Bettina Funcke in Conversation with Seth Price, 2002
unpublished transcript.

Bettina Funcke: In the last ten years, film and video have become popular tools
and references in contemporary art. However, there are still facets of these
mediums that are poorly understood and often badly translated in exhibition
contexts: how they are shown, how they relate to other artworks in the space,
and how the audience is guided to see these works.

Until recently you showed your work in the context of film- and video festivals
like the New York Video Festival, the Rotterdam Film Festival, and the Biennial
de l'Image en Mouvement in Geneva. But you have begun to situate your work in
the realm of visual arts. Why does the context of the art world—its museums,
galleries, exhibitions, and projects—interest you more than that of film festivals?

Seth Price: In festivals, there's a lack of—you drop your work in a black hole.
Sometimes the art world provides more context and flexibility, and ambiguity.
Last year Barbara London invited me to do a screening at the MoMA, and I made
a piece (*New York Woman*, 2001) which was at right angles to the video
medium, you might say. I was looking at antiquated music production techniques,
and in a way examining cultural production in general, the way production
technologies dictate style. I made versions-- more like shadows-- of old dance
singles from different periods. I had an idea that the structures could be
mimicked, I mean the structure only, like the bones of the songs are the
production... at MoMA I gave a talk about this, the methods, the history of the
music, a lecture, and then I distributed free compact discs with the songs. I did
show videos, but only as supplementary information, as 'visuals'. Later I showed
the same piece in a film festival, and people didn't know what to make of it, or,
well, the expectations were totally different, all the attention focused on the video,
really, which doesn't make sense as a discrete work.

BF: What about linearity and the loop as two different forms of time-based work?

SP: The scheduled screening—not just in film festivals, anywhere—it's a kind of
control, and the idea of the loop is more of a total flow, like the faucet got left on...
Well, for most of film history movie theaters were okay with viewers just drifting in
during the screening, sitting on through the end, the beginning, and back to
where they came in... which is when you leaned over and whispered "this is
where we came in". That was a popular expression. It defeats the schedule, you
don't have to arrange your day around the ticket line. That would only happen in
a gallery today. It would be interesting to see commercial movies presented as
loops... inevitably it would have to be framed as some kind of "project"...

BF: Your work *Painting Sites* (2001) uses the loop, which is one reason for it to
be shown in an art context. It consists of two narrative elements: a kind of a
manipulated slide show of paintings and a fairy tale that you have written and are
reading yourself. These two elements break with linear narrative and, by turns,

affirm and contradict one another. At times the images seem to illustrate the story, and at times they make no sense together at all. Can you tell me about your ideas for that piece, and how you conceived of it?

SP: That piece came out of opposition, out of contradictory impulses. Dan Graham said something about situating the work at the edge between two things so they contradict each other. I wanted to make a video without a video camera. To remove my hand, you know, or at least put it behind glass. And to work with the two predominant strands in video art, the narrative and the performative, but then negate them, make them work against themselves.

 I wanted a kind of seduction, too, to appeal through extreme simplicity, an extreme simplicity of structure. The elements, at least at first, could seem like known quantities. The images are presented like a slide show, which is familiar if you took an art history class, and the story is a fairy tale, in professional tones like a voice actor. Getting that authoritative voice was the performative element, to plant the idea that if you're having difficulty keeping up, it's your fault, you aren't paying attention. I dropped the dumbest video effects I could on top of the paintings, like a kind of digital violence.

 BF: How did you choose to combine these visuals with the German Romantic fairy tale?

 SP: Some bodies of the--some cultural areas are basically monoliths... but under scrutiny, you know, they unfold or they point somewhere else... Nineteenth-century 'Märchen', that's the name for it, they're couched in the language of fairy tales, but they weren't for children, they're labyrinthine and morally ambiguous. I decided I would analyze the stories, to mine the formal tropes and the stock phrases, and I wrote one... The story I wrote never resolves, it's a stack of tics and clichés, it goes in a circle. It's like the *New York Woman* pop songs. A kind of production skeleton. Anyway, around then I was asking search engines to return results for the term "painting," really just out of curiosity, to see what people were nominating for such a universal category. I saved all the images in the order they were served up by the search, and I added the narration, and that was the video... It's a fact, a fact: the organizational function of the web only seems to mobilize when it's asked to produce results, the rest of the time it's nothing, it doesn't exist at all, in the usual sense, it has to reconstitute itself a million times a second, for different users. It has to make itself up, to look like architecture, for you. So, anyway, in this case, it was being asked to assemble a body of knowledge which has already been mapped ad nauseum according to specific ideological and historical tendencies. The web has a leveling effect, it doesn't care about anything in particular... This year Richard Posner published a book (*Public Intellectuals. A Study of Decline*, 2001), listing the top 100 public intellectuals, and the ranking was determined by Internet searches! The same strategy determined *'Painting' Sites*, but self-consciously: take a snap-shot of a database in flux, hold it up to the light, with minimal framing, and endow it with

the resonance of a fixed system.

BF: It seems to me that you are developing a kind of advanced technique of appropriation. You get into a certain genre—for example, electronic pop from the early days of the sampler, or the German Romantic fairy tale—until you are familiar enough to create a pseudo-product of the same genre, following the rules of that cultural genus.

SP: Maybe... in one context a work can be legible as a network of signs, or a proposition about how signs work, and at the same time it might stand alone as a functioning cultural artifact, in such a way that it would be impossible to prove to a skeptic that it's actually art... Media, or mass media, means ideas packaged as entertainment, like a book or a CD... so, a contribution to the general cultural conversation and the popular archive, something that lives or dies by the rules of the general market, as opposed to that of the art world.

I put out a record last year (*Title Variable*, 2001-2005). It was early video game sound tracks, downloaded as files from Internet fan clubs and file-sharing networks, which I turned into music tracks, into an album. Because this was going to be a product, it was important to work with a trend, with the idea of nostalgia, with a fetishized area of the culture. One reason it had to originate in what you could call an art context is that it's not legal to pirate these songs, though they're already stolen, anyway. But that's a failing in the culture: given obvious demand, why can't someone buy old video game soundtracks at the store? It seemed appealingly perverse to shift the 'content' from a newer system of distribution, the Internet, to the older model of products in stores. Fans hacked the songs from the original arcade machines, but it took the Web to give these artifacts a distribution medium. My album cover came from cdcovers.cc, which is a web database of music packaging for people who are already ripping off the content. I read this Warner Brothers lawyer, who was saying he wasn't concerned by this practice... I have to say, it's amazing, he has no imagination at all... It's clear packaging is the last card the industry has, the last vestige of the old model of distribution.

BF: You are giving me only half an answer here. You said that you had to make the CD within the context of art because of copyright issues, but, really, you could have addressed those issues and then made a real, profitable, product—but you didn't. Are you torn at the moment between wanting to be an artist and wanting to be a music producer, or do you want to work with the tools of a music producer from the position of an artist?

SP: I wouldn't mind being a music producer. I am, anyway... You're right, the challenge to copyright law is inherent in the album, but I think even if you wanted to do it legally, the difficulty of tracking down all of the rights-holders would make the project practically impossible. To start with, some of the tracks, as they were found on the Net, had no information whatsoever, including the name of the

game from which they were taken... the names read like machine language. But I like that anonymity: recontextualized as a product, or within a standard distribution model, the lack of identification stands out, it's suggestive. And I'd have no clue if one of these old soundtracks was a complete fabrication. That's a unique quality of the web, as an archive: it's not like the public library, which follows federal regulations like ISBN, etc.; the Web has no use for provenance,or identification, or truth value. Like public access cable.

BF: The web manifests extreme pluralism, though. One finds not only websites reminiscent of the obscurity of public access TV, but traditional archive structures, such as the Library of Congress home page, or the New York Public Library website, the MoMA library catalogue, and so on. The host signifies the kind of archive you are dealing with. But I do agree: for your kinds of keyword searches, the internet produces ambiguous and nonlinear results that are based on a specific pluralism of the net that obliterates all traditional understanding of the hierarchy of information.

I'm still curious about genre appropriation. Let's talk about that a bit more. You are currently researching Christian apocalyptic novels, a quite particular literary genre that you are planning to take on. As I understand it, you are planning to write such a novel yourself. How does that relate to your earlier work, and your ways of making work?

SP: Well, an attempt to find a way to make it, make the, keep art-making interesting. I'm not always so comfortable with objects! Genre constructs itself by demanding your immersion in a rule system. So... I had the idea I might remove taste, by taking the vernacular on its own terms, without a distance. I started trying to appreciate musical or literary genres I thought I didn't like... Then there's a natural temptation to create works within these media, and the content becomes an expression of the formal parameters.

The kind of appropriation you were talking about, or at least as a "strategy", is pretty common in the mass market. And an art-making practice that abandons craft, plasticity, and singularity in favor of information, distribution, and circulation has to really catch up with consumer media, with mass production. It's just like this! When he started out, (author) Robin Cook wasn't getting the sales he wanted, so he got a bunch of best-sellers, he analyzed them, and then he went and wrote his breakthrough, *Coma* (1977). I read that Moby listens to hit songs over and over, for similar reasons... Well, those are two extremely "successful" examples... this isn't strictly about selling, which depends just as much on factors like promotion. The aim is to identify formal characteristics, signs, that give something widespread appeal at a specific moment. For example, you could resuscitate older designs and techniques that shed light on a past moment and on the present, like in *New York Woman*. The point is that minimal legibility as a pop artifact depends on a strict adherence to rules. Otherwise, the work is instantly relegated to the realm of the experimental on formal grounds alone.

BF: Jorge Pardo said that in order to be an interesting artist you really had to understand your relation to other sorts of production. Elsewhere he continued that thought: "What does it take for a relationship to be worth something in a work of art? It's a question that runs through my work. What's the minimum expectation in juxtaposition between one thing and another?" He sounds like the generation after Dan Graham, following a similar goal with his work: to situate a thing on the edge between two things so that they contradict each other. Do you believe that this edge will be found for your generation in technology and media as forms of communication or as forms of public space, rather than in architecture or design?

SP: With media, unlike, say, architecture, you have something generally reproducible and not localized in space. There's work that has rubbed mass-media against art—Dan Graham or Robert Smithson's magazine pieces, Chris Burden's TV ad, or maybe Stan Douglas's TV spots, but I haven't seen them—these are precedents for a practice that inserts itself into communications and popular media. Digital technologies of the last ten years or so have reshaped the terrain so much... there are entirely new problems. Like Linux, an 'open-source' operating system: the code is freely available and manipulable, an on-going project to which anyone with the know-how can contribute, which means the authors probably number in the thousands by now. It's decentralized and impossible to co-opt, but it provides power and utility to the degree that large companies have to reckon with it. At the same time, and inherently, it challenges ideas of ownership and authenticity. It doesn't matter that this was not conceived as art; it is a great example for art.