

## Seth Price: Video as Paradox

### Ben Portis, 2003

The opening image of Seth Price's *"Painting" Sites* (2001) – an off-center detail of an iconic Gilbert Stuart portrait of George Washington – sends us reeling into the realm of origination myth. The prejudices, the gauzy tensions and the purposeful irresolution inherent to such myths lie at the heart of Price's work, which itself challenges the purported self-invention and evergreen renewal of artists' video.

*"Painting" Sites* is composed entirely of still images found on the Web. Price entered the keyword "painting" and grabbed the pictorial results more or less in the order they were served. The display formats of a computer screen and a video monitor are nearly interchangeable. However only video acknowledges its format and transforms the arbitrary adjustment of variously made paintings into something that easily passes for intent. Video gives rule to the random and unruly sequence of images. It determines aesthetic order from an otherwise *informational* imperative. Cropped according to a formal necessity (as opposed to the technical limitations of personal computers) the pictures become beautiful in a new way. The old and the dated look fresh and contemporary. Video selects and frames whereas the Web either omits or makes inclusion trivial by dint of excess.

A rambling folk tale, written and narrated by the artist in an archaic but erudite manner, is read over and under the sequence of painting images. Word and image rarely coincide in a sensibly descriptive way, but each continuously inflects the other. The tale conjures timelessness, yet has pockets of vague prehistory that obscure the main events and puzzle even the central characters, who enter and exit through the holes in the narrative, as if on a stage with hidden exits and trap doors. What make the tale stage-like and the pictures panoramic are not correspondences (repeatedly wished for only to be abruptly dismissed by reasoning) but Price's arch artistic presence and pushy manipulations. His ripe yet monotonous voice, the lithe yet hackneyed transitions, suggest points of interest within a featureless setting of nostalgia. Eyes and ears stir drifting imagination, but this is a world better left to the dogs that Price repeatedly dwells on in the video. (They can use their noses for direction.)

In its short history, video has wrangled with the terms of its own origin. Upon abandoning the materiality of traditional art forms, video cultivated an early discourse based on its distinctive formal properties, slipping between the critical divisions of the Modern and the Postmodern. So securing its aesthetic position, its other qualities gained artistic footing too. In an interview published in *Trans 11*, Price said "I wanted to make a video without a video camera and, simultaneously, work with the two predominant strands in video art: the narrative and the performative, only to negate them, to turn them against themselves. ... Getting the authoritative voice was the performative element: I wanted to plant the notion that if you were having difficulty following, it could be because you weren't paying attention."

Painting holds the dominant rank in the visual arts, more so when the authorities of *art* and *history* are dropped and its popular connotations revealed, as happens here. This painting is immaterial, requiring not canvas, paint or even attribution to artists. It is readily

recognizable in wall calendars and jigsaw puzzles. Video art's derivations from painting are deep, dependent and often strategically understated.

American myths of origin are conveniently shallow and recklessly overspent. They obfuscate in the name of "reclaiming" traditional values. The United States once renounced myths, theirs and Europe's too, to build a transparent nation. Ludwig Tieck, the German romantic whose literary style *"Painting" Sites* pastiches – and who is cast anew by Price as first character to enter (and exit) the story – was George Washington's junior by a full generation. He resurrected the defeated European origination myths as vampire literature and they have their fangs in us still.