

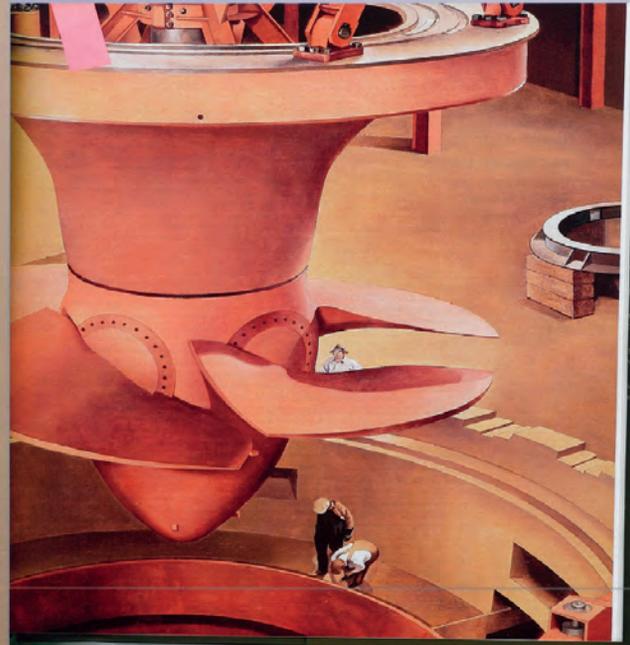


I DON'T STAY IN LANE

SETH PRICE AND STEFAN KALMÁR  
IN CONVERSATION



*Charles Sheeler*



*2004*

January	February	March	April	May	June
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Charles Sheeler  
Suspended Power, 1939  
Detail



On the occasion of Seth Price's survey exhibition at the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, this exchange between the New York based artist and the director of the ICA London, Stefan Kalmár, touches on some of the themes and ideas that have animated Price's almost twenty-year-long career.



**STEFAN KALMÁR**

One thing that surprised me in your opening speech to your exhibition at the Stedelijk was how you described your works as scattered particles.

**SETH PRICE**

I don't remember that. I know I said it had always seemed to me like a trail of wreckage, of unrelated debris. "Particles" sounds better.

**SK**

"Debris" is a term that I am quite fascinated with recently, as "fragments" might be more appropriate for a 1980s or 1990s postmodern discourse, but "debris" captures much better the mood, the culture, of whatever we call this period after 2000 till today. "Debris" also connotes destruction, or at least an impact of sorts. Debris of course can have particles as its smallest unit.

**SP**

"Fragments" makes me think of cinema, and where montage went with the move from film to video in the 1980s and 1990s.

**SK**

Or archaeology, like Allan McCollum's surrogates. What I find appealing about the term "debris" is its violence, the silent elegance, of floating plane wreckage or building dust.

**SP**

Right, you couldn't ever put it back together. "Fragments" implies a whole that could possibly be reconstructed.

**SK**

Wars create debris, not fragments. Juan Gaitán, from the Museo Tamayo in Mexico City and I have this back-and-forth of what an exhibition entitled *Debris of Civilization* might look like.

**SP**

That's your first-person shooter. How would you install a show like that?

**SK**

Maybe it's just a soundtrack.

**SP**

A soundtrack encoded on a USB stick inside a vitrine.

**SK**

*Music for Airports* on a USB stick in a vitrine. Which kind of is what you do, a bit like a black hole. Traces, speculation, narratives, maybe traps.

**SP**

Sounds frustrating when you put it like that.

**SK**

No, not at all. Like a walk through a dystopian landscape that's not frustrating, but reality, into which traces of narratives are folded.

**SP**

But dystopian?

**SK**

Walking the line of uncertainty, for sure. Your fashion show in Kassel was dystopian—not without complexity, fascination, and apocalyptic beauty, and of course possibility.

**SP**

I was thinking how funny it is that the infrastructure of our communication environment, meaning social media really, was basically created by men in their late teens and twenties. So all of the anxieties of these young dudes are coded into the culture. Insecurities around courtship, mating, status, fear of missing out, bragging, and bullying: this becomes the constant state, for vast numbers of people. Can you imagine if all the social media platforms were built and managed by people in their sixties?

**SK**

"Young man" and military bragging and insecurity, I guess. But then again what would *unsocial* media look like?

**SP**

I'm over in antisocial media, myself.

**SK**

Yep, either all media is social in one form or another or its actually propaganda—the "social" seems like a commodifiable surplus, an extra asset. So there is media and there is "social media."

**SP**

I can't deal with social media. It's not addressed in any of the work in Amsterdam. Maybe only in the *organic.software* website.

**SK**

But yet when it comes to art writing, your work allegedly is built around social media as one of its core reference points.

**SP**

Maybe there is a kind of work that people make with social media in mind, thinking of its own status as a replicated distributed image. Or maybe it approximates, in its effects, the way that phenomena online must stand out, grab your attention, demand to be discussed, hated, or loved. This can be done well in an artwork, and it also runs the risk of contorting itself with insecurity.

**SK**

And then there is work that comes out of this very particular cultural coil that is the past seventeen years that I think we all are still trying to grasp and make some sense of.

**SP**

Yes, no one has yet formed a coherent idea or story about this period. I wonder if art history has ever gone so long without the stories fully coagulating.

**SK**

Your work in itself inevitably carries the traces of that period and its particular logic. It is part of it—and so am I and so are you. No "outside" there. This is why Amsterdam was so remarkable, because it is the closest I ever saw of what formed—to use your own words—a replica of that condition, and it seemed it "did" itself, as if you were in another room or universe and hadn't touched a thing. If that makes sense. Not sure I can explain it, but I am fascinated by it. It is a good, a very good thing.



**SP** You mean it gave the impression of an outside from which to survey?

**SK** Maybe to grasp a complex logic and understanding and a form of relating to this reality that otherwise could be perceived as bonkers or simply incomprehensible.

**SP** I want to contain and redirect that sense of bonkers. A couple of people told me that if they hadn't already known my work, the exhibition would have made them think the artist was a psychopath.

**SK** Maybe it was a toolkit of sorts. But then again that sounds too didactic. Maybe more a texture, a structure, a script that we only understand through having been conditioned post-2000, sharing the same new form of literacy.

**SP** That's nice that you use the word "tool." I have come to think of artists as tool makers and myself as a maker of tools for other artists. It's a kind of justification for what I'm doing that finally makes sense to me, or that I'm not uncomfortable with.

**SK** Why would you think you need to "justify"?

**SP** To me, art always felt totally embarrassing as a phenomenon, and "artist" was a corny thing to call oneself. And I still find something deeply embarrassing about making an artwork. I think that's why so much of my work makes something from nothing, or plays with immateriality, flatness, image. Since to go ahead and make a piece of volumetric sculpture sitting in a gallery would be the most corny thing imaginable, I'm kind of hugging the margins rather than jumping into the pool.

**SK** I relate, as I often feel like the joke that starts with, "A curator walks into a gallery..." But then again, I also know that art has afforded me exactly the knowledge of self-reflexivity, of knowing I am implicated. But then again it's hardly "hugging the margins" when you have an entire floor at the Stedelijk, right?

**SP** Hugging the margins formally, I meant, rather than jumping into the making of definitive "Sculpture." Anyway, it's my own inner feeling. It's a justification that allows me to proceed with making a statement as grand as that exhibition and still keeping intact a sense of self.

**SK** Do you recall the moment when you made your first "sculpture"? Not that film can't be a form of sculpture. But what was that trigger?

**SP** I was playing around the summer before my first show at Reena Spaulings (in 2004), trying to figure out what to show, and I had a picture in my mind's eye of an ass coming out of a calendar. I had been doing these calendars, and then the body came pushing out of them. So I had to go and figure out how to cast and mold and vacuum form. But those sculptures were flat and hollow—they were topologically the same, just flat sheets with a slight redistribution of the material.

**SK** When you look at those works now, do they read differently? Something more uncanny that you weren't necessarily consciously aware of in their "making"?

**SP** Uncanny in the sense of *unheimlich*?

**SK** Yes, and how they became somewhat iconic for that period, haunted by its time.

**SP** People thought they were ugly. For a long time, that was often a primary response.

**SK** Is "ugly" even a category for you?

**SP** "Ugly" would mean I'm trying to synthesize it still. It means

I don't understand it yet. Kelley Walker once told me he thought all good art was beautiful, which meant that an ugly work that was a good work was also a beautiful work. I did a screening at Light Industry, and afterward Ed Halter came up and told the crowd how he had always loved my films and videos and then I had gone and started making all this ugly sculpture. Everyone laughed. It feels good to make something that someone would call ugly, but I don't know why.

**SK** I get what Ed meant, because your "sculptural work"—even though I think we should never see it in isolation, simply because it is not done in isolation—seems more, say, "unhinged." It has a different logic, or maybe indeed tries to escape logics that others attempt to impose.

**SP** It's funny because a lot of that early video work was perceived as ugly at the time too, maybe because the aesthetics and uses of technology were not common yet, were not widely seen. Making a video of search results for "painting" before the introduction of image search, or making a compilation of compressed Internet video material before the existence of YouTube or video search or the widespread bandwidth to even share video. But then you give it five or seven years and the videos lose that ugliness. Maybe that's what happens when you try to escape the imposition of other people's logics. Eventually you have to face up to being called an artist, or a husband, or straight, or a vegetarian, or all the other corny labels that are about imposing ways of being, rather than ways of doing.

**SK** "Ways of doing"—I like that.

**SP** I mean that I recognize that I "do" art. I can say that I have made a lot of art. It's undeniable. But to say I "am" an artist is something else. It would be silly to deny it out loud—again, it's more of a feeling. At breakfast I was a vegetarian because I didn't eat any meat, but who knows what might happen.

**SK** As if they constantly undermine their own status.

**SP** Status update.

**SK** How do these modes that you "operate" in—music, film, text, sculpture, fashion, website, video, painting, drawing—work together? Is this just text, stuff, excess?

**SP** There are a lot of good terms now for tackling questions like that. "Lanes": I don't stay in lane. "Sandbox": it's like playing in different sandboxes.

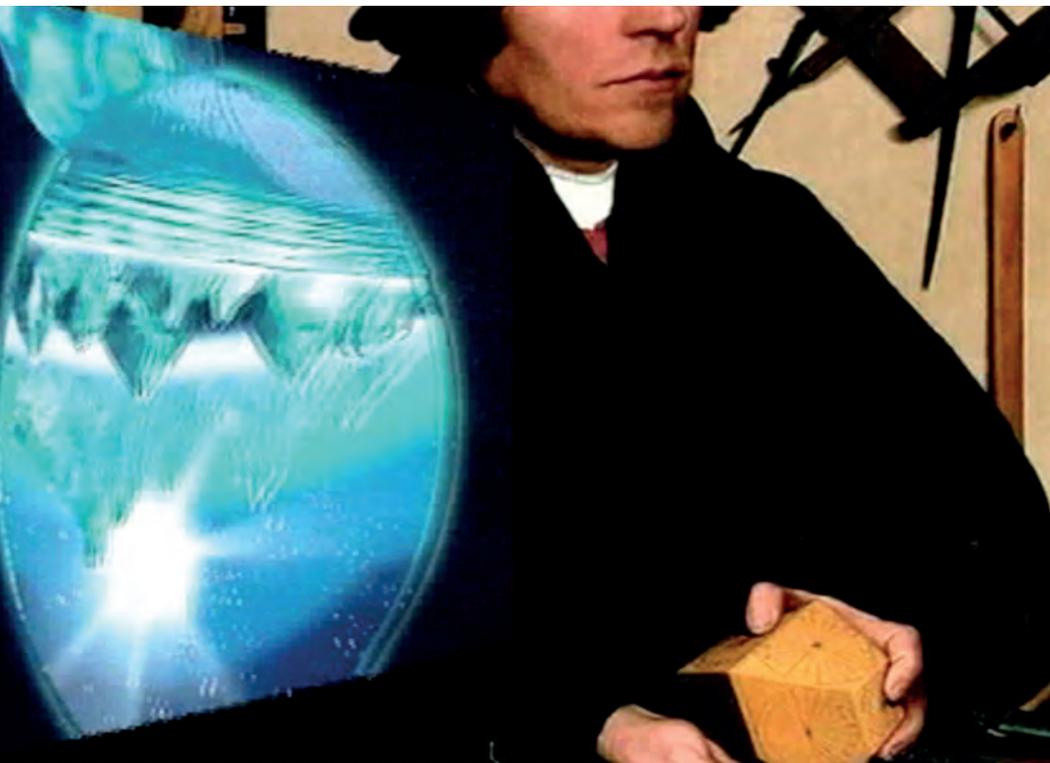
**SK** Again let me rephrase or repeat what I said earlier: for me, your work carries the traces of today's logic, the inevitability of the now, like the Larsen Effect a visual feedback to its own condition that it is part of. This is why Amsterdam was so remarkable, because it is the closest that I ever seen in which it formed a replica of that condition.

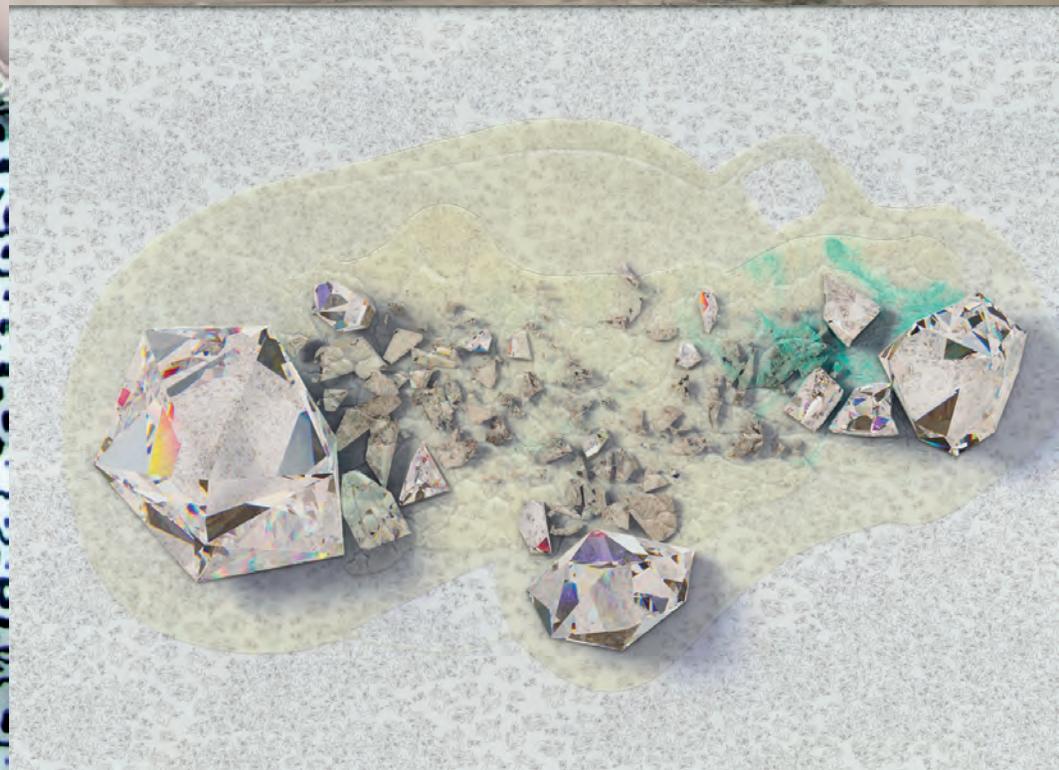
**SP** Thank you Stefan, that's really great to hear. I can say the show was like a documentation of seventeen years of trying to make a painting or a sculpture or a video the way I thought they were supposed to be done, and never quite getting there.

**Seth Price** lives and works in New York. *Social Synthetic*, a survey exhibition of his work, is currently on view at the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam and will travel to Munich's Museum Brandhorst in October. An exhibition focusing on his filmic and video work will open at The Institute of Contemporary Arts in London this Fall.

Since December 2016 **Stefan Kalmár** is the new Director of The Institute of Contemporary Arts, London. Previously he was Director of Artists Space, New York, Director of the Kunstverein München, Director of the Institute of Visual Culture in Cambridge.



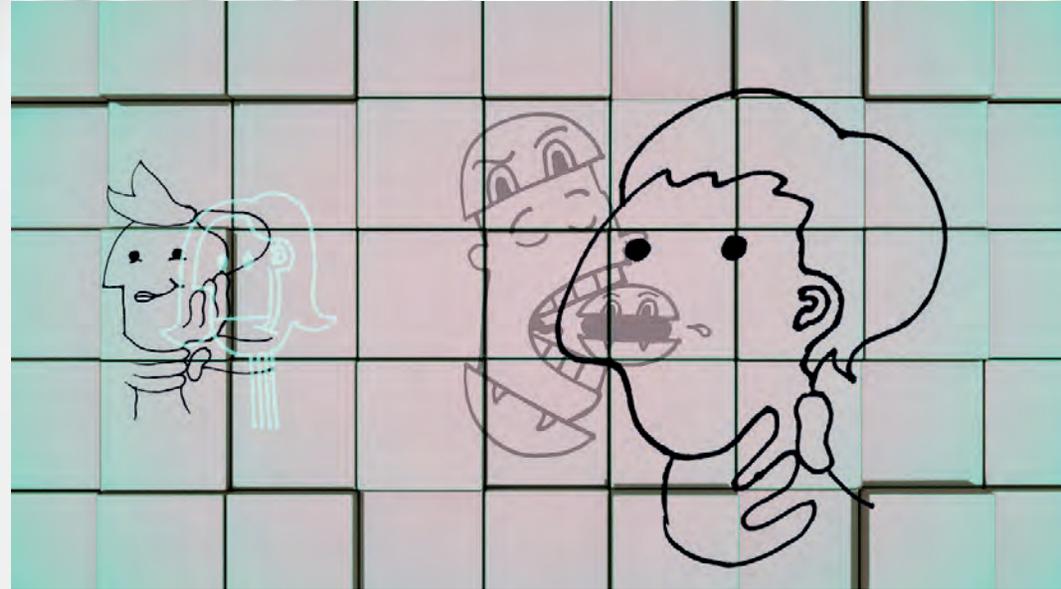








*In fact, serial killing requires a level of psychological compulsion that children are not capable of.*



In order of appearance:

- 01 *Fuck Seth Price: A Novel* (New York: Leopard Press, 2015; 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 2016). © Seth Price. Courtesy: artist and Leopard Press, New York. Photo: Ron Amstutz
- 02 *Folklore U.S. SS12* fashion show staged during the opening of dOCUMENTA (13), Kassel, 2012. © Seth Price. Courtesy: the artist. Photo: Henrik Strömberg
- 03 *Different Kinds of Art* (detail), 2004. © Seth Price. Courtesy: the artist. Photo: Ron Amstutz
- 04 *Big Screw*, 2004. © Seth Price. Courtesy: the artist. Photo: Larry Lamay
- 05 *Mesh Bag with Virus Pattern*, 2013. © Seth Price. Courtesy: the artist. Photo: Ron Amstutz
- 06 *Street Style Print Test*, 2015. © Seth Price. Courtesy: the artist and Petzel Gallery, New York. Photo: Ron Amstutz
- 07 *Art History*, 2003. © Seth Price. Courtesy: the artist and Museum Brandhorst, Munich. Photo: Ron Amstutz
- 08 *Untitled*, 2008. © Seth Price. Courtesy: the artist and Reena Spaulings Gallery, New York. Photo: Ron Amstutz
- 09 *Social Synth*, 2017, *Social Synthetic* installation view at Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, 2017. © Seth Price. Courtesy: the artist and Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam. Photo: Gert Jan van Rooij
- 10 *Social Synthetic* installation view at Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, 2017. © Seth Price. Courtesy: the artist and Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam. Photo: Gert Jan van Rooij
- 11 *"Painting" Sites* (still), 2000. © Seth Price. Courtesy: Electronics Arts Intermix, New York
- 12 *Industrial Synth* (still), 2000. © Seth Price. Courtesy: Electronic Arts Intermix, New York
- 13 *Waste Piping*, 2016. © Seth Price. Courtesy: the artist and Petzel Gallery, New York. Photo: Brica Wilcox
- 14 *Folded Heart on Table*, 2016. © Seth Price. Courtesy: the artist and Isabella Bortolozzi Galerie, Berlin. Photo: Ron Amstutz
- 15 *Rotating Sawtooth Pattern Bag* (detail), 2012. © Seth Price. Courtesy: the artist and Petzel Gallery, New York. Photo: Kat Parker
- 16 *Exploded Dry Erase Board with Pieces*, 2015, *Wrok Fmally Freidns* installation view at 356 S. Mission Rd., Los Angeles, 2016. © Seth Price. Courtesy: the artist. Photo: Brica Wilcox
- 17 *Crystalline Spill Lattice*, 2017. © Seth Price. Courtesy: the artist and Petzel Gallery, New York. Photo: Ron Amstutz
- 18 *Fwee9u&LL*, 2017. Courtesy: the artist
- 19 *Loser with a Tattoo*, 2017. Courtesy: the artist
- 20 *Nailed to the Wall*, 2006. © Seth Price. Courtesy: the artist and Captain Petzel, Berlin. Photo: Simon Vogel
- 21 *Redistribution* (still), 2007-ongoing. © Seth Price. Courtesy: the artist and Petzel Gallery, New York