

Gwen Allen

## Interview with Seth Price

Among other things, Seth Price's 2001 project *TitleVariable* is a question, a query that might be phrased—as the artist did in his 2002 essay “Dispersion”—as follows: “Suppose an artist were to release the work directly into a system that depends on reproduction and distribution for its sustenance, a model that encourages contamination, borrowing, stealing, and horizontal blur? The art system usually corrals errant works, but how could it recoup thousands of freely circulating paperbacks?”<sup>1</sup> *TitleVariable* inquires into the ways that digital technologies have affected music production, examining a brief but turbulent history that in thirty years has yielded cheap synthesizers, the compact disc, MIDI (the Musical Instrument Digital Interface), personal computers, the sampler, and the World Wide Web.

The project includes a series of music compilations, concentrating on pivotal but vaguely defined or historicized moments within this history, including both popular forms and more rarified modern compositions. Considered so far are: the growth of the early video-game soundtrack as a musical form; the transition when mainstream pop producers started to assimilate the previously marginal black musical forms of rap and hip-hop into a more lucrative, commercial system; the consolidation of experimental “industrial” music into beat-oriented dance genres; and the very first years of the music sampler. The compilations have been released in various audio formats and packaging designs, occasionally with different titles. Some have been available cheaply in bookstores, museum shops, or on the internet, while others have been self-published or produced as limited art editions. As an accompaniment to each, Price wrote an essay on the music in question and published it in a magazine. These essays take rough cues from the music and range in style from the tersely schematic to the base journalistic to the more abstractly theoretical.

If *TitleVariable* functions as a critical history of music technology, suggesting how production tools have transformed music—not just how it sounds but who controls it and its distribution—the project also reflects on the contemporary conditions that govern the production and consumption of culture both within and outside the art

1. Seth Price, “Dispersion” (2002), in *Mednarodni bienale grafike (International Biennial of Graphic Art)* (Ljubljana: Moderna galerija, 2003), also available online at [www.distributedhistory.com/Disperse.compressed.pdf.zip](http://www.distributedhistory.com/Disperse.compressed.pdf.zip)

Seth Price

## Excerpts from *Title Variable*

### Selections from **Was ist los?**

2005–

Toscanini's tenure at La Scala wrought changes that would eventually turn the form into the consummate bourgeois entertainment. Prior to his arrival, the orchestra was seated on the same level as the audience, an audience with none of the docile characteristics of today's opera-goers, rather, a mob of hardy commoners, robust peasant folk, loyal to the toil of the soil, drinking, eating, and jesting, in the manner of her C's, U's, and T's: “Let us meet at the opera and then decide whence we go . . .”, “Well-met, friend, pray share this flagon . . .”, “Scubberdegullion”, “lass”, etc. This is the lumber of life.

It must be emphasized: Toscanini had the luck of good timing. Architecture is the model in Western metaphysics, and as such is a necessary corollary to ritual. At just this moment the bourgeoisie was working itself into a supreme ecstasy of privacy, decorum, and interiority. Built spaces were spaces of fantasy. The opera is such a fantasy, a ritualized repetition of aristocratic tradition. A depletion but also a preservation of forms lacking the vitality to proceed under their own power, delivered in the sorts of patrician packaging necessary to fire the bourgeois imagination. The emptying gestures of ritual are a force of preservation, just as death is the romanticizing principle in life. In this light, the phenomenon of a proper house for opera can be seen as a secret handshake between the middle classes and the aristocracy. For their part, aristocracies dutifully keep alive those endangered pleasures that repel the bourgeoisie. Now, as then? In our time there is no such thing as a bourgeoisie. Yet . . . Well, why not? One dreams all day long, just as during the night. It is possible that cultured people are merely the glittering scum that floats upon a deep river of production.

. . .

But what results from this? If architecture is the model in Western metaphysics, we are in some sense the inhabitants of older buildings, and ours is the business of living in a ruined house. It's useful to take a hard look at the word ruin, a word that splits. On the one hand, it could refer to the sorts of ancient structures cherished in the early nineteenth century: squalid, overgrown, graffiti-covered, surveyed at sunset for best effect. Yet it might also indicate those same

world. Price questions how objects and experiences accrue value and meaning, and foregrounds the construction of authority and originality by legal and corporate systems. Not least, *TitleVariable* resists the primacy of the visual in our culture. Its dispersed form is difficult to represent or display—and even hard to talk about, since it does not lend itself to conventional modes of art criticism, nor to the resolution of meaning, which tends to be the goal of such commentary.

**Gwen Allen:** All of the moments you focus on in the history of sound are in the recent past—mainly the 1980s going up to the early 1990s. What is compelling for you about this time period?

**Seth Price:** I'm interested in the effect of digital technologies, and they reached the marketplace sometime in the 1970s. It does happen to line up neatly with my own lifespan.

**Allen:** What role does the experience of listening to the music play in this project? Typically someone makes a music compilation either because they like the music—in the case of amateurs—or in order to profit from it. Your compilations do not seem to fall into either of these categories.

**Price:** I'm not sure it's necessary to listen to the music to enter the piece. It has something to do with the way recorded music is starting to operate in the culture. As a downloadable file, music is hard to control and hard to sell. It has no packaging. Its value starts to approach zero. So the industry proceeds from the idea that the music is a pretext, that the main reason someone would want to buy it, would recognize it as a product at all, is because there's something desirable about the package: the cover art, or some celebrity essay, or because it's newly remastered. You could see the iPod as an attempt to maintain control by giving the music a very stylish package, and hopefully leading people to buy music through the website. It's the way data seems to be going. With this project it's similar. People in an art context tend to focus less on the actual music in the project than on its packaging, but in this context packaging is taken to include an idea of artistic strategy or intent, or a history of conceptual art. The compilations are like pretexts for writing the essays and for some of the ideas.

**Allen:** What role do the essays play in this project?

**Price:** They're the part without form.



ruins today: sandblasted free of graffiti, restored and conserved, made lucrative, seen only in the full daylight of “open hours.” In the first example, ruin implies benign decay; in the second, active preservation, make-work, and industry.<sup>1</sup> Locating pleasure in benign decay is a perversion, for these structures are useless and wasteful, a spilling of seed, like gay sex, like gay sex.

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Many are interested in the idiom of a form, few in the grammar. Personal computers, for example, were originally made so as to be programmable by their owners, but when consumers eventually rejected this aspect it was removed or hidden. Similarly, while the combination of sampled sounds, MIDI, and digital manipulation promised all sorts of possibilities, it turns out that most people don't want to build sounds that have never been heard. They want sounds corresponding to existing phenomena, invocations of reality at the touch of a finger, like paint straight from the tube: brass, woodwinds, car accidents, shrieks, breaking glass. The machine recalls events and dispatches them in a digital relay that is by design simply on or off, making obsolete the weak signal, the half-understood communication. A zero-sum spell.

So, you found the sampler's perfect expression early on, when you hit on the idea of employing sampled human voice as a repitchable synthesizer sound. An electronic keyboard simulates a piano, often noting even the force with which the keys are struck: it wants you to believe that it is a percussion instrument. The voice-sample technique, then, is the process of generating limitless copies of a unique and resonant human utterance, refashioned as a sprawling kit of

1. The French have a saying: “The consumer has only three basic needs, to be safe, to be loved, to be beautiful.” This is the desire of ruins in our time.

**Allen:** Because of the inherent ephemerality of print and the fact that your essays have been printed and reprinted in various publications and formats?

**Price:** Yes, and they relativize the other parts of the piece. A piece of music lacks form too, but there's something about writing that's different. Instead of form you could say “value.” Writing has a strange role in the art world: it's necessary to create value but is not itself valued. It has power and it generates money, but it doesn't normally bring the writer power or money. Writing keeps this project from reducing to either collectible objects or to the glamour of pop culture. A lot of art about music falls back on trying to reproduce the cultural cues that go with youth, with subculture, with subversion; things tend to be investigated through mythology and nostalgia. I want to talk about that, but in a distanced way.

**Allen:** Artists' writings typically supplement the work. They can be used by historians and critics to decipher the work. Here they are the work—or part of it. And yet they are not primary, and not really secondary or supplementary, either. Maybe it's the lack of hierarchy, this neither-nor quality that is troubling to some readers.

Locating *TitleVariable* is a challenge—a challenge to collectors, I would imagine, and also to criticism. It is a difficult piece to talk about because it exists in so many different sites and formats: as albums, published essays, and digital files distributed online, and it continues to proliferate.

**Price:** It's hard to strike a balance where all the parts are self-sufficient but also point elsewhere. It forces me to think about how to make a work that can't easily be described, a piece without a singular location or a particular medium, without an identifiable position, something that never resolves. It seemed appropriate to a piece that looks at constant historical change and technological change.

**Allen:** One of the things that refuses resolution for me in this piece is that on the one hand there is an insistence on the dispersal of communication and the fact that it can't exist in a single location and doesn't take an identifiable position, yet there also seems to be an attempt to say something true about the past.

**Price:** I would agree with you up to the point of saying that it's an attempt to say something. I don't know that it's necessarily about the past. As far as truth . . . I'm waiting for someone to really set me straight on the history of opera.



silicon-calibrated fake drums. The voice becomes a structural element under total control, it is made useful, as opposed to evocative or expressive. That which reliably promises communication becomes pure instrumentality, a move based on the notion that instruments give us what we want—predictability, security, control—rather than the confirmation of an accurate representation of the real. It goes to show you that when your desires become reality, you don't need fantasy any longer, nor art.

Digital duplication was one of the twentieth century's few new schemas. Such developments draw the curtain on older powers, and, by the end of the 1980s, around the time Reich completed his sample-based work, the configuration “avant-garde music” was thoroughly depleted, a constellation made cold from forgetfulness. All forms of depletion are heralded by the degradation of language, and, just as the eclipse of Rome's power was contemporary with the decline of Latin, so the eclipse of avant-garde music was indicated by its wish to transform embodied language into an instrument. A desire to be, rather than to seem.

You could argue that sampling poisoned the well. On the other hand, it is true that in homeopathic medicine, and sometimes in magic, you put a drop of the bad thing, the thing you fight, into water or some other medium. Sampling may be invasive, negating repetition, disordering us, but then that's the wish of every man: to disorder, to mayhem. You must fight something in order to understand it! Voice sampling, possibly all sampling, gives us a text that is critical of reading.

Graffiti performs a similar operation. The gesture of graffiti must preserve that which it seeks to destroy. Were it to entirely efface its object, its particular critique would vanish. None, after all, is worse shod than the shoemaker's wife.

**Allen:** Has anybody been bothered by this lack of authority on some of the subjects you discuss?

**Price:** Once I wrote an essay that had something to do with art history or art criticism ["Dispersion," 2002], and a friend assigned it to her critical-theory class. It provoked some strong reactions. Somebody thought I was naive, and somebody else read it as cynical. Someone said, "Who does he think he is?" Maybe since I'm not an art historian.

**Allen:** I find it really interesting that the same text was read as both naive and cynical—these terms are usually mutually exclusive. To me that points to something about how your text destabilizes the expectations of its readers. Your writings have also been accused of being loopy, of posing, or of not meaning anything. They are difficult to pin down.

**Price:** People expect artists' writings to behave a certain way. There are models.

**Allen:** TitleVariable underscores the outmodedness of certain technologies or sounds. Why does this interest you?

**Price:** That's hard to answer. Technologies are so bound up with other factors. I'm interested in outmoded production methods, not outmoded consumption methods. My interest in obsolescence per se doesn't go too far; it's a guilty pleasure, something to do with nostalgia. But interesting things happen around the moment of obsolescence. The first samplers were incredibly expensive, so the people who got to use them were necessarily people with access to institutions that could afford a fifty-thousand-dollar machine. Sampling itself never became outmoded; most recorded sound in this culture probably passes through some kind of sampler. But those first machines were outmoded because of their price tags. That was the late 1970s. Eventually they did drop in price, and that changed the users; you had the growth of amateur production like hip-hop or techno, the experimental musics of the last twenty years. So my interest in those samplers has to do with the circumstances created by that high price, which meant that the first sampler users were likely to be young, classically trained composers, probably men, probably graduate students in universities with forward-thinking music departments. So some of the earliest experiments with the sampler might come out of the Webern tradition or something, plus whatever other theory was around. The music represents a weird little pocket. These essays felt like ethnographic research. That was the urgency for me.



The work of Marcel Broodthaers occasionally follows this logic, most clearly in his piece *Un Coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard*, with its pleasantly incestuous abuse of the Francophone avant-garde. The publication of Mallarmé's poem "Un Coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard," a work distinguished by its typography and disposition of the words upon the page, marked the first time that a poem's conception and meaning was determined through the mechanical printing process. A lyric automation of the design function. In 1969, Broodthaers made a series of pieces that reproduced the exact page layout of Mallarmé's poem, and the layout alone, since he effaced each line of text with a solid black bar. This gesture, while it banished all communicative symbols, retained the striking look and feel of the work.<sup>8</sup> Mallarmé's piece was emptied out, reduced to seductive packaging. This is a move typical of "appropriation," which may be considered simply an advanced form of packaging.

These depleted forms were engraved onto aluminum plates, as if prepped for mass production, and presented as fine art. Broodthaers claims and then augments Mallarmé's poem to produce a new, third body, a field between the works. The whole is without novelty, save the spacing of one's reading; the blanks, in effect, assume importance. The madness of the "a self-annihilating nothing" prescription. But this was only to be expected, since Broodthaers was an imi-

8. "Look and feel," a term popularized by the computer industry, is often used to describe the overall aesthetic of a particular operating system. A well-known example is the successful graphic user interface of the Macintosh, a design which was subsequently copied throughout the industry. The term gained notoriety through a series of lawsuits—Xerox against Apple, Apple against Microsoft and Hewlett-Packard—brought on the basis of whether or not it was legal to appropriate aesthetic qualities crystallized in code. Look and feel, in its current sense, is a notion that did not really exist prior to the personal computer, but one that now affects all consumer realms based on digital technology. The shade of seduction used to paint the information architecture.

**Allen:** Your essays have appeared in different types of publications—music magazines, art and design magazines, cheap xeroxes, booklets, and exhibition catalogues, as well as online. Often the same essay will appear in several different places with subtle changes. Why?

**Price:** At some point I realized there was no reason for the essays to crystallize in a final state. It was always like that with the music compilations, but it took longer to realize about the writing. People ask for things to include in a magazine or a book or a web project, and it seemed like there was no longer any reason to turn them down because I had this stock of writing that was always a little new, or just new enough. Every time I go back to the essays I want to change things; arguments seem weak and could be cut, positions seem too oblique or too clear, or there might be things I've read that I want to include. All writers must feel this. So why not? Or sometimes the title of the piece seems like it should change. Usually this all seems interesting enough for whomever has asked for material. This magazine was the first one that declined to print an essay on the basis of nonoriginality.

**Allen:** Your work does challenge the protocols for academic publishing and copyright, though—the idea that scholarly work should be original.

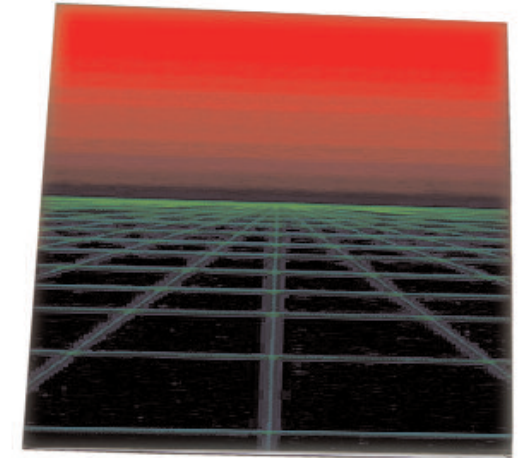
**Price:** I wouldn't consider it scholarly work. It's more in the general area of poetry, although it's not that.

**Allen:** At different times your writings evoke various genres—journalism, poetry, historical writing—but don't settle into any single one. Could you talk more about your rhetorical strategy in the essays?

**Price:** The voice in each essay was deliberate. The two "journalistic" essays were published in music magazines, where there's a tradition of music journalism coming out of rock criticism and the pop culture of the 1960s. The fourth essay was about very abstract, theoretical composition, in an academic context, and that was on my mind putting that piece together.<sup>2</sup>

**Allen:** How do fans of the music respond to your interest in it? The project raises this question for your audience: what are your stakes in this music? I think people want to know how you feel about the music—is it personal?—and

2. The essay "Was ist los?" was the fourth to be written. Versions of it have also appeared under the titles "Décor Holes," "Unique Source," "All Natural Suicide Gang," and "Akademische Graffiti." See also <http://www.ubu.com/sound/price.html>.



tation artist. It may be that the supreme triumph of such advanced art is to cast doubt on its own validity, mixing a deep scandalous laughter with the religious spirit. There is a violence in this turn, the same violence that attends graffiti: "Don't think, look!"

In regular usage, the word graffiti describes an urban decay-threat, akin to mold, understood as pathology. It may be pathological, but not because it's vandalism, rather because it dreams of total saturation through an open-ended sequence of events, each a slight variation on the last. Such total coverage is a futile and perverse premise, an infinite possibility wedded to perpetual disappointment, a pursuit ripe with frustration. Like the poor man who sells his saucepan to buy something to put in it.

Then again, graffiti, like any human expression, is basically a search to find a style and context that makes further expression possible. Graffiti culture (and why does it take so long for people to map a "culture" onto their violence?) represents the anarchic, expressive territory of those who have subverted painterly representation from the standpoint of cool alienation. A person inscribing a coded sign on the side of a bridge piling enacts a ritual repetition: language is defaced by pictures. Writing that will never have a book. This isn't the business of living in a ruined house, it's the business of representing a ruined house, its interior trappings sketched out for all to see. The art object is seen as an object of contemplation, not to be parsed, but to be puzzled over. Its secrets may have to do with art, but with something else as well, which hovers beyond, with no name forthcoming.

maybe feel betrayed somehow to learn that the project is not motivated by your own personal identification with the music, that, as you've stated elsewhere, it isn't necessarily music you like.

**Price:** When you put a lot of energy into some obscure cultural area, like collecting overlooked old music, it must be frustrating to see some company package it for a broad public. There's a similar suspicion if an artist does it. If it were returned to a specialist culture, things might be different, but it doesn't get put back in the right place.

**Allen:** Dan Graham talked about the disposability of his magazine works such as *Schema* and claimed that they "subvert the gallery (economic) system."<sup>3</sup> Is this one of your intentions with *TitleVariable*? Do you think this is possible?

**Price:** I'm not trying to subvert that system, no. I decided it was important to make some works that are free, some works that sell on the consumer market for a mass-media price, like the CDs, and some works that are clearly part of the art economy. Those are three different systems, and they each have a different pressure that leads to a different kind of work. Then it becomes interesting to see if you can make one work that functions in each arena. So the music compilations are downloadable for free, but for whatever reason people continue to buy them as actual CDs—the packaging, I guess—and I've also sold limited, signed editions within the art world, like the vinyl LP, which I had the manufacturer make incorrectly so that it has a weird, sculptural quality. I don't know that releasing something into these different arenas subverts any economic order. It fully exploits it. It might want to make holes in something else.

**Allen:** Does *TitleVariable* have a gallery presence?

**Price:** I've been invited to put it in two group shows. These were in *kunsthalle* settings that were a little flexible or experimental. Both times we ended up printing out the essays on six-foot-high placards, which looked imposing. We also made bootleg albums and sold them for something like two euros. I guess "bootleg" isn't the right term there. The project doesn't really belong in a gallery, but it was good to try to figure it out anyway.

**Allen:** Why do you think European spaces have presented it rather than United States galleries?

3. Dan Graham, "Other Observations" (1969–73), in *For Publication* (Los Angeles: Otis Art Institute, 1975), n. p.



### Selections from *Early Video Game Soundtrax* 2001–

Video game soundtracks appeared in the early 1980s, when primitive analogue oscillators allowed for the first real musical accompaniments. Previously, most of the noises emanating from the machine were isolated sound-effects, layered on minimal, repetitive backgrounds, such as the menacing "putt-putt-putt" of *Asteroids*. Today, the industry-wide use of sampling has produced a genre generally indistinguishable from commercial pop. While today's electronics can reproduce entire sampled bands, these older soundtracks were programmed, not composed in the traditional sense, let alone "played." Their reliance on mathematical progression often suggests classical counterpoint. They have always existed solely as strings of numbers, and do not derive from analogue, real-world sounds. This was uncommon at the time, even in commercial pop music, which relied heavily on microphone recording.

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Early soundtracks were encoded in arcade games, disks, and cartridges, and were not available beyond that context. Unlike film scores, video game music was inseparable from its original medium. Composers had to assume a transience for their work: game systems changed rapidly, and the games themselves were often discarded or forgotten. By the same token, such medium-specificity assured a well-defined audience, constituted largely of adolescent and teenage boys.

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The genre presents unique structural limitations. A track need not follow a standard musical trajectory, since it must be capable of looping ad infinitum, allowing players as much time as needed with a given screen or level. Because

**Price:** I don't know.

**Allen:** When I think about *TitleVariable* in relationship to some of the other work you've made—sculpture and video—I can draw connections based on recurrent motifs (the Lascaux prints that appear in sculptural work and on a record cover, for example) and perhaps on a more allegorical level (the way that the vacuum-formed sculptures rely on processes used in packaging and suggest the absence of a thing). Do you see *TitleVariable* as conceptually related to some of this other work?

**Price:** It probably is. But I like the fact that it's clearly something else. I don't know if it's helpful for me to think about similarities too much. There might be a shared concern with the idea of the cut, cutting, editing, where the act of manipulation is pushed forward. You could think about the whole *TitleVariable* project as an insistence on the primacy of a manipulation process. The film I made this year, composed entirely of fragments of my editioned video work, ended up doing something like that. The material itself becomes just "content," it ends up foregrounding the process of how arbitrary material is given meaning.

**Allen:** Would you say that there is a politics to this act of cutting or manipulation in *TitleVariable*?

**Price:** What do you mean by politics?

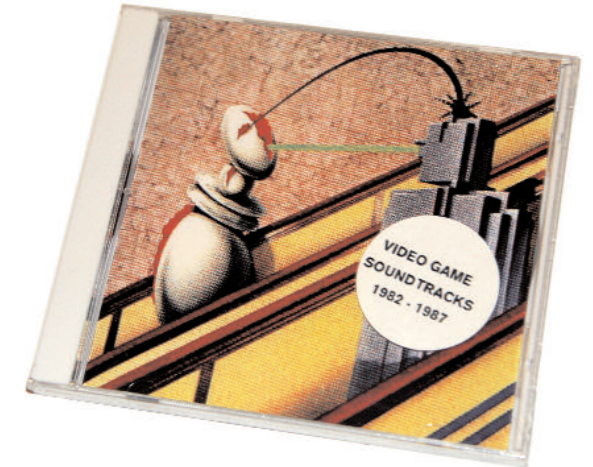
**Allen:** Well, *TitleVariable* deals with a history of production technologies and the relationships between production and distribution. As you implied earlier, these things are not the result of some natural course of events or the technology in and of itself; they reflect the way in which power and economics have affected the control and use of certain technologies. Your project draws attention to these processes.

**Price:** That's true, the essays do that. In a way they present themselves as straightforward social critique, at least the first three. It's one of the ways they're supposed to function in the project, like free agents, the way the albums operate as straightforward albums. It's how they're legible, it's an entry point.

**Allen:** But the project also functions as social critique in a less straightforward way.

**Price:** What are you thinking of?

**Allen:** Well, not just on the level of content, but in its form (or multiple forms) the project functions as a critique or challenge to the economies of art and products.



of this, many of the album tracks start abruptly or peter out, their duration determined by the programmer who removed them from the circuits. For this reason, many of the tracks must be considered extracts or samples of larger and arguably infinite compositions.

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Dictated by a game's theme, the songs reference vernacular musics such as horror soundtracks, carnival music, and vaguely ethnic genres. However, even as a song may invoke "Asian music," it's not clear that the composer knows much about the idiom. This is irrelevant if the listener—who may, remember, be twelve years old—gets the shorthand. In this there is a similarity to advertising jingles, which must quickly supply complex discursive cues to a broad audience, with little concern for authenticity . . .

### Selections from *Journalistic Approach to New Jack Swing* 2002–

What a time you chose to be born! The short-lived musical genre known as New Jack Swing is just old enough to be vaguely embarrassing. It hasn't attained classic status, and may never do so. Why is it that some styles pass directly into legend, while others remain trapped in an awkward limbo?

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It's important to stress that, like most conservative pop, New Jack Swing depended heavily on producer Svengalis. When we talk about the 1980s, the specter of production control looms over all hit music, dance music, electronic music, beat music. The entire New Jack Swing venture can be seen as a producer's grab for market share, a way to

**Price:** Maybe in a very abstract way, or a very slight way. More, I think, because it has no image. A lack of image can challenge a work's place in the art system. And it challenges the artist.

**Allen:** Evasion of the image or object—going back to Duchamp's antiretinal art, and then in the 1960s with dematerialization—has been a strategy through which artists have challenged the art system and market. How do you think your work differs from these previous examples in its lack of an image? Or perhaps another way of asking this is how does it continue this history?

**Price:** It has something to do with reproduction. You can take a photo of a readymade or a diagram in a magazine, and it can become the iconic image for the piece. I don't know that you can produce an iconic image for this piece that makes any sense. And not simply because it's a logical proposition or an inert gas or something.

**Allen:** It's funny the term "manipulation" (in everyday language) has the connotation of someone orchestrating events or people in a deliberate way—of control. My sense of *TitleVariable* is just the opposite (not that the piece isn't deliberate, but that you deliberately let go of some of that control with the piece.)

**Price:** There's a loss of control when you put something online, I can see that. But you could also frame it the other way, that the project has everything to do with exerting control.

**Allen:** Control over what?

**Price:** Setting the terms. Even if that means insisting the terms are subject to change. Asserting a right to have it both ways.

**Allen:** Do you have a sense of your various audiences, of how people respond differently to this project depending on the context in which they encounter it?

**Price:** I'm not sure. I've encountered references on music websites. Someone will be into one of my essays and point other people to it. That feels good. These people not only don't necessarily care about the art context, they may not even be aware of it.

**Allen:** What is the role of design in your writings? Do you design the essays?

**Price:** I used to do all the layouts for publication. The last few times "Was ist los?" was published, I asked the in-house designers to handle it.



assimilate an obstreperous but commercially successful youngster into the secure, decades-old structures of popular black music. The sound could be described as an admixture of hip hop—at the time roughly produced, which wasn't surprising, considering that albums were being turned out by nineteen-year-olds on cheap bedroom sampler kits—and the kind of music on which labels like Motown always depended, popular soul that relied on producers to midwife the product. At the time, this sort of music depended on being seen as sexy, smooth, "adult"; lacking was anything "edgy," which was a defining critical term in the 1990s, across media. Adult Urban Contemporary producers decided that, in the interests of survival, they'd better incorporate hip-hop rhythms, samples, and production techniques. If this indeed was some kind of strategy, today's charts demonstrate its total success. Motown itself, through streetwise marketing and production, found new life in the 1990s with prime New Jack Swing acts like Another Bad Creation and Boyz II Men, the latter of which is, according to the RIAA, the most lucrative R&B group in history.

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For a supposedly street-wise mode, however, the music itself is fairly tame. This is due partly to fat record contracts, which demanded high production values, which meant increasingly professional electronic studios and a clean, airless sound that made no attempt to conceal its digital origin. As with electrofunk, the goal was the crispest highs and the heaviest bass. While in some musics samples are chinks in the armor through which grit, poor recording, and vinyl-crackle enter, here they were employed as rhythmic punctuation rather than as loops, and were in any case often generated in the studio rather than appropriated. Tracks were actually composed, often by producers with extensive musical training, and synth sounds came straight out of the box,

**Allen:** How did this work out? Was it interesting to see how the design changed?

**Price:** Yes, and it made things a lot simpler.

**Allen:** The compilations themselves use different physical storage media—CDs, LPs, an audio cassette. What is the significance of these choices?

**Price:** Different people have handled the production and distribution of each album. Two were put out by a group that does a CD-only series, mostly experimental music. A gallery helped me finance the vinyl LP, and we released it as an edition. The format is part of an idea of packaging that includes everything that's not explicitly "content": the cover designs, and any text around the album, like press releases or reviews, in this case the essays.

**Allen:** Research seems central to your work, at least in this project. How did you go about doing this research?

**Price:** I spent a lot of time online, trawling fansites and auctions and file-sharing networks. A lot of downloading. These musics don't have established histories, so most of the information comes from amateur or hobbyist sites.

**Allen:** What do you find interesting about this culture, about the amateur rather than the professional?

**Price:** Amateurism by itself isn't as interesting as the reasons something would be open to amateurs, why something is passed over by professionals and the market, why it's relegated to people with motives that don't have to do with profit.

**Allen:** You've talked about how the writings can function as ordinary music journalism—and have been read that way. What about the music compilations? The compilations also function as compilations for fans but also, not quite. For example if I remember correctly not all of the tracks are named and attributed on the packaging?

**Price:** Yes, I've never included much information. The design was about looking good, primarily. The game soundtracks aren't labeled as to where they came from, let alone who composed them, in part because that information was often missing from the downloads. And I don't want the focus to come down to particular bands or songs that I've selected, that's too specific, it's not about that. It's also protective, because I'm dealing with corporate intellectual property in a public way.



with little of the knob-twiddling that House and Techno brought to electronic music. It was a voracious, synthetic mode, seeking to fold in hard beats and cuts, breathy vocals, chimes and bells, swelling strings, sexual innuendo, and declarations of love. Rapping was kept to a minimum, sometimes contained in bridges and breaks, and overshadowed by harmonizing, crooning, wooing. The term "swing" referred to the rhythm, which often employed a combination of straight 8ths, 16th-note shuffles, and 16th-note swing patterns (in Europe, the music was sometimes known as Swingbeat, and this name survives in the Netherlands, which inexplicably is a stronghold of New Jack Swing fandom).

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What are we to make of this movement? It may be that it's deeply reactionary, but there's something interesting about the low regard in which it's now held. You can trace a cyclical pattern: every ten years or so, up rises a dumb, catchy mode that will eventually come to sound like death.

#### Selections from *Journalistic Approach to Industrial Dance Genre* 2003–

*Slowly, we realize that there was an age of "cinema-theater," when the scenarios and special effects relied on hand-crafted objects and constructed environments, as opposed to the abstract realms of digital programming.*

Where did this music come from? An interlocking world system of Reaganite American might; opposed to it, a founder-ing socialist international; the rise of personal computing and digital HiFi, notably the compact disc; the stirring of desktop publishing and desktop music production; the spread of cable television, purified water, hyperpackaged foods like

**Allen:** Could you talk about how these compilations are different from what one might expect from an ordinary compilation that functioned only as that?

**Price:** They're extensively edited. Some of it, like "beat-matching," where you blend one song into the next, is more normal. In the case of the academic electronic music, I selected passages from the original compositions and used them as material: cut them up, repeated them, slowed them down, layered them on top of one another. That's not normal practice. Or I'll slip in the odd sample or song of my own. I worked very hard on these albums, to make them both historically relevant and good to listen to. It's hard to really talk about those aspects unless someone knows the specific history, but it's there.

**Allen:** *TitleVariable* invites comparisons with previous examples of alternative distribution, in the 1960s and 1970s, for example, when many artists sought out alternative sites of distribution and display, often using mass media, magazines, etc. You've written about this history, and I'm wondering how you see your practice in relationship to it.

**Price:** That work makes possible everything I'm doing here.

**Allen:** While these artists occasionally took out ads or published articles in magazines that were not art magazines (*Harper's Bazaar*, *Village Voice*, *Screw*), for the most part their work appeared in art magazines and catalogues. Whereas with *TitleVariable* art magazines do not seem to be the main intended place of publication.

**Price:** Some of those pieces, when they were actually published in nonart contexts, must have been virtually incoherent. For an actual reader of *Harper's*, the piece isn't legible; it doesn't even exist. So the gesture of the piece is important, but the work needs to be retrieved by art to complete the circuit. That's not a critique, but I want to make a distinction between that and what I'm trying to do. The writing and albums in this project hopefully retain some function beyond the art context. A music critic in the *Times* reviewed the industrial album like any other album, which was great, and I don't feel that's deceptive. It actually is a historicizing compilation—it has value.

**Allen:** I find it interesting that this project moves back and forth among online versions and printed matter and various sound media. The use of physical distribution media creates a context (or multiple contexts) which gains critical force against the backdrop of digital culture, which often lacks context.



Capri-Sun, Fruit Roll-Ups, Yoplait, and Pringles; the rapid development of the information age, including the appearance of the cell phone and the boom in modems and data-transfer: what did this all mean? The question may seem so vast that it leads to despair. Everyone is aware of the times changing: the future, instead of offering continuity, appears to advance toward us. This was surely the case from about 1980 to 1989—although one must remember, when studying the evidence, that the reaction of many people to their own awareness of change is to pretend to ignore it.

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What are the musical precursors for this genre: Disco, Italo, Synth-pop, New Wave, Punk? Maybe a bit stolen from each, but Industrial Synth was really *sui generis*, and probably unrepeatably. Which is a good thing for most people, since "Industrial" is usually understood as goths trying too hard to be hard. Goths, a bit less effort if you wish to be punks.

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*It is truly the working-class queers who can claim the mantle of revolution and resistance, who furthered the cause to a greater degree than their polished and campy brethren of good taste.*

So, because it was so goth and performative, the scene seemed quite gay, despite an apparent paucity of actual queers at the boards. Take Front Line Assembly in 1989, at The Roxy: the crowd all in black, hair half-shaved/half-long, top knots, dyed fringes, combat boots, fashion's take on bondage, fey boys in eyeliner. A mawkish, unglamorous bunch, possessing little of the fashion sense of the punks. Picture a sullen kid, reading *Semiotext(e)* or *Re/Search*, maybe *Society of the Spectacle*, although he swims in anti-intellectual waters, so publicly he totes books on Manson, Satanism, criminal pathology, and Nazism, in keeping with the deadpan morbidity inherited from 1970s Industrial. But

**Price:** I don't think it lacks context, but it certainly is different from print. I don't know what digital culture would be, exactly, as distinct from anything else.

**Allen:** What I meant is that digital information is infinitely more malleable and has a greater possibility of being decontextualized. It also has a potentially much broader audience—and there is a real egalitarian possibility there of course, but also a potential for loss of meaning, for loss of context. *TitleVariable* would be a really different project if it were only published online and didn't involve the various print and sound media—I guess I'm trying to get at that difference . . .

**Price:** Maybe that idea of context versus decontextualization depends on an idea of singularity. As soon as I relaxed the idea that the text pieces had to be discrete or singular, I felt a lot easier about how they multiply. People have printed them without asking, which is fine; it's good that people feel they can take that liberty. If I don't like the context, I can tweak the piece and put it somewhere I do like. It's the same with the design of the albums, or their titles, or even the songs. The packaged media in this project are not the work; they're more like off-cuts or something. It's like a website: there's no expectation that it be either definite or material. It doesn't have a time or a place. It's not understood as a thing, it's understood as a state or a condition, like the weather.

**Allen:** If your work points to the differences between the systems of the art world, consumer products, and free web-based distribution—the way these different realms shape a product—do you think it also suggests ways in which these supposedly separate systems overlap? Or what happens when they collide?

**Price:** What's an example of how they might collide?

**Allen:** Maybe "collide" isn't the right word, but it seems that *TitleVariable* functions in these different realms, but it also functions by bringing them into contact with one another. For example, if someone reads one of the essays in *Sound Collector Audio Review* and someone else reads it in an exhibition catalogue, then both of these readings are in tension in the piece.

**Price:** I'm not sure how they would be in tension. It's hard to try to talk about tension in the piece. You either have a diffuse cloud of separate pieces, or one piece with a lot of parts, I'm not sure which. I haven't thought about trying to track it all down: all the times the essays were



remember, he's more accurately into the *appearance* of morbidity. He should be looking at the Black Romantics, or Decadents, Beardsley, Huysmans, Rimbaud. Nature is of interest only when it's ailing. Nature is that which decays. But there is no such thing as "dirty" there. An attitude channeled into the genre's most endearing trait: a sincere, unapologetically hokey use of technology: stutteringly repeated vocal fragments, snatches of B-movie horror dialogue and soundtracks lifted from VHS rentals, flat bass synths, the shrieks and clanks of machines inserted to subtly connote *Industry*. A literal music, as with band names like Manufacture, Chem-Lab, Klinik, etc. The singer's voice might be industrial-synthed into incoherence, as with Skinny Puppy, who stole this, not to mention their entire initial sound, from late Cabaret Voltaire: rasping screeches, a teary rage beyond expression, form and content joining to condemn society: look what you've reduced us to!

*"Can't say yes, you can't say no/You're living in a fascist state./Violence is your point of view/It always makes/The best of you."*

—"Digital Tension Dementia," by Front Line Assembly

What you're reduced to is intoning high-school-level doggerel. But at least this was a place for explicit social critique, more so than punk, which, while it opened up a space for flailing anarchy, was quickly absorbed into a tradition of youthful pop discontent; even juxtaposed with Situationism and Dada by Greil Marcus (yes, true, but . . . zzzzzzz). Compared with punk, Industrial Synth often had a more hard-edged, if equally simplistic, critique of social control, while keeping things vague enough that kids wouldn't shun it as "protest music."

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published or reproduced, all the music releases, in different media or packaging, and the different data files, which are hosted on a number of sites, including some online “exhibitions.” . . . Trying to inventory what defines the piece, the prospect seems exhausting. And you never know how stuff propagates online. It gives me a jolt to think that one of the albums could now be circulating online, under someone else’s name, completely cut off from me.

**Allen:** The kind of tension I am talking about takes place in the reader, who in experiencing the piece must in some sense reconcile or come to terms with the various ways in which it can be read, or realize that they don’t resolve into a single reading of the work.

**Price:** There can be a tension in trying to come to grips with what, exactly, is in front of you.

**Allen:** Is the question “What is *TitleVariable*’s medium?” one that you can answer?

**Price:** I couldn’t say its medium. It might be “mixed media.” Or mixed activities. Mixed, professionalized, cultural activities: research, journalism, graphic design, audio editing.

**Allen:** In *TitleVariable* you allow the processes of production, distribution, and consumption to shape or manipulate the product. This is certainly a departure from traditional ideas of how the artist might create work, where the artist controls the outcome of a final product, not just what a painting or sculpture looks like, but often where and how it is exhibited.

**Price:** I’m curious about the act of dispersing something so it’s not singular in location or objecthood or duration, or whatever. It would be interesting if you could treat an artistic position that way, or an artistic trajectory.

**Allen:** This dispersal—this difficulty in describing, representing, or exhibiting *TitleVariable*—is perhaps its most distinctive quality. What motivated you to make a piece that was so dispersed?

**Price:** I don’t know. It kind of grew on its own. You spot a tendency and encourage it.

**Allen:** Do you know when it will end?

**Price:** I’m waiting to see if another historical moment suggests itself. It can take a while to settle on the right one. Maybe it’s already ended, but I can’t tell yet.



It could be claimed that this is a radical music, but perhaps the opposite is true, particularly in the music’s structure, which was thoroughly committed to the song form. For some time, the cutting edge of electronic music had been drifting free of rote structures, casting off verse-chorus-verse in favor of meandering beats unburdened by singers, albums, or bands proper. Industrial Synth, like the Neanderthal branch of the family tree, observing with furrowed brow as Homo Sapiens dreams up all kinds of tools. Well, one must be “even-handed”: some European Industrialists were on the technological cusp, like the New Beat artists who began incorporating acid-house squelches, and most bands did eventually make a turn from 1-2 crash to “four-to-the-floor” throb, starting with late-1980s singles like Nitzer Ebb’s *Control I’m Here*. . . . Prior to this, however, Industrial Synth fans, while probably aware of house and techno trends, seemed to consider that sort of club culture to be too ecstatic, too silly, not dark enough. Or too black. After all, if Punk had stripped rock’s blues roots to a crude gesture, Industrial Synth, with the exception of the all-black group Code Industry, was teutonically white, and lack of anything resembling “soul” was seen as a virtue. This inclination, plus the music’s martial rigidity and its obvious fascination with social control, invited accusations of fascism, Nazism, and a general flirtation with state tyranny. But art can’t be fascist. And band names like “Nitzer Ebb” were as authentic as “Häagen Dazs” or “Frusen Gladje”.

Gwen Allen is an assistant professor of art history at Maine College of Art.

Seth Price was born in 1973. He lives and works in New York. The entire *Title Variable* project to date is archived at [www.ubu.com/sound/price.html](http://www.ubu.com/sound/price.html).

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