

Photographed by  
GEORDIE  
WOOD

ART

Styled by  
MALAIKA  
CRAWFORD

Rings  
SETH'S OWN  
Socks by  
FALKE  
Shoes by  
CHURCH'S

Who

the  
Fuck

is

Seth  
Price  
?

Joan Jonas goes  
in search of answers.

THIS PAGE AND  
OPPOSITE:  
Sweater and Belt by  
SAINT  
LAURENT  
BY  
ANTHONY  
VACCARELLO  
Pants by  
DIOR MEN

Who is Seth Price? Or to bastardize the title of the artist's own 2015 novella: *Who the Fuck Is Seth Price?* It's a fair question. If you've ever wandered into one of Price's gallery shows and felt simultaneously fascinated and unnerved by the 45-year-old *New Yorker's* barrage of vacuum-formed polystyrene casts of, say, a crumpled vintage bomber jacket, a human fist, or coils of rope, you are not losing your mind. Many of Price's wall works consist either of a clever use of that would be expanded upon or empty spaces and voids or a highly sheened, seemingly viscous surface suggestive of some embryonic goo. Price's output has never been built on stability.

It might be easier to think of his pieces as hostile mutants capable of limitless transmutations and metamorphoses. Early in his career, after a post-college job working at the influential New York media-art lab Electronic Arts Intermix, Price explored a range of unexpected, hard-to-categorize strategies and materials: electronic music mixes; computer screensavers; philosophical essays disseminated via the internet that would be expanded upon or abridged over time. All of these experiments only loosely fell under the rubric of visual art. Price's great themes are circulation and distribution, and how

they morph and change, grow or shrink or turn sideways, as they move through a system. To engage directly with Price's work, to nail down "what exactly he means," is to risk building a house on shifting sand. Case in point: He published a getting-off-the-grid survival guide called *How to Disappear in America* (2008), and yet his continual re-visitation and resurrection of works, concepts, and ideas refute the notion that permanent disappearance is ever truly possible. One of his more volatile art productions (often considered one of the most significant artworks of recent decades) is his film *Redistribution* (2007-ongoing), a serious yet farcical, mordant yet uplifting, surrealist yet documentary-style down-the-rabbit-hole exploration of artistic adventurism that started out as a critique of "artist talks" at museums. The film has been recut and reassembled with new material eight times (last fall, a new version premiered at the Metrograph theater in New York). It is like a cinematic petri dish capable of ceaseless cell divisions and viral growth.

This winter, the Aspen Art Museum will mount an exhibition of Price's work that, in part, celebrates the trace of his own hand in his otherwise hyper-industrial surfaces. Entitled "No Technique," the show includes his earlier knot-and-rope polystyrene reliefs interspersed with more recent work such as his "Social Space" series, where toxic chemicals are poured on CGI images of scientific forms. Late last fall, while preparing for the new show, Price stopped by the SoHo studio of the artist Joan Jonas. They've known each other since the EAI days. In the intervening years, "new media" has only grown and mutated in unexpected ways.

**JOAN JONAS:** What was the name of your show last fall in New York?

**SETH PRICE:** "Hell Has Everything."  
**JONAS:** I love that title. Hell is more interesting than heaven.

**PRICE:** Hell comes with the idea of somebody ushering you in and saying, "You'll love this. This place has everything." It's a kind of seduction, whereas heaven is airy and nothing but love and good feelings.

**JONAS:** Dante's *Inferno* is much more exciting than his *Paradiso*. Now, I want to talk about how we first met, which must have been more than 20 years ago when you were working at EAI.

**PRICE:** I started there in the summer of '98 and stayed about seven years, working on videos—yours included.

**JONAS:** And you used some of my video footage of Richard Serra and Robert Smithson talking at Joe Hellmann's home in your work [*Digital Video Effect: Spills*, 2004]. That was an early piece of yours, wasn't it?

**PRICE:** Yeah, that was my first show.

**JONAS:** It had a lot of your signature elements, especially in terms of packaging. You put a monitor in a cardboard box and then you manipulated the video with what appeared to be a virtual pour of ink over its surface.

**PRICE:** Yeah. I poured a kind of viscous paint onto a glass that I balanced horizontally and filmed from underneath. I was thinking about that Jackson Pollock film by Hans



NOODLES, 2011

Namuth [1951] and this whole idea of horizontality. Anyway, I recorded these pours and superimposed them on some of your video footage.

**JONAS:** You and I had such a good dialogue at EAI. I remember back then you were trying to figure out a strategy for making art, working with ideas of distribution and reproduction. And that's still the crux of your work.

**PRICE:** It certainly is. I started off by thinking about how things circulate and that led to a bunch of works using music and sound and packaging and writing—really anything that you could circulate and that would capture that process of experimentation. It's funny—I've never had a line to describe my work. Some artists do and it's great to have that sense of clarity. But what I do is more a process of testing, thinking, researching, experimenting, and then the work comes out of that. And if you're into it, maybe you can go on that ride and it takes you somewhere. It's kind of similar to what you do in that your work encapsulates so many different elements and themes. It's never one thing. Sometimes even good friends ask me, "What is your work about?" And I really don't know how to answer that question. Not being able to answer used to worry me. Now I think it saves me.

**JONAS:** You don't like to ascribe meaning to your work, but that doesn't mean your work isn't about something. It reminds me of a piece I saw in the early 1970s by Bruce Nauman at his first show at the Whitney. It was a vitrine with a hole in the middle. I liked it so much because it didn't look like our idea of what sculpture was at the time. Many artists work that way—they push against the limits. Musicians have done this, too, exploring, for example, dissonance. Your work is a bit like that in my mind. And you might say that you are not trying to "make images," but you are still making images. I'm thinking of your work with rope. How were those pieces created?

**PRICE:** The piece of rope is dropped by the machine operator onto a sheet of plastic. For insurance reasons I couldn't drop it myself. I could barely be on the factory floor. It's quite literally in the heat of the moment, because the plastic gets very hot and you have to drop it at just the right moment before it's vacuum-formed.

**JONAS:** It makes me think of Duchamp's *3 Standard Stoppages*, where he adhered dropped threads to canvas. Was that the inspiration?

**PRICE:** I had to consider that work, of course. There are many artists who have used strings and rope. That his-

tory sits on your shoulder when you're working.

**JONAS:** Were you ever attracted to surrealism?

**PRICE:** There's something about psychedelia and surrealism and mutation that is very attractive in your late teens and early twenties. I turned my back on it for a while before coming back to it.

**JONAS:** I relate to surrealism more imaginatively than you do, but also in its juxtaposing of disparate elements. Maybe that's where I see it in your work. You don't worry about things making perfect sense. You let them make their own sense.

**PRICE:** When I say I don't want the work to mean something, that doesn't mean I don't want it to mean something to someone. I want the viewer to make their own sense of things.

**JONAS:** You recently made light boxes with super-close-up images of skin. Skin is another one of your metaphors. It's skin, but it becomes an abstract work. And it's hard to talk about. You can talk about color and depth and feeling—although people tend to try to talk about imagery, no matter what.

**PRICE:** You can't avoid images. That's what makes them so compelling. But they're so often collapsed into the discourse around painting, and painting is so often reduced to an image—that's the overriding experience of the spectator. That's why I was wary of images for so long. They beckon you in one direction. I love painting. I love that they tend to come from a single point in time. But early on I was trying to do something that could be dispersed and distributed, and that risks losing the power that an artwork from a particular moment and place contains. But there's something exciting to me about risking this loss of power and instead scattering things.

**JONAS:** It's a different power—the power of, say, the internet rather than the power of a painting. Now, I know you are often grouped in with other artists who are your friends—people such as Wade Guyton, who also makes painting-like works through the use of machines. I wondered if you ever think about the artist Rebecca [R. H.]

Quaytman, because I see similarities in the way she works with photographs in her paintings.

**PRICE:** Whether it's Wade or Rebecca or me, there's a question of how to use photography, whether it's snapped by a phone camera or taken by a Hasselblad. I've been doing a lot of 3D renders, which is another form of photographic technique. It's all a question of how you take a flat image with power and mystery, and use it in a way that's worthwhile.

**JONAS:** Since I mentioned it, how do you feel about the internet?

**PRICE:** I don't work with the internet as much as I did 10 or 15 years ago. Even for my film *Redistribution*, most of that material I made or created on my own—either shot on camera or in animation programs with a team. There is some stock video footage that I bought and some segments I recorded off the television. Most of it doesn't come from the internet.

**JONAS:** Maybe it dates me to even ask about "the internet."

**PRICE:** People are now talking about "the digital," which includes the internet. And in *Redistribution*, there is a cascade of different looks and feels that suggests the experience of the digital or the internet.

**JONAS:** Knowing that most of the images in your film were made by hand does make a big difference.

**PRICE:** I've run into this before where people thought something I've made or composed was downloaded off the internet. And that's fair because I did address the internet directly in my early work. That expectation really attached itself to my work.

**JONAS:** If I pressed you to describe for me the content of, say, those skin works, what would you say?

**PRICE:** Actual skin first suggested itself to me because it was so full and so empty as a concept. It's totally charged—it could mean so many things. Visually it's almost like terrazzo or sand. It's formed of so many details, but it resolves itself into a more bland totality. I liked that pull of two directions at once—it's bland and yet so charged. That's how I like to work, pulled in two directions. Then I had to experi- ➔



VINTAGE BOMBER, 2008



HELL HAS EVERYTHING, 2018

“Sometimes even good friends ask me, ‘What is your work about?’ And I really don’t know how to answer that question. Not being able to answer used to worry me. Now I think it saves me.”

ment with the printing technology of skin, which is actually much more complicated than you might expect it to be. I’m thinking of bus ads or billboards that look great from a distance but turn to garbage close up. First, I hired a photographer with a high-end camera to shoot skin, but it didn’t give me what I wanted. I kept thinking that there must be some sort of walk-in body scanner. A flatbed scanner just wouldn’t give enough dimension. Eventually I found a startup outside of San Francisco with engineers who had built this very special robotic computer-controlled camera. They didn’t even know what to use it for yet. So I went out to have a look and ended up renting it and had it shipped to my studio here in New York. It had a robotic arm with a digital camera attached to it. We had to spend a week just figuring out how it works and then we advertised for models on Craigslist and other sites. It turned out to be very hard work because you’re asking someone to lie there for up to six hours while this mechanical arm reaches all around you. It takes thousands of tiny photographs, which the software then stitches together into a coherent whole.

**JONAS:** I was also intrigued by the show you just had with the squid skin.

**PRICE:** Yes, we went down to Chinatown, got a squid, and brought it back to the gallery.

**JONAS:** A dead squid?

**PRICE:** Yes, and then we filleted it. They have these incredible cells in their skin. Squid skin actually does look like a terrazzo floor or an abstract painting. When you’re looking at the work, you can tell it’s organic and you might think, “That can’t be human skin. But if it isn’t, what is it?” I like that mystery to be in the work, and I like trying out new technology to make it possible.

**JONAS:** I mentioned your great show titles. There is a literary aspect to them, like the recent one you called “Left Behind.”

← “I was documenting streetwear that featured patterns reminiscent of envelope security liners, which I used in the 2012 fashion line I made for documenta. I took this picture of a particularly steezy, crisped-out kid in New York and transferred it to plastic, then poured chemicals on it to break up the image and make it run and pool. I then took a photo of that mess and put it in a CGI program and had the software swarm algorithmic patterns around it in response to the shape of the chemical spill. I printed this pattern overlay onto the plastic surface and painted the backside with colors so they showed through. I mounted it all to metal and wood. The turquoise shape on the right is a police barrier lying on the sidewalk, not a stake being driven into the kid’s back.”

**PRICE:** That was named after the Evangelical sci-fi book series about the Rapture. It came about because I had briefly thought of writing a sci-fi Christian novel as an artwork on dispersion after 9/11, but eventually I concluded I couldn’t do it.

**JONAS:** Maybe just as well. But your “Left Behind” included those silhouette pieces that you did that work like gestalt shifts where you see an abstract shape and then you see in the negative space a set of hands.

**PRICE:** I think that started around 2007 with all of these images of people circulating online and just experiencing so many images of people interacting, touching each other, and handing each other things, and these images flashing across the world and flashing through my eyes and back out again. Google Image was still relatively new then, and maybe I was grappling with that explosion of visual imagery. Thanks to Photoshop, I could apply surgical tools to these images and turn them into sculptures. It’s also about moving from the dematerialization to the material, which is something artists have always thought about. Social media and all of these digital tools have simply accelerated the question. We’re all leading split lives, with our own selves being dematerialized in one part of our lives and material in another. Those silhouette works sort of snap between two realities—you keep flickering back and forth.

**JONAS:** It’s like that famous double image of a duck/rabbit.

**PRICE:** Yeah. There are some people who can’t see them both ways, even if I point it out.

**JONAS:** It can be hard to grasp negative space. A lot of words like “void” or “vacuum” get brought up when discussing your work. What comes to mind when you think of a vacuum?

**PRICE:** It makes me think about that old saying that “nature abhors a vacuum,” which means that a vacuum is, therefore, unnatural.

**JONAS:** It’s the fear of emptiness.

**PRICE:** Right, horror vacui. There’s a horror and there’s also an attraction.

**JONAS:** But then, right in *Redistribution*, you show that Bruegel painting [*Kinderspiele*, 1560], which is the opposite of a vacuum.

**PRICE:** I didn’t take art history classes. The observation in the film about the pile of shit in the foreground of the Bruegel painting came from just looking closely at the detail of a child poking a pile of shit. It just so happened that I was in the process of re-making or adapting *Redistribution* for a new screening, and I thought, “This is perfect, I have the perfect box to put that in.”

**JONAS:** It must have been all over the place in those medieval squares.

**PRICE:** Hiding in plain sight. And as artists, I guess it’s still our favorite game to poke something you shouldn’t be poking.

**JONAS:** Another ongoing theme of yours is the idea of the “envelope.” I wondered how that related specifically to your interest in fashion. You even did a fashion show with a Seth Price clothing line at documenta in 2012.

**PRICE:** Like everything, it started as research and I ended up basically making these wall hangings that were wearable envelopes. So I took it one step further, working with a designer in New York. Then even further, at documenta, where I had a show of clothing that was made of the same liner print from the insides of envelopes. It was exciting. It was just collapsing all of my ideas into one. I didn’t take the fashion line any further. I guess the next step would have had buyers making orders. The clothes actually were for sale at a department store in Kassel, Germany.

**JONAS:** This fashion question leads me to ask you if you have a persona. And by that I mean a Seth Price apart from the Seth Price sitting here in front of me. You do perform in public. When you read from your novel *Fuck Seth Price* at the Whitney, you wore makeup and a costume, and you had your hair slicked back. You were playing a role. What role were you playing?

**PRICE:** That took place in the Whitney amphitheater, which was very new and modern but also a little bit corporate, with a plate-glass window overlooking the Hudson River. I felt a little like I was doing an art-world equivalent of a TED Talk, so I wanted to step into that by wearing these Alexander Wang black nylon pants and blinding white New Balance sneakers, and slicking my hair back. And makeup always feels good. I also asked them to videotape it from two angles so that I could use that in *Redistribution*.

**JONAS:** Is that in the current iteration of the film?

**PRICE:** Yeah. Except I identified it as Singapore, not the Whitney. I called it a TechGnosis Conference. But don’t you feel like you play roles in public? Do you pose for a photo?

**JONAS:** I do, yeah. One does have to, but I sense more often than not that you tend to put on a slight disguise.

**PRICE:** Just slight. A hint. Maybe you don’t want fire, but you want a smoke screen. ●

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