Role-Playing Games: An Interview with Seth Price

By Ed Halter

As with most things, we can probably blame either Andy Warhol or Dan Ackroyd for starting the trend of artistic types of one kind constantly wanting to be artistic types of another. Musicians want to be actors, filmmakers want to be video artists, writers want to be talk-show hosts, gallery artists want to be celebrity chefs, and so on. Long Island City guy Seth Price is one of these types, only he's a bit more aware of the process. In fact, he's made his own transformation from video artist to musician into its own self-referential game—and now he's trying to lose the self-referentiality in the process.

Price first became known for his short experimental videos and films like Recital, Industrial Synth, *and* Triumf, *which have played the Rotterdam Film Festival, the NY Underground Film Festival, Cinematexas, and elsewhere. More recently, he's been invited to show at the Museum of Modern Art and the 2002 Whitney Biennial. Asked to screen his videos for these institutions, he snuck in some new audio projects:* Game Heaven, *a compilation of video-game soundtracks, and* New York Woman, *a series of electronic compositions based on old dance songs. I spoke to Seth in the park across from the* Sound Collector *offices and got him to talk about what this art thing was all about.*

Sound Collector: I guess the first question I have is about the *Game Heaven* project. You got that put on sale at the Whitney store for the Biennial. Did anyone buy any?

Seth Price: The Whitney bought 20 off me outright, and I have no idea if anyone bought any copies. There was a nice piece in *i-D Magazine* about it, which listed the Whitney as the only supplier, so maybe that generated some sales.

SC: It's on CD?
Price: It is on CD now. I would like to see it on vinyl, but I don't have the money at the moment.

SC: How did the whole project come together?
Price: Well, about a year and a half ago, or at any rate last spring, I was looking for the soundtrack to *Rastan*, which is an arcade game from 1987 or 1988, and I figured that I could find it on the Internet. There are these incredible trading sites run by video-game enthusiasts, where people hack the soundtracks from arcade games and cartridges and consoles. I don't know how this is done, but the information is converted to files that can be uploaded and swapped on these sites. So I downloaded about three hours' worth and put together the best 40-minute mix tape that I could think of.

At this point I wasn't really considering it anything other than something I was doing for my pleasure, and for my friends. But at a certain point I noticed that everyone responded so strongly to it that I started to think about the implications of ripping stuff off from the Internet, stuff that was already kind of circulating in the public domain. In many cases it was impossible for me to discover not only who had written these songs but also what video games they had even come from, because stuff on the Internet material comes with very little information attached, sometimes. Some of these songs were downloaded from Napster with no more information than "video-game soundtrack." And it started to become exciting as a project beyond the interest simply in the music but also the whole methodology, or the strategy, of taking material that was circulating publicly and shifting it from one form of distribution to another.

SC: How did you select the tracks?
Price: On one level, it was initially about the tracks that I liked and that my friends liked most. But part of that comes from the fact that it's a genre like any other, with its own conventions, and a lot of genre-specific clichés started to surface.

SC: Like what?
Price: I guess ethnic idioms, for one, because the game soundtracks are really overdetermined by the kinds of games for which they're written. They're commissioned, I'd imagine…I mean, this is part of the mystery: I don't actually know, 15 or 30 years ago at the beginning of this industry, what the conditions were, whether these were in-house composers or freelancers. But in a certain sense there is a similarity to advertising jingles, because you had to write a song that was brief and compact, and very suggestive; in this case, of genres like horror music or carnival music or what was imagined to be Asian music or Mexican music, depending on the scenario of the game. And this started to produce all kinds of rote structures.

SC: Did this project happen before *New York Woman* or after?
Price: I think it might have been around the same time. It didn't really come

together until the last six months or so. I was thinking more about music as... as circulated information, as product. Which goes for both projects. In the case of the video-game soundtracks, it was clear that this was a musical genre that was completely inseparable from the context in which it was produced. In other words, it was a soundtrack to a game, but it was not available outside of the game. It was not available in the soundtrack section of Tower Records. And this was part of the project; I wanted to use the Internet to show that there was a way to get around standard distribution structures. And we all know this about the Internet, this is one of the claims that has been made about the Internet—that it's a way to circumvent distribution systems. But in this case, to remove the information from the Internet distribution system and put it into—and this is almost retrograde—but to encode it on a CD and present it as an album. And I think that this move highlights a lot of really particular aspects of the Internet, and maybe even of digital media in particular, because these songs were always produced for nonlinear use. They were not produced for reproduction on an album. They were not intended as music.

SC: Well it also has the aspect of shifting the focus from production on to, say, curating or indexing.
Price: Yeah, absolutely. I think that when all content is available in some form, the challenge shifts to ordering the content, presenting, producing, packaging, disseminating.

SC: Now, essentially, how is what you're doing different from if someone who wasn't an "artist" just downloaded their favorite video-game songs and put them on a CD, which someone may.
Price: Well, I think there's no practical difference. Other than the fact that it's presented in the context of art. Which you could say is one of the hallmarks of, of the "art-object"—context alone. I think that's something that's interesting for me in this project: demonstrating how this actually could be done by *anybody* who finds a corner of the culture that they care about that's not being represented as it should be, commercially or in the mainstream.

SC: But why do you need to do that in the context of art? Why can't you just be, like I said, just any old person who has the technology?
Price: Well this project should have been carried out five years ago by any number of cool alternative labels, but it wasn't. I would have bought it if it had been available at Tower Records. So for me, part of the project is taking something that's fetishized, that in a certain way is trendy but is also not generally available, and showing how easy it is to do this sort of thing. Now, the other part of that is promotion. Because without any promotion or press, it doesn't make a difference, I might as well not have done it. It's about demonstrating an idea. And part of the reason it has to be done, I think, within the context of "art" is that the copyright issue can then be seen as commentary; whereas in, let's say, a community of Napster users ... I guess what I'm saying is that it's easier for people to accept this abuse of intellectual property as critique within the context of art than it is within the culture at large. For whatever reason, Art or the "art world", so-called has created a space where that's acceptable.

SC: Now, your *New York Woman* project. In this case, you were learning to actually make music as the project.
Price: Yeah, that also came out of frustration, I think (and I just realized that both of these projects come out of frustration). In the case of *Game Heaven*, it's a frustration that I couldn't more easily access some of these old video-game soundtracks. In the case of *New York Woman*, it was a frustration that I couldn't hit the right balance between repetition of pop structures and the suggestion of "the new" in the pop songs I was trying to write.

SC: What kind of pop songs were you trying to write?
Price: I was trying to do anything catchy. Catchy and conventional. And it kept on coming out just "off" enough that it sounded experimental, which was not at all what I wanted. I don't know how to write songs in the sense of song-craft, the singer-songwriter and that whole tradition. So at a certain point I started listening to songs and graphing, on paper, what was happening bar by bar,

in the different parts, whether it was the bass line coming in at this measure, or a sample dropping out right after the chorus. Initially I just wanted to get an idea of how they were putting these things together. I know this is ridiculous, because anybody who's written pop music has already figured that out, that it's incredibly simple, structurally. It's not simple, obviously, to write a hit, or even write a catchy melody. But structurally it's fairly primitive. And then I thought: well, I should just go the rest of the way and actually copy these structures that I've graphed.

SC: So what kind of songs were you studying? Was it a specific genre, or did you just pick songs you liked?
Price: I was looking at electronic pop music from the early to mid-1980s, because I think it was a time when pop producers were starting to get heavily into electronics, and MIDI and synthesizers, samplers, but before electronic music started to wander off into much more experimental territory, like house music or techno, where song structures were dropped and the idea of the star or the singer—or the human voice at all—was dropped. So this was a moment when there was still a verse-chorus-verse structure, and these people were aiming for charts. But on top of that, again, it was an era that was in some way fetishized or trendy. I mean, the last year has seen the whole electro thing here.

SC: So name some of the songs that you were studying.
Price: Well, "I O U," by Freeze, and then there's a Club Nouveau song—what was it?—"Heavy on My Mind." Club Nouveau is a really underrated New Jack Swing group. And "The Model," by Kraftwerk. That was the first one I did. I thought it was appropriate.

SC: So a pretty diverse group of songs.
Price: Yeah, they're quite different within the genre—within electronic dance music, yes. To some listeners, they probably sound similar.

SC: And you made up your own symbolism of how you were graphing them?
Price: It was just rough shorthand—lines, dashes, circles, arrows. Not very interesting to look at.

SC: And at what point did you make the *New York Woman* CD?

Price: Well, I had five songs. And I needed to present a piece at the MoMA [in May 2001]. It was supposed to be a video piece, and I decided to do a short talk on this methodology, and give out some CDs I'd burned, and show some music videos, and call it a project. Without really knowing what I was doing or where I was going. I thought that doing it at MoMA would give it some kind of permanence or at least make me try to iron out some of the ideas and bring them to completion.

SC: Did it?

Price: I think it's kind of a failure, but maybe it helped me get to somewhere else.

SC: What was kind of a failure? That actual event, or the project itself?

Price: No, the event was fun, but I think the project's really only half done. Because I ended up making some fun electro songs, but then it's like, who gives a shit? Because *most* producers don't necessarily know anything about music. Because this was part of the tradition I was trying to insert myself into: that of the DJ or music industry hanger-on who finds himself in a position to produce a track and has to quickly do something. This was one of the reasons I chose electronics, because it's very easy for somebody to whip up a track using electronics, whereas with traditional instrumentation, you either have to know what you're doing or you have to hire session musicians. But with the formula and some machines, you can very easily put together an electronic track. And so, you know, I proved that I could do that. But I'm not sure where that puts me.

SC: You dedicated one of them to Warren Fischer, right?

Price: Yeah, that was kind of… [laughs] That is kind of embarrassing. They're in chronological order from the Kraftwerk song, which I think was about '79, up to that last track, which really was a way of acknowledging the electro trend.

SC: So each track was based on what you perceived as the structure of a specific song.

Price: It was absolutely based on a specific song, which was also representative of a particular genres.

SC: And you named each track after the producers of—

Price: The tracks were named after the producers whose work was ripped off. So you had "Baker/Robie, 1985" or "King/McElroy, 1986," and I can't remember the other ones.

SC: And who were those people?

Price: Those were music-industry freelancers who moved from … well this does not hold true for Kraftwerk, but a lot of the other people were real hardcore producers who were writing songs and then tacking on singers at the last minute, and who might have at any moment more than one single in the top ten under the names of different women. For example, "Connie", "Xena", "Shannon". For some reason, there's a one-name protocol. The producers were really looking at what their rivals or colleagues were doing and listening to the new 12-inch that came out that week, to see what the new equipment was, what the new styles were, what they could copy. They were, in many cases, amateur musicians who kind of found themselves in that role. And so in a lot of ways it was a position that I could project myself into.

SC: So now you've actually moved from kind of researching and playing the role of one of these producers to producing new music on your own?

Price: Yes, *Iron Curtain Girl*. That's an album of electronic dance hits from the ten years directly preceding the collapse of Soviet Russia. These are singles that were produced by iron-curtain businessmen, working with professional singers like Julia Nova, Irina Mammon, Zhana Klic, in countries as diverse as Russia, Albania, and Poland… And working from Western models of what dance music should be, often a few years behind, churning out 12-inches that were totally lost to history. I remember in 1989, in Wenscelas Square, in Prague. It was the first New Year's after the fall of the Berlin Wall. And, um, I was there with my partner, Jane Resznichenkov, and we were digging through the crates at some of the music shops a few blocks

away, and we missed a lot of the champagne-popping because we were busy chasing down some of these 12-inches, which have now become the *Iron Curtain Girl* project. Because there's been a real resurgence of interest in the Soviet bloc and a nostalgia for the Communist state. So they've been compiled on a kind of mix tape, which really aims to stoke the fires of nostalgia for the Communist era.

SC: And how many do you have in there right now?

Price: There are ten at the moment, I think. Ten or 12.

SC: From, uh, where?

Price: Well actually they're straight off my G4. At any rate, they sound like something that Jane Resznichenkov might have dug up somewhere.

SC: I've heard one of them—it sounds really good. You know your videos and films—like *Industrial Synth* or *Triumf* or *American Graffity*—tend to push the limits of…how do I put it?

Price: Boredom? [Laughs.]

SC: Yeah. Like a lot of video art can do. You seem very interested in getting right to the limit of what someone can actually sit through, and going maybe a little bit more. But your music isn't like that at all. The music you're compiling is very poppy and very consumable.

Price: Well maybe I'm learning something from doing music, because I don't think I want to make videos like that anymore.

SC: Really. Why not?

Price: I think it's more challenging to write a song that's actually legible as pop music, and in no way reads as experimental. Maybe it's easier to put something together that reads as experimental, in both video and music.

SC: It's easier for you, or it's easier for anybody?

Price: For me. I can only speak about myself. And they're equally dismissible and equally transient. So maybe it's more interesting to go after the more difficult angle.

SC: So which direction are you going to go with *Iron Curtain Girl*? Is it going to become part of an art project or is it going to be ...

Price: No, no, I want full-on distribution. It's only interesting if it functions as a real product. And the same goes for *Game Heaven*. The only reason that it's been perceived as an art project now is that it had to be self-published, and the arena that was open to me at the time and continues to be the arena open to me is that of art: museum bookstores like the Whitney, the MoMA, Printed Matter, or Rhizome. But if I had my choice, I'd go for Kim's or Other Music in a second. Part of the problem with pursuing that is the material is all pirated. So it's more difficult to get a traditional distributor who's willing to back you up.

SC: And do you have any plans for anything you're working on after *Iron Curtain Girl*?

Price: Maybe something with zero conceptual angle.

SC: Something musical, you mean? With zero conceptual angle?

Price: Yeah, yeah. Something that's only an album of music that has to stand or fall on its merits as music, and not as any kind of art project.