DATA MATTERS
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Organic Software: An Interview with Seth Price

Dr. Anne Luther spoke with Seth Price in an email interview about http://organic.software, an online database that the artist released anonymously in 2015. It contains profiles of over 4000 art collectors that the artist accumulated alongside images of their digital portraits, street views of their private address, corporate and private affiliations and political donations, educational bio and information about their net worth. The website displays a certain performative element through its visual language, anonymity and contextualization into jargon and vocabulary of software development and algorithmic analysis linking entities of an ecosystem of actors in the artworld and their political and economic contexts. The website was discussed in multiple published articles (Texte zur Kunst, Vice, Metropolis M) and was part of an exhibition at 365 Mission Rd in LA.

Seth Price is a multi-disciplinary artist who works in a wide range of media. His work has been exhibited internationally and was included in the 2002 and 2008 Whitney Biennials, the Venice Biennale in 2011 and dOCUMENTA (13) in 2012. His video works have been screened at the Rotterdam Film Festival; Tate Britain, London; Institute of Contemporary Art, London; The Museum of Modern Art, New York; Eyebeam, New York; and Biennale de l'Image en Mouvement, Saint-Gervais, Geneva and in his latest exhibition at the Stedelijk Museum, among others. His work is included in the collections of the Kunsthaus Zürich, Zürich; the Museum of Modern Art, New York; the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. (Seth Price biography, studio website).

Anne Luther: How did your interest to work with programmers evolve in your practice?

Seth Price: I got into in coding when i was in elementary school. There was a state-funded pilot program with donated Apple IIe computers, and over several years we learned rough concepts of programming, using Terrapin Logo. Later, in sixth and seventh grade, I programmed with MSBasic and tried to teach myself C, which failed. My interest was in making video games. The interactive gaming sequence in my video Industrial Synth uses the actual MacPaint files I made for one of these games in 1986. I took a class in C+ in college. But my brain is not built for math, or numbers, or that kind of abstract quantitative thinking! I can't conceive of a calendar, or keep track of dates, or do simple computations. So I sucked at coding. For this site I hooked up with some people who knew what they were doing.

AL: You talked in an article in Texte zur Kunst *about the project becoming a work of art a year and a half after you released the website anonymously. That's when you put your name into the FAQ section, a signature of sorts. Would you ever release the algorithm or code that was developed for the work?*

SP: Once, we released a Continuous Project issue that was the content of the HTML from our website. In this case, the piece is really about the site as a kind of

experience (though there definitely was also a performative element in staging it as an anonymously created object.) I wouldn't want to focus on the code.

AL: Could you describe why you chose to build a website that shows the data in its current form? I am interested in the choices of distribution, organization and access of the data. Would you release the data as open data or would you allow other individuals to scrape your website or work with an API of sorts?

SP: I feel like I walked away from the project. It's an abandoned construction site. I'd be hesitant to get involved again, because I feel distant from it now. But it was definitely made to be a standalone site, a place, a kind of location, with a visual language and a feeling. That was as important as the data. This was not just about publicizing the data, or I wouldn't have made it anonymous. Anonymity really works against any sort of socially conscious idea.
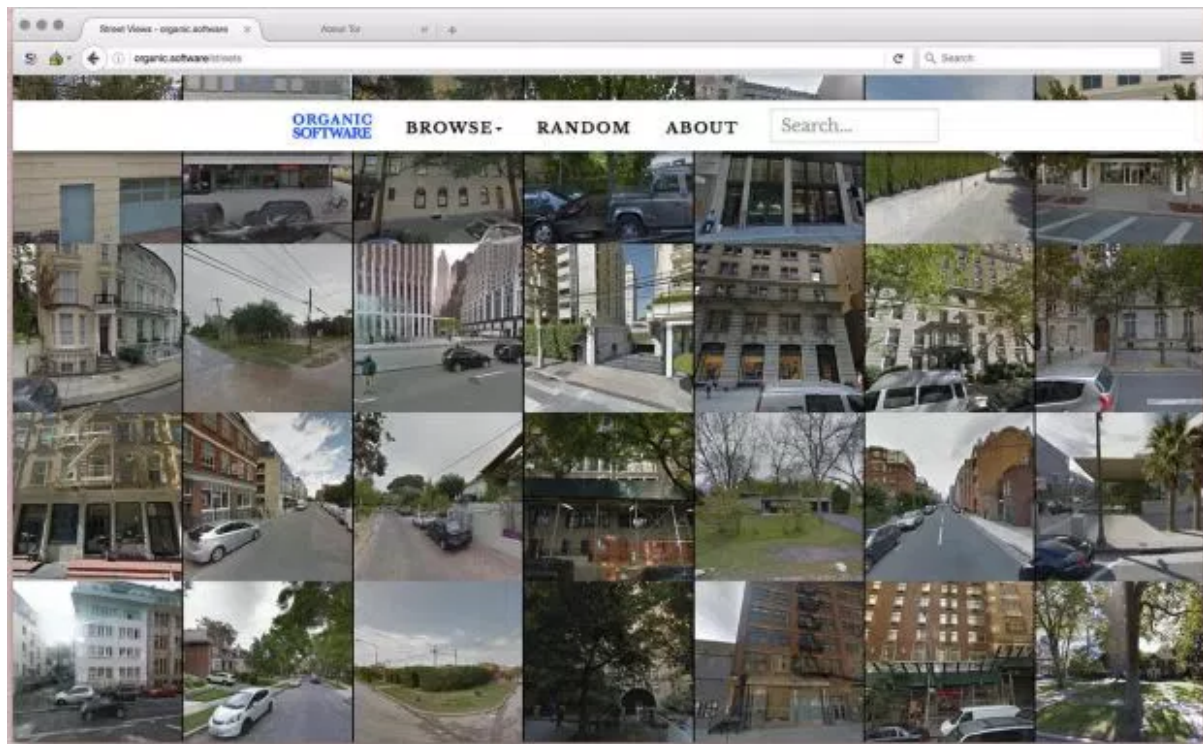
AL: You mentioned on the website that you are working on further development of the tool and other data sets. Is the work a 'work in progress' or in other words do you use the information in future works or are you developing any other collaborations that are data-driven/informed by large scale digital data collection?

SP: That whole anonymous 'About' page was fictional — the bad grammar, everything. I was never planning to develop the project any further, that was just part of the fiction of a North Korean/Iranian/Russian hacker working on some insane software project.

AL: *Was this work made with an ideal 'use case' in mind?*

SP: I didn't think about that. It was an experiment, an opening up of possibility. I now know that the ideal case, realistically speaking, is probably people who work at galleries or auction houses using the comments section to trade anecdotes about collectors.

AL: *Organic Software links individuals, to their context of wealth and their affiliations in the art world. Do you consider this work as a form of institutional critique? Two works come to mind that also speak about art collectors and their wealth context and that are shown in galleries and are part of museums collections that they critique: Hans Haacke's Shapolsky Et Al. Manhattan Real Estate Holdings, A real-time social system, as of May 1, 1971 and Andrea Fraser's ACTIONS! Countdown from 2013, a slideshow that shows collectors, their political involvement and wealth context and their 'role' in the art world.*

SP: I did talk to Andrea Fraser while I was working on it, and she told me about the project she was developing, though I don't know if it had a form yet. She was speaking of it as a book in development, which still sounds great. We were going to compare notes and hook up, but it never happened. I don't think of this as institutional critique. I tried to design the site in a specific way, so that it wouldn't read as a social justice project, or internet art, or institutional critique. It was supposed to be blank, odd, and unplaceable. That was as important as the content: make a website that has actual useful information, but the framing is so weird and unplaceable that it doesn't make sense. So it's context art, if you want to place it, but all of my work is a kind of context art, in that sense. It would be similar to the way I would make a painting or a sculpture: explore a language and existing situation, yielding a feeling, and a kind of possibility, and an unknowing, or a lack of sense. I don't make art with a motivation or a concept or an idea in mind, and this was similar.

AL: A space outside or inside the art world that allows a critical voice towards the financial context of institutions and galleries is hard to define and carve in the current complexity of contemporary art. You talked about a sort of hypocrisy describing the project. Can you talk about this seemingly contradicting motivation for building and releasing the dataset as a work of art?

SP: The hypocrisy would come from someone who thought I am condemning a system, or individuals, while benefiting from it, and I recognize that's a risk in making something like this. But I don't think of myself as a critical voice, in doing this. This is more like a self portrait.

AL: Can you talk about your motivation to build this website – was it motivated by changing the art world's embeddedness in a current political, economic context or rather to make this embeddedness known in a more tangible and large scale manner?

SP: No, it was personal. Just exploring a feeling. I figure I could never change much in the way you're talking.
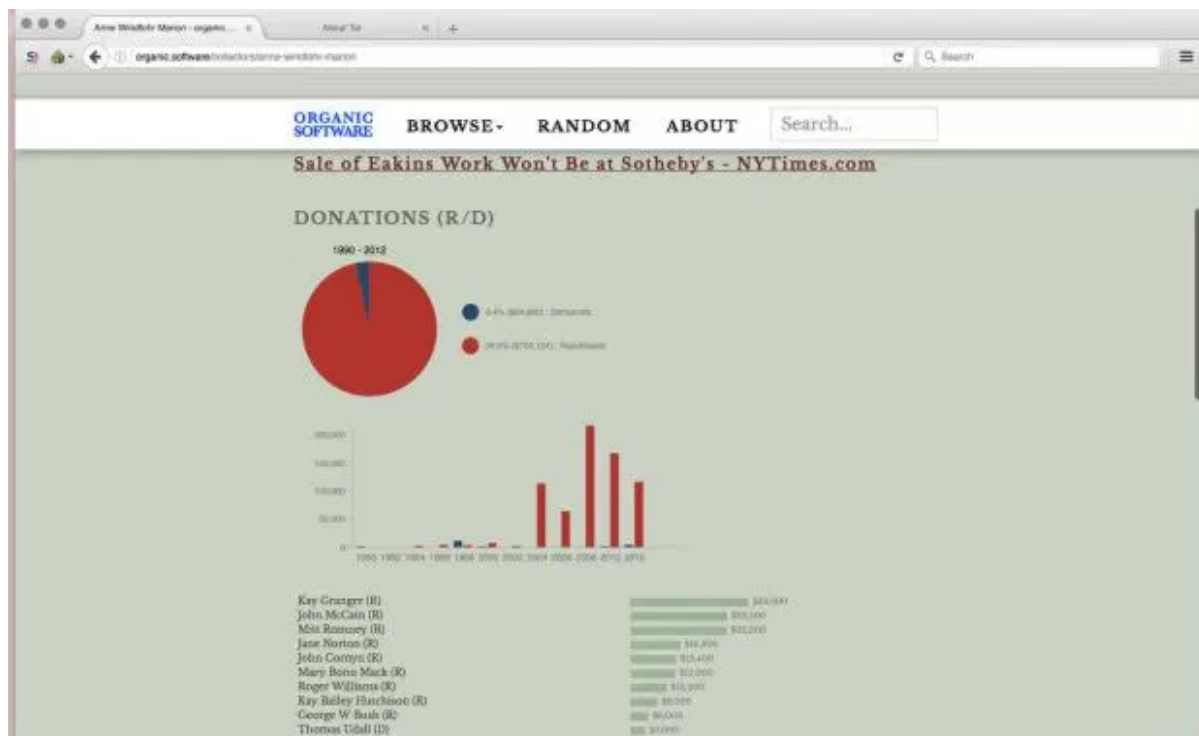

AL: Has your understanding of the information that we find on the website changed in the past year (first year of the Trump administration)?

SP: I don't think so.

AL: Is there an ideal scenario for the use of the tool for you or was there a certain urgency that informed the conceptualization and production of the work?

SP: You know, there was an urgency, actually, I forgot about this. The urgency was because in 2013 or '14 I learned that one of my galleries had sold a work of mine to an Israeli state museum, which I would not have allowed if I'd been asked. But then you get all sorts of questions: maybe museums and art represent the best in an otherwise objectionable state, or at least the possibility of dialogue and expansion and awareness. And then there's the fact that any fortune is tied to objectionable behavior; many collectors have made their monies in "impure" ways. So I thought it might be good to have a place where one could at least do preliminary research. That was the impetus to start the project. Again, it was personal.
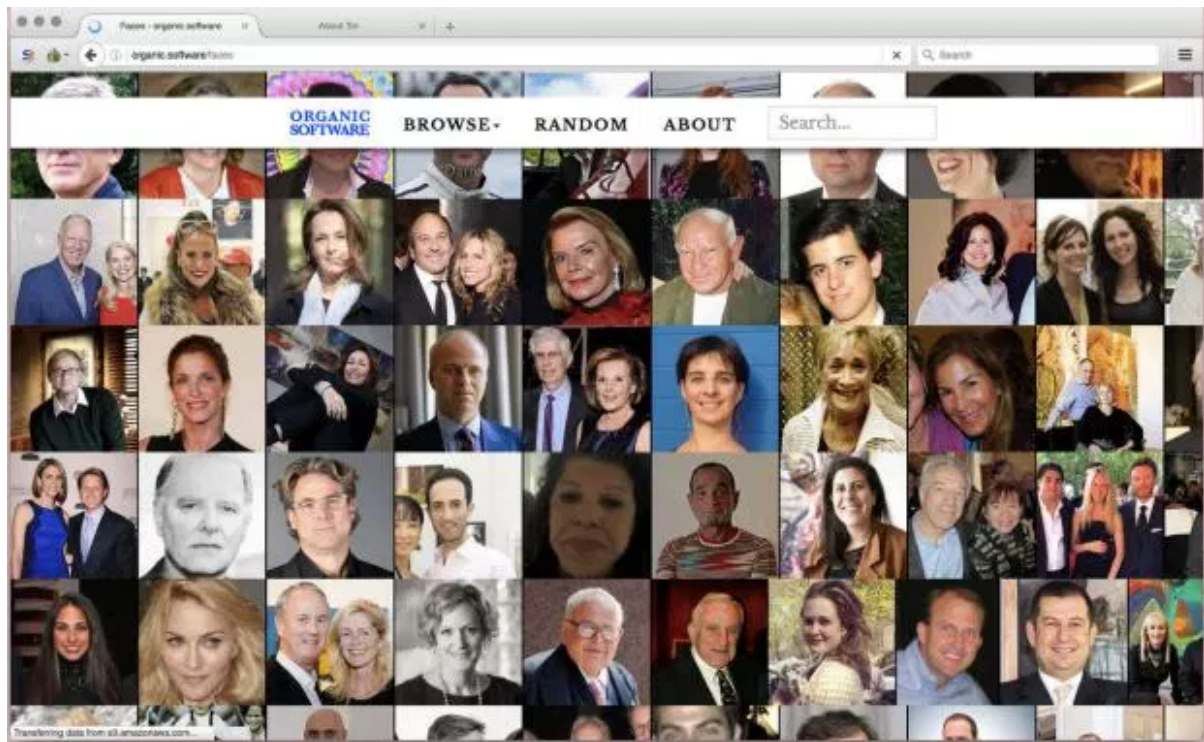
AL: How was the tool perceived in your group of peers? Did anybody use the tool as a frame of reference for changing their access to art works or affiliations to museums?

SP: I have no idea. I think it has been most helpful as a kind of basic 'Face Book' where people can see what a certain collector looks like, or go through the Faces

page and say, 'Oh, there's that guy who was at dinner the other night, let's find out who he is.' Social reconnaissance, really. But that's cool.

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ABOUT

The Center for Data Arts at The New School engages with data as both a subject and a medium for artistic expression. CDA's artist-led team believes that data can only be understood in its social, cultural, and economic context and brings an artist's toolkit to data problems in the real-world. CDA applies research, creative experimentation, and radical conceptual frameworks to its core mission: interpreting today's information landscape through art and design.

As ubiquitous information technology reshapes the world we know, CDA's Data Matters publication is a wide open platform for examining data's many crucial and disparate roles, offering analytical, critical, and creative perspectives on the rapidly evolving state of data arts.