explains how relationships, processes and patterns may appear to us. In other words, from these perspectives, systems do not name actually existing things and structures in the world but rather describe a way of looking at the world and understanding our relationship to it.

However, systems might be considered underlying structures in the world that serve particular functions. Meteorologists talk about weather systems; town planners devise transport systems; engineers might design systems in factories to process anything from food to motor cars. From this perspective, systems actually exist and we know this because we can see them, or at the very least parts of them, and what they do. Arguably the most important such system is the internet. If the internet is a system made of different component things, then, presumably, it's theoretically possible (even if practically impossible) to weigh it. It is not a metaphor, but a literal thing comprising myriad interconnected elements. From this perspective, systems are not defined by us but rather discovered and identified through our interactions with them.

We know the internet is a physical thing that performs functions because we can see the ecological impact of its underlying infrastructure.⁷ The processors, networks and cables required for online connectivity use up vast amounts of natural resources including fossil fuels, water and precious metals. As a recent report into the carbon footprint of the internet put it: 'charging up a single tablet or smart phone requires a negligible amount of electricity; [but] using either to watch an hour of video weekly consumes annually more electricity in the remote networks than two new refrigerators use in a year.'⁸

The use of words like 'virtual' or 'cloud' suggests that the online world is abstract and disembodied. But as James Ball puts it in his book *The System*, about 'who owns the internet and how it owns us,' the internet is a physical thing made up of cables, mechanisms and huge data centres connected in a global system. All elements of this physical infrastructure are owned and managed accordingly and 'We refer to the online world as if it's abstract from the reality we all occupy every day: this is a myth, and it's a myth that obscures where the real power lies.'⁹

There are people implicated in all of this too. Each time content is moderated in social media what *Wired* calls a 'vast, invisible pool of human labor' checks it and reports that already in 2014, there were over 100,000 people moderating content of world's social media sites, mobile apps and cloud storage services, which was around twice the amount of people working directly for Google and nearly 14 times that of Facebook.¹⁰

In both uses of system – as metaphor and infrastructure – there are two things at stake.

First is how useful it is to describe our contemporary world. A system is a set of elements connected so they form a recognisable and coherent whole, and this connection performs some form of recognisable function. A system orders its world and simplifies the chaos that surrounds it. If you look around you will see systems everywhere as a way of naming things. Security; banking; air-conditioning; clothing; even razors have all been called systems (and it's become something of a hobby of mine to spot just how that word appears everywhere from the side of buses to toothpaste tubes). Systems are inescapable; ubiquitous.

Second whilst systems are an integral part of life in the *Age of Dispersion* (from the 1950s onwards), their use has a history that extends back behind the introduction of Cybernetics and Systems Theory alongside communication and computing systems in the 20th century through the 19th century and the mechanical systems like steam and photography of the industrial revolution to the 18th century. Three things happen at this time. First, system is given a definition in the first edition of Samuel Johnson's *Dictionary of the English Language*. Second, 'system' is established as a genre of writing¹¹ and as a way of understanding the production and organisation of knowledge, such as in Kant's appeal to systematicity in his three Critiques and the subsequent system(s) of German Idealism.¹² Third system became a means of social organisation underwriting modern forms of polity including liberal democracy, economics, law and education. Before this, in the 17th century, system is woven into the birth of modern science. The concluding book and overview to Newton's *Philosophiæ Naturalis, Principia Mathematica* is called, 'The System of the World.' In other words, the history of systems is an alternative way of narrating the history of modernity.

Be they infrastructural or metaphorical, systems are understood through the combinations of their component parts, operations and behaviour. Their whole is greater than the sum of their parts, as the cliché runs. Systems thinking is a way of thinking about the world in terms of emergent properties: that is wholes, rather than their constituent parts. It considers outputs and behaviours in terms of function, communication and control.

We know that you don't understand an ant colony by looking at a single ant any more than staring at a Euro coin helps you understand the economy. Knowing how the gears on a bike work doesn't explain the Tour de France, and human consciousness is not reducible to mere synapses snapping in the soft-machine of the brain. Each of these is complex entities that are better described when considered as systems that display distributed behaviour. The behaviour of the ant colony is dispersed throughout its system.¹³ Our memories are not located in individual parts of our brains but rather spread across neural and even social networks.

Artists are obliged to work with systems. Some know this; some choose this situation; others pretend to be oblivious. But like it or not, every time something is exhibited, published, photographed, printed, written about, insured, sold, tweeted or whatever else happens to art these days, it is circulated within systems

of dispersion, distribution and display. Artists use systems because of what they do. After all, mediums like sculpture and painting are complex structures with their own particular patterns of self-organisation. But there are other systems that artists can also use as mediums: technology; architecture; bodies; language; styles; and objects. These are systems too. Sometimes these systems are in plain view; at other times they are hidden. In the examples in this book, some of these systems are pulled from their often occulted obscurity, given aesthetic form and offered up for interrogation. Despite superficial differences between the works, they all share an underlying preoccupation with systems as a way of thinking about structure, relation, context, communication and technology.

The Age of Dispersion

This current era of systems and dispersion has been given different names. For Frederic Jameson, it was the 'age of the world system' (1992); Manuel Castells *The Network Society* (2000); and *The Postmodern Condition* by many others including JF Lyotard (1984). In each account, the economic, social and technological circumstances of late capitalism are coupled with the forms of knowledge and subjectivity that are produced by these conditions.

All of these definitions relate to social conditions developing in the second half of the 20th century coupled with the cultural and historical influence of electronic technologies such as computing and telecommunication systems. This leads to both the subsequent dominance of information as a metaphor for communication and organisation and in particular new configurations of those social systems that were established in modernity including: the economy; law; education; and forms of modern liberal democracy.

After the Second World War, new processes of production began to emerge out of the joint influences of the peacetime application of military research and development (including radar and telecommunication) and the necessity to rebuild societies. These post-industrial and post-Fordist processes are essentially inseparable from a global system of the transfer of materials, goods, services and data.¹⁴

For instance, the phenomena of containerisation followed the invention of the modern container in 1956 and its adoption in the subsequent decade. It is based on a standard sized entity or unit that could be easily transferred between ships, trains and trucks. Before then, it didn't make sense to manufacture things in other places to avail of cheaper resources and labour. Containers rendered everything transferable in a global system: raw materials; products; even people subject to trafficking. The container ship made capital truly migratory on a global scale and radically changed the nature of trade in a global network that transcended nation states. Dramatic changes in labour and employment were brought about by new technologies including mechanised production and computing. In the early 1970s, the Americans abandoned the gold standard which, along with the collapse of the Bretton Woods System of international

economic management, heralded the subsequent market fundamentalism of neo-liberalism and its logic of deregulation and privatisation in a system of economic trading underwritten by the logic of speculation. It is no coincidence that this occurred alongside the military-industrial-cultural complex's development of telecommunication and computing networks including the internet (and its predecessor Arpanet) and the World Wide Web (in the early 1990s), which facilitated the rapid and massive exchange of information across global systems of communication and surveillance.

These technological developments coincided with the power of nation states becoming effaced by global systems of communication and control where capital migrated into information which, subsequently, became the primary unit of capitalist exchange. In such cultures, power no longer operates according to a disciplinary logic of modernity (as Foucault argued), but rather control where power is distributed across networks and 'ultra-rapid forms of free-floating control [have] replaced the old disciplines operating in the time frame of a closed system'¹⁵ as Deleuze claimed in his famous essay 'Postscript on the Societies of Control.'

These effects of production and power create new experiences of subjectivity which, like information, is similarly understood to be both distributed and dispersed across different communicative networks and also produced and mediated by them. Hence, in the *Age of Dispersion*, human identity does not exist a priori to the processes of its production but rather emerges from the ecology of social, historical and material conditions, such as economic transactions, communication systems and social media, within which it is positioned. In other words, subjectivity does not pre-exist processes of power and production, but is instead constituted by them. It is *dispersed*.

The conditions of the *Age of Dispersion* present radical challenges to the accounts of, on the one hand, the autonomous and rational humanity that emerges in the European Enlightenment, and on the other art: or rather those aesthetic products and experiences that humanity produces and experiences its subjectivity through. As in other, and related, accounts of the conditions of subjectivity in late capitalism, such as Posthumanism and The Anthropocene, humans are identified as enmeshed within and reliant upon existing economic, technological and ecological networks that are beyond their control. The *Age of the Dispersion* thus suggests a political necessity for forms of cultural production to mimic its effects, map its operations and reveal its conditions in order to open it up for critique and the proposal of alternatives.

Technology, Identity and Self-Understanding

A common understanding of the word technology is as a technique, methodology or knowledge. It has been common throughout history for humans to understand who and what they are in relation to prevailing technology. In early Greek and Christian societies where the dominant technology related

predominately to agriculture, humans were clay infused with spirit. In the 3rd century BCE, humans related themselves to hydraulic engineering; now, the human was understood as the site of canals and pipes for liquids such as the four humours. In the 16th century, humans became machines; that is, automata of cogs, gears and springs, whilst in the following centuries, metaphors of chemistry, steam power and then electricity were used.

The model of the human as a computer subsequently emerged as the dominant metaphor for cognition and behaviour with the establishment of the so-called von Neumann architecture, which provides the conceptual model of more or less all existing computers. This understands the human through a dualism in which the body is a piece of organic hardware that processes information about the world. From this perspective, thought is a type of software that decodes or represents the world through its own processes of simulation.

Each of these technologies and metaphors for humanity comes with their own potentials and restrictions. They each place humans within a particular worldview with a particular horizon. Each world will have its own limit.

Systems and dispersion are also related to particular technological conditions and precipitate another paradigm shift. They follow the logic of The Cloud and The Stack. They are a way of taking the world, thinking about it, manipulating it and doing things in it. Within systems, human subjects are conceived of as the outcome of dispersed relations within those systems.

Thinking in systems and dispersion means considering phenomena in terms of information and relations rather than objects. When both art and the human subject are understood through systems, the idea that either is the expression of either a set of universal human values or an autonomous instance of individual expression needs to be jettisoned. Instead, they are both objects and subjects that are radically distributed and dispersed across systems of communication and control. The pioneer of Second-Order Cybernetics, Gregory Bateson, described its subject matter as not objects or events but the: ‘information ‘carried’ by events and objects. We consider the objects or events only as proposing facts, propositions, messages, percepts and the like.’¹⁶

Systems give us another technique alongside art, for thinking about who we are. This requires understanding that our individuality is positioned within a complex set of technological and environmental coordinates. Humanity is positioned within broader systems such as history, culture, language, architecture, economics, chemistry and physics. The human body is just one, biological, system amongst many others. Some of these are necessary for our existence; others are oblivious.

In an interview with *Women’s Own* magazine in 1987, Margaret Thatcher made one of her most contentious and notorious claims:

And, you know, there’s no such thing as society. There are individual men and women and there are families. And no government can do anything except through people, and people must look after themselves first.¹⁷

Thatcher could not have been more wrong. All people *are* is their relations. All of us get our identities from the systems we are dispersed throughout. And this is no cause for alarm, but rather a thrilling opportunity to rethink who, what and why we are at this moment.

Notes

- 1 Seth Price, ‘Dispersion’, in Beatrix Ruf & Axel Hochdörfer (eds.) *Social Synthetic* (Cologne: Koenig Books, 2017) pp. 67–85; pg. 68.
- 2 Seth Price, ‘Dispersion,’ in Beatrix Ruf & Axel Hochdörfer (eds.) *Social Synthetic* (Cologne: Koenig Books, 2017) pp. 67–85; pg. 71.
- 3 Described in the *Art Review Power 100* as being the 29th most influential entity in the art world in 2021 and ‘a brand name through commercial partnerships and celebrity supporters that few can match’ at: <https://artreview.com/artist/kaws/?year=2021>.
- 4 Kenneth Ewart Boulding, *The World as a Total System* (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 1985), pg. 9.
- 5 Stafford Beer, cited by Hugh Dubberly in, ‘A Systems Literacy Manifesto’ (Oct 2015) at: <http://www.dubberly.com/articles/a-systems-literacy-manifesto.html> (accessed, 10th March 2021).
- 6 <https://www.ikea.com/ie/en/cat/storage-solution-systems-46052/> (accessed, 10th March 2021).
- 7 In 2015 data processing used 416.2 terawatt hours (TWh) of electricity or about 3 percent of the world’s electricity and 2 percent of total global emissions. Google used 5.7 TWh. This represents more electricity the whole United Kingdom (300 TWh) and the same carbon footprint as the aviation industry. See James Bridle, *New Dark Age* (London: Verso, 2019). Similarly, the energy demands of virtual block-chain currencies such as Bitcoin are immense and will only increase as the production of the currency slows down. The Economist recently reported that that the power use for the servers that produce the software for Bitcoin software is at least 22 TWh per year which is about the same as Ireland. The Economist Group Limited, ‘Why Bitcoin Uses so Much Energy,’ *The Economist* (Jul. 9th, 2018) at: <https://www.economist.com/> (accessed, 2nd June 2022).
- 8 ‘The Cloud Begins with Coal – Big Data, Big Networks, Big Infrastructure, and Big Power,’ (2013) at: <https://www.tech-pundit.com> (accessed, 10th March 2021).
- 9 James Ball, *The System: Who Owns the Internet, and How It Owns Us* (London: Bloomsbury, 2020) pg. 3.
- 10 These figures come from Hemanshu Nigam, who runs online safety consultancy SSP Blue and was former chief security officer of MySpace, quoted in Adrian Chen, ‘The Laborers Who Keep Dick Pics and Beheadings Out of Your Facebook Feed’ at: <https://www.wired.com> (accessed, 2nd June 2022).
- 11 Clifford Siskin, *System* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2017).
- 12 ‘By as early as 1837–1838, only a few years after Hegel’s death, and still during Schelling’s lifetime, Carl Ludwig Michelet published the two-volume *Geschichte der letzten Systeme der Philosophie in Deutschland von Kant bis Hegel* (*History of the Latest Systems of Philosophy in Germany from Kant to Hegel*), thereby grouping these four philosophers and their works within a determinate epoch of German philosophy’ Brian O’Connor and Georg Mohr (eds.), *German Idealism: An Anthology and Guide* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2007).
- 13 Bert Hölldobler and Edward O. Wilson, *The Superorganism* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2009).
- 14 These ubiquitous systems of everyday life are undergirded by the prevailing myth of data as proposed by Claude Shannon in his theory of Information. Information

10 Introduction

- Theory was formulated by Shannon with Warren Weaver in the aftermath of the 2nd World War, as what they called a mathematical theory of communication. Claude Shannon, 'A Mathematical Theory of Communication,' *Bell System Technical Journal*, 27 (July & October, 1948) pp. 379–423 & 623–656.
- 15 Giles Deleuze, 'Postscript on the Societies of Control,' *October*, 59 (Winter, 1992) pp. 3–7 (5 pages).
- 16 Gregory Bateson, 'Cybernetic Explanation' reprinted in *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, New Edition (Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 2000) pg. 410.
- 17 'Margaret Thatcher a Life in Quotes,' *The Guardian* (Mon. 8th April, 2013) at: <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2013/apr/08/margaret-thatcher-quotes> (accessed, June 2022).

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2 Seth Price and the Stuff of Systems

There is a dominant strand within contemporary art that is underwritten by a particular understanding of what the human subject is. Both are characterised by dispersion throughout systems of communication and control. The term dispersion was borrowed from Seth Price's essay of the same name and which is one of his best known works. This work is considered along with some other examples concluding with *Folklore U.S.* (2011–2014) to argue that whilst, as Price acknowledges, his work sits within the horizon of Conceptual Art rather than being about the dematerialisation of art, it is ultimately concerned with exploring the physical supports of image production and the *re-materialisation* of art in the *Age of Dispersion*. In an inversion of the logic of conceptualism Price draws aesthetic attention to the materiality and *stuff* of things that are dispersed in systems.

Price identifies Conceptual Art as both the theoretical and historical horizon for his practice. But whilst conceptualism explored the dematerialisation of art through focusing on language, the reproducible image and the institutional supports for art, Price, however, explores those elements of materiality and distribution that are not explicitly associated with artistic mediums. Rather than the typical tendency of conceptualism to turn to language, photography and Institutional Critique leading to the dispersion of individual works of art into systems, Price focuses attention on the other side of the equation of Conceptual Art. His work foregrounds the physical correlates and media that otherwise might recede from aesthetic and critical attention. These are elements such as Mylar film, CNC-routed veneer, PDF files and videotapes that support and distribute images and texts. In arguing this, I claim that Price is following the cues of Robert Rauschenberg who through his exploration of entropy, affect and materialisation offered an alternative trajectory for practice to those of modernist medium specificity and anti-art that stemmed from the dual influences of either Clement Greenberg or Marcel Duchamp.

From this first observation follow the two main claims of this chapter.

First, by exploring contemporary conditions of dispersed subjectivity Price not only offers a general portrait of human subjects in the *Age of Dispersion* but also provides something of a self-portrait in a mode that is neither

representational nor Expressionistic but rather mimetic of certain conditions of distributed identity and their material supports. That is, rather than attempting to represent subjects or subjectivity in the *Age of Dispersion*, Price mimics its effects on identity through his own strategies of dispersion. As he observes: 'Few strategies are needed to keep up with commercial distribution, decentralization, and dispersion. You must fight something in order to understand it.'¹

Second, I argue that through this drawing of attention to the material supports of distribution and dispersion one may use Price's work to consider the often occluded material conditions of the systems we inhabit.

Dispersed Subjectivity

Price has explicitly acknowledged dispersed subjectivity as a subject for his practice. In *Redistribution* (2007–present), Price made an audio-visual recording of a typical artist's talk. Typically, these talks introduce examples of work alongside influences, motivations and overarching themes all of which link the artist's practice to their identity as a unifying agency. However, in *Redistribution* any singular identity of the talker, or meaning of the talk, is undermined by the use of jarring graphics, background music voice-overs and repetition, which sometimes make it hard to follow. Further, the piece remains in a process of adaptation as Price edits, adds and removes parts for different manifestations (public talks, video recordings, etc.). In this work, the form and content of the artwork become indistinguishable from one another: that is, the means by which the work is recorded and subsequently distributed is also its primary subject matter. And both are in flux.

The overall feeling of matters being in flux reappears in *Fuck Seth Price: A Novel* (New York: Leopard Press, 2015): an abstract novel written in a self-reflexive stream-of-consciousness style that Price once called 'slippery autofiction.' The subject seems to be an artist, much like Price, who spends the majority of the text considering both the condition of contemporary art and the construction and function of the novel itself. At the same time, he made <http://organic.software> (2015), which is an online database that he had originally produced anonymously. It contained a dataset of over 4,000 high-profile art collectors including images of faces, addresses, political donations, net worth and other information available online. In discussing both pieces Price reflected on them as companion pieces and as portraits.

They're both written: one is a novel; the other is coded. One takes up a current literary form, the other looks like a social-media site. They were published in the same month. They're not art objects. They don't make money, they cost me money. The site was an exercise in making an anonymous and unpublicized artwork, while the title of the novel makes it the opposite of that. They both express a kind of negativity and aggression, obviously. They're publicly accessible, and they circulate outside the art

world. At the same time, they both address a kind of local politics, in the sense of the art world as the world around me, the thing I know about, care about, can speak about and also implicate myself in, and all my feelings about that. But there's a level of fiction introduced: it's not a direct view. The novel is a slippery autofiction, and the website's About page has a fictional backstory for why there's this massive database of art collectors.²

In these examples, Price is presenting a portrait of the art world in 2015 along with a type of self-portrait.³ However, these are portraits that are not representational in either iconic or expressive terms. They neither present any likeness of Price nor express any of his subjective states. Instead, by virtue of their distributed nature they are mimetic of the conditions of *dispersion* that characterise both works of art and human subjects in the *Age of Dispersion*.

Dispersion, the Essay

Price's most well-known work *Dispersion* (2002–ongoing)⁴ began as an academic essay drawing on art historical and theoretical sources to reflect upon conditions of dispersion against the horizon of the emerging predominance of the internet. It was initially available in printed form but has since become widely available in digital form as a PDF and via online sources, as well as forming the basis for the installation *Essay with Knots* (2008) (Figure 2.1).

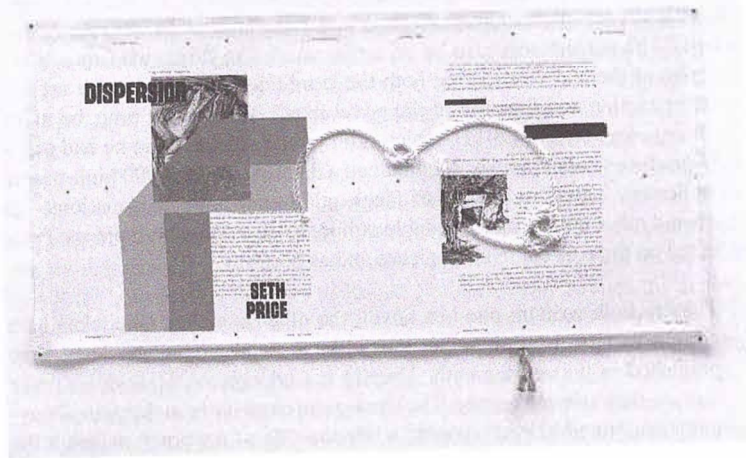


Figure 2.1 Seth Price: *Essay with Knots: Alpha+Omega* (2008)

In each iteration, *Dispersion* performs its dispersed nature as it declares its distribution over the numerous platforms by which it is presented. In the essay, Price poses the central question that forms the meaning of the work and which apply to both the object and the subject in play:

Suppose an artist were to release the work directly into a system that depends on reproduction and distribution for its sustenance, a model that encourages contamination, borrowing, stealing, and horizontal blur?⁵

Price claims his starting point is Conceptual Art which he identifies as a historical moment from the early 1970s that is still the dominant horizon for contemporary art. That is, Conceptual Art is a project that, for Price, remains both 'radically incomplete' and ubiquitous in that: 'today it seems that most of the work in the international art system positions itself as Conceptual to some degree, yielding the "Conceptual painter," the "DJ and Conceptual artist," the "Conceptual web artist."' ⁶

As already discussed, *Dispersion* is ostensibly about the influence of Duchamp, and the figure of the Readymade, on art made over the last 50 years. In particular, this influence has rendered fluid and dispersed the once rigid borders that protected the separate and distinct identity and value of art. Now, when considered in relation to the fields of experience or use in which works of art may be positioned, such as communication, entertainment or economics, they are indistinguishable from other things in the world.

What Price takes from Duchamp is the artistic turn towards an interrogation of the systems of support, distribution and display that art takes place within. But he pivots away from the usual reading of Duchamp's significance to relating it specifically to new media and the Information Age:

Distributed media can be defined as social information circulating in theoretically unlimited quantities in the common market, stored or accessed via portable devices such as books and magazines, records and compact discs, videotapes and DVDs, personal computers and data disquettes. Duchamp's question has new life in this space, which has greatly expanded during the last few decades of global corporate *sprawl*. It's space into which the work of art must project itself lest it be outdistanced entirely by these corporate interests.⁷

Conceptual Art is frequently read according to the oppositional logic of the avant-garde. As such, through a turn to language (Linguistic Turn) and negation of aesthetics (Anti-Aesthetic) it operates as a form of Institutional Critique. In doing so, it is characterised as a critique of the hierarchical systems and power dynamics inherent in institutions and an attempt to undermine the individual art object as a privileged focus of aesthetic attention; a means of self-expression; or a valuable commodity. For this reason, Conceptual Art

is often coupled with a critique of capitalism in general and the art market in particular such as in the work of Lawrence Weiner or the flourish of politically orientated use of conceptual gestures in South American art, especially from the late 1960s. Price, however, is interested in a different trajectory, that is with interrogating how art is reliant upon the distributive and dispersive systems of capitalism, such as music, design, fashion, graphic design and advertising in order to be experienced through portable formats such as, Price observes, 'books and magazines, records and compact discs, videotapes and DVDs' and which now include screens, tablets and other devices. As Price puts it:

It is useful to continually question the avant-garde's traditional romantic opposition to bourgeois society and values. The genius of the bourgeois manifests itself in the circuits of power and money that regulate the flow of culture. National bourgeois culture, of which art is one element, is based around commercial media, which, together with technology, design, and fashion, generate some of the important differences of our day. These are the arenas in which to conceive of a work positioned within the material and discursive technologies of distributed media.⁸

In other words, Price's work is not Neo-Avant-Garde or a continuation of practices that have proved either inert as forms of Institutional Critique, as seen in the work of Daniel Buren, or as bolstering rather than dismantling the form of the artwork as a commodity as can be seen in the co-optation of the figure of the reproducible multiple without an original exemplified in the market-driven practices of Jeff Koons or Damien Hirst. Instead, Price's exploration of systems of dispersion continues the interrogation and redefinition of the relation between subjects and objects, which was always central to modernist self-reflexivity in general.

Whilst Duchamp is his stated starting point for Price's work in general and *Distribution* in particular, an equally important one is Robert Smithson who is alluded to both formally and theoretically. This influence goes largely unstated in *Distribution* aside from two brief mentions and an image of *Spiral Jetty* in some versions.⁹ Elsewhere Price makes more specific use of Smithson. For example in *Digital Video Effect: 'Spills'* (2004), Price appropriates personal home video footage taken by Joan Jonas of Robert Smithson discussing the art market with Richard Serra and the art dealer Joseph Helman.¹⁰

In straightforwardly stylistic terms, *Dispersion* actually looks like a Smithson essay (Figure 2.2).

Formally, the presentation of *Distribution* recalls Smithson's published work from the late 1960s and early 1970s such as 'Spiral Jetty' and 'Quasi-Infinities and the Waning of Space.'¹¹ In the latter, Smithson accompanies blocks of text with black and white thumbnail images from a variety of historical sources such as Kepler's model of the universe and an installation shot of a Donald Judd wall piece. Likewise, *Distribution* includes black and white

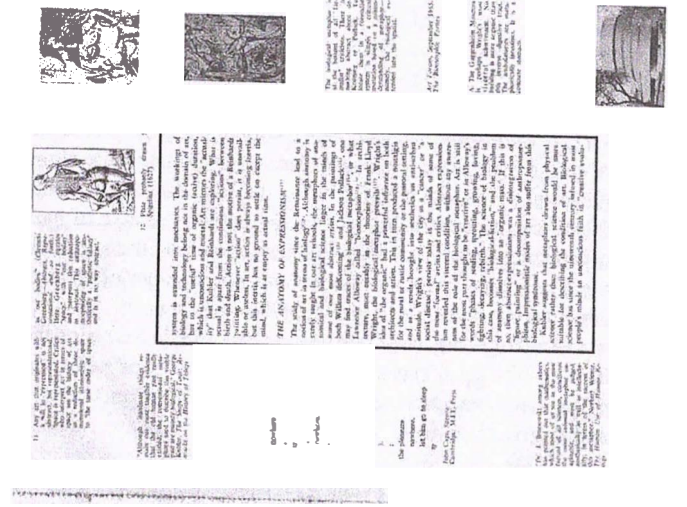


Figure 2.2 Robert Smithson -Infinities and the Waning of Space, Arts Magazine Vol 11 ve ber page

reproductions of a similar scale in relation to the text including Liam Gillick, *Legislation Discussion Platform* (1998); and Dürer, *Melancholia I* (1514).

However, I argue that it is Smithson's figure of the Site/Non-Site where his most significant influence on Price lies and it supersedes that of the Readymade in terms of conceptual significance. The Site/Non-Site establishes a dialectical relation between elements which, as I will also observe in relation to Gillick's work, are a process of constant deferral of attention away from any specific focus. In Smithson's work, the dialectic involved an abstract gallery installation that referred to a landscape along with the attendant geographical site such as *A Nonsite (Franklin, New Jersey)* (1968), which is a gallery installation of a sculpture with a receptacle containing limestone from the site along with a photographic print of the location. Smithson described the relationship between Site and Non-site as consisting of what he called a 'course of hazards' composed of a network of objects and signifiers including the site itself alongside: 'signs photographs, and maps that belong to both sides of the dialectic at once. Both sides are present and absent at the same time.'¹²

In other words, instead of being a discrete object for aesthetic reflection the appearance of Site/Non-Site manifests as a complex, recursive and yet never fully graspable system of interconnected features across which meaning is dispersed. This is also how Price describes his own work:

With more and more media readily available through this unruly archive, the task becomes one of packaging, producing, reframing, and distributing; a mode of production analogous not to the creation of material goods, but to the production of social contexts, using existing material. Anything on the internet is a fragment, provisional, pointing elsewhere.¹³

The influence of Smithson positions Price's work in a counter narrative to that of the dominant reception of Conceptual Art which is characterised by a linguistic turn; a dematerialisation of the art object; and a tendency towards an anti-aesthetic sensibility.

Price is explicit in foregrounding the materiality of his work. For example, his account of *Dispersion* prioritises the material over the textual, semiotic or conceptual elements of the work:

People were starting to simply talk about Dispersion as an essay, which it's not. ... It's the text, but it's also the package, the design, it's the circulation. That's why I wanted to print it on these big panels with the knots: then you have to look at it as art.¹⁴

This point is illustrated by *Essay with Knots* (2008) which is a sculptural installation in which the essay is re-presented across nine wall-mounted panels of vacuum-formed plastic incorporating knotted cord. This provides an explicitly three-dimensional surface support for the written text and prioritises

a haptic over an optic engagement with the work and a conceptual shift to opacity from transparency occurs. In doing so, specific aesthetic attention is drawn to the non-textual elements of support for the work. Much like Smithson's *Heap of Language* drawing which imagines words as lumps of geological material, the audience for *Essay with Knots* is encouraged not to read the text but to look at it as a physical thing that occupies space in the world.

A similar effect of opacity is achieved with *Hostage Video Still with Time Stamp* (2005–2008). Here, Price uses images taken from the internet of the head of Nicholas Berg, the American Jewish freelance radio-tower repairman who was captured and then beheaded by Islamic militants in 2004. This was a notorious example of how images are circulated through online sources, in this case via a five-and-a-half-minute video which showed Berg first addressing the camera before being decapitated. Price used a low-resolution image of Berg's head, which was then printed on Mylar (a clear polyester film), thus transplanting the image from one medium to another. This arrests the image from its place in a restless flow of every changing content and gives it a fixed material form. But rather than offer up the image for scrutiny instead the primary content becomes the material support.

Writing on the work, David Joselit identified three modes in which the piece replicates the effects of dispersion: first, as a computer file which is copied until degradation; second, as the material of support such as the Mylar which is 'twisted or tied into crumpled configurations that serve as a spatial metaphor for the ostensibly "immaterial" traffic of images online'; and third, as 'the grisly and horrible physical violation of Berg is an explicitly biological form of "dispersion," in which a head is parted from its torso.'¹⁵

Folklore U.S.

Price's preoccupation with the material correlates to systems of dispersion is illustrated in *Folklore U.S.* The work was produced for dOCUMENTA (13) (2012) and comprised three closely related elements: a collection of paintings and fabric sculptures; a clothing line designed in collaboration with the fashion designer Tim Hamilton; and a fashion show. The respective venues in Kassel for each of these iterations were the Hauptbahnhof exhibition space; the commercial shop space of SinnLeffers where the clothes were on sale and in window displays; and the *Folklore U.S.* Spring/Summer 12 fashion show held in the Friedrichsplatz parking garage at the opening of dOCUMENTA (13). The main form shared across the paintings, sculptures and clothes was an envelope considered as both a container of material to be distributed and a symbol of business transactions. Both jackets and envelopes are the iconography of commerce, and both can conceal sensitive material. These forms were decorated by the corporate logos¹⁶ and a crosshatched pattern.

In the choice of both form and content, *Folklore U.S.* evokes the iconography of the military-industrial-cultural complex of the United States. All of the

work used the aesthetics of military clothing with the clothing line including a trench coat, a bomber, a flight suit and gaiters. Price has observed that there is a close link between military kit and sports and leisurewear exemplified in the bomber jacket as something designed for warfare that was subsequently appropriated as a fashionable item. This migration of materials and motifs from the military sphere to the public one also recalls Gillick's use of Plexiglas as a material used in both army equipment and corporate design and Steyerl's co-option of vocabularies and iconographies of surveillance. Price also insisted that only the techniques and resources of garment production be used in the production of the work saying:

The final product is about the fabric, the trim, the cut. So even when a designer presents clothes within a narrative, like, "This is my hobo collection," or whatever, everyone watching the show is more concerned with the details of the clothes. What people are paying attention to is two buttons instead of three, or how the fabric drapes. The narrative information the designer supplies—"My collection is referencing 1930s haberdashery"—that's just historical footnotes, no one gets hung up on it. Whereas in the art world people can get very hung up on the concept, more so than on the material.¹⁷

This meant that if some process or material was not readily available, then it was not used. This effectively repositions Folklore U.S. within the systems of commerce and fashion signified by the use of the department store and fashion show as sites of display which repositions the piece outside of the system of the art world. As Price said (in conversation with Christopher Bollen):

The project started as an experiment in fabrication, to make sculptures inside the world of garment design, inside its logic, and then to send the exact same materials and processes to Documenta through two separate channels: the art exhibition and the department store next to the Fridericianum. ... The point was to see how these languages warp the content in different ways, toward or away from critique, or use, or fashion, or readability.¹⁸

Positioning artworks within different systems of distribution provides an opportunity to observe the conditions of those different systems and the effects they have on the content that is dispersed amongst them. The difference between the domains of art and fashion is similar to what Dave Hickey observed as the difference between what he calls the Commercial Art World (CAW) and the Museum Art World (MAW). Hickey's point is that the Commercial Art World doesn't care about discourse or narrative history. It is not, in other words, engaged in questions of medium specificity or on any ontology of artworks. Instead, the main pre-occupations are judgements on what is, or isn't, relevant, 'in' or 'cool.'

The Stuff of Systems

Price gives material and, hence, aesthetic form to the flow of images and information that can seem to be, in everyday experience, dispersed, disembodied, dematerialised and merely virtual. He offers an answer to the question of whether the systems of dispersion can ever be grasped. Price clogs things up and arrests the flow of data with opaque, sticky and haptic matter.

This has relevance because it can sometimes feel that one can never properly see systems but only feel their effects. They are, after all, made of multiple, distributed parts dispersed throughout time and space. It makes no more sense, for example, to ask what the internet looks like than to think about how the global economic system smells. The global systems of everyday life are apparently ineffable, invisible and untouchable. This systemic turn is another way of thinking about modernity, that is those social, economic, technological and biological evolutions of the past few centuries. This move to systems is part of a fundamental, rapid, unstoppable and irreversible shift in how societies operate that Nicholas Negroponte called the move from 'atoms to bits.' Negroponte is referring to the migration of human interaction into virtual, distributed and cloud-like spaces. But, as he also observes, there is stuff left over. After all, he explains, it's your physical body that needs to go through the gate in an airport and 'when you go through customs you declare your atoms, not your bits.'¹⁹

It is often assumed that information is independent of the stuff through which it is communicated and that, as Negroponte says, 'A bit has no color, size, or weight, and it can travel at the speed of light. It is the smallest atomic element in the DNA of information.'²⁰ In other words, information treats the meanings of communication as independent of the means by which that information is communicated so that the message will be considered the same no matter what its material or mode of transmission might be, be that cables, sound or light. The dots and dashes of Morse Code, for example, can be transmitted through marks, beeps or flashes. What this ignores, however, is that each of these different materials and modes comes with different experiential effects. There are also tacit, second-hand meanings to communications, as well as their apparent messages. There is a phenomenology to communication that comes bundled in with its processes of coding and transmission.

This phenomenology of communication comes about by paying attention to the encounter with the quotidian elements that support and accompany messages. It is suggested by Paul Dourish's discussion on what he calls *The Stuff of Bits* from which this chapter borrows its title. As he points out the information that proliferates in contemporary society is only ever encountered in physical form: 'whether that is marks on a page, electrons flowing through wires, or magnetized segments of a spinning disk.'²¹ Dourish observes, even

though digital data is superficially composed of zeroes and ones, not all information is created equal:

those 1s and 0s are not all equivalent or equally important. Some have greater significance than others. Some affect the others, some play more central roles in the representation, and some are more critical.²²

Take, for example, a computer program. Whilst the operating system follows the instructions of the program, what the computer actually does is more than what is specified by the instructions. There are, for instance, different ways in which the functions of the program might be carried out that vary from computer to computer and between different operating systems. Different platforms have different means of working that may change how the program operates, which are not specifically detailed in the program itself. In other words, the experience of a computer program, and what it is like to use it, is not specifically designated by the set of instructions that it is comprised of. To type an essay using Microsoft Word on an Apple PowerBook is a different experience to using a Dell Latitude 7280, the laptop I am using to finish typing this text with its irritating and awkward keyboard.

These differences between systems hinge on the differences between the material manifestations of information as it is dispersed between systems. They lie in the gaps and nooks between what is coded and what is expressed: and between what is specified and what is subsequently produced. As Dourish observes, the mechanics and physicality of information processing are meaningful in themselves:

In the slippage between notation and enaction, we find the lie of virtuality. The denial of materiality that is at the centre of virtuality rhetoric could be maintained only if the specification were complete: if a program really were an adequate account of what will happen in execution, if an mp3 really were a complete explanation of how music will be produced, or if a digital 3D model really specified what you'll see through a display. Yet, none of these are, in fact, the case.²³

And it is precisely this slippage between notation and enaction within systems of dispersion and poking at the lie of virtuality that is what Price's work is, ultimately, about.

Notes

- 1 Seth Price, 'Dispersion,' in Beatrix Ruf & Axel Hochdörfer (eds.) *Social Synthetic* (Cologne: Koenig Books, 2017) pp. 67–85; pg. 71.
- 2 Beatrix Ruf and Axel Hochdörfer (eds.) *Social Synthetic* (Cologne: Koenig Books, 2017) pg. 334

- 3 When asked about the act of using data as art, and whether this constituted a form of Institutional Critique of the systems related to art practices, Price replied: 'The hypocrisy would come from someone who thought I am condemning a system, or individuals, while benefiting from it, and I recognize that's a risk in making something like this. But I don't think of myself as a critical voice, in doing this. This is more like a self portrait.' Seth Price, 'Organic Software: An Interview with Seth Price,' *Data Matters* (February 8th, 2018) emphasis added. Archived at: <http://www.sethpricestudio.com/interviewarchive/OrgSoftInterview.pdf>.
- 4 At <http://www.distributedhistory.com/Dispersion08.pdf>. The first print publication was *The 25th Ljubljana Biennial of Graphic Arts*, ed. Christophe Cherie (Geneva: JRP Ringier, 2003) pg. 239.
- 5 Seth Price, 'Dispersion,' in Beatrix Ruf & Axel Hochdörfer (eds.) *Social Synthetic* (Cologne: Koenig Books, 2017) pp. 67–85.
- 6 Here, Price is invoking Art & Language. For example, Charles Harrison, "As to self-destruction: as Carles Guerra has observed, the work – and we don't just mean the artwork – is always *radically incomplete*. It tends to present itself as something cut-off - something potentially capable of re-absorption into the discourse, which may be of dialectical interest only in virtue of its effacement" Art & Language, 'Not Quite the Belaqua Pose – A Talk in Three Voices,' Published at: <http://www.systemsart.org/index.html> (accessed, June 2022) [emphasis added].
- 7 Seth Price, 'Dispersion,' in Beatrix Ruf & Axel Hochdörfer (eds.) *Social Synthetic* (Cologne: Koenig Books, 2017) pp. 67–85.
- 8 Seth Price, 'Dispersion,' in Beatrix Ruf & Axel Hochdörfer (eds.) *Social Synthetic* (Cologne: Koenig Books, 2017) pg. 71.
- 9 For example, it appears in the Social Synthetic version of the essay, cited here, but not in the version that appears in the catalogue for the group exhibition *Dispersion* curated by Polly Staple at the ICA, London (2008/2009).
- 10 Michael Newman has also suggested that the effect in film where the images are interrupted by the appearance of pouring liquid might be an allusion to Smithson's *Glue Pour* (1970).
- 11 Appearing in *Arts of the Environment* (ed. Kepes) and *Arts Magazine* respectively.
- 12 Robert Smithson, 'Spiral Jetty,' in Flam (ed.) *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996) pg. 153.
- 13 Seth Price, 'Dispersion,' in Beatrix Ruf & Axel Hochdörfer (eds.) *Social Synthetic* (Cologne: Koenig Books, 2017) pp. 67–85.
- 14 Cited by Hochdörfer, pg. 25.
- 15 David Joselit, 'What to Do with Pictures,' *October*, 138 (2011) pp. 81–94, 84–85.
- 16 Capital One, The FDIC, Corbis, the ImageRights Agency. UBS. Paychex.
- 17 Seth Price, *Folklore U.S.* (London: Koenig Books: 2014), pg. 14.
- 18 Seth Price, *Folklore U.S.* (London: Koenig Books: 2014), pg. 14.
- 19 Nicholas Negroponte, *Being Digital* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf Inc., 1995) pg. 4.
- 20 Nicholas Negroponte, *Being Digital* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf Inc., 1995) pg. 14.
- 21 Paul Dourish, *The Stuff of Bits* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2017) pg. 3.
- 22 Paul Dourish, *The Stuff of Bits* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2017) pg. 17, original emphasis.
- 23 Paul Dourish, *The Stuff of Bits* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2017) pp. 23–24.

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