

# FIA BACKSTRÖM AND SETH PRICE

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**FIA:** When I told Matt I was writing a text on your work, he gave me the assignment to talk to you for *North Drive Press*. So I thought you could make a review of my review—this could be a thread throughout the discussion. In the first sentence of my text I set out: “It’s 2004 . . .”, then I go on to a comparison with the summer of 1969 . . . now, for this year’s “Greater New York” you’ve made a set of new pieces with “2005”, the new embossed logo of the work. They’re all updated!

**SETH:** In your text, you mentioned “1969.” The Stooges song. I think they made another song later, called “1970.” Maybe they made it a year later.

**FIA:** In both of these cases there’s something about now, about being now.

**SETH:** The 2004 pieces are in the show too.

**FIA:** I know, but they’re stacked on the side. They’re listed as leftovers.

**SETH:** They’re closer to people.

**FIA:** True.

**SETH:** You can touch them.

**FIA:** Your work is frequently involved in a discussion of 1980s appropriation strategies, and even uses those ways of working.

**SETH:** You mean the Martha Rosler piece (*Two For One*, 2002)?

**FIA:** Yes, for example, or the music projects that are here in “lesser new york”: *Iron Curtain Girl* (2001-2003) and *New York Woman* (2001) have some discussion around that. By putting your embossed stamp on all of your work of 2004 or 2005, it’s not saying “1985,” or any other year. Why is that?

**SETH:** It’s when they were made.

**FIA:** A date location.

**SETH:** I don’t know, time . . . Like Martha taking the ads [ROSLER’S 1985 VIDEO “GLOBAL TASTE: A MEAL IN 3 COURSES; ELEMENT<sup>1</sup>” WAS COMPOSED ALMOST ENTIRELY OF APPROPRIATED, THEN-CONTEMPORARY, TELEVISION COMMERCIALS]—it’s so tricky to take something from the culture. I thought it would be interesting to take her piece, move it out of context, the same way she treated the ads. It’s interesting what happens to pieces over time, the slow shift to another way of meaning.

**FIA:** How so?

**SETH:** When the critique isn’t clear anymore, when it gets seen through a scrim of other readings. And then you see the piece also as a marker of a certain kind of gesture, a kind of work you might not see anymore . . .

**FIA:** As when, rather than being a critique, the reading is about a longing for some kind of radicalism.

**SETH:** Yes. Like a new Martha Rosler. People are reinvesting in her. I think it’s coming out of a 1990s enthusiastic-activist aesthetic. They want an elder statesman. Like a kind of come-back, a reunion tour.

**FIA:** Like an Iggy Pop of the art world.

**SETH:** But she never went away. I think those pieces you brought up are different in their intentions. There was this dumb “retro” stirring in music and pop culture around 2000. I wanted to iron it out, by crossing it with the notion of *ostalgie*, which is a similar process in how it works, but something we can’t understand here in the United States, or in the West, I guess. I wouldn’t say the project itself is “retro.” I think it abuses that category. Yes. It was inhabiting what was actually a contemporary style, from the year 2000, which was kind of a horrible style, with this sentimental fixation on a past moment in music. But that’s what people wanted: a guilty pleasure. “Retro” is a strategy for marketing purposes, just like in art. So you could say I was along for the ride. Using someone else’s psychic investment. Giving people what they want. Along with an excess, which they don’t want.

**FIA:** Ah . . . “giving people what they want.” But it’s not really that simple, to give people what they want.

**SETH:** OK.

**FIA:** When people get what they want, they start to do things with the material, they start to circulate it in different ways.

**SETH:** Sometimes when you get what you want, it stops circulation.

**FIA:** But it's not about pleasing.

**SETH:** Yes it is.

**FIA:** Do you think so? Are we talking now about *Iron Curtain Girl* and *New York Woman*?

**SETH:** No, in general . . . It's funny that you made a link between the Rosler and the music.

**FIA:** Really? I thought there was something about the strategies of '80s art-making—when this kind of appropriation was going on, which Martha Rosler was a big proponent of—that was very efficient at the time. Going there and investigating it, whether it be appropriation or retro operations—what happens when you appropriate the Martha Rosler video is completely different—maybe in part it has to do with nostalgia, and that's how I would read the music pieces as well.

**SETH:** Well, it's taking something that's already lying around in the culture. Here it was something that had to do with nostalgia and the way it's commodified. At her retrospective people all clustered around this video, which was only one part of the installation. They ignored the text and the books, all the more strident parts. They went right for what you can get on TV anyway. Old commercial codes being thrown back at you. They got something very different out of the work than they would have gotten twenty years earlier. It's interesting, because her piece is partly a critique of the way the market uses products and signs, and how it can always fold a stray right back into its own production, but this is what happened to the piece itself. It got folded back in.

**FIA:** And becomes it.

**SETH:** It's hard to use material that's so close. You can see how there's something tasteful about taking the cowboy. And how this good taste is what rescues it.

**FIA:** How so? You are talking about Richard Prince.

**SETH:** Taking an image that already aspires to a timeless quality. Taste-making. Whereas Martha didn't work with things that appealed to her on the level of seduction. She even claims that these images have no hold on her, that she's immune to them. But then she recognizes they're powerful. After all, she used them.

**FIA:** But the next step then, in you appropriating her video, is almost this kind of educative, or even loving, way of making a "cover" of her work. You are not doing it in an immune way, really, the way she did.

**SETH:** Hmm.

**FIA:** You just said that when you walked into her retrospective at the New Museum, people weren't paying the attention they ought to, and you kind of wanted to fix it.

**SETH:** Fix who?

**FIA:** Fix the situation.

**SETH:** No, they paid all the right kinds of attention. They walked in ready to confront a heavy weapon, and they got a guilty pleasure instead. It was like a bonus to her original piece.

**FIA:** If it were the case that you had been the one who had made this video, using twenty-year-old commercials, that work could almost line up in the hippie art tradition . . . Only fifteen years down the line.

**SETH:** What's the hippie art tradition?

**FIA:** I would say, people who work in this very nostalgic way around hippie . . . Hippie nostalgia, like staged Outsider art, with gaudy colors, embroideries, crafts-oriented things.

**SETH:** Oh, stuff they're doing now.

**FIA:** Uh-huh. Like, if you had made this video yourself, you could almost belong to this tradition, only you are working a little bit forward in time.

**SETH:** I see what you mean.

**FIA:** It's like a Trojan horse, a little bit.

**SETH:** It gets confused with a nostalgic feeling for 1985 political art. That was a time.

**FIA:** You think? Yeah.

**SETH:** When I was in grade school. It meant a lot to people.

**FIA:** But going back, then, to the text that I wrote on your show at Reena Spaulings . . . I bring in Yves Klein for a couple of different reasons. First, because I think that the plastic molds have some kind of resemblance to his paintings: I don't know if they should be called paintings, or sculptures, or objects. And also in the way you took the entire exhibition into account, from the invite onwards, in relation to his show "Le Vide." I don't really want to ask questions like this, but how is your relationship to Klein? What would you say?

**SETH:** I don't know his work very well. He seems like an interesting artist. It's a good idea to trademark a color.

**FIA:** So when you read this text, when I wrote about Klein, what was your reaction?

**SETH:** I liked it. You looked at the surface of the show, the blue, the gold, the female forms, and that brings you to Klein, and that opens onto something entirely different.

**FIA:** From?

**SETH:** From the idea of taking note of the surfaces. I have a question: I wonder what you mean when you write "this show is perverted."

**FIA:** I wrote that because all of the items in the show seem to have had their functions cut off in one way or another. For example, if you show this never-before-seen video with Smithson and Serra, and then you put this digital effect or transition that looks like oil spills passing over so you can hardly see it, and then the TV is still in its original packaging . . . the CDs with the beheading of the American hostage are used as stands for the marble—sorry, that wasn't what they were, they were images of moldy bread mounted on Plexiglas.

**SETH:** It was actually real glass. Yeah, some people thought it was marble. They kept talking about some kind of "corporate lobby marble."

**FIA:** Yes, even for these, the images were photographs of moldy bread, and people thought they were marble.

**SETH:** The bread wasn't moldy.

**FIA:** It wasn't moldy? But how did the green tint . . .

**SETH:** It was black and white.

**FIA:** Really? I created this green tint, then.

**SETH:** That's what happens when you print black and white images with color printer settings. It acquires some kind of tint.

**FIA:** I think so, yes.

**SETH:** Bread was the most banal thing I could think of. Something that would be familiar to most people in the world.

**FIA:** I think it worked like a pure Rorschach. I guess everyone knows it, but you could see the surface of the moon in there, or . . .

**SETH:** They were all different slices.

**FIA:** So it is on the surface of the moon, I guess. [LAUGHS]

**SETH:** [LAUGHS]

**FIA:** It wasn't clear that it was marble, either. It was something that hovered in between many possibilities, until John Kelsey told me that it was photographs of bread, and then I added the moldy part to it.

**SETH:** And you added the photograph part.

**FIA:** Did you scan it, or . . . Is it not a scan?

**SETH:** It is a scan.

**FIA:** It is a scan, but not a photograph, I see. Can I come back to the appropriation? What happens if you have a Sherrie Levine doing an Edward Weston, or a de Kooning, in the '80s? Now, you didn't take the Sherrie Levine Weston photographs, you took the Martha Rosler. There is a huge difference between Sherrie Levine's approach and yours.

**SETH:** Maybe it's entirely different to deal with media. For some reason appropriation has always been linked to the image, rather than to mass codes in general. I wonder if in this case it's not about the image, but something else.

**FIA:** That's what I wonder too. It kind of steps up a level, if you want to talk hierarchically. It is a kind of distancing device.

**SETH:** There's no such thing as a copy anymore.

**FIA:** No, or a "cover," or anything like that.

**SETH:** Everything is new.

**FIA:** It's something that happens when you do the cowboy; you have all of those significations that come with that singular image. If you do the Martha Rosler, there is a lot more surrounding signification that comes with that gesture. It's not only some abstract painter, there are layers of activity.

**SETH:** It's hard to drag her original intent along with the material. I don't know what her intent was. I guess I don't need to. I'd really like to show her video in a theater. Like a film, an old-guard experimental film. She really put a lot of work into editing it. It deserves to be seen from beginning to end.

**FIA:** Then they have to sit in the chair and see it through.

**SETH:** But it wouldn't be unpleasant in a bad way. Just like all that old structuralist-materialist film.

**FIA:** It is interesting to think about what you said, that she told you that she was immune to the imagery on a seductive level.

**SETH:** I think she said something like that. Maybe I made that up. It seems like something she would say.

**FIA:** I can believe that she would have said that.

**SETH:** Let's say it's the case.

**FIA:** For now we can put those words in her mouth.

**SETH:** Yes, for now and forever.

**FIA:** I can also doubt her statement, obviously. In coming back to your pieces at P.S.1, which are amazingly seductive, the wall pieces with "2005," the jacket in gold and pearl and all of these kinds of surfaces that are very glaring; you want to touch them and be close to them. It's not that kind of '80s left-wing radical strategy where you had to struggle against the seduction, the way Rosler operated.

**SETH:** So, what is it?

**FIA:** What is it that you did? Shall I say?

**SETH:** Should I work a little for it?

**FIA:** No, but I wonder, if Martha Rosler was immune to her images, I feel that your pieces at P.S.1 are very consciously seductive.

**SETH:** She wanted to make the commercials as degraded as possible, to entirely debase the material.

**FIA:** But in your case . . .

**SETH:** That might be a perversion.

**FIA:** Yeah. But in your installation at P.S.1, it's the opposite. I feel very seduced by those pieces.

**SETH:** They're not "appropriation," are they?

**FIA:** No, they are not. I guess they are imprints of real things.

**SETH:** They're just single sheets of plastic with a dent. I like that they are one thing.

**FIA:** How do you mean? They cannot be anything else.

**SETH:** Materially, I mean. All this energy goes into this long, difficult series of processes—fixing and casting and re-casting the object. Making a sculpture, really, which in the end no one ever sees. We just pull a plastic impression of it, it takes about ten seconds. The materials list just says "plastic sheet," or whatever.

**FIA:** [LAUGHS]

**SETH:** It's relaxing.

**FIA:** And easy. We come back to Martha Rosler, or in your show at Reena Spaulings I can come back to Yves Klein, or Duchamp, or in the show you have even Smithson and Serra sitting and discussing. Many people mentioned Marcel Broodthaers in relation to this show. A lot of '80s and early '90s political art was going on outside of the art context, especially in the "politically correct" '90s when one would go to, I don't know, coal mines in Poland or investigate all kinds of injustices in Vietnam. But you are not really interested in that . . .

**SETH:** That impulse?

**FIA:** Yeah, or in that way of acting politically. What I'm trying to say is how it's referential, your references are

very involved in an art context. Art-historical or internal references are all over in your work, when you directly appropriate Martha's work, in the Serra/Smithson video, etc. In the Serra/Smithson video you have made this transition that looks like spilled oil that wipes over so that, instead of flying to Baghdad with a camera and photographing starving children or something, you are staying inside of the art world and mostly remaining within those semantics.

**SETH:** I guess I'm not much of a traveler, then. But artists here in the 1930s, the socialist realists, they traveled, didn't they . . . Mapping out the soup kitchens in the cities and the farms in the country. But it was always referring to the larger world, because even though it focuses so much on isolationist America and what we had going on with the New Deal, that only functions next to apparently awful things elsewhere. But, uh, the '80s political art, are we talking about—when you say "political art," are we still talking about . . .

**FIA:** It is very imprecise.

**SETH:** One thing about some of the art you mentioned is that it's an utterly New York kind of art. The kind of art people refer to when they use words like "pictures" or "appropriation," or even "Pop," it grew right here, it's not an LA phenomenon, it's not European. I know there were concurrent things like the Independent Group, but those concerns are different from this continuous New York line that goes from Pop through appropriation to what some New York artists are doing now. It's a kind of political micro-climate. A New York image-world. It sends out a report on the way things are at the image center, the production center. Like *Sex and The City* does. You can't say that kind of art doesn't travel very far.

**FIA:** They may have traveled as images, but for example, Alfredo Jaar, Allan Sekula, or others traveled a lot physically. If they didn't travel far away, many went far away in their choices of images. The appropriations were usually outside of the realm of art, like Martha Rosler would work with advertisements, the movies, or even scientific images.

**SETH:** I wonder if "appropriation" is the right word.

**FIA:** For them?

**SETH:** It seems like a kind of re-showing.

**FIA:** What is an appropriation then, something more twisted working?

**SETH:** There's something about redirecting attention, something quiet about . . . you know, yet another display . . . It makes a smooth process out of something brutal. It's not claiming. I think of claiming when I hear that word.

**FIA:** "Appropriation"?

**SETH:** Yes.

**FIA:** But re-showing would then be something gentler, when you just change the focus slightly.

**SETH:** Soft focus.

**FIA:** Re-showing is such a boring term. It has to have another term, I think.

**SETH:** Yes, it is boring. How about "re-presentation"?

**FIA:** [LAUGHS]

**SETH:** Put the "re" in parenthesis.

**FIA:** Or just "show."

**SETH:** What about Sturtevant? That's an honest question—I don't know so much about Sturtevant. I think she made some films.

**FIA:** Me neither. I know very little, but she keeps coming up.

**SETH:** Did Warhol "claim" his images?

**FIA:** Well, I guess that they got claimed for him, even if not by him, but by others.

**SETH:** Even though he was giving them away, really.

**FIA:** It's kind of weird with Kelley Walker's show at Paula Cooper in 2003, the poster he made with the race riot and toothpaste. Immediately you think of Andy Warhol when you see those race riot images, so of course there has been some claiming going on, or something has happened if that's the immediate read of those images.

**SETH:** In those pictures the violence in the image and the fact that this image is now claimed by art history, it gets mixed up in a nice way.

**FIA:** If everything exists as an image already, what about the efficiency of working with art-historical references, rather than images of, say, a famine in Somalia? Art images are full of signification, they are so rich. If I go to Alaska and make work on an Indian reservation, any images I might take are always already available. With art-related references there are more layers of signification and power floating free or at play. They cannot pose for innocent images.

**SETH:** That Joan Jonas video is pretty boring.

**FIA:** Which one is this?

**SETH:** The home movie you brought up, with the digital effect. It's just a bookmark. So whatever pleasure you get out of that, I don't know. Is it better or worse to enjoy something like that?

**FIA:** There isn't a moral issue really, is there?

**SETH:** Well, the conversation is a little . . . anyway, it's not art. The interest comes from the fact that it's the un-archived personal history of a celebrated artist, and it records a series of gestures and arguments between these two other historical figures. The framework is the only thing that animates it.

**FIA:** Your framework?

**SETH:** Your framework. The conversation is not really about anything in particular—art and money, but that doesn't go anywhere. A placeholder. I wouldn't even think of it as an art-historical reference.

**FIA:** No? Rather a sensation-tinted art reference—a semi-private moment from the '70s New York art scene on video, never before seen—like an image of Michael Jackson in *People* magazine. But then, what if you had shown, for example, some kind of nature video in there instead?

**SETH:** Oh, nature documentaries? I feel like there are these videos—maybe I made this up, or maybe I'm thinking of screen savers—where the camera penetrates the jungle, just keeps going deeper, just keeps thrusting deeper . . . Nothing happens, like those rain forest records. Do they have that, a nature penetration video? Can you buy that?

**FIA:** I don't know. It seems like it would be an intro to some Hollywood movie.

**SETH:** But if it went on endlessly . . .

**FIA:** That seems like a lot of action, though.

**SETH:** Yes, a nature video would have punched a hole in the show, instead of leaving a kind of surface tension.

**FIA:** Isn't it something about the audience? We are all interested in art, that's why we go to see your show, we all share knowledge and references. If instead you used a specialist's documentary about . . . dew on some leaves and some very special spiders crawling around, that would mean a lot more to somebody who is a biologist, who is very into these kinds of things. But in using this video we can all cut to the chase, we don't need to pay so much attention to it. It seems like it's a way to insert content that is not really necessary to dwell on.

**SETH:** Telling you what you already know. Do you feel like galleries now are always showing these, basically, nature videos?

**FIA:** Mmm, a lot. There was this Pipilotti Rist show that had a lot of nature in it, I remember. Did you see it?

**SETH:** I think I saw that show. Or maybe I'm thinking of the last one. I'm not sure I get the work. Do you understand it?

**FIA:** No, not really. We were talking the other day about this thing in indie music . . . There is this term "emo rock"—emotional rock . . . Elliott Smith would be the biggest emo rocker. Then I thought, what would emo art be? The person that immediately came to mind as an emo artist was Pipilotti Rist.

**SETH:** Is "emo" a bad thing?

**FIA:** Not necessarily. I guess it depends on where you come from. I don't know if all expressionists are emo artists. I'm not sure if they are.

**SETH:** Artists are recognized as the experts at human expression.

**FIA:** Then I continued and I thought about this thing "imi rock," which would then be imitational rock, and imitational rock or pop would then be something . . .

**SETH:** You made that up.

**FIA:** Uh-huh. For example, Swedes are very good at making imi pop or imi rock.

**SETH:** “Imi pop”? What’s it called, when words read the same backwards and forwards . . .

**FIA:** A palindrome. I didn’t think about it—good. Also, the Japanese are very good at imi pop. Then you can think about this: Like you said, is it good or is it bad? You could derogatorily say this just sounded like something else, but if you say instead that it is imi rock, it’s really good imi rock! Then I’ll see how I can get this thing going with re-showing, or re-appropriation, in some sense . . . Is your taking Martha Rosler’s video, is that imi art?

**SETH:** Or curating . . . Do you mean “imi” as in imitation, and that’s the opposite of emotion?

**FIA:** Not necessarily opposite. Obviously expressive gestures are many times imitated. But I guess that if it should be emo, you’d assume that it has some authenticity, some expressive thing.

**SETH:** Like Martha Rosler?

**FIA:** Yeah, I guess. If it’s imi you wouldn’t expect it to have that expressive authenticity. You wouldn’t really respect things that are imitational.

**SETH:** An imitation of life.

**FIA:** What, *Imitation Of Life*, the movie?

**SETH:** An imitation of life? I don’t think so . . . Martha Rosler’s work might be an imitation of life. Doing it all over again brings it back to just life.

**FIA:** So she would be the imi artist. [LAUGHS]

**SETH:** [LAUGHS] We should get her in here to defend herself. I wonder if she is going to read this.

**FIA:** We can just edit it.

**SETH:** Well, she already did that to her own work, when she staged her group show this past year. She showed all her—that classic series of antiwar photo-collages, but next to the new ones, which relativized them. Presented them as a piece of art history you can actually buy.

**FIA:** Framed!

**SETH:** So then you can get one of the contemporary ones too, compare and contrast. That was a good show.

**FIA:** But this word “appropriation,” maybe it should be left alone there in the ‘80s.

**SETH:** Maybe it already was.

**FIA:** No, didn’t Lauri Firstenberg bring it up again with the re-appropriation exhibition and text that she did in LA two years ago?

**SETH:** Is that what she called it, “re-appropriation”?

**FIA:** Yeah, or “renewed appropriational strategies,” or . . .

**SETH:** “Appropriationisms.” So, she relativized it, she recognizes it.

**FIA:** The problem?

**SETH:** Yeah, in the terms.

**FIA:** There is still the problem. We need to have some way of talking about this, what’s being done right now.

**SETH:** Maybe it went the way of “conceptualism” or “minimalism.”

**FIA:** Appropriation, you mean?

**SETH:** Mmm.

**FIA:** But there is something else here, to come back to the review. In the end, in the last paragraph, I’m bringing back a lot of the, what do you say, throw-outs that I made throughout the text, to try to . . . I guess if you would write a regular review, you would tie it up in the end . . . but this tie doesn’t go anywhere, it just makes all the signifiers float around even more crazily, and it’s not making sense, basically that’s what I am putting into play. So, something happens when you start to really re-appropriate or re-show, something happens to the meaning production. It becomes some kind of subversive setting free or letting go of some suppressed stuff.

**SETH:** It sounds therapeutic.

**FIA:** Not therapeutic, the opposite. It becomes very hard to keep anything contained.

**SETH:** Holding your breath underwater.

**FIA:** In the text, when I started to look at how all the

significations collide and come together, how they don't amount to anything, they're just sliding around, on a huge surface board . . .

**SETH:** Like advertising.

**FIA:** Exactly, its operation is made overt. In a sense the way that Martha Rosler and her appropriational strategies in the '80s—there is some kind of thing going on in your work, maybe calling it appropriation is not relevant, but there is some semantic sliding.

**SETH:** That sounds good.

**FIA:** You like it?

**SETH:** Yes.

**FIA:** So no more "appropriation," but something else.

**SETH:** You could spell it differently, like "womyn" with a y.

**FIA:** But it's not imitation either, that is clear. It's not imi art. For example, if you go to Wade Guyton and Kelley Walker's show at Greene Naftali, you immediately think of Andy Warhol in the room with the so-called "paintings." It's not really that they have appropriated Andy Warhol. I don't know if they are imitating, if one could call it that.

**SETH:** I don't know what they are doing.

**FIA:** I don't know what's going on.

**SETH:** Maybe "appropriation." But that's Guyton/Walker, not Wade Guyton and Kelley Walker. So, it performs the same operation on their separate avatars.

**FIA:** What's that?

**SETH:** Avatars? I think it's a word from those online games, for your alter ego in the game. So Guyton/Walker has two avatars out in this world.

**FIA:** OK, so you said before that you maybe curated Martha Rosler's work . . . because curating is such an open and bland word anyhow. I was thinking rather than appropriating her work, maybe you made a "cover" of her work?

**SETH:** Yes, but to "cover" the work you'd have to reproduce the process, not the product. You'd record

food commercials off the TV now. Which is what she did then, with the goal being to show a cutaway of contemporary media that has a kind of transparency. But of course twenty years later it doesn't.

**FIA:** She was talking about her "now" when she was doing it; in your pieces, you emboss the year "2005." You're kind of making a similar gesture. One wonders what will happen to this work in, say, 2015.

**SETH:** It could get the word "vintage."

**FIA:** But it's really funny . . . One more thing about years: Some years are label years. For example, I mention in the text here the year 1969, which is not the same as 1975. 1969 functions like a "label" year, and it seems like when you emboss 2004, it is this kind of labeling, as if to say: *remember, this was the year when all these things went on with oil, pictures from prisons in Iraq, and so forth* . . . And we come back to 1985. You said something about the politics of 1985.

**SETH:** 1985. That's when they first published *Eau de Cologne*.

**FIA:** The magazine you had in Continuous Project?

**SETH:** Yes.

**FIA:** And of course 1984 would be, from an Orwellian perspective, the major year.

**SETH:** With the jackets, it makes the numbers special. They have to bear the weight of all communication. And then the jacket gets silence. They rub against each other, these two different ways of looking—

**FIA:** The golden Jacko jacket.

**SETH:** Jacko?

**FIA:** Jacket.

**SETH:** Michael Jackson?

**FIA:** Uh-huh, or the jacket Yves Klein had when he fell out, jumped out the window.

**SETH:** He was wearing a jacket?

**FIA:** Not really that kind of jacket, though, more like a suit jacket.

**SETH:** He might have been wearing a flight jacket. I think he owned one. A white leather one. They've always been popular.

**FIA:** Two thumbs up.

**SETH:** But what were you thinking when you started talking about nature documentaries?

**FIA:** It was this thing in the art video, when Smithson and Serra were discussing back and forth, and they weren't really going anywhere. Many times I feel the same thing happens in nature videos—of course, sometimes they do, it's made up, the killings and so on, but many times there's a lion going back and forth, there are raindrops falling on some special thing, and there is nothing more than that . . .

**SETH:** You don't know what to do but to keep looking. It's true, there's no such thing as criticism of nature, it's always taken as it is. I went to the circus last night. It's for children, so there's no attempt made at any kind of narrative or sense whatsoever, it felt like it was about to fall apart. They didn't care. You could see all the gear just lying around the ring, huge coils of rope and empty equipment bags. When you have this spectacle made for families, not just for children, but also for adults who are seeing with the eyes of their children, you then may reduce it to the absolute minimum of what's required. That's a nature documentary, in a way, isn't it? There was a regular dog, just a mutt, running maniacally around the central ring. Over and over, maybe twenty times before they ushered him out, while all these other more important things were going on all around, with, uh, wild animals, and this troupe of acrobats from Mongolia. It wasn't clear if it was supposed to happen like that or not, but it didn't matter, you couldn't take your eyes off the dog. That was my favorite part. People invented dogs. It was the first, or, well, the second or third technology.

**FIA:** I haven't been to a circus since I was a kid almost. Were there a lot of things going on at the same time? As I remember, there was just one act and then the next little act.

**SETH:** Maybe that's the way you remember, one thing after another. But at the time it's horizontal. 🍷



# SETH PRICE—NOT MAKING SENSE

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BY FIA BACKSTRÖM

It's 2004. Just as Iggy sang in '1969', there is nothing to do all across the USA. With a retro logic we could label this time the Fall of Diverted Information, or the Power of Oil. Looking for contemporary strategies, Seth Price's show at Reena Spaulings gallery doesn't operate in revival mode.

Upon entering the show, one sees several sheets of plastic hanging on the walls. Some sheets are blue with velvety flocking, like a late, misconceived flower-power contribution; others are gold, a sexy pearlescent skin color, or white, vacuum-formed under heat, all traces of production left intact. There are three recurring shapes on the sheets. One is the form of a single breast, reminiscent of Duchamp's *prier a toucher*. This hard, pliable plastic may be touched in the stack of sheets leaning by the gallery entrance, where their visual function has been eclipsed by their empty behinds on display. Other pieces show the form of a small encaged fist, bulging out in a feeble effort to burst through, no cries for justice can be heard. "2004" is embossed on several sheets in a straight Franklin Gothic-like typeface, not spray painted as with 'old school' political slogans, rather semi-elegant, sad, in a Warholesque repeat, without empowering the sign, no climax in sight.

The colors of the sheets and their relief shapes make one think of Yves Klein, whose 'trademark' blue has here morphed into a plastic surface with a vegetation pattern, French Revolution lily style. Klein staged his show "Le Vide" in 1958. His opening presented an empty gallery, with the surrounding circumstances considered all the way down to the drinks, which were blue: proposing to the audience to see what we don't see and not see what we expect to see; an invisibility. In classic Klein spirit, Price's invite is purposefully considered as integral to the show. A gig poster to bring home as a souvenir: a direct, albeit black and white, take on Hipgnosis's classic cover for Pink Floyd's *Dark Side of the Moon* album, the gray spectrum of which recurs in semi-transparent vinyl on the shop window (the gallery used to be a shop). Looking like an artificial, grey-striped sunset, this gradient bars, in increments, peeking in from the outside, sifting light to the inside, making all less or more visible.

How does one speak or circulate information with invisible Internet filters making our choices? It is a different mode than Kundera's ciphered postcards in the Prague spring of 1968. In the former Soviet Union, the coded way of omitting details was directly decodable if you knew how. Now, pushing of meaning and encoding in (post) capitalist information society, where nothing is what it seems (but it is nothing else either); an eternal circulation of rhetoric or ways of saying "it". The medium is not the message. Price uses references to art as if for rhetorical or political means, instead of using, as is customary in an art context, the outer world. The effect is a focus on the signification slides, rather than on societal issues.

In the far end of the room is a 'merchandise table', as if one were at a concert, with items such as books of lyrics, t-shirts silk-screened with the artist's and the gallery's names, as well as a 'logo' from a Jihad video on the internet, and a stack of black CDs. According to the checklist, the CDs contain downloaded footage depicting the 2004 beheading of an American journalist by Pakistani fundamentalists, a file which the FBI had been trying to bar from flowing freely on the internet. To see what is not simply a black, circular, stacked, formalist shape, one has to purchase it, for the reasonable price of \$10—a weak sales pitch by corporate standards—or be left believing we've been voluntarily filtered away.

Other stacked CDs support three flat, equally-sized glass panels, mounted on what looks like corporate, imitation marble, or maybe the surface of the moon. I am told the images are scans of bread. It looks moldy. The panels alter the function of the CDs, from information bearers into bearers of something altered that looks like something fake. Information collapses into material. On one of the panels is a transparent frozen puddle, like vertically positioned cum, which runs neither up nor down. It is liquid glass: see-through to see what you already think you see. Right next to it, sort of pouring over the old coat-rack structure inherent to the gallery, is a sheet of safety glass, broken but all clinging together. Not fully splintered, as in the accidentally-broken large glass by Duchamp—no release—yet not all together in its perfect original state. The title *Fuck You, You Fucking Fuck*, speaks of unreleased, misdirected or omni-directional anger: impotently it doesn't go anywhere, like hanging glass too cracked to see through. Once the title—taken from a popular New York tourist tee—was circulated in print reviews it was switched to NTSC, the American video standard, creating a rip in the distribution of information.

On the floor, a video in which Richard Serra and Robert Rauschenberg discuss their faith in the art market is screened on a new Panasonic TV/DVD player still in its styrofoam packaging and box. Both merchandise and video have a virginal air around them, as they have never been seen before. Both have been diverted from their original function. The video has been altered with a digital video transition, created by Price, with the appearance of black opaque liquid, flowing like oil, sensually wiping the image in and out with no cuts. Like the perfect commercial: we are captured, remaining to see the next wipe of the scene—a discussion dragging on with no climax—while keeping our gaze on the product, prisoner in its styrofoam case, submissively inviting scrutiny from any angle from its upturned position on the floor.

We don't see what we see. The interface doesn't take us anywhere. Liquids don't flow well, black oil is turned into plastic, bread looks like the moon, and the spectral light has been drained of all color. The dark side of black shiny CDs is conceivable, but not visible. Transparency and opacity are not useful in understanding the information. The logic is warped, it is not making sense. This is not 'rebus art', although it may seem as if knowing that this is an image of bread and not 'fake' marble makes you feel sane and temporarily in control—more on the bright side of the moon—as if having ceased the circulation of possible significations. Here is a constant diversion of the channels of circulation of signs, barring possibilities for making sense. No satisfaction in sight, an infertile terrain, the original purpose or function of so many elements temporarily obstructed: this show is perverted. "It is 2004, baby".

