Interview, Chris Bollen & Seth Price, January 2012

BOLLEN: On my way to your studio, I was thinking about your work and how it often borrows material from the Internet or champions its dispersion techniques, and I had this somewhat loopy, over-blown thought right on 35th Street: If the Internet didn't exist, Seth Price would have been the artist to invent it. No one gets credit for what they might have invented, but I do think there is a corollary between the Internet and a lot of your work.

PRICE: Well, I started using the Internet mainly because it was there, like anyone. It was something I started doing at my desk at my day job, I was always in front of a computer, and I didn't own one myself. The Internet was an easy and cheap way to get stuff, alter it, and dump it back in the stream.

BOLLEN: I recently reread this essay you wrote in 2002 called *Dispersion*, which I have to say holds up pretty well ten years later, especially because it seems to suggest that the Internet is a roundabout way of getting past the usual art-world market system. Do you think ten years after you wrote *Dispersion*, that the Internet has fulfilled your artist fantasies?

SP: I don't know, I do have the sense that this is a golden age for music, because of the proliferation of shareable software, and of places to distribute music and consume it. But I started writing that essay not because of any interest in the Internet, but out of frustration about how to be an artist, or whether I even should "be" one. You know, is it possible to make objects? Is that interesting? So really it was my thinking through how to enter this other world, and when I finished it, I thought the text itself might be a piece.

BOLLEN: So you started to disperse *Dispersion*.

PRICE: First I just gave it to Josh [Smith], Wade [Guyton], Kelley [Walker], Bettina [Funcke], some other people I knew. Then I started a website and put it up.

BOLLEN: You initially wanted to work in film, didn't you?

SP: I started out doing film and video, but more in the experi-

mental film festival world, and that was just a wretched place. Although now I think I appreciate it much more. I didn't go to art school, and I didn't really know much about the art world when I came to New York, but within a few years I was working at [artist's video distributor] Electronic Arts Intermix, and Dia was right there, and I started meeting people who took art seriously, and took themselves seriously as artists. The art world seemed like a good place to show my film and video work. The discussion was somehow different. Eventually that let to an invitation to do a show at Reena Spaulings, and I decided to try sculpture. So I sort of backed into it.

CB: So you didn't intend to make art objects.

SP: I was fighting it, because—well, I don't know why. Maybe it was a self-destructive impulse. And the title of 'artist' is just so embarrassing. Just to assert that: "I am an artist!" It took a long time to be able to say that. It started to seem coy to fight it, anyway.

CB: It's like calling yourself a novelist. I will never call myself that. It sounds so conceited. I'm just a writer. Novelists should not go outside.

SP: Titles are restricting.

CB: But really you're an artist when you start making money on your art. When the art you make pays your bills then you have no choice but to admit being an artist.

SP: You're right. It's a professional category. It's a tax category.

CB: Occupations instead of preoccupations.

SP: And it's important to take that step. I quit my job in 2005, and that was a big deal. You step into the abyss.

CB: Your work consistently plays off the idea of presence and absence. There-ness and not thereness. In your serious of gestalt silhouettes for example, it is the voids that actually come to represent the figures of the work. Or you make these vacuum forms of objects that are no longer present underneath them, almost as if they 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?

SP: [Laughs] Maybe. It's funny how you try to figure out your own work after the fact. You're right, so much of my work is about flatness and absence. But really it's about material, too. The material has always been super important for me. Surfaces, whether rough and industrial, almost brutal, or totally shiny, this idea of the perfect surface. I would say yes, I always had a problem with the image. I preferred working with writing, and music, and video. The iconic image is done so well with painting and sculpture already. That may have led me to avoid a certain kind of image making, and I ended up making these absences, but I was always interested in materiality. And that's what's been interesting about working with fashion: fashion is almost a totally materialist pursuit. The conversation is about the garment: the fabric, the trim, the cut. So even when the designer wraps up the clothes in a narrative, "this is my hobo collection," people are essentially concerned with the material details. What people are talking about is two buttons

instead of three. How does the fabric drape? The narrative references:—"Oh, my collection is referencing 1930s haberdashery"—that's just these sparkling footnotes. The concept is salad dressing. Whereas in the art world, people get very hung up on the concept, probably more than the material. The material is just in service. At least these are my impressions of the fashion world after getting involved with Tim [Hamilton]. It's cool, because in some ways it's like art, it's this parallel world of material, concept, and distribution. They're both based on the circulation of needless luxury goods. You don't "need" art, you don't "need" fashion.

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, 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 miniscule 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.

SP: Yeah, like the bomber jacket. It's a perennial, it never goes out of style, every designer makes one. At this point the elasticity of the thing is so great that anything can be called a bomber. That history is just an essence you, like, spray on.

BOLLEN: 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. You didn't have any trepidation as an artist designing clothes? … Well, I guess you aren't launching the Seth Price brand.

SP: I kind of am [laughs]. It's clothes for sale.

CB: Oh. So if I were to be wearing Seth Price, what would I have on?

SP: It's military. It's seven garments. Trench coat, bomber, flight suit, gaiters, some other stuff.

CB: How did it all start?

SP: Well, last spring one of my [vacuum-formed] bomber jackets (2005) was bought by MoMA. That piece was supposed to be an iconic image, but then when it's actually on the walls of MoMA—I don't know, it's a shock to feel that your odd 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'm not complaining, I was happy about it. But it felt uncomfortable too. I kind of childishly wanted to take the bomber jacket back from the museum and just sell it out, in a way.

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

SP: He got in touch with me. He'd collaborated with Collier Schorr and Ross Bleckner before. Initially he asked me to make a video for his presentation, and I was totally uninterested. That's what I do already, show up somewhere with some video, that's an art show. But I had a pair of pants he did that I liked, and my summer was completely empty except for moving my studio, which is a drag. So I said, "No, but I'd like to design clothes," thinking it was a shot in the dark, but Tim said let's meet. I wanted to do a white canvas bomber, and

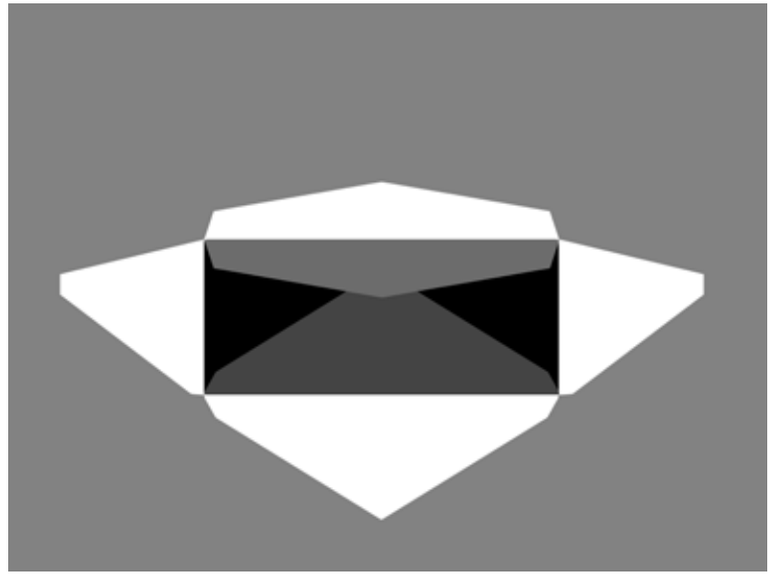
then decided to expand it to an all-military line. Sportswear is so indebted to military tailoring. So I started getting really involved with the cut, and then the liner patterns, and that led me to envelopes, and the security patterns that are printed on the inside. I was thinking how an envelope is a single sheet of material that's cut to a pattern, printed on the liner, then folded and attached to contain an object, in the case of a security envelope, sensitive financial data, presumably, which you have to guard from sight with a repeated pattern or logo. And a jacket is essentially a piece of fabric which, having been cut, is folded, arranged, attached, and then, like an envelope, takes you places.

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

SP: Right. Anyway, after a couple months it occurred to me, I'm working on Spring/Summer 2012 clothes, and meanwhile I'm supposed to be coming up with ideas for Documenta, which is also Spring/Summer 2012. So maybe I can wrap it all up. And it went from just this whim to becoming the heart of my work that year. Which was a strange move. But in the fashion industry there's a willingness to take the narratives that are offered, not uncritically, but enthusiastically. I felt free to stack all these over-the-top ideas in a way I wouldn't do in my "art." It becomes this high concept Hollywood bullshit: "The banks meet the military… On the runway." And that level of unease became exciting.

CB: All-in-one fascism.

SP: All-in-one ideological critique, too dumb to even propose.



You know, just thinking about what a cliché "critique" is. Putting bank logos inside expensive designer clothing? Modeled on both army gear and business envelopes, and made of canvas, the material of not just the military but also paintings? It gets too thick with signifiers. But I was free to mess, because it was fashion. You walk down the street and see someone wearing an all-over print of skull-and-crossbones, but the skulls are actually Spongebob, wearing a Monopoly millionaire top hat, and it's not bones, it's a dildo and, like, a mortgage contract. That's fashion and streetwear design, you just stack all this shit. But a show like Documenta is seen as an alternative to the U.S. market-driven art worlds, which are presumably focused on shiny things and keeping the pop torch burning and, you know, fashion. So it seemed like a good opportunity to show up like, "Hey, the New York artist is superficial, true to form." There's a Beuys quote about "everything people accuse me of, I will be that, over and over."

BOLLEN: Which corporate logos did you pick?

PRICE: Capital One. UBS. Paychex. The FDIC. Corbis, the image rights agency. And a generic crosshatch envelope pattern, similar to these Jasper Johns paintings. There are others. I toyed with using AmEx, which has a beautiful logo, but it seemed too precise, especially bringing it to Germany.

BOLLEN: All of these symbolic pileups reminds me of 9/11. Remember how Karlheinz Stockhausen got so much criticism for calling 9/11 a work of art? I rather agreed with that criticism, but the engineers of 9/11 were so metaphorically aware, so seduced by symbolism, it's almost maddening how much they piled on. I don't know if 9/11 would have the same resonance if the hijackers were flying Jet Blue on October 12th.

PRICE: And a box cutter. They couldn't have improved on that.

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

PRICE: The idea was to send two related but separate bodies of work. First are the clothes I'm doing with Tim, they'll be on the racks at a department store in Kassel that happens to be right next door to the main Documenta venue, the Friedericianum. The two buildings actually look very similar. The store sells stuff like Gant and Tommy Hilfiger, but they're premiering some "designer corner" to coincide with Documenta, so they wanted to work with me.

BOLLEN: So you're doing the store windows.

PRICE: Yes, they're these big vitrines on the main Documenta plaza, so it's like having this ninja-style extra venue that didn't come through the official channels. It amounts to a very public but unplanned installation by one of the exhibition artists. The curator could have squashed it, but luckily she was into it.

BOLLEN: 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, the non-fashion store, right?

PRICE: I'm using Tim's industry connections and all the materials from that collaboration to make art works. They're big, not-quite wearable security envelopes, but fabricated as garments within the fashion system of pattern maker, muslins, seamstress, samples, factories. Garment construction as a sculptural fact. They have all the trim, zippers and pockets, and arms and legs, but they aren't made for the human form. They're made for the wall. It's like mutated versions of the clothes, with all the ratios skewed differently. You have the same ideas and materials, it's one message that's sent to Documenta through two different channels, the fashion world and the art world, and hopefully the outcomes will be deformed by the particularities and needs of those channels.

BOLLEN: I wanted to ask you about *How To Disappear in America* (2008). It's been out for two or three years now. Have you gotten any interesting responses?

PRICE: Yeah. Julie Cirelli wrote an article for Dossier about this idea of "how to disappear." It's an old theme, even apart from the history of these publications, which goes back de-

cades. There are television shows, plays, songs. Anyway, she tracked down someone behind one of the texts I'd used in the book. Online, it was anonymous and unauthored, and said: "Anyone is free to use this, provided you don't make money off it." But when the guy who hosts the site heard about our book he was upset, and got in touch with Leopard Press. They kind of smoothed it out, I think they explained that everyone involved lost money. Apparently he told Julie he was a 'coauthor,' although he'd been representing it as this anonymous piece he was just hosting. It's all probably some anti-attribution web-libertarian move, he probably wrote the whole thing. I did see that later he was posting snide remarks about the artist Seth Price on some anarcho-Utopian forum.

BOLLEN: Was he angry about the form in which his information was being distributed or did he feel you were mocking his work?

PRICE: I don't know. I think it was the idea that it was framed as an artwork. The category is suspicious. If we printed it up and just sold it in a left-wing bookstore it would have been a different story.

BOLLEN: Well, artwork is traditionally all about how to appear in America, not disappear.

PRICE: But artists can disappear into working. Being a successful artist encourages you to disappear into the forces of production and economy that were traditionally the enemy to some romantic conception of the artist's life. You don't work for the galleries, or for the market. But you certainly can disappear into all that and then you might as well be.

BOLLEN: You can become a brand name.

PRICE: For me a big part of making work has to do with restlessness and boredom, which were very important when I was working day jobs. I was frustrated and desperate, which is a spur to thinking about artwork. You need that, and you need time to reflect. Once you have assistants to keep busy and galleries to feed you can just vanish into it. But art's not a job.

BOLLEN: That's the whole problem with day jobs. You get paid by the hour so you are selling off your hours, one by one to other people for money. That's frustrating if you want to do your own work.

PRICE: But on the other hand I think back to my job at EAI: I was given a computer and a lot of time to think about this new tool. I was working, but I was in this environment full of tools. Before that, I remember making paintings with all of the office supplies at this job I was working in Times Square. There are all of these serendipitous tools around you. Whereas the studio can become an echo chamber.

BOLLEN: Did you pick the texts arbitrarily for *How To Disappear in America* or were you cognizant of building some sort of narrative?

PRICE: There was definitely a kind of urgency and high-stakes paranoia to a lot of them. That gives a narrative sense. There was one text that was relatively down to earth that a skip tracer had written, like, "Look, I hunt people professionally and I know all their mistakes; here are my tips." So you can trace some of the shifts in tone through the book. But I spliced

them all together, and took out the headings, cut things out, rearranged it, and wrote a kind of intro. And I had a free hand with dumb quips. There are a lot of places in the book where a paragraph ends with a phrase like "'nuff said," or "Natch." It was the salt on the dish.

BOLLEN: Are you ever going to make a companion book?

PRICE: How Not to Disappear.

BOLLEN: Or maybe you'll work on another electronic music mix? I've got some great mixes from you over the years. You bring music to your art productions quite often. Again, there's that immaterial quality to your work.

PRICE: Well, music is the ideal medium. It's better than art. All the nameless emotions. I love listening to it, talking about it, making it. It's interesting that there's this whole cultural and economic apparatus based around something fundamentally immaterial. One thing I've noticed is that music and fashion have really internalized blogs as crucial mechanisms, to a degree that the art world hasn't yet.

BOLLEN: Maybe art still values the intimate, in-person interaction between viewer and object. Or maybe music and fashion are very immediate pleasures, while art feels like it needs to engage in some heady discourse that can't be captured on Tumblr accounts.

PRICE: I also wonder if it's because a lot of art is privatized. Fashion blogs depend on this street photography renaissance, but you can't photograph what's in collector's houses. I had this interesting experience of looking through an auction catalog last summer for the first time, because one of my works was on the cover. It's amazing, there's this other world, you see pieces you'd never see in a museum or gallery or magazine, because it's based purely on the logic of the market. Maybe a piece was sold to someone before it was ever showed or properly documented, and that person sat on it and sold to someone else, and it never entered the common conversation. I'm talking about pieces by great artists that are almost totally unknown. And then there's a lot of crap, too, probably overwhelmingly. But strange, never-seen crap.

BOLLEN: It's amazing to think of this whole hidden chapter of art out there that no one has access too. It's like a secret art history behind the very public one we think we know so well. How do you feel about making art works that end up like that, going right into rich people's houses and never being seen

by a larger audience?

PRICE: I'm fine with it [laughs]. I don't need to see my work again after it leaves my studio. I don't have a sentimental attachment. As long as I have documentation, I'm good.

BOLLEN: People have this misconception that artists should be thrilled that their work is selling at auction. But you and I both know many artists who are devastated by auctions. They feel they are being cheated by their original collector or worry that the work will get in the wrong hands and won't end up in the right museums or collections. Really an auction is the moment when an artist has lost total control of the work. Does that bother you?

PRICE: I have for some reason mostly escaped the auctions. People are sitting on their Prices. It's probably one of those cases where they're waiting for a high-profile collector to test the waters. I still don't fully understand why it's something to worry about, I know it's similar to dumping stocks, and your conception of value as an artist rides on that sort of thing, but so far I haven't been burned and I don't have a personal feeling about it.

BOLLEN: 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 portfolio." 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 arts 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.

PRICE: I was thinking about a different model of circulation, but I never thought of it as a replacement. I always liked the idea of redundancy. To operate in different economies, sometimes with the very same artwork. *Dispersion* is an example of that. It's a free PDF online, so it's available any time, with no price and no spatial location, or endless locations if you prefer. And then it exists as a booklet you can buy, it sells for ten dollars at Printed Matter. So that's the shareware economy and 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 is sculpture, it was for sale in the art market, the essay got broken up and the pages got sent to different homes.

BOLLEN: 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.

PRICE: I know, I thought about that a lot. But it was important for me to do that with *Dispersion*. I didn't do it with my other texts. I could have, and that would be the cynical gesture. But *Dispersion* was always all about circulation and economies of circulation. I never thought of it as an 'essay,' it was a kind of ambiguous mix of the text along with its design and its circula-

tion, the whole envelope, and this was a way to bring that out. I wanted to drag it back from being simply a set of propositions, take it back into material and the plastic arts, highlight the graphic composition of the design files. 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. I knew it would be something people would critique. But there's so much anxiety among artists and critics about the concept of selling out that it must be an interesting concept to engage with on some level. I always like working in an area where there is a threat of compromise. Well, not always. But it's good to feel a little uncomfortable about some aspect of a work, whether it's material, or conceptual, or some aspect of the economics. If you don't play with them they start to flow really smoothly and soon you've forgotten that they're things you can fuck with.

BOLLEN: So "selling out" is never an issue for you?

PRICE: Taking the clothes to Documenta is a way of playing with those feelings. Not selling out economically, more risking my integrity or something. Putting these ideas on a stage where they'll just be ripped apart. It could come across as a simplistic equation of art and commerce, or a naive attempt at critique and a clueless attempt at fashion. The whole cliché about art and fashion is probably a reason not to do it. There are lots of reasons not to do it.

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

PRICE: With mutual suspicion. There's a kind of seduction/repulsion quality that is consistent. That's a big part of it for me. I was walking down the street in New York a few months ago and they were working on a new YSL boutique, there was plywood over the storefront covered with a billboard-sized vinyl announcement with a mostly naked woman. It was a provocative image, people had been scrawling all over it.

BOLLEN: What did they write?

PRICE: Objections. "This image degrades women," things like that. My first reaction was to stop and look at the image, because I love the seduction. And I'm interested in fashion photography, and I'm interested in advertising and printing technologies. Okay. Then I read the commentary, which is also interesting, and I enjoy graffiti and the destruction of private property, and I like dissent and unlicensed commentary. And I agree or sympathize with a lot of the sentiments and objections. But I detest moralizing more than anything, so I was at the same time thinking, what the fuck, why can't you let me enjoy my stupid moment of seduction? I like all of those different pushes and pulls in one image.

BOLLEN: I love that it's become the graffiti artist who is the voice of moral decency. What a world it is when the vandal is the moral center who is monitoring cultural imagery.

PRICE: The whole thing was complex. I'm interested in that tangle.

BOLLEN: Finally, I wanted to ask you, what the hell happened to Internet art? At the beginning of the 21st century we were all promised all of this Internet art that was going to revolutionize the art world or how we perceive it and it's really disappeared. You have artists like Cory Arcangel, who hacks into old video games, but his work is really nostalgic, not futuristic. So where did it all go?

PRICE: It dissipated into a gas, and now it's everywhere. I made a piece in 2000 called *"Painting" Sites*, a video that was based on Internet searches for the term "painting." I was simply taking the images that came back from that search. At the time it seemed new and exciting. I didn't know of anyone else making art from Internet searches. But then when I showed the piece I felt a sense of shame or embarrassment, because of the digital aspect. "Media art" felt so geeky. I remember artists I knew in college who ran away from computers, never got a cell phone, listened to music only on vinyl. That was what it meant to be an artist, not toying around with your computer. That's all changed now.

BOLLEN: They wanted to be authentic. And computers aren't authentic.

PRICE: Back then there was a stigma attached to new media, to the digital, and that's pretty much gone. It doesn't really mean anything to be an Internet artist now. All of that stuff has just dissolved into the general vocabulary. Making art from

web searches is a whole genre.

BOLLEN: I remember your painting search. And I remember Nate Lowman doing a similar Richard Prince piece where he searched "dick" and "prince" and got a bunch of penis porn images and shots of British royalty [Guggenheim slide lecture, 2007].

PRICE: Yeah. But to go along with my Internet search piece I wrote a German romantic fairytale, a *märchen* in the tradition of Ludwig Tieck, Hoffman, and Kleist. And read it as the soundtrack. It was pretty goofy. But it did have an element of the human to it.

An excerpt of this interview was published in *The Believer*