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Less Like Art: Seth Price as Author

by Ross Simonini



View of "Seth Price: Wrok Fmaily Friedns," at 356 S. Mission Rd. Courtesy of the artist, Petzel Gallery, New York, and 356 S. Mission Rd., Los Angeles. Photo Brica Wilcox.

For a moment, Seth Price dropped out of the art world. In the summer of 2013, he stopped producing new work, laid off his assistants, canceled his upcoming exhibitions, and requested that online magazines remove articles written about him. He did all of this to begin a new career as a writer. He'd written before—an erudite essay on artistic distribution, a manual of found internet articles on how to disappear from society, and sundry other chunks of text, the kind often labeled “artist's writings,” an art world subgenre that seems to be more respected than read. But this time Price wanted to write something more substantial, something less like art and more like literature, and, as he explained it to me, the form he chose was the young adult novel. He produced 200 pages of text, but never finished or published the book.

He became anxious about his dramatic career turn and he found himself sliding back to his old ways. “My art world identity kept intruding,” he's said about that period. Eventually, he stopped writing, hung a new show, and felt like a literary failure. He was back to being a plain old artist.

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That moment of resignation is where inspiration hit. Or at least that’s how the story goes, the way Price tells it. He abandoned the YA book, began writing again, compulsively, and in a few months, produced his first novel, *Fuck Seth Price* (2015), a slim, dense novella that functions as much like cultural criticism as it does fiction and memoir. The account is a parallel reality, an alternate history. Narrative drifts in and out over what seems to be Price’s genuine reactions to the real art world, with some of the names and proper nouns adjusted, some not. It’s a fictional approach to fact that is not uncommon in new literature. Autofiction, as the form is sometimes called, already traces a lineage through some profound writers, such as Elena Ferrante, Sheila Heti, Karl Ove Knausgaard, and Tao Lin.

Where memoir claims to be a true account of the author’s life with some allowances given, the autofictional novel demands that it is all a lie, a sort of anti-memoir. Protagonists often bear the name of their creator, narratives resemble reality more than not, but the books are firmly considered as novels. It’s a postmodern sleight of hand that can feel overly clever and wink-winky when described, as I am doing now, but in practice, the approach is refreshing and relevant, and has produced some of the most potent works of fiction in recent years. It’s also literature’s strongest response to reality television, and in a way, to the internet, where our identities are as malleable as our imaginations.

“It was not a coincidence,” Price writes of his protagonist, “that his disenchantment with visual art occurred right around the time when making simplistic, often digitally formulated abstract paintings became suddenly passé, as was discussing them, critiquing them, even satirizing them.” For Price’s protagonist, cultural awareness is an overwhelming and occasionally debilitating burden. He feels a great anxiety trying to keep up with culture, and it’s his obsession with the capricious swings of painting that drives him into the field of writing, which he sees as a fresh artistic space, the frontier: “Writing, on the other hand, which had little connection to money and power, was only broadening its already considerable mass appeal, thanks to the proliferation of texting, tweeting, blogging, and so on, even as those same forces were emancipating writing from its long-standing narrative conventions.”

Price paints himself as the most calculating of artists, willing to pivot his entire career path on the whim of the mainstream. This kind of a move might have once been scorned as “selling out,” but that phrase has lost its righteous luster. These days, selling out means being successful, and the artist’s only responsibility is to do it well, or make it “cool”—a key word for the protagonist—which is to do it boldly, knowingly. In this way, *Fuck Seth Price* could be seen as a manifesto for contemporary art, which is not to say that the book has any fixed philosophy—it doesn’t—but neither do the varied impulses at work in most art these days. Instead, the book offers a more exploratory text with the spice of confusion, unsure of its exact position but filled with enough insight to keep the reader compelled.

In January, Price held an exhibition titled “Wrok Fmaily Freidns” [sic] at 356 Mission in Los Angeles. He showed a variety of “wrok”: light boxes, collages, sculptures, and installations, much

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of them created from plywood, plastic netting, looming PVC pipes, and other construction materials. As always, he managed to perfectly dismiss and adhere to the unspoken rules of fashionable art, an approach he describes in the book with deadpan crassness: “In preparing the work, any number of methods or styles would do, so long as the result looked ‘cool,’ ensuring that the painting would seem classic and minimal while emanating a vague awareness of rich historical struggle.” The fictional Price has a careful list of guidelines for his arting practice: the work should “seem tasteful,” but also have a “lack of concern for traditional skill,” a “cynical irreverence,” and a punk-like “dismissal of history” that would make it, in actuality, “tasteless.” It’s almost as if Price, the author, is trying to preemptively critique his own visual work, which unsurprisingly resembles the art he describes. And he’s good at it. In fact, I have yet to read someone write about Seth Price as well, or as enjoyably, as Seth Price. But of course, that would only be if he were writing about Seth Price, which he’s not.

The book’s title says a lot about the paradoxical engine powering it. Price wants to erase his artist persona, but he also wants to codify it in a great American novel. He both adores and rejects the art world. He wants to make a painting but he’s too aware of art history and American innovation to give into such a comfortable impulse. It’s a fraught, binary state of mind, one with which most millennials can certainly sympathize. Despite all his shrewd knowingness, however, the snarky opinions Price originally describes eventually reveal themselves to be pledges of love to art.

For the 356 Mission show, Price produced a catalogue which includes a few dozen excerpts from his abandoned novel. He called it *Wrok Fmaily Freidns: Aka Books of Ice: The Tark Ones*, suggesting some kind of a fantasy-adventure trilogy, but in fact, the book’s gist seems to be something much closer to *Fuck Seth Price*—a “prequel” as he’s called it. Its plot seems to involve a poet named Boss, and its concerns—wealth, cuisine, high culture—are expressed in aphoristic conviction: “Accessories have conquered the world” and “A drug is a worldly item that is not to be sold and not to be bought.” Price’s characters are the keenest of aesthetes, their attention claimed by the sensual, cultural stimulation around them. Unfortunately, they aren’t very happy about it, and spend much of their time decrying the commercial industries supporting that stimulation.

Throughout the catalogue, the text alternates with photographs taken of used building materials, some of which overlap with the combines in the show. For Price, the excerpts, which often end mid-sentence and include multiple misspellings, are his own literary building materials, a vocabulary and style he spent a year developing. Like his use of autofiction, the misspellings provide Price with a kind of untouchability: he’s simultaneously revealing an intimate nook of his art, and using formal maneuvers to dissociate himself from it, to make sure no one takes it seriously. All of the book’s text is shown within digitally constructed images, as chiseled writing on tablets set amid the atmosphere of a screensaver. Again, the aesthetic suggests both a vulnerability and formal coolness, but the bright backdrops and abrupt edits keep that same reader at a polite distance, preventing her from truly sinking in to a good old-fashioned novel.

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These kinds of techniques are rarely seen in the kingdom of letters, a place where Price does not (yet) live, where manners and tradition lead the way, where a typo is still a typo. Artist’s writings, however, have long embraced the mistake. In 1993, Sean Landers published *[sic]*, a long harangue of a book—a novel?—chock full of dyslexic-looking misspellings, as the title suggests. To boot, all of it is entirely hand-written, sometimes illegibly so. This worked well when *[sic]* was shown as a work on paper, installed on the walls at the Venice Biennale in 1993; on the page, though, it made for a bit of a slog, the kind of book best experienced in small bursts, with passages selected at random. It resisted being read.

Fuck Seth Price, on the other hand, was written with the kind of sharp tone and deep insight found in the greatest voice-driven novels. It could have been convincingly distributed by any of the major literary houses, but in actuality was published by the small, enigmatic imprint Leopard Press (run by Wade Guyton and Bettina Funcke), which has only put out two other books—Price’s *How to Disappear in America* (2008) and Charles Harlan’s *Carol Bove Manuals* (2010). Price should be part of the conversation about the contemporary novel, but he doesn’t seem to want to be. He’s about as comfortable in the literary world as he is in the art world. He’s aware of what multifaceted urges can do to a tidy, specialized art career. So he constructed some characters to fit his needs: Seth Price, writer, and Seth Price, antihero protagonist. Each adds a new storyline to the brilliant, expanding farce of his career. Meanwhile, Seth Price, the artist, is still there, the man behind the curtain, undermining himself, smearing his good name, fucking with his own slippery identity.

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