SETH PRICE

Redistribution (video transcript)

HELLO. THANKS, NANCY. I'm going to show slides of my work from the last six or seven years. It's chronological, or pretty much chronological.

I'm like a person who makes things. You do it one after another, unending. It goes on for such a long time: something new, and something else, and something something. Here come a lot of different strategies and arrangements, all interesting, all interlocking, mutatis mutandis … Such a lot of things! And then the question will be put to you: If you have something to say, why not simply say it? Why the elaborate games, the things that stand in for other things?

Well, I studied some film and video in college, and afterward I thought I might try to do that, or work toward that. I was working with video and showing in film festivals. After a couple of years I did start to look at art, at the art world, and that opened up a new horizon, and I started to try and define my work against what I saw there.

It seemed like art video split into two threads, historically. There was a performance tradition, which went back to the early 1970s and the birth of the medium: this encounter between the artist and the lens, which was about presence, about the artist's "look and feel." On the other hand, there was a cinema thread, which really started to come into its own in the early 1990s with large-scale projection, and you get video refracted through a cinema structure: budgets, crews, actors, scripts … This has to do with movies and television, the narrative lens, the idea of fiction.

So, it seemed there were these two tendencies, the performance and the cinematic, and I wasn't interested in either. But they're both based around the lens, its particular way of taking. Getting rid of the camera seemed interesting, making a video without a video camera, without a scenario or performance—or without even editing in the traditional sense. And that's not a new impulse. It's certainly been a staple of experimental film. But how do you do it again? And, actually, I was tired of having to use a camera.

These images are from a video I made in 2000. I typed the term painting into a search engine and took just about whatever came back. Taking imagery solely from the Internet seemed like a way to move the focus away from these other video traditions, to start to think about digital video as simply material in a chain. It translates directly from a circulated image, which itself is an offcut of a stored file, to video data. It never enters the realm of chemistry or electromagnetic tape. That way, anything within the video realm, whether it comes from film or a computer lab or some waste on the Web, is reduced to the level of graphics; it becomes diagrammatic. Treating the material this way started to clarify things for me: it highlighted procedures and tools, translations, plasticity.
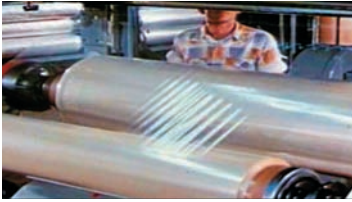
What is it that is so appealing and fascinating about plastic, as we saw satirized in films like *The Graduate* and as we see in these industrial films? It may be the material's apparently limitless array of uses, its universal promise, which goes back to the boom in plastic production associated with the World Wars and their birthing of a new material culture. Plastic's development was deeply entwined with military production, but in the postwar era it also represented the spirit of recreation. This was the material of choice for all manner of consumer goods aimed at a public eager to define its new wealth through the expression of lifestyle choices. The idea of something wholly synthetic, multi-purpose, and brand-new had a deep resonance for Westerners beaten down by the long march through war, depression, poverty, and war again. Plastic could be adapted to any purpose or sphere of meaning, a ready servant, willing to work for us, to be used.

Anything that is completely elastic, however, will wind up in the garbage before long. That's built into the material and the expectations we have of it. It may start its life as oil, as the accumulated sediment of millions of years of dead organisms, but it will pass through many different functions and forms before it comes to rest once more in the waste heaps and middens of history. Too many forms, in fact, too many uses, too many possibilities! This is a game where all options are open, all forms recombinant and mutable. On the one hand, these materials can be regulated through observation and careful calibration: the processes of translation are supposedly subject to rigorous scientific logic and technological manipulation. At the same time,

they're confusingly open-ended and adaptable. The categorical barriers between states of matter are no longer of consequence: a material easily translates from liquid to solid and back again, a shirt may be conjured out of a bubbling vat of material, used food containers are miraculously transformed into brand-new baby carriages.

It's a powerful image, a prism that gathers a number of related ideas: an irrationally open-ended social promise linked with the measured and rational notion of the technological, and at the same time the practical implications are crushingly banal … You wouldn't see this constellation of ideas in such an exaggerated form until the end of the twentieth century, with the rise of a new

digital age carrying a similar promise—that all goods and concepts are subject to shifts in form and meaning executed as quickly and easily as the movement of a decimal point.

When the tendency is for everything to open out in all directions at all times, the problem is trying to establish a meaningful relationship between any two things. You might ask, isn't that what we would all want, to endlessly open in all directions? But if you can't establish a basic relation between two points, you might find yourself on the road to psychosis.

I WANTED TO SHOW YOU THIS SLIDE, which is a painting by Brueghel called *Kinderspiele*. It depicts many different kinds of play. Most can be classified in one of two ways: either you see people performing with one another, body games, like in these details, or else you see people using tools or instruments: stickbats, hoops, masks, dice. But the artist has included one activity that's a bit different: a person probes a pile of shit with a stick, as others watch. What can be gained from this activity, what narrative does it serve?

Shit is unusual: it's both natural, as a part of the organic and pre-technological world, and it's also man-made—you could even say it's the first human product. It's not without its charms, or uses, one of which is to embody these paradoxes of inside and outside, production and waste, use and lack of use. Brueghel may have been aware of these symbolic aspects, for the position of this person and the pile of shit can be no accident. The painting is a dramatic exercise in linear perspective, stretching back to the haziest reaches of the city at the top of the canvas, so among all the objects and activities featured here, the pile of shit, positioned at the bottom and center of the canvas, reads as virtually the closest item to us, the audience. It's literally foregrounded. Of all the ways we have invented to make the time pass, surely there's something unusual in our fixation with our own waste.

All artworks carry their dates around with them. It's information extrinsic to the piece, but you can't shake it, it will shadow your work forever. A year calendar poster, with a theme picture and a grid of numbers, seemed interesting. Its aspects kind of cancel each other out. Supposedly function is the main thing, with the art smuggled along in a package that's about utility, but then the grid of dates is often so tiny that it's useless, and you wind up with pure decoration. So the utility is more like a frame for an aesthetic decision: you like cats, you get a cat calendar, you like dogs, you get a dog calendar …

Some of the paintings in these slides feature obsolete computer graphics or advertisements made with computers, and also American painting between the Wars, from before the Americans supplanted the European avant-garde. Where there are signs pointing to the postwar boom in American art, they're buried. It's a kind of odd period in American art, there's something melancholy about it … It falls outside the normal progression, anyway. It's almost a kind of Socialist Realism, with the WPA, the New Deal, and those attitudes. This slide shows the calendars as posters, glued to the wall. I had also started printing them on canvas, as paintings, but I never showed those; I didn't have a gallery when I did them, and when I had one later, I was doing something else. So showing them here in Cologne is interesting, now that they're out-of-date. Sometimes it's good to go forward and then double back, and circle around again. To those who turned their feet around so that their tracks would confuse their pursuers: why not walk backward?

Anyway, at that point I wanted to somehow get back into video, and I was thinking, how do people make video today? Materially, technologically, video as a tool, as a kind of structure. It seemed like people take "content" and feed it through a set of digital effects. This is true whether it's a cheap TV documentary zooming slowly in on an archival photograph, or a Hollywood movie where footage is treated with color effects, or computer-generated imagery, or video art. So I decided to focus on the effects themselves. I made several videos that function like demonstrations of digital video transitions. They're proposals for effects that could actually exist, like "plug-in" software you might buy and enlist in some project or other.

This one is called *Digital Video Effect: "Holes."* The image accumulates as a series of droplets or holes, like paper-punch waste, and at a certain point you can see the image as a composite, though not entirely clearly, and then it drains away. The "content" here consists of pictures taken from websites that function as clearinghouses of grisly or brutal images, mostly pictures of people who have been in accidents, supposedly supplied by police examiners, morgue workers, or photojournalists who couldn't publish the material. A lot of these could be fabrications, but the point is really about circulation and redundancy. You know, these kinds of images have been around forever, but now they have a new form of circulation, so it's all different. Certainly the audience changes; when I was working on the video I showed it to some students, and they immediately identified the sites, and some recognized individual pictures. Last year it came out that American troops in Iraq were being awarded free porn-site memberships in exchange for uploading grisly war photographs to these other sites, which are often owned by the same companies.

This is intense and brutal imagery. It's not easy in any way, even because it can seem "too easy," in the sense of a quick provocation. I think I decided to work with it because of this difficulty. The challenge was to make it conform to an idea. How do you work with material that seems like it doesn't belong in art, either because it's presumed tasteless or boring or cynical or "topical" … In the end, I think you just try to take pleasure in the process, and hope that the difficulty is preserved in the work as a question.
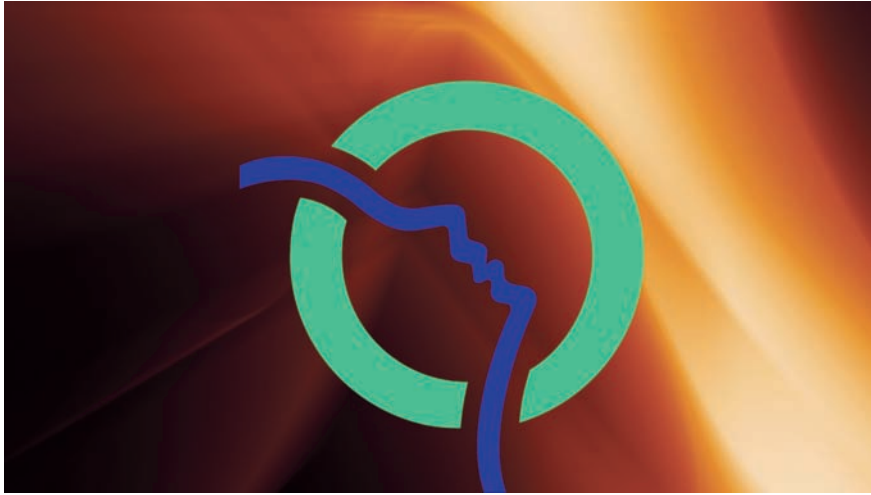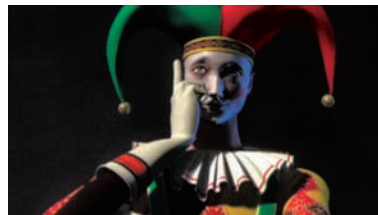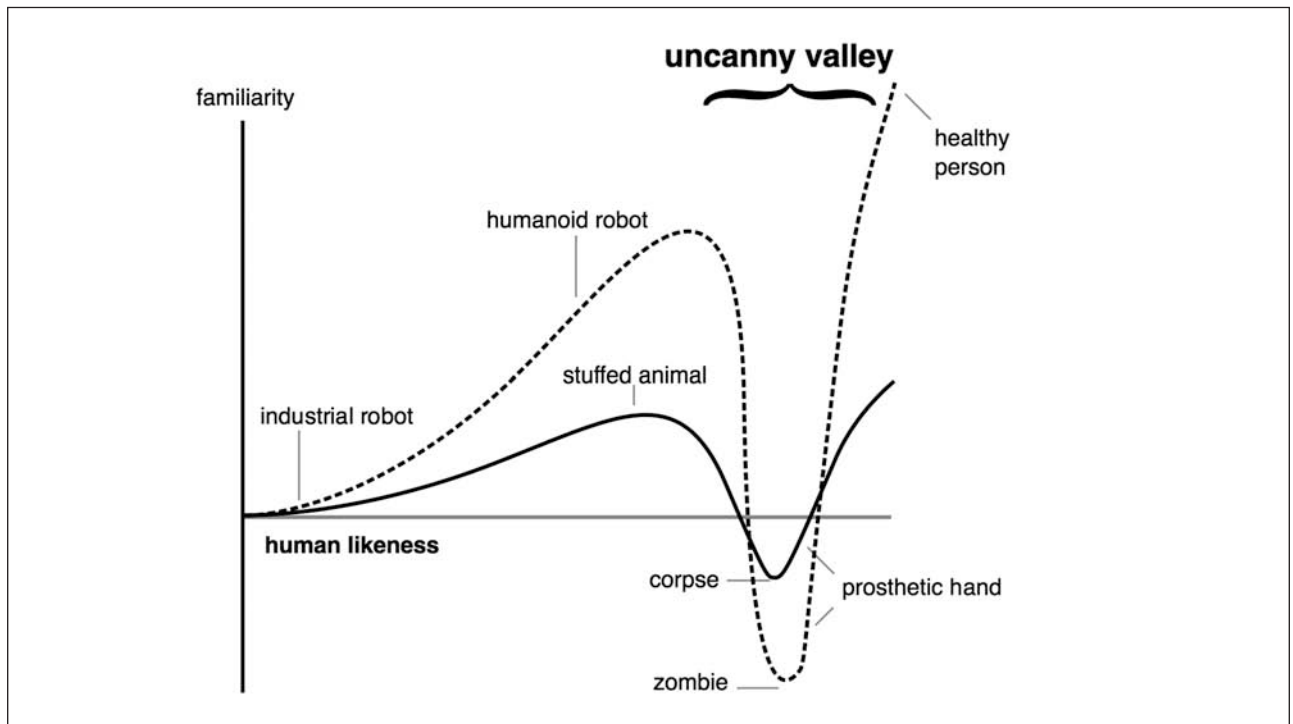
I made a second piece, based on the idea of "spills," where the video material is made to flow like liquid. The material for this piece was also hard to know how to use, not because there was a question of taste or morality, but because it was so strong. I knew Joan Jonas, and I asked her if I could use a piece of home movie footage she'd shot in the early 1970s, with Robert Smithson and Nancy Holt, Richard Serra, and her, all sitting around with the art dealer Joe Helman, talking about the state of sculpture and money and art, the economy, the art economy. It hadn't ever been used, or even seen; it was a kind of private object, from the archive. And that status, the fact that it was a document, made it hard to bring into art. It was made by an artist, it featured artists, and they were talking about art, but it was somehow not art, because it was a supplement. And on top of that, you just want to see it, you don't want to see what's been done to it. I felt as if I couldn't use it.

I want to briefly go back to the performance/cinema question. It's interesting: by the late 1980s or early 1990s there's a kind of hybrid installation form where the performance thread and the cinema thread come together. Artists start filming performance scenarios within sets, using all kinds of props and trappings, and then they include these sets and props in the exhibition, alongside the video. So an object appears on-screen, full of cinema life, and then you turn your head and see it in real life, but mute, used up—the leavings of cinema. You're asked to read the art as occurring in two places at once: in the video, where the object serves the narrative, and simultaneously as an actual object,

which has retreated to the quiet realm of sculpture. This is what these video installations seem to do: they split the art between the object as a useful but kind of profane video image and the same object as an appealing but useless presence, like an out-of-work actor.

But there's another possibility: it could be that the object has actually graduated to another use, is furthering a new narrative, which is that of the exhibition. And in that case, the real work has begun, which is reconciliation, making a bridge from one fantasy world of narratives and symbols—that of movies and television—to another, the grown-up world of functionless objects, like in stores or exhibitions. Artists are asked to perform this task of reconciliation all the time. The "artist's statement," for example, or lectures like this one: the artist is used as a bridge from one frame to another. In a funny way, to speak about my own work now, looking at these slides of older work, feels like a splitting. People often want to hear what the artist has to say, what lies "behind" the work, yet at the same time it's taken as performance, and in the end maybe they really don't care to hear the tone and enunciation of a particular speaking voice.

uncanny valley

familiarity

healthy
person

humanoid robot

stuffed animal

industrial robot

human likeness

corpse

prosthetic hand

zombie

That reminds me of an interesting phrase: "the uncanny valley." It's used by those who work with computer animation or robotics, in Hollywood or advertising. The idea is that people can tolerate robots and computer-generated faces that are crudely humanlike; they can even find them endearing or cute, but when the likeness approaches full realism, it becomes uncanny. The face is no longer seen as a clever likeness but as a real person with whom something is "off." So the uncanny valley is that point at which the verisimilitude of the human likeness achieves a degree of success that consumers find revolting. And that's why, even as the technology allows it, you may not see completely realistic depictions. You're probably going to keep seeing talking horses, or whatever.

In 2004 I had the chance to do a solo show at Reena Spaulings, in New York. I decided that I wanted to make sculptures, which I hadn't done before. And I wanted to keep using the date as a motif, like in the calendars, but I dropped the calendar aspect.

The vacuum-forming process is primarily used for packaging. You go to the drugstore and everything from cosmetics and toothbrushes to batteries and cologne is packaged this way. It starts with a mold, usually made out of wood or metal, as in this slide, and then hot plastic is sucked down around the mold, and you get your hollow shape. In looking back at the history of how artists had used the process, it seemed that while many artists had experimented with the technique briefly, particularly in the 1960s, there were very few bodies of work, and the ones that did exist often took up the logic of signs and signage as the model. Anyway, I started working with the breast and the fist. There seemed to be something strange about packaging the human form this way. I think masks are the only example I can think of in culture.

After that, I wanted to keep working with the body, but to distance it. Something about the bomber jacket is iconic, and it was so open. It's been around since World War I, when it was developed for pilots, but it's had a lot of different lives, it gets taken up by various groups and fed through trends and subcultures. It's here to stay, but it keeps changing, and the changes stack up, and reach back, and affect all the previous iterations. It went nicely with the idea of the date, this kind of faux-vintage effect: a once functional item that's been faithfully re-created for an upscale retailer.
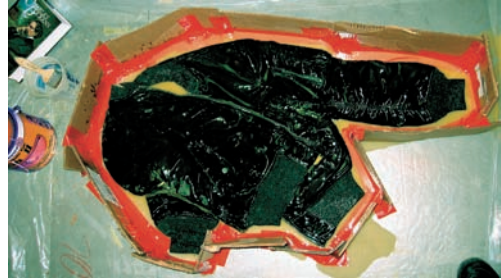
At first I liked the idea that you spend time and energy making a mold of industrial plastic and that you never actually see that object. It's a sculpture you don't show anyone, you just pull impressions off it. Then I got sick of casting and making molds, which was a real hassle. I started using knotted ropes. You just toss them on the bed of the machine. They get trapped in the plastic, but that's nice. As a viewer you're aware that they're there, behind their own image.

These days the vacuum-forming factories are closing down. All the business is moving to China. I could e-mail a digital file to Shenzhen, where it would be used to produce ten thousand identical vacuum forms that would be shipped back in a cargo container, and this would be cheaper than doing the work around the corner from my studio in Brooklyn. I've had to keep working with new shops as they shut their doors, one by one. It's really an older technology, a holdover from the postwar manufacturing economy.

This 16mm film—these waves—came out of thinking about abstraction, about why there's so little abstract film and video in the art world. Abstraction has a rich history in experimental film and structuralist/ materialist film, but all that seems to run on some track parallel to the art world, an impoverished track, kind of like poetry. In any case, when you look at what's exhibited in galleries and museums, there are very few artists working with filmic abstraction. Though recently that does seem to be changing. There's a kind of poetics of silence expressed in abstract film. It's a silence that shuts up the viewer.
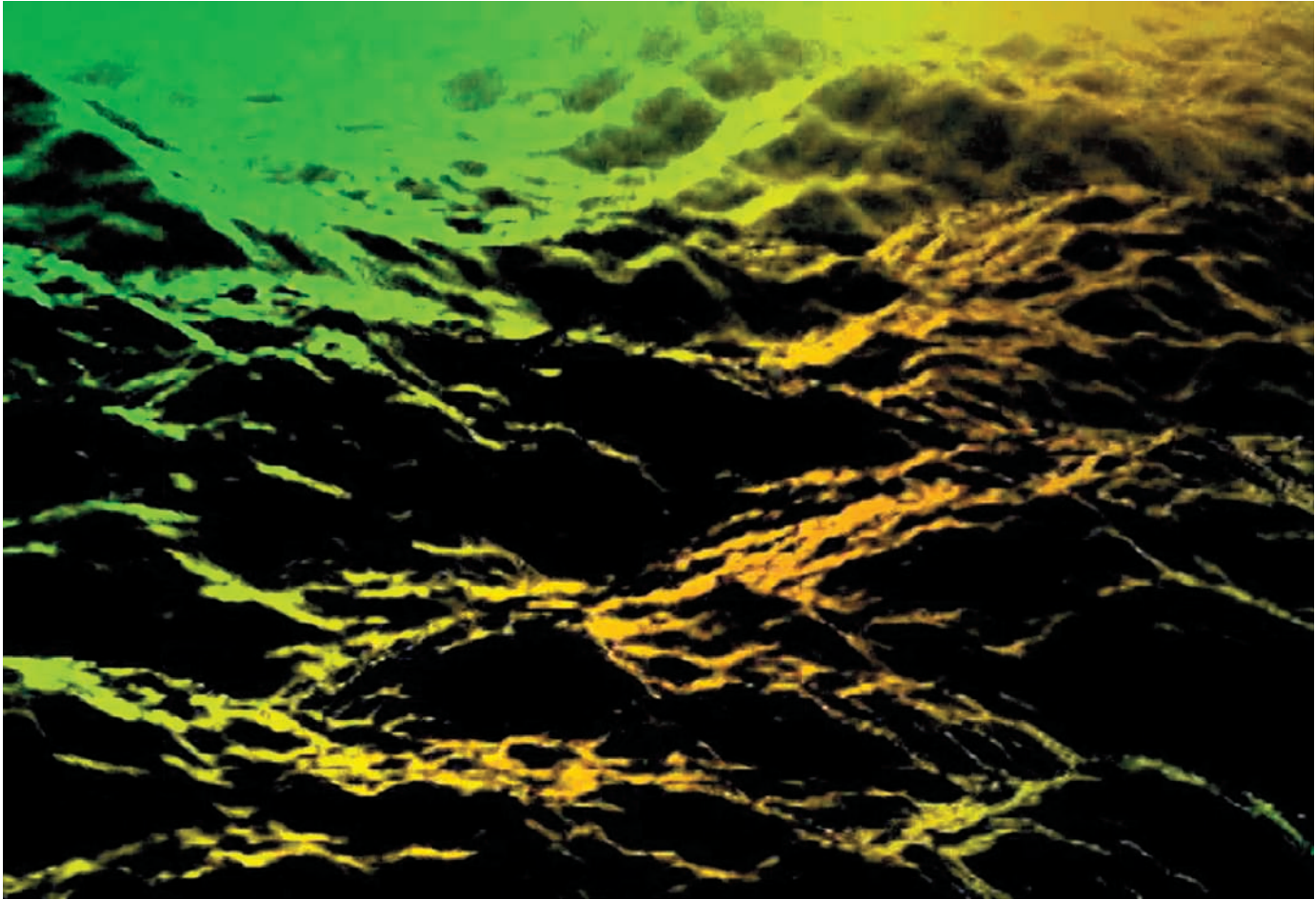
Many of the technologies that made this "waves" film possible are based on patents held by one man. Thomas Edison obtained patents on the telephone, which brought me these images over an Internet connection, patents on movie film, on electrical bulbs, on the projector that sends this out on a cone of light, on the movie screen … How is it possible for one person to hold a patent on all the things that make up this work?
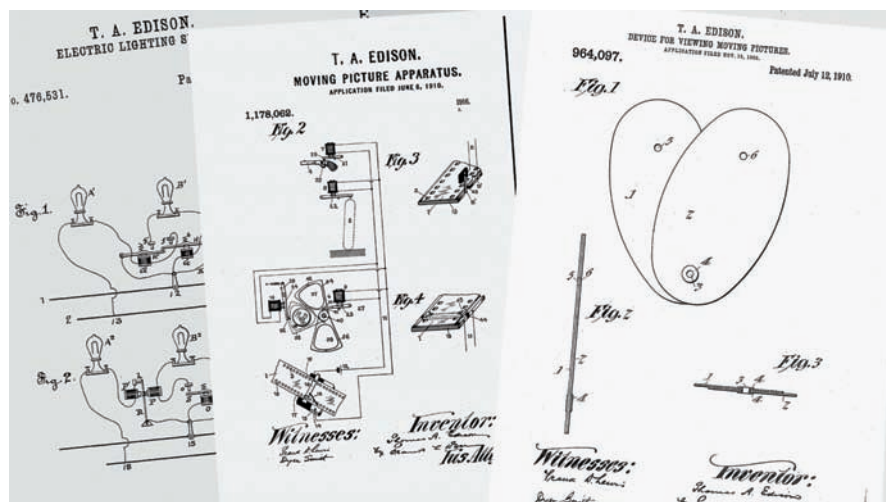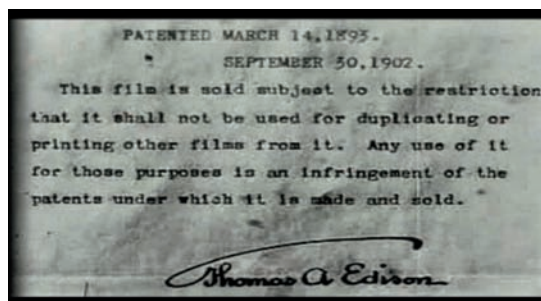
Edison was a maniac for copyright, and in this respect he was ahead of his time. Look at all the lightbulbs he patented, each an idea predicated on minute variations in design—an attempt to cover as much territory as possible. At one point he decided his films needed to be copyrighted, but he was frustrated by the fact that the nascent medium was not yet protected by federal copyright law. He was impatient to assure security for his intellectual property, and he realized that he could make use of the copyright system that existed for still photography. So he went through his films and printed

each frame as a separate, unique photographic print, which he then mailed to Washington and copyrighted as its own photograph. What an incredible effort! One that forced the man to break his moving images down into their constituent pieces, reversing the new, magical, illusion of motion, to instead generate thousands of legal documents. It's a strange journey for an image.

When I was making the videos from Internet images, I started thinking about the Net, and how you could take things out of it, but also how you could put things back into it. Any image there is provisional, and refers to data stored elsewhere, and after you take this image, its owner might alter the original, leaving your copy as this unknown and untraceable offcut. There's something unstable about the medium. Anything can be replaced or altered at any time, and nothing ever is truly finished or final.

I started thinking about how to make a piece that not only would use the Internet as medium but would have some of that fragmentary nature, would be dispersed among different media, different forms, and over time.

In 2001 I started making compilations of music, produced and distributed by small independent music companies I knew. In each compilation I was trying to locate a genre or moment when production technology changed, and, as a result, there were changes not only in the music's sound, but also in who got to make it, how it was distributed, what the economics were. To accompany each compilation I wrote an essay about these shifts and published it in a non-art magazine. I was hoping this all could stay as one "piece," even though it was composed of different essays and records and physical packaging.

To give an example, when the digital sampler was introduced in the late 1970s, it was a room-size machine and incredibly expensive. Only institutions could afford it. So for a brief time, the musicians making sampler music were mostly academically trained electronic composers, people who came out of Webern or something, because they were the ones with access to university electronic music labs. Some high-end music studios had them, too. But it wasn't really until a bit later that samplers became cheap enough for eighteen-year-olds without a lot of resources, and that's when you really start to get all the experimental musics of the period: techno, the spread of rap. But at the beginning, there's this weird niche where academic composers are pioneering the sampler, and this was the kind of un-named genre I focused on in that compilation and essay.

Music is a funny thing in culture. It has this huge infrastructure, commercially, materially, and socially, this vast apparatus for a product that's extremely immaterial and hard to define, and therefore easy to project onto. And working with music seemed like a good way to think about other things that share those qualities. For instance, it seems like a digital culture tends to operate according to scattering and redundancy, and for now, at least, it's popular music that really encourages this, or where it's clearest. In this sense, it was interesting to think about *Title Variable* as a redundant piece. I mean that the same work simultaneously inhabits different economies in different forms: the essays and music are free online, but they also get packaged in magazines or records for commercial prices in the general marketplace, and they exist as limited-edition vinyl records or artist books, which sell in the art world for art world prices. Maybe commercial culture always winked at the charms of redundancy, but now it finds it has no other option.

I think every writer probably has looked at an old printed text and seen things they'd like to change, but there are protocols of publishing, rules that limit the ways in which you can change older texts. The Net, however, is understood to be a fully manipulable medium; authors may simply update an article or posting. Information there seems to represent not a fixed object, but some kind of state, like the weather. So at some point it became clear to me that nothing in the *Title Variable* project need ever be finished. The music and the essays can be endlessly re-edited, repackaged, re-released, a title can change, the content can change, and it remains the same "piece." Software works like this; it's essentially in flux, always pointing to the next version and the last version, but somehow understood to be the same over time. This has transferred to a lot of my work, including this video.
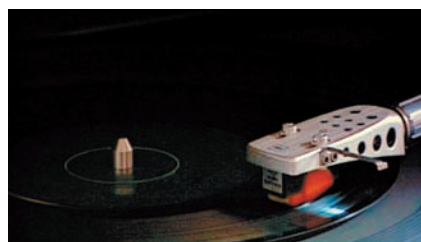
Making work, you're building a ruin, really. You're making objects that always point elsewhere, that refer to other structures. And these structures are incomplete. They're tokens, icons of transmission. Any piece of art, when it's removed from the studio and removed from the gallery and isolated, is a kind of souvenir of a process of thinking.

I got an e-mail last week from some artists in France who were planning a show of my work based entirely on material they'd taken from the Internet. They'd already put it together; they were just notifying me out of politeness. It's great, not simply to lose control over the work, where it goes, and what happens to it, but the fact that other people naturally assert their right to take this work and manipulate it. It was seen as part of the situation into which I'd placed myself, part of that contract.

You might say, "Yes, of course we value fragmentation over wholeness, the periphery over the center, incompleteness, failure, ambivalence, et cetera." Is it because we know that the way of things is entropic, and to insist otherwise seems naive and backward? For the sake of argument, let's pretend that disruption, diffusion and dispersion, mimesis, parody, and confusion are not only legitimate artistic tools to this end but also desirable and effective tools, or at least fashionable tools. Wouldn't it follow, then, that up is down and yes means no? As if a twist of the kaleidoscope would reveal, in these bright shards, the same world made over as ideal.

But worlds are somehow conjured from these scattered bits and pieces. Walk down the streets of a major media capital, London or New York, looking at all this material, these cubes and grids and planes: these geometric shapes somehow produce fantasies and immaterial imaginings! How is it that all this power and money and image and value are conjured up from these mute surroundings, these dumb objects?

In the end, you need some sort of structuring device to give meaning to all this material. Writing is one thing that structures artwork. But the status of writing in the art world is very strange: writing confers value on the work, but itself has very little value. Writing about an artist legitimates the artist, and it may bring power and money to the artist, but rarely brings power and money to the writer.
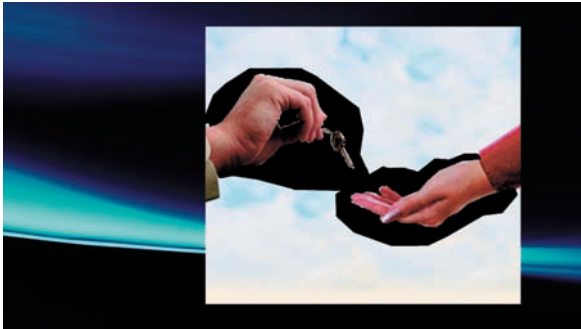
In 2002 I finished a written piece that took the form of an illustrated essay. I was really trying to work through some things I was thinking about around my own art. At some point I thought it might be interesting to try to test some of those thoughts by making them public. I published it first as a booklet, as in this slide; then I uploaded it. I think the way the piece moved and circulated was part of the idea, part of what it means to put a kind of nonspecific thing out there. I mean, it acts like an essay, which as a category

seems to demand specificity, as distinct from, say, a poem … And it starts to move under its own steam and accrue readings, and that way it can literalize all the things that go on with any piece of art, or cultural product, but as an essay it can make this easier to see, the kind of reading and rewriting that happens when something is at least initially presumed to be a direct or honest expression of what the producer believes.

One of the things I wrote about was the phenomenon of the "Daniel Pearl video," which had come out that year. This was really the first of what's been a number of jihadi Internet propaganda videos to become front-page news. In this image you can make out the video still, with the time stamp on the lower right. Anyway, here was this thing in the center of culture, with an unprecedented level of access, but such an incredibly public transmission is actually received totally privately: anybody with a computer can read the debate in the news and then view the evidence in his or her own bedroom. There's a collapsing of public spectacle and private spectacle.

Then there's the intimacy, which goes back to Edison's Kinetoscope, which was intended to be used by one person at a time: you put in some

money and bend close to the screen and shut out everything else. And then as the twentieth century develops, that idea changes into cinema, which is publicly received, and then television arrives and enters the private home but still carries a kind of publicness, because you watch a broadcast with millions of other people. But now the Internet, viewed on a home computer, is private and also on demand, and on top of that it requires that you lay hands on the object, you place your fingers on the keyboard as you watch, you're physically attached to the image … It completes the circuit, back to this Kinetoscope idea.

Sometimes in medicine you take a drop of the bad thing, the thing you fight, and you ingest it. It seems as though an advanced Western image culture might displace violence from its own bodies into the realm of images. Something needs that violence to be present still, but somehow dispersed into images, images that represent the violence that is now done to others in parts of the world that don't exist to us, except as images.

These paintings from the Lascaux caves are eighteen thousand years old. An image like the one in this slide appears to depict an animal being hunted. You can see the arrows finding their mark, on the left. So it might be an expression of desire, some kind of wish fulfillment on the part of the artist. But there's very little agreement about what these images are, or are for. In fact, there are two opposed readings that are sometimes brought out in the same breath or the same text: on the one hand, cave painting is seen as the origin of art, the beginning of the time line of the history of art, the earliest "expression of man." On the other hand, it's manifestly not art, because it's ritualistic, with purpose and a function, in this case, the idea of some social function around food or communication with the spiritual realm.

The image of the hunt here actually comes from a photograph taken not in the real cave but in a full-scale replica that the French government built next to the original so that tourists could experience the paintings without damaging the real cave. You still make a pilgrimage to the site, and enter a cave, but the cave dates from the early 1980s, not from eighteen thousand years ago. So the person who painted the particular image in this artwork is, in fact, known to us. Her name is Monique Pétral.
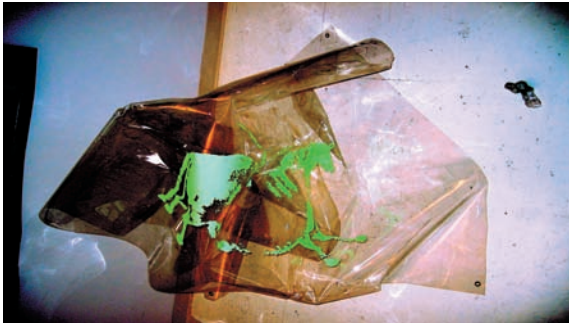
In some ways poetry—its humble means, its impoverished state—is the antithesis of the contemporary art exhibition. But what they might share is a willingness to keep things in suspension, to leave empty spaces, to focus on the limits of the work. The question why is always simply left alone. As a producer, or really as anyone who visits exhibitions, you have to ask yourself, what does an art exhibition have to give or to teach me? Is the exhibition a model for a way to be, or a way to use things? Does it propose something? Does it add to a conversation? The questions may already be flawed; for example, the notion that we're to learn anything, or the idea that art examines, reveals things, critiques; must you turn to art to learn that there's injustice, that subjectivity is administered, that control and power collect the tickets at the door, that desires are commodified? Might it be that the value of an exhibition comes from the degree to which it lies on the edge between two things, between articulation and incoherence, the old and the new, aesthetic and idea?
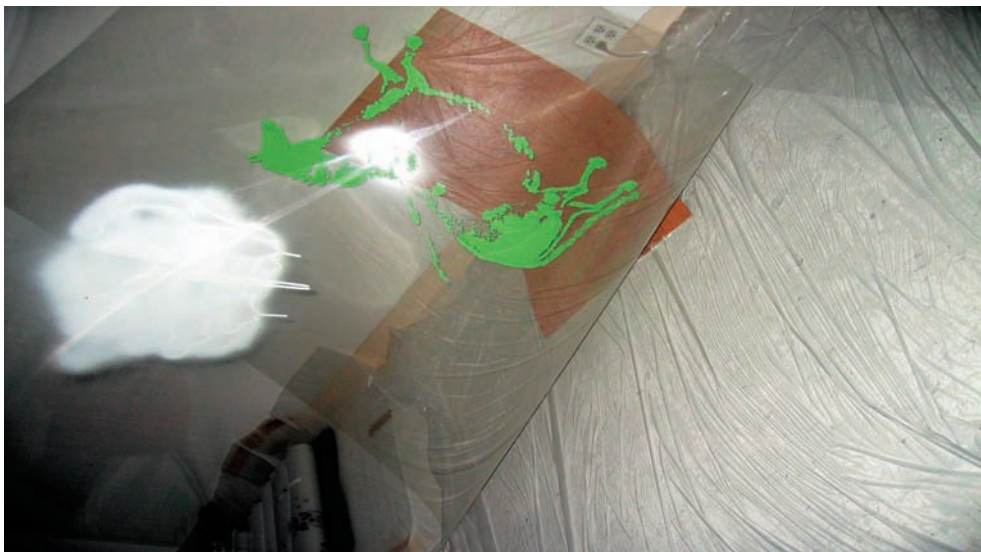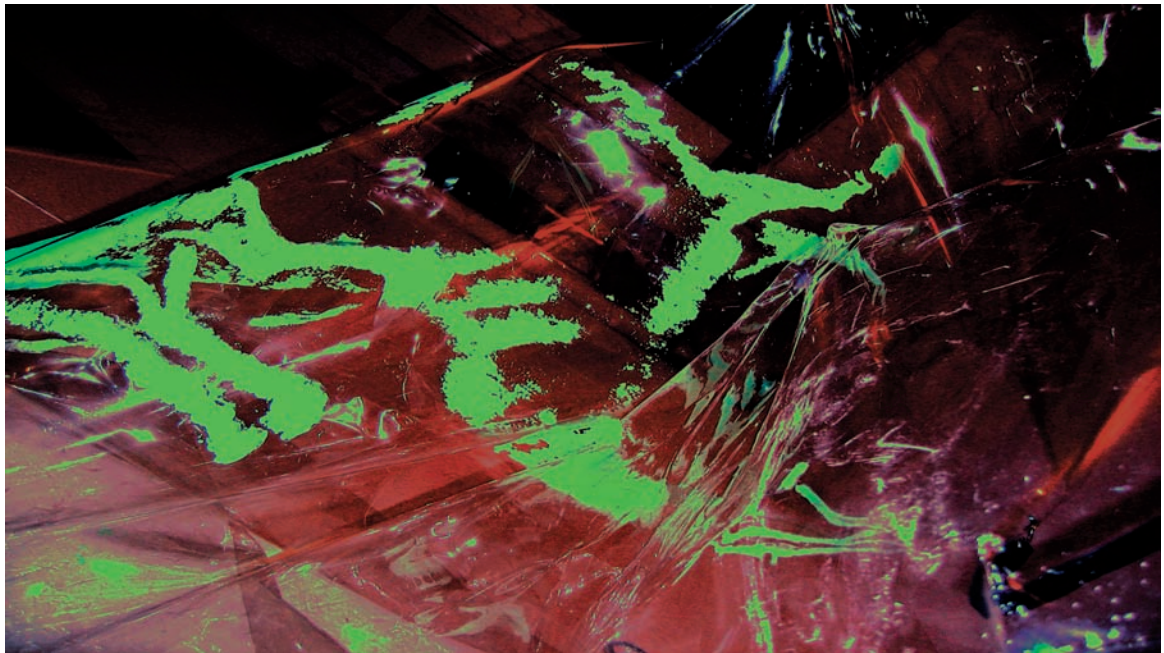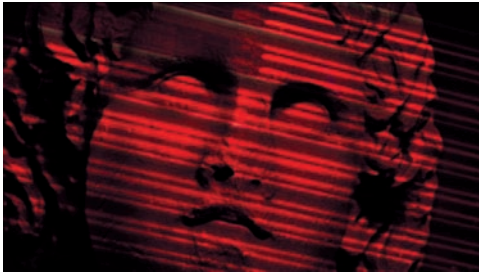
On the other hand, how can you compare an exhibition with a poem, a novel, a film, or a performance? Is it a matter purely of taste, of connoisseurship? The facts of connoisseurship seem so arbitrary! Wine, for example: how did wine become the virtually international, trans-historical force that it is? A particular fruit, subjected to a particular procedure: was this predetermined; why not some other fruit, some other procedure? What a particular, almost haphazard, phenomenon, storied and celebrated as the peak of connoisseurship, a stand-in for culture and breeding, from antiquity to the present. But low, also, stinking low, in the gutter, on your back, rubbing your eyes: how did such a great year deal you such a harsh blow? Each year, each vintage, is stocked and stored, an object now. It might not be opened at all, it might exist as a sculpture, a small, heavy glass piece, bought and sold at auction, passed on to the next owner, appreciated from afar.
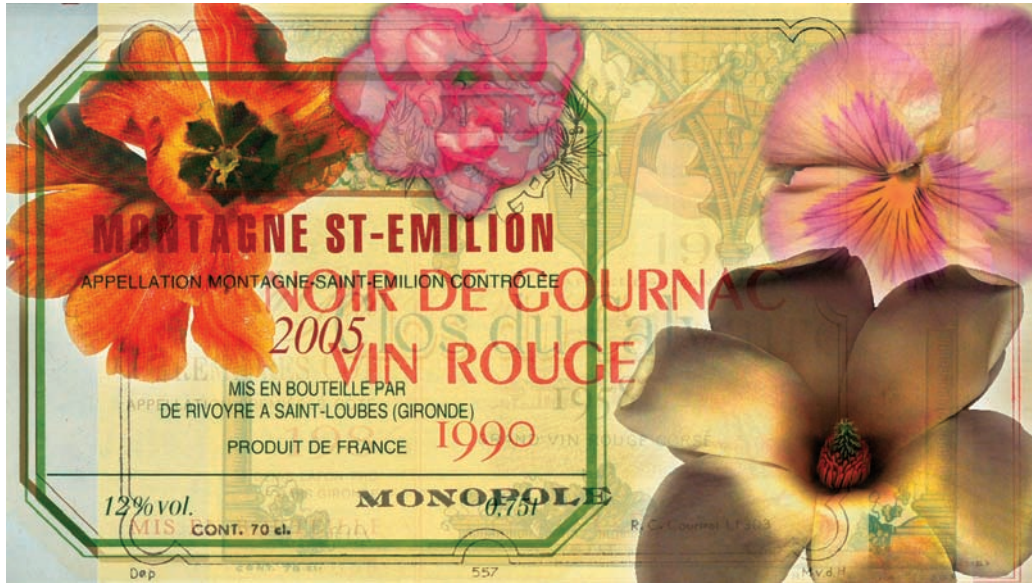
There's a question to which no artwork has an answer, to which every artwork is susceptible, which is, so what? There is no answer. You ask it of yourself, as an artist, and there's only silence. It's not a nihilistic question, or pointless skepticism, because the silence produced is actually useful. This silence records an echo: the artist has made a noise and prepared some kind of recording device to capture the echo that comes back. Your utterance now has a shadow that cannot be cast off. This shadow is the work.