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# Metropolis M



## The Ever Curious Case of Seth Price

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*I am meeting Seth Price in his studio in Midtown, New York, three months before the opening of his major show at the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam. It's exciting to meet him in person, in the flesh, when so much of his work seems to be about finding ways to renegotiate presence. Beyond the fact that his output is extremely diverse – spanning a novel, poetry, records, sculpture, paintings, installations, videos and even a fashion line – the figure of the artist “Seth Price” itself seems unstable. He has told himself to go fuck himself (releasing a novel with the title “Fuck Seth Price”) and compiled a book of texts on “How to Disappear in America”, a recent exhibition was titled “Steh Pirce”, and one of his series of works (consisting of abstracted logos as patterns) is called “My life”. Just as these works draw attention to authorship and Price's persona, they also*

*point to the futility of these very concepts. And though Price is very involved in the discourse around his work – he has contributed catalogue texts to his own exhibitions, has given lecture-performances on his work, has written his own press releases and, perhaps most famously, he published a critical essay entitled “Dispersion” in 2002, at the outset of his career – rather than pinning his work down, these writings act as nodes that extend and further complicate it. Myth making is always around the corner; context and content, theory and fiction are always on the verge of blurring. The interview below is a condensed version of our discussion.(THIS INTERVIEW WAS PRINTED IN DUTCH IN METROPOLIS M NR 2-2017.)*



**You're in the middle of producing an exhibition that will be shown at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam. On the Stedelijk's website it is described as "a comprehensive overview of your artistic career." Besides showing existing pieces, are you also producing new works?**

SP: I've been making some new wall-hanging works, and new sculpture. We're working on a video for the entrance area over the grand staircase, and trying to figure out the logistics of hanging a screen that's parallel to the floor and the size of the staircase area. It's going to be a silent piece that should have some mystery to it. I won't say too much, but it comes out of this technology I've been working with in the last year and a half, to gather huge amounts of data using a camera, from fairly microscopic areas of people's skin, and then use software to knit together these photos into huge, high-resolution, continuous images. It's the same general idea behind Google Maps, where they send a plane to take a lot of photographs and then turn it into a continuous image. We're going for ultra-high resolution, which isn't usually the goal, or even realistic, for something like a mapping programme.

**You have used this mapping technique on human skin before, but then you showed only still images. I am thinking about works like "Bob", and "Danny", which you showed in your last exhibition at Mission Road in LA.**

SP: Yes, huge light boxes which were almost two metres high, and up to about seven metres wide; there'll be a couple of those in the show. We're going to have one hanging on the wall and one, I think, will be horizontal, which you would look down on. The video comes out of the same technology, basically.

**Often the objects that you exhibit are present only through their absence – through the negative space that they might have taken up or through an effect left on a surface. I am thinking about your vacuum-formed works, which are sheets of plastic from which elements such as the outline of a face, a bomber jacket or a fist protrude. They refer to the body but then make clear its absence. Can you talk about how you navigate the space between the extreme flatness of the image and the extended flesh of the body?**

SP: I have always been interested in flatness – I wouldn't say it's an active interest, but it's a tendency in my work. I'm interested in things that have to do with the flatness of the image, and with graphics... But how can you do that in sculptural space, in three dimensions? The silhouettes are sculptures but they're completely flat, and they do have a certain absence to them, but the materiality is super-important. It's all about getting the right feel and the right look, and those are sculptural questions. Once you go into the realm of photography, of course there's a precision and specificity that is already in the image, but you're talking about printing it on a given, flat substrate. So I did want to get the right fabric and so on, but the material questions are different. It really *is* about this disembodied, glowing image. In a way you could say the silhouettes are directly related to the photographic, though. They take a compressed photograph and use only the negative space.



**I am also curious about the relation between making images or photos yourself, and working with found content that you have found online/pre-existing objects, such as the images that you used as the starting point for the silhouette series or the objects that you worked with for the vacuum-formed series. Your work has a very finished quality to it. Can you talk about the decisions and processes behind this?**

SP: For the bomber jacket, I bought a couple of different jackets, found one that somehow encapsulated what I wanted, and then had to figure out how to cast something that's made of fabric and which crumples. First you have to make a mould of it, into which you can pour resin. In order to make a mould of soft fabric without it looking like it's been totally flattened, you have to make it hard, which I did by lacquering every surface. Then you have to fill under every zipper tooth and behind every fold, because you can't have any of the material seep into these areas or you'd never get the cast out of the mould. So there's this tremendous process of preparing the material. The same actually applies to the envelope sculptures: it was a huge undertaking. Even the calendar paintings, which might look like they were taken from somewhere, were all composed. I think that it doesn't often appear that way, because I'm not interested in revealing labour in the artwork. I think that's something that people like about certain traditional kinds of painting and sculpture: there's an interest in seeing the labour. In fact, I'd rather make it look like it already existed, make it look as if the art was simply taken from somewhere else. I want you to see the piece and not think about any of the labour or the processes or technologies.

### **Like it fell from heaven.**

SP: You immediately get the look and the feel, but it's not about process. With the light boxes, I think people see them and think, 'What is this? It's a photograph.' Then maybe they get up close and think, 'But this is a very strange photograph. It's twenty-feet wide, and the detail is incredible. Maybe it's a scan.' But that would be impossible, because the bed of the scanner has a fixed focal plane, so anything that's not touching it will be out of focus and not lit correctly. But I don't want to bring that up as an issue to somebody who doesn't know about photographic or scanning technology. I'd rather the work appear as something *unheimlich*: it's kind of strange; it's kind of familiar.

**I first encountered your work through your essay "Dispersion" in 2002. I read it online and it felt very exciting to me – there was a shared feeling that with the internet and its possibilities there is a potential for art to function radically differently and your essay was really important in articulating this.**

SP: I was lucky, in that in 2002 there wasn't a lot of writing about these questions, and people were hungry for something like that. It would be harder now to circulate that essay, because of the massive amount of stuff. But back then even

circulating a PDF was new and interesting. For me it was just one gesture, it was something I was interested in at the moment, and it was really personal, it was about, 'Can I make artwork? Can I make objects? Can I enter the art world?' Circulating it as an illustrated document, a *piecer* rather than an essay: that also has a tradition, in conceptual art. But what I think happened was that it was read not as just one experiment, or within a history of illustrated artworks, but as a manifesto for my own practice. Of course it does relate to issues in my work, but at a certain point it becomes a stone around your neck. When I started to make the silhouettes, for instance. I'm interested in the study of products, and look and feel, and the perfect surface, and formalism. If you don't see that the silhouette pieces are figures, they simply look like beautiful, formal sculptures, and I thought, I want to play with that. I remember there were people who were really not into that work, and were writing or saying things like, 'This is a sell-out! How can you do that after writing "Dispersion," which is basically saying that artwork should be free?' I don't think it even was saying that, but I do think people were invested in the idea.

**I think people were invested in the idea that artworks could exist someplace beyond the art world in and of itself, and that was exciting. What then happened maybe was that there was a contrast between this and your practice: the fact that you worked with well-established, big galleries and that you put up shows consisting of these material objects that were so seductive and functioned so well in these spaces. Of course they were smart and they tingled with ideas, but it also seemed to contradict this idea in the essay that art could exist in an extended, non-art space of the internet and that this could be a motor for something else, a different kind of art that could reach different kind of audiences.**

SP: It was exciting to me, too, and it's still exciting. And I have been producing dematerialised work all along: books and websites and music, videos on YouTube; that continues to be an interest for me. But I'm curious about a lot of things. I want to do big things and small things, I want to do dematerialised art and do paintings. Not all at the same time, but sometimes you wake up and say, 'That work I was doing, I'm so bored with it, I need to try something else...' I don't want to ever have to apologize for doing something completely different. If there were a way that made sense to me, I would be painting with a brush on canvas, it's simply that there's no reason at the moment. So I've tried to get there through other means, with the calendar paintings, with the plywood pieces, and even these soft garment

envelopes on the wall, which are like exploded paintings. I'm just saying there's no production method or area or technique that I have a polemic against. It's all open.



**In the recent novel you wrote, “Fuck Seth Price”, you write about an artist who exclusively caters to the art market.**

SP: I haven't revisited that piece in a couple of years.

**You wrote it quite recently though.**

SP: Well, I wrote it in 2014, and now it's 2017. So it feels like I haven't thought about it for a while.

**Let me tell you. So basically, this young artist decides –**

SP: Decides to find a way of painting –

**Exactly. So then, reflecting on a current trend –**

SP: Decides to - cynically - completely change his kind of work.

**– by strategically making use of a feeling that he sees emerging around him: a nostalgia for something that is vaguely remembered but cannot be described precisely. He then translates this into a series of paintings that have a fresh look but make vague references to forms of cultural cachet.**

SP: Yes, because they suggest a political awareness, or something.

**The social context of the artist who produces this work is clearly the art market and his work is strategically created to respond to that context. Relating this to your work, how important is the context for which you create, given that you work in so many different formats, and how do these form and context relate to one another?**

SP: The context of the work is on the same level of importance as the material of the work. If you make a sculpture out of fabric and hang it on the wall, it's in the realm of sculpture. If you make it out of fabric and somebody can buy it and wear it, then you haven't quite left the realm of sculpture, you're still there, but you have to also say that the context, in fact, is garments, clothing, utility. Writing a novel – I mean, it's just a text until you situate it materially in the world. So you design it as a book. What kind of book? Well, you could publish it as something that takes its form from the world of literature, but then what is the text itself? What does it respond to? The art world is really good at providing an arena where you can write anything, because there are no rules. But that also makes it difficult to find a form. It's a great thing, and it's also a difficult thing. I had wanted to write a novel for years and years, as *art*, but I also like to read and I was just

curious about the state of literature. I found myself interested in this current trend of autofiction. You can also say it's a style, or a technology that writers are using. In ten years it might look like a period mannerism. I thought, 'Okay, this is good for me. This is my way in.'

**The title says 'Fuck Seth Price', it points to you and at the same time rejects you, so there is this moment of leaning in and stepping out at the same time.**

SP: I think playing with oppositions is part of it. That title is not a title from the world of literature, it's an artwork title, basically. That kind of gesture of aggression towards the audience and yourself, I don't think that's the kind of title you'd see in most literature. It's like a stamp from the art world, saying this is actually also an artwork, even if I won't distribute it in the art world and we're not putting it in a show. And it shouldn't be in a show. The whole point is it's not in that world. You can buy it in a bookstore, or online.

**You know what puzzled me at the last exhibition you had in LA? The iPad with the collectors that you could pull up. Can you talk about this?**

SP: It's a website. When I was writing the novel during that year, I started working on this. I thought of them together, as companion pieces. They were published the same month.

**What is it called?**

SP: Organic Software. [www.organic.software](http://www.organic.software). It's basically a database of art collectors. Essentially it's like a social media site.

**Art collectors you know personally?**

SP: No. Maybe a couple of them. I mean, there are something like 5,000 on there. I thought of it as another piece of writing, though. The novel took the form of literature, it was about trying to write something using literary styles, techniques, and tools, while the website was taking the form of a social profile database and it's written in a language called Ruby. So one work is literature, the other is code. They both were projects that circulate outside the art world. They don't make any

money, they only cost me money, they can't be bought or sold as artworks. They both had to do with some kind of nexus of persona, profile, data –

### **Capitalism, probably?**

SP: To some degree. They're ways to think about my role as an artist in an ecosystem that touches on financial, political, social issues, from the local level to the global level. Basically, I was situating myself, through a kind of fiction. With the website, I thought I would experiment with making an anonymous artwork, to see what happened. In fact, it turns out that if you make an anonymous thing and you don't publicize it, it's practically invisible. That was one thing I learned. But also, it just felt cool to make something anonymous. How often do I get the chance?

### **But it brought together profiles of existing collectors.**

SP: Yes, that's right.

### **If I was to go to the website, what could I do? Could I just browse their profiles and –**

SP: You can browse the directory of faces: click on one and it'll bring you to a profile. They all have different levels of information, but in theory you can see links to news articles about the collector; you can see a graphically represented history of their political donations to Republicans or Democrats, and by year who they donated to, and how much. You can see a list of charitable donations to philanthropic organisations, and a list of auction data. You can see photographs of various houses or properties they own, although we chose not to include the addresses. Affiliations: if they sit on the board of a major corporation or museum, it'll show you that and you can click on it and it'll show you the full board and the other members of the board. There's a box for user comments, which people can leave anonymously.

**I**

### **s this a gesture aimed at making the art world more transparent?**

SP: It's not a work of social justice. I'm sure there are people doing that much better than I ever could. But it is supposed to be a tool, to be useful to artists. I don't know, it was complicated... I'm still not sure what it was about, but I think the novel, the website, and the light boxes have a lot to do with personal data.

There's obviously a kind of aggression in all three of those bodies of work, an aggression towards the art world, but also towards the things that the art world touches that make it what it is today. Like the lightboxes or the novel, you can see the website as a portrait: this is what 5,000 of the most prominent collectors in the world look like in 2015. They're virtually all white, they're wealthy, the articles are generally about real estate, or finance, or social scandal. But it wasn't my intent to call attention to anything in particular. It's just, again, it was an exploration of a medium, a context, a process, and it obviously came out of my feelings two or three years ago, about where I was at.

**It was also the time that you took a step back from art making right?**

SP: Yes, that year I stopped making art. I didn't do any shows, I didn't do any fairs, I didn't have studio visits, I let everybody go from the studio, and I even – I can't remember why I wanted to do this – I contacted every magazine online and had them remove profiles, articles or photos of me. It mostly worked. There's only a few things left. Now, I'm like, 'Why did I do that? That was stupid!'

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