

WTF

Cory Arcangel

NJS Drawing: Ricky Bell, 2002  
Pen and colored pencil on paper

In the early 2000s, Seth and I were both A/V techs. I worked at the recording and video-editing studio Harvestworks Digital Media Arts Center, and Seth worked across town at the video distributor Electronic Arts Intermix. Sometimes we would hang out after work at EAI. I'd love to say we were discussing fine art and philosophy, but in reality we were two nerds geeking out—a *literal* A/V club. What we did talk about were things that seemed very present then: the net, music, computers, and stuff we were working on. At the time, I had a sideline in antique computers and HTML, and Seth had a sideline in bizarre mixtapes and strange videos. We were not *artists* making *work*, but instead, we were *nerds* making *projects*.

One such project Seth handed me in 2002, on VHS—at the time still a viable medium(!)—was called *Nieuw Jaccz Swinige*. The short video features a flyover of a cheap laser-tag computer-grfx-styled topological map of famous New Jack Swing producers. We see Guy, Boyz II Men, and even ringleader and mastermind Teddy Riley (in classic Price, misspelled “Terry Riley”), all while generic computer-generated stars and triangles shoot across the screen. The sound track is a wobbly, unquantized Korg M1 synthesized funk jam with a rude digital slap bass (think the *Seinfeld* theme) and out-of-tune whistling overlaid. I'd recently graduated from a music conservatory, after a childhood spent glued to MTV and a home computer, and the video seemed eerily custom-made for my interests: rudimentary computer graphics, check; embarrassing early digital and home-brew music production, check; a nearly academic knowledge of a recently passé—though vital—pop vernacular, check! I knew immediately after viewing the video that it was perfect. I had ended up in New York randomly and was as clueless as to what exactly I was doing as a twenty-four-year-old could be. But *Nieuw Jaccz Swinige* was so concise, so *totally bizarre*, and lined up so perfectly with my own non-sense experiments, I clearly remember thinking, “If this is the kinda stuff people in New York are making, I'm in the right place.”

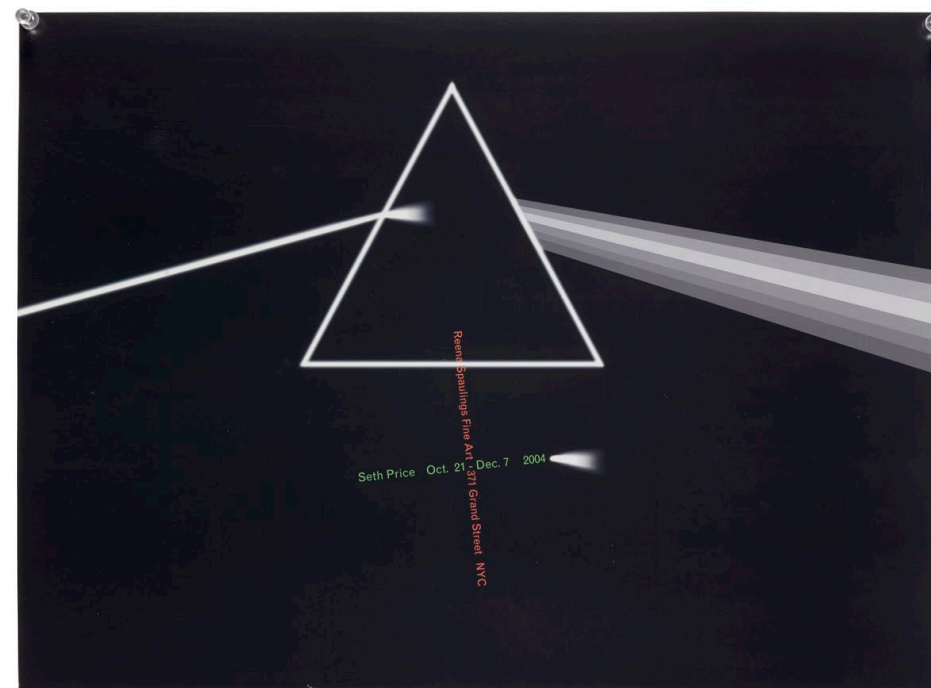
A few years later, in 2004, Seth had his first gallery show, at Reena Spaulings. It was mostly objects. Seth had hung broken safety glass over a few poles, lined the space with flat plastic wall hangings featuring breasts, and leaned a print of a scan of a piece of bread against a wall. Even for Seth, this stuff was weird. I was *completely* lost. And I wasn't alone. There was a theory going around among Seth's A/V friends that the sculptures in the show were, in fact, a joke. The confusion mainly stemmed from a small merch table Seth had placed in the corner. On the table were many of his A/V(ish) projects from the previous few years—a zine version of *Dispersion*, a book of his poems, and some mix CDs. Given the familiarity and gravity of these projects—he had been handing out this stuff for years, some of it already semilegendary—the theory was that the merch table was the *actual* show, and the rest of the stuff was a gag that Seth had spent a few hours (at most!) cooking up the weekend before. As far as I was concerned, it was plausible—the Seth I knew made stuff on computers, not sculpture. I had no idea he even had a studio!

It took a couple of years, but I eventually got clued in to the non-A/V world of fine art, and thus it dawned on me that Seth hadn't been joking in 2004 (at least not in the way rumored). He had somehow become an *artist* who made *work*. Even so, the experience I had at his first show has repeated itself over and over for more than a decade. Seeing Seth's work is always a massive WTF. Luxury body bags? Skin scans? Italian-American pasta? Luckily, in decoding the work, I have my experience with *Nieuw Jaccz Swinige* to provide a reference. If Seth's cultural radar was astute enough to pick up (let alone combine) New Jack Swing, minimalism, early computer graphics, and raw digital

funk in 2002(!), my assumption has always been that *all* his work is made with such sensitivity and foresight—an assumption he continues to prove correct even though sometimes it might take a hot sec to piece together. With *Nieuw Jacxz Swinjge*, Seth not only provided me with a road map for his body of work, he gave my own nonsense projects a sense of home—while also demonstrating the effect a perfect three-and-a-half-minute video made by a member of *my own generation* could have. And not only did I want to participate in that game, it gave me something to shoot for. Not bad for some random VHS from an A/V friend.

*Coolin' in the studio, you know how the story goes / Bobbin' our heads to the tune we're about to do / It's a laid-back swing thang / The groove we feel is strong / We need peace here to get it on ... / We're just vibin'.*

—Boyz II Men



Exhibition poster for *Seth Price* at Reena Spaulings Fine Art, New York, 2004, offset on paper