

CHRISTOPHER BOLLEN IN
CONVERSATION WITH SETH PRICE

January 2012

Christopher Bollen: Your work consistently plays off the idea of presence and absence, or presence by means of absence. In your series of gestalt silhouettes, for example, it's the voids that actually come to represent the tangible figures of the work. Or take your vacuum forms, which carry the shape of an object that's no longer present, as if these works hold the ghost of the item. If we were to read your work biographically, could we say that there is some refusal on your part to give yourself over to the object, to be an artist who makes concrete things, instead of voids?

Seth Price: *[laughs]* Maybe. It's funny how you figure out your own work after the fact. You're right, so much of my work is about flatness and absence. But it's about material, too. That's always been important. Whether it's rough and industrial or totally shiny, with this idea of the perfect surface or product. I would say I always had a problem with the iconic image, or the image per se. And maybe I still do. I started out wanting to work with writing and music and video. And that may have led me to avoid a certain kind of image making, and I ended up working with absences. But I was always interested in materiality.



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CB: And now you're collaborating with a menswear designer, actually designing clothes.

SP: Yes, and that's what's been interesting about working with fashion. It is almost a totally materialist pursuit. The final product is about the fabric, the trim, the cut. So even when a designer presents clothes within a narrative, like, "This is my hobo collection," or whatever, everyone watching the show is more concerned with the details of the clothes. What people are paying attention to is two buttons instead of three, or how the fabric drapes. The narrative information the designer supplies—"My collection is referencing 1930s haberdashery"—that's just historical footnotes, no one gets hung up on it. Whereas in the art world people can get very hung up on the concept, more so than on the material.

CB: Right.

SP: So it's a parallel world to art, in that it's also all about material, concept, and distribution. And it's also based on the circulation of luxury goods; it rides this swell of money and tries to keep its autonomy somehow, if it's any good. But there's a different understanding in fashion of what's on offer. People dive in, they're affirmative of the concepts or narratives in a show, but they don't take those things so seriously because they're more interested in the material details and what those choices indicate.

CB: Fashion is always going to be about the details, because at the end of the day there are only so many ways that a designer can remake the same garment. Especially in menswear, where it's very difficult to redesign a suit so that it looks radically different every season. So the focus has to be on the slightest alterations, the minuscule changes in material and form. Otherwise the whole industry would go down the drain. Clothes are pretty standard and limited, just like human bodies are.



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SP: Yeah. A bomber jacket is a cliché that never goes out of style. It gets reinvented every couple of years. Every designer makes one. At this point, the elasticity of the thing is so great that any jacket could be called a bomber. Whatever history the garment has is just an essence you kind of spray on.

CB: You weren't fearful about stepping into the world of fashion? Many artists consider fashion to exist just beyond the River Styx in terms of cultural value. Well, I guess you aren't launching the Seth Price brand.

SP: I kind of am. [laughs] At documenta it will be clothes for sale.

CB: So if I were wearing Seth Price, what would I have on?

SP: It consists of seven garments: a trench coat, a bomber, a flight suit, gaiters, and some other pieces. It's military. They're going to be made out of white canvas, with security patterns on the lining.

CB: How did it all start?

SP: Well, last spring one of my vacuum-formed bomber jackets was bought by MoMA. That piece was supposed to be an iconic image, but you know, it's such a shock to feel that all the loose ends are being tied up. All of the things that didn't make sense start being named. You see that people behind the scenes have been stitching you into the fabric of your time. I can't explain it. But I wanted to take the bomber jacket back from the museum—to sell it out, in a way—by remaking it. So the collection is allowing me to pursue that.



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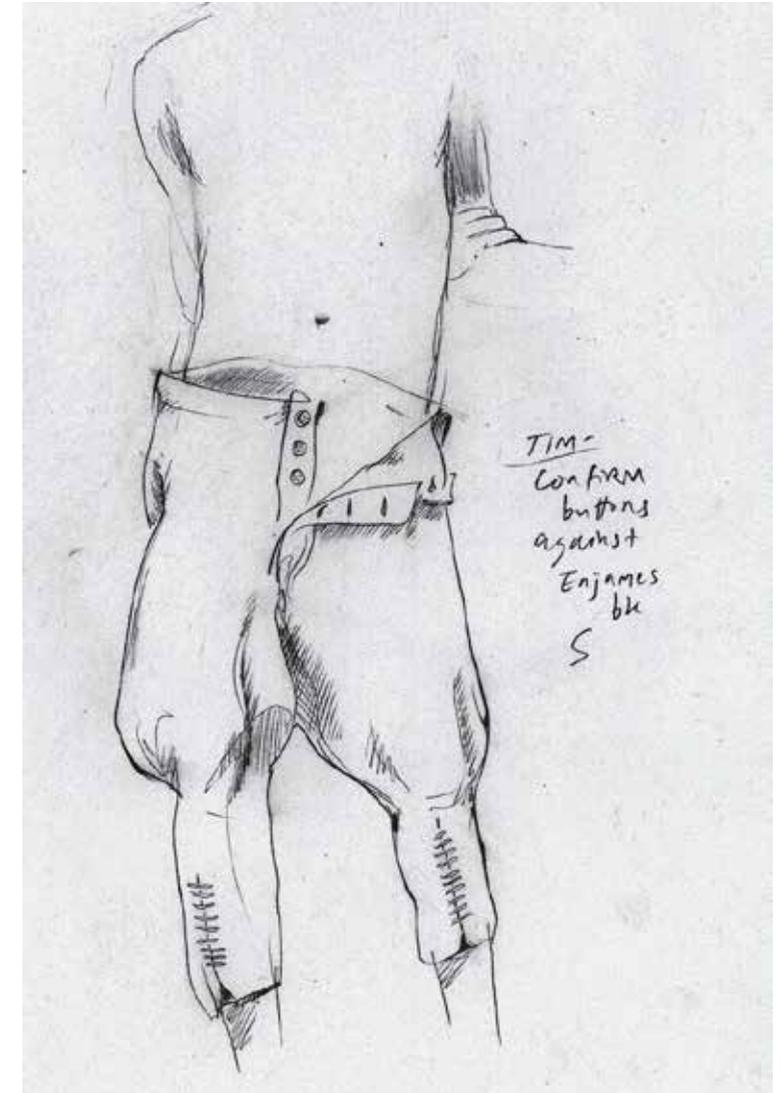
STYLE	SS2012 - SP 01	STYLE	SS2012 - SP 02	STYLE	SS12 - SP 07
DESCRIPTION	BOMBER JACKET	DESCRIPTION	HOODED BATWING JACKET	DESCRIPTION	GAITER
COMPO	CANVAS (BODY) - COTTON TERCATE (LINING)	COMPO	CANVAS (BODY) - COTTON TERCATE (LINING)	COMPO	CANVAS (BODY) - COTTON TERCATE (LINING)
COLOR	Off White	COLOR	Off White	COLOR	PAINTED
PRICE:	318	PRICE:	398	PRICE:	158
STYLE	SS12 - SP 04	STYLE	MC-OW-03	STYLE	SS12 - SP 06
DESCRIPTION	FLIGHT PANTS	DESCRIPTION	Tailored Overcoat	DESCRIPTION	PONCHO
COMPO	CANVAS (BODY) - COTTON TERCATE (LINING)	COMPO	Cotton	COMPO	CANVAS (BODY) - COTTON TERCATE (LINING)
COLOR	Off White	COLOR	Off White	COLOR	Off White
PRICE:	200	PRICE:	460	PRICE:	480
STYLE	SS12 - SP 05			STYLE	
DESCRIPTION	FLIGHT JUMP SUIT			DESCRIPTION	
COMPO	CANVAS (BODY) - COTTON TERCATE (LINING)			COMPO	
COLOR	Off White			COLOR	
PRICE:	520				

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CB: How did you get in touch with Tim Hamilton?

SP: He got in touch with me. Initially he asked me to make a video for a fashion presentation. That was last fall, so that would have been, let's see, the Spring/Summer 2012 collection. The fashion calendar is really schizophrenic. So his request was, "Do you want to create a video backdrop for my show?" and I was completely uninterested. Because that's what I do already. You show up someplace and install a video and that's an art show. But my summer was empty, so I said, "No, but I *would* like to design clothes," thinking it was a shot in the dark. But he wanted to meet. I wanted to do the white canvas bomber, and he was into that, and he proposed doing other pieces. You know, we got excited about working together. So it became this military collection. I've been thinking about how much sportswear is indebted to military gear, and working with the bomber as an image, because it's so coded, and Tim's always been into army stuff. He has these great reference books, these military-clothing collectors' guides. Strange books. I started getting really involved with the details, and we'd go back and forth about, like, dolman sleeves.



CB: But this early collaboration with Tim wasn't exactly art yet, was it?

SP: No. I was just exploring another way of producing, or thinking about another industry. It was for fun. But then I made a proposal for documenta that was rejected, and suddenly it was fall and I was trying to figure out what to do, and I thought: Wait a minute, I'm already making Spring/Summer 2012 clothes, and here I am supposed to be coming up with Spring/Summer 2012 art. It's perfect, I can just roll it all up.

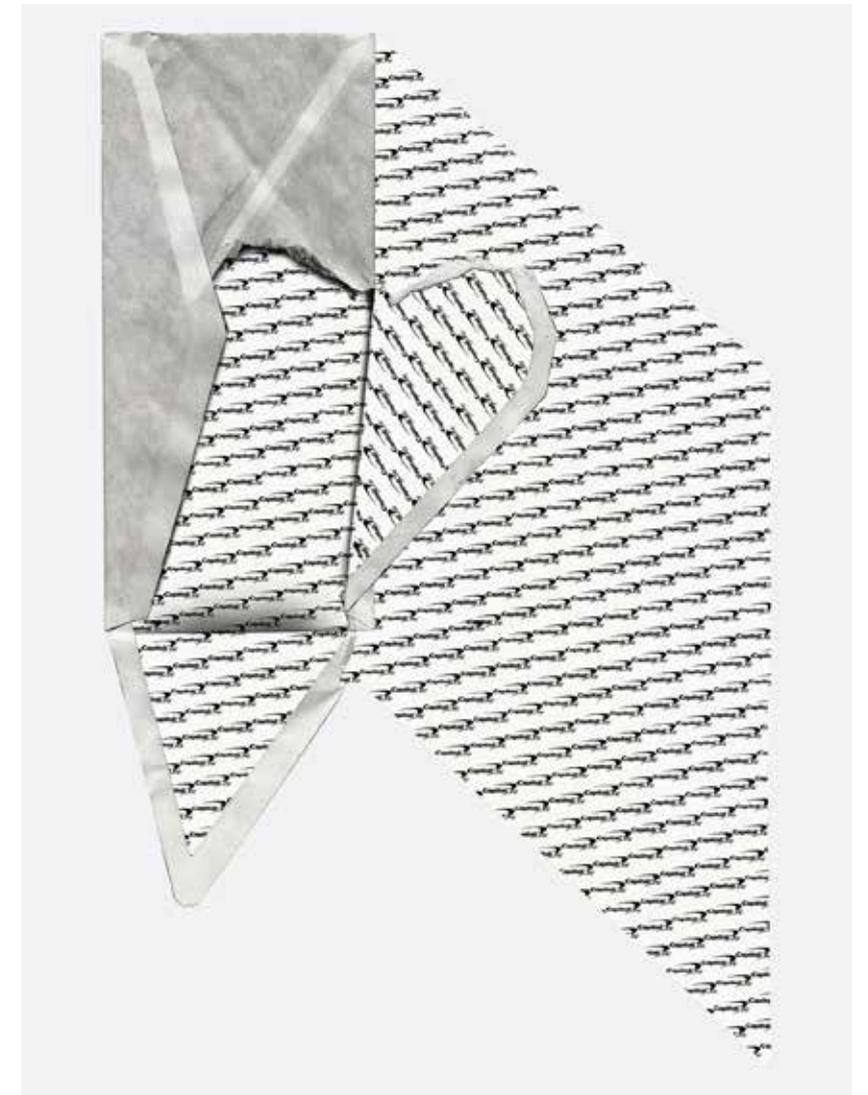
CB: How did envelopes become an influence in the design process?

SP: Last summer I was kind of idly working on these envelope designs, just little sketches based on security patterns. I've been working with envelopes for a couple of years already. I was thinking about how an envelope is a single sheet of material that's cut to a pattern, printed on the inside, and then folded and attached to contain an object or, in the case of a security envelope, sensitive financial data, presumably, which you have to guard from sight by use of a repeating pattern. And a jacket is the same, it's essentially a piece of fabric that, having been cut, is folded, arranged, attached; like an envelope, it takes you places.

CB: And like an envelope, a jacket conceals sensitive material that is often guarded from sight by corporate logos.

SP: Right. So when we were planning out the garment liners, it made sense to me to use security patterns. And I felt like I could compile all these somewhat over-the-top ideas in a way that I wouldn't do in my art. I mean, to put a corporate logo inside a piece of military gear that is also a bank envelope, it becomes kind of a high-concept Hollywood pitch, like: "The banks meet the military... on the runway." [laughs]

CB: All-in-one fascism.



SP: All-in-one ideological critique. Too dumb to even propose, within a framework that's so concerned with criticality. Canvas is something you make army gear out of, and it's what paintings are made of, and already you're too thick with signifiers. On the other hand, I felt like, yes, I can do it, precisely because it's "just fashion." You walk down the street and see someone wearing a hoodie with an all-over print of skulls and crossbones, but then you notice the skulls are actually SpongeBob, wearing a Monopoly top hat, and it's not crossbones, it's a dildo and, like, a mortgage contract. That's fashion and graphic design, or streetwear design, at least. People just stack up these codes ad nauseam. But then as I was working with this in the clothing, my anxiety about doing that for some reason flipped over into being excited about engaging with it, as art, by preserving that anxiety as part of the work. I decided it could translate to documenta and bring this other level of, I don't know what to call it, awareness of the mythology in the art world about critique. The lore around criticality and "the political" in art. How if you transgress that it's almost seen as bad taste. Saying too much, or saying it in the wrong place. And how "political art" is often seen as sort of well intentioned but naive, but thank God someone's doing it. I mean, there can be a pretty narrow view of what the political is. And "selling out," what is that?

CB: Right.



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SP: All these questions. Not that this is my primary interest in doing this work, but it is a way to take a step back and think about framing the project as a whole, and relating it to its context, giving it another set of questions. So that basically gave me permission to do it. And a show like documenta, a lot of people are invested in seeing it as an alternative to the U.S.-market-based art worlds, which are presumably focused on shiny things and a post-Pop heritage, and, you know, fashion. I thought it seemed like a good opportunity to show up, like, "Here's the New York artist, true to form." There's this Beuys quote where he says something like, "Everything people accuse me of, I will be that, over and over." So we'll see what happens.

CB: And you did a fashion show last fall, right?

SP: Yes. I mean, Tim did his SS12 show here [in New York City], and our collaboration was one part of it. We chose a space together, an empty storefront. I did a sound track, I made a video. It was fun. That show was all samples. We're in touch with a Korean factory now that's making the full line.

CB: Which corporate logos did you pick?

SP: Capital One. The FDIC. Corbis, the image-rights agency. UBS. Paychex. And a generic crosshatch envelope pattern. There are others.



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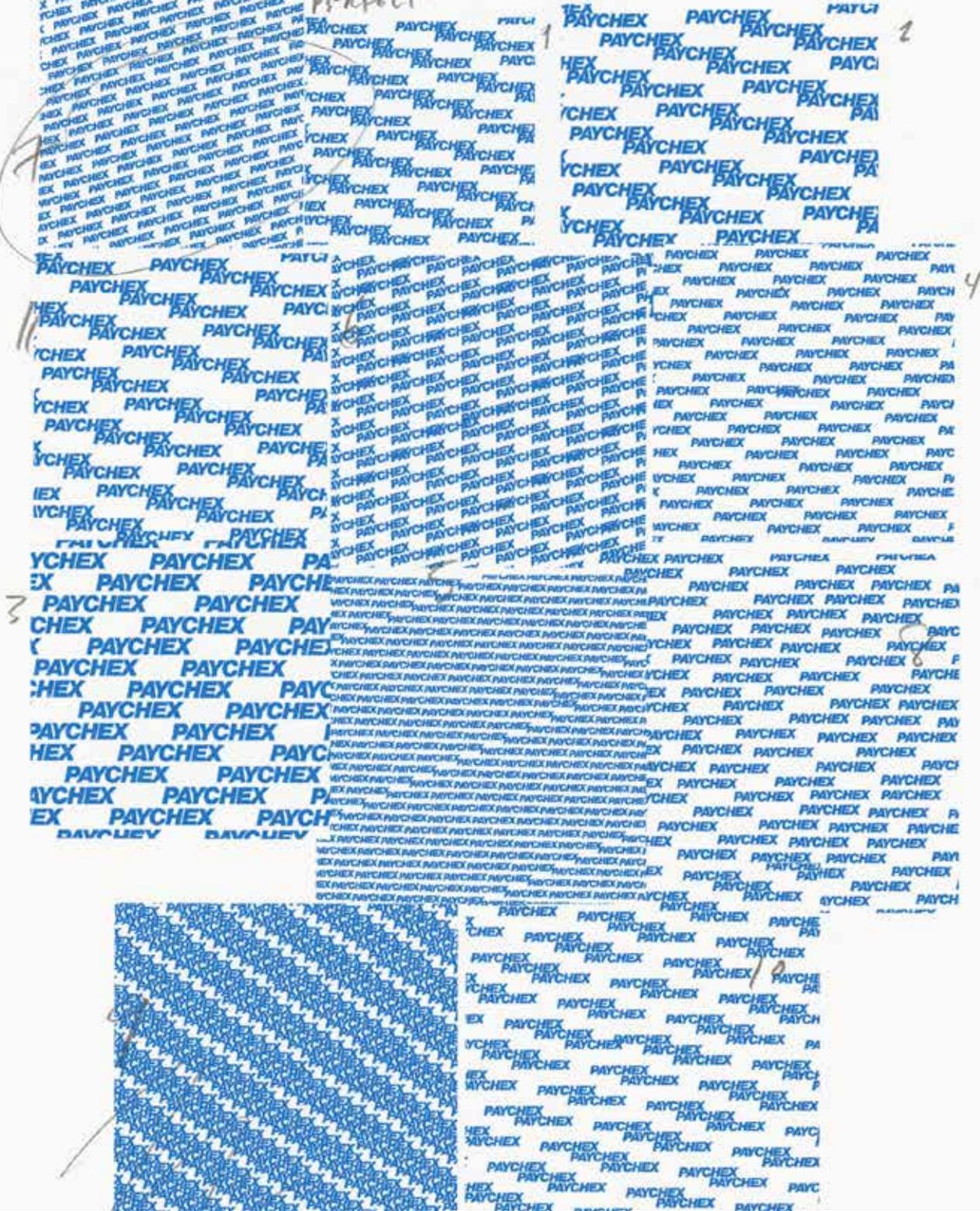
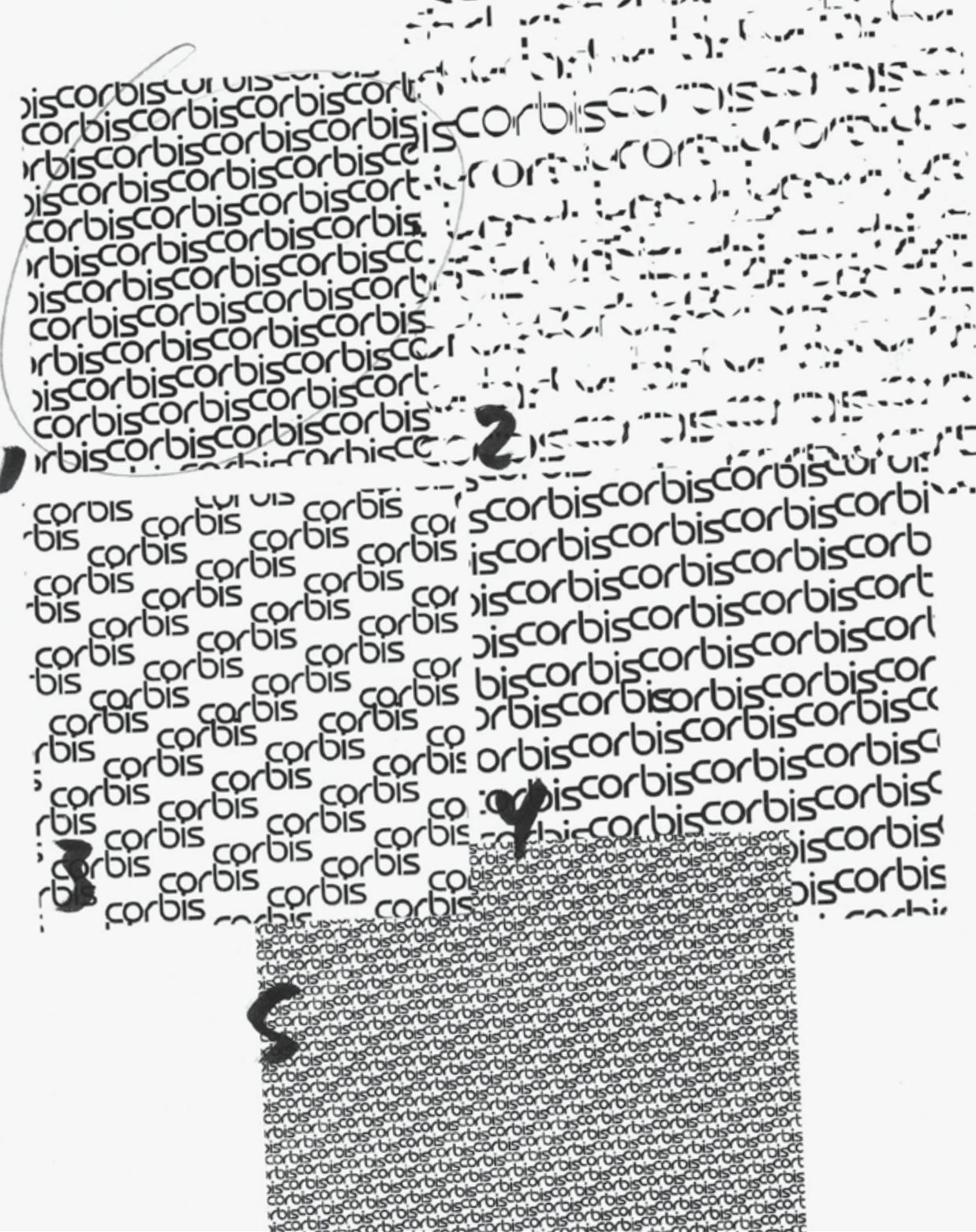
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CB: I'm surprised documenta is down with you showing fashion. What exactly are you planning to exhibit?

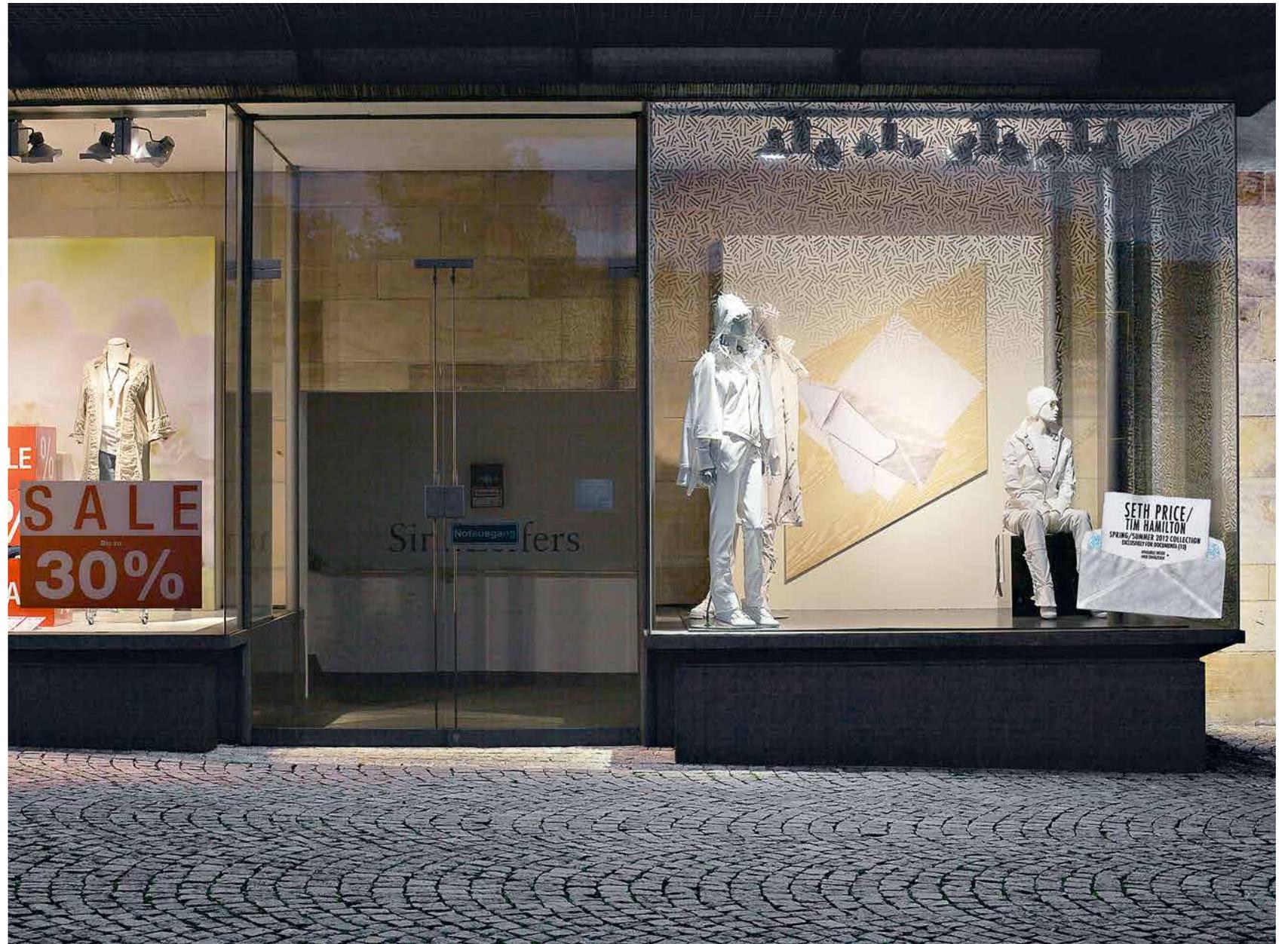
SP: The idea is to send two related but separate bodies of work. One part involves the clothes I'm doing with Tim. They'll be for sale, on the racks at a department store in Kassel that's actually right next door to the main documenta venue, the Friedericianum. The two buildings actually look similar, kind of eighteenth-century buildings, with colonnades. The department store mostly sells labels like Gant and Tommy Hilfiger, but they're debuting a "designer corner" to coincide with documenta, and they wanted to work with me. But basically they're a conservative department store in the provinces, so they're nervous about putting art in the windows. We had to do a pitch to their buyers, so I wrote it with no reference to militarism or any art concept, I presented it as just white sportswear. Which is not entirely untrue. You get to do that with fashion, you can always strip it back to its material, utilitarian facts: it's just fabric to put on your body, and that's fine, too. Whereas in art there's an anxiety about stripping it back to just being material to put on the walls, because then why are we even doing it?



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CB: So you're doing the store windows.

SP: Yes. They're big vitrines on the main documenta plaza. It's like having an extra venue for my work. Because the clothes are being consigned directly to the department store. It's not going through documenta. Which made me nervous, because the shopwindows in particular amount to a very public installation by one of the exhibition artists that wasn't part of the game plan. More people will probably see the shopwindows than whatever I do in the exhibition hall. But luckily the curator's into it.







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a. SinnLeffers department store window, dOCUMENTA (13), Kassel, 2012 b. *Black Letter with Leak*, 2012, in SinnLeffers department store window

CB: In five years, documenta will be sponsored by Gucci. You've opened the floodgates. But you're still showing a second body of work at documenta, right?

SP: Yes. I'm using the garment-industry connections and all the same materials to make artworks. They're these big, not quite wearable security envelopes, but they're made like garments, in the fashion system. It's like mutated versions of the clothes, with all the ratios skewed differently. You have the same ideas and materials, but they aren't made for the human form, they're made for the wall. It's garment construction as a sculptural fact. So basically you have one idea that gets sent to documenta through two different channels and gets deformed by the particularities of those channels. At least, I hope.



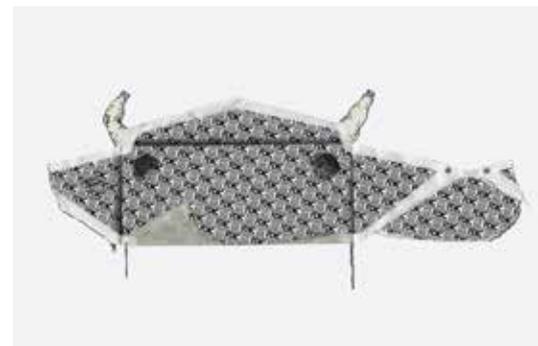
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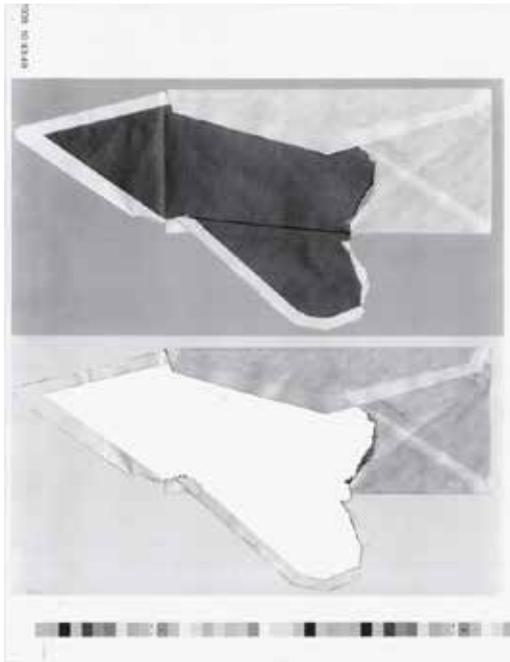
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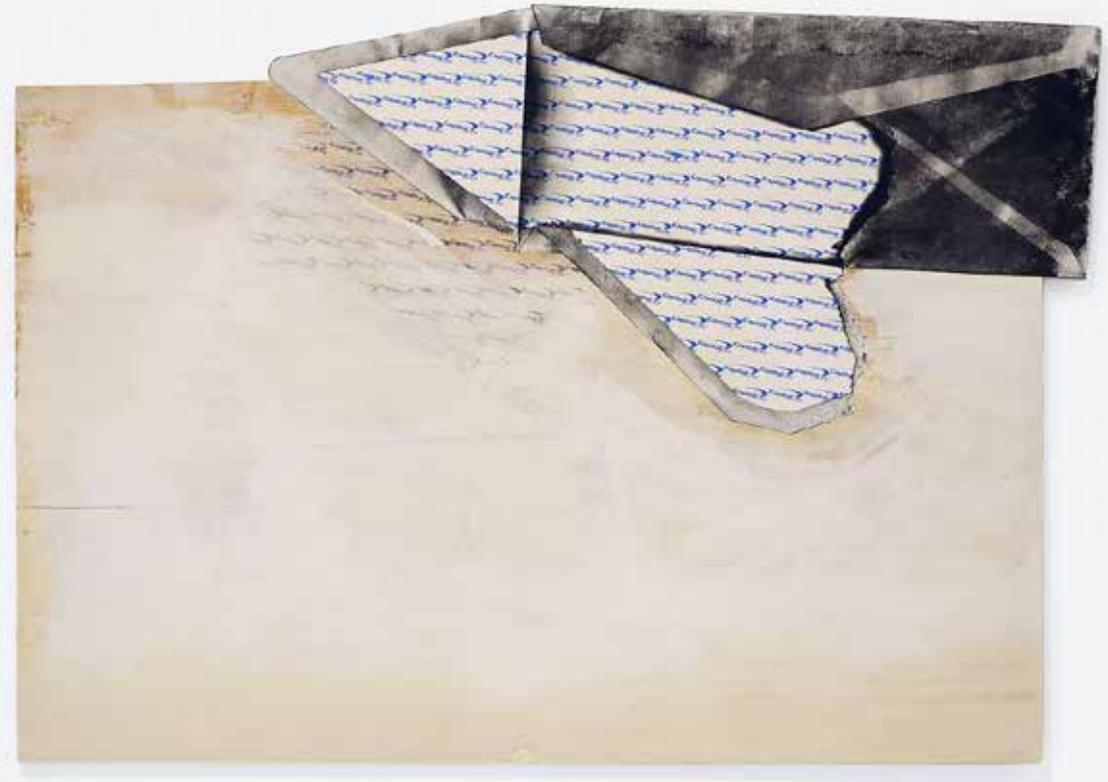






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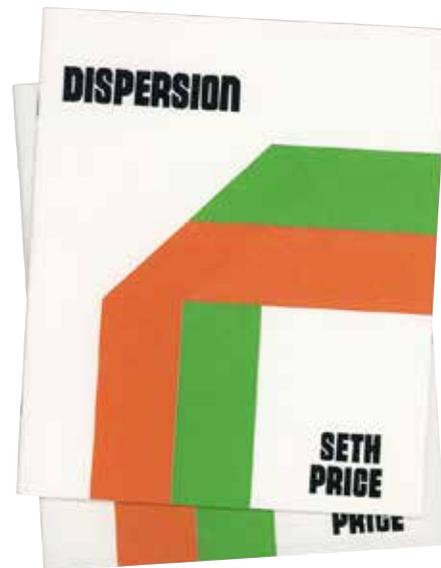
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a. Working drawing, 2012, ink jet on paper b. *Black Letter with Company*, 2012, screenprint, gesso, acrylic, enamel, and acrylic polymer on plywood, dOCUMENTA (13), Kassel, 2012



CB: On my Facebook account the other day, an avid art patron who shall remain nameless posted an article that basically said, "In this day of stock-market volatility and real estate implosion, the rich are diversifying their art portfolios." In other words, art is a safer investment right now than gold. This woman posted the article as if it were something the art world should celebrate. I don't want to seem old-fashioned, nor do I think that artists need to be poor to create legitimate works. And yes, money makes the art world go round. But I think a bunch of disinterested speculators buying up art and determining who gets shows and what has value is pretty awful. At least it's not the reason I took refuge in art as a young adult. I thought in your essay *Dispersion* you were trying to figure out ways to short-circuit that relationship between the artist and the buyer.

SP: Well, I was thinking about a different model of circulation. I never thought of it as a replacement. I liked the idea of redundancy, that you could operate in different economies simultaneously, and sometimes with the same artwork. And *Dispersion* was my example of that. It operates in three spheres. It's available online as a free PDF, and that version is available everywhere, there's no spatial location, essentially, unless you think of a server somewhere as the location. And there's no price. But then it also exists as a booklet you can buy. It's selling for ten dollars at Printed Matter, and then it comes up as a used book on Amazon. That's the retail economy. And then I took the essay's layout file and printed the spreads on plastic and vacuum-formed them over knotted ropes. That's sculpture, it was for sale in the art economy, at art-world prices. And the essay got broken up, and the pages got sent to different homes. So in a way it's this same idea of sending a work through different channels and seeing how they recompose the message.



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CB: Isn't that a bit like having your cake and eating it, too? You can say your work is free to the public, but you also get to sell it to the highest bidder. I don't know, Seth.

SP: [laughs] I thought about that a lot. But I could have done that with any of my essays. That would have been the cynical gesture, to just keep moving them into this vacuum format. But I think it made sense with *Dispersion*, which was always all about circulation. I didn't think of it as an "essay"; it was kind of an ambiguous mix of the text and its design and its circulation and the different manifestations. So this was a way to bring that out. I liked the idea of taking the piece back into material, into the plastic arts, and pointing to the design as something to look at, an image in and of itself, rather than just a delivery device. I knew it would be something people would critique for "having my cake and eating it, too," as you said. I don't know if it was a successful gesture. But it seemed like there were enough questions or conflicts there that it was worth trying. There's so much anxiety among artists and critics about the concept of selling out that it must be interesting to engage with on some level. I always like working in an area where there's a threat of compromise. Well, maybe not always. But it's good to feel a little uncomfortable about some aspect of an artwork, whether it's material, conceptual, or some aspect of the economics. If you don't play with these things a little bit, they start to flow really smoothly. And soon you're not even aware that they're things you can fuck with.



The monumentality of public art has been challenged before, most successfully by those for whom the term "public" was a political rallying point. Public artists in the 1970s and 1980s took interventionist praxis into the social field, acting out of a sense of urgency based on the notion that there were social crises so pressing that artists could no longer hole up in the studio, but must directly engage with community and cultural identity. If we are to propose a new kind of public art, it is important to look beyond the purely ideological or instrumental function of art. As Art and Language noted, "radical artists produce articles and exhibitions about photos, capitalism, corruption, war, pestilence, trench foot and issues." Public policy, destined to be the terminal as-if strategy of the avant-garde! A self-annihilating nothing.

An art grounded in distributed media can be seen as a political art and an art of communicative action, not least because it is a reaction to the fact that the merging of art and life has been effected most successfully by the "consciousness industry." The field of culture is a public sphere and a site of struggle, and all of its manifestations are ideological. In *Public Sphere and Experience*, Jürgen Habermas and Alexander Kluge insist that each individual, no matter how private a component of the capitalist consciousness in a given society, must be considered a producer (despite the fact that this is not always true). The task, they say, is to fashion "counter-productions." Kluge himself is an inspiration, acting as a filmmaker, lobbyist, writer, and television producer. The terrain of German media: An object disappears when it becomes a weapon.

The problem arises when the constellation of critique, publicity, and discussion around the work is at least as charged as a primary experience of the work. Does one have an obligation to view the work first-hand? What happens when a more intimate, thoughtful and enduring understanding comes from mediated discussions of an exhibition, rather than from a direct experience of the work? Is it incumbent upon the consumer to bear witness, or can one's attention derive from magazines, the Internet, books, and conversation? The ground for these questions has been played by two historical tendencies that are more or less diametrically opposed: on the one hand, Conceptualism's sharpening knock for generating public discussion through secondary media. This does not simply mean the commercial cultural world, but a global media sphere which is, at least for now, open to the interventions of non-commercial, non-governmental actors working solely within channels of distributed media.

a. *Essay with Knots* pp. 12–13, 2008 (detail), screenprint on high-impact polystyrene vacuum-formed over rope knots

CB: So selling out is never an issue for you?

SP: Well, the fashion thing started because I had this urge to sell out this piece that had been taken and placed in this other constellation. And I don't want to complain that the work got bought by MoMA. I was really happy about it. But it was also a conflicted feeling. So taking the clothes to documenta is a way of playing with that feeling of selling out. Not economically, more in terms of integrity or whatever. And to take the project to a stage where certainly it will be picked apart. And maybe it won't work. It could come across as this simplistic equation of art and commerce. The whole cliché of art and fashion is a good reason not to do it.

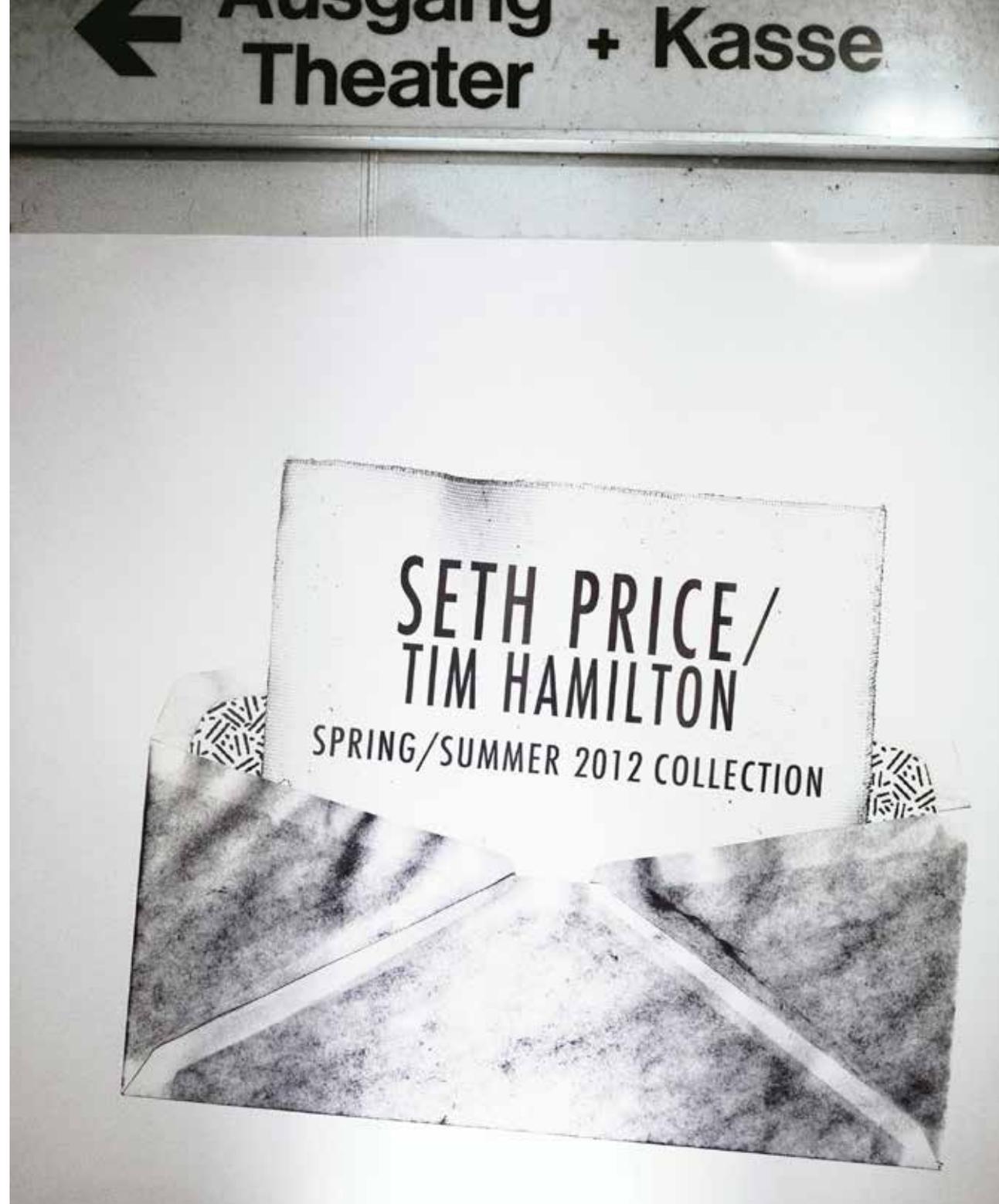
CB: Well, art can barely find a new way to sell out. When you think back to that notorious 1974 Lynda Benglis ad in *Artforum* where she posed naked with a dildo and sunglasses, two of the editors, like Rosalind Krauss, were so outraged they resigned from the magazine. Ten years ago, *Artforum* was chockablock with Dior Homme ads and no one said a word. We've come a long way, in other words, in forty years, with the relationship of art and fashion. The audiences have intermingled, and they've infiltrated each other.



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SP: There's a kind of seduction/repulsion quality that's consistent. That's a big part of it. I was walking down the street a few months ago and they were opening a new YSL boutique, and there was a plywood fence around the construction site, and the fence was covered with a billboard-size vinyl print of a mostly naked woman advertising the store. It was an inflammatory image, and people had been scrawling all over it.

CB: What did they write?

SP: Objections. "This image is degrading to women," things like that. My first reaction was to stop and look at the image, because I like the seduction. And also I'm interested in fashion photography, and I'm interested in advertising, and I'm interested in printing technologies. And my next reaction was to read the commentary, which is also interesting. I like graffiti and the destruction of private property and vandalism, and I like dissent and unlicensed commentary. And I agree with a lot of the sentiments people were writing. But I detest moralizing more than anything, so I was also thinking, why can't you just let me enjoy my stupid moment of seduction! I liked all of those different pushes and pulls in one moment.

CB: What a world it is when the vandal is the moral center that is monitoring cultural imagery.

SP: The whole thing was complicated. I'm interested in that tangle. ♥



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