

What to Do with Pictures

DAVID JOSELIT

“It’s an amazing customer imprint,” Mr. Ballmer said. “And Skype is a verb, as they say.”¹

In 1967–68 Richard Serra prepared a famous list of verbs.² This compendium of actions—“to roll, to create, to fold, to store, to bend, to shorten, to twist, to dapple, to crumple, to shave,” and so on and so on—implies matter as its proper “direct object.” You can roll, fold, store, bend, shorten, twist, dapple, and shave lead, for instance, or crumple paper.³ This litany of verbs also includes two sustained “lapses” into nouns, including many gerunds (whose grammatical function is to transform verbs into nouns): “of tension, of gravity, of entropy, of nature, of grouping, of layering, of felting . . .” If the infinitive verb marks a time outside of action (“to rotate” suggests a possibility that need not be acted upon), Serra’s nouns imply the dilated moment of an unfolding event—to be “of tension,” for instance, means that force is being or has been applied. Indeed, Serra’s early sculptures might be defined as matter marked by the exercise of force.⁴

Serra’s verb list furnishes a terse blueprint for post-Minimalist sculpture. But it also implies a general theory of transitive art—of art produced through the exertion of force on something, or someone. Since what counts in transitive procedures is not the nature of the material acted upon (such as lead or rubber) but the generation of form through action, Serra’s list can easily be repurposed

1. Andrew Ross Sorkin and Steve Lohr, “Microsoft to Buy Skype for \$8.5 Billion,” *New York Times* (May 10, 2011).

2. The list was only published in 1972. See Richard Serra, “Verb List, 1967–68,” in Richard Serra, *Writings/Interviews* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), pp. 3–4.

3. On the other hand, “to create” seems an exceptionally general action smuggled into this list of specific operations: like the last verb in Serra’s long list—“to continue”—it is a meta-procedure.

4. Serra is by no means the first artist to propose a transitive model of art wherein force generates form. A modern genealogy for such practices could easily be established that would span the manipulation of readymades (where perhaps “inscription” takes the place of “force”) to Jasper Johns, whose paintings index the residue of actions taken upon or “in” them, to the various practices of the late 1950s and ’60s in which scoring movements or actions was fundamental, including Happenings and Fluxus. The particular virtue of Serra’s list is how clearly, directly, and uncompromisingly it asserts a “transitive” position.

through a simple change of “direct objects.” Relational Aesthetics, for instance, might be said to consist of learning how “to scatter, to arrange, to repair, to discard, to pair, to distribute, to surfeit” groups of people. Or, as I will argue below, the verbs “to enclose, to surround, to encircle, to hide, to cover, to wrap, to dig, to tie, to bind, to weave, to join, to match, to laminate, to bond, to hinge, to mark, to expand” may be applied to the behavior of pictures within digital economies. Such substitutions mark a shift from the manipulation of material (paint, wood, lead, paper, chalk, video, etc.) to the management (or mismanagement) of populations of persons and/or pictures. Under such conditions, “formatting”—the capacity to configure data in multiple possible ways—is a more useful term than “medium,” which, all heroic efforts to the contrary, can seldom shed its intimate connection to matter (paint, wood, lead, paper, chalk, video, etc.).

Formatting is as much a political as an aesthetic procedure because the same image may easily be adduced as “evidence” in support of various and even contradictory propositions—determining a format thus introduces an ethical choice about how to produce intelligible information from raw data.⁵ In digital economies, value accrues not solely from production—the invention of content—but from the extraction of meaningful patterns from profusions of existing content. As the term “data mining” suggests, raw data is now regarded as a “natural,” or at least a naturalized, resource to be mined, like coal or diamonds. But unlike coal and diamonds, with their differing degrees of scarcity, data exists in unwieldy and ever-increasing quantities—it is harvested with every credit-card transaction, click of a cursor, and phone call we make. This reservoir of tiny, inconsequential facts, which is sublime in its ungraspable enormity, is meaningless in its disorganized state. Since such data is both superabundant and ostensibly trivial, what gives it value are the kinds of formats it can assume, which may be as wide-ranging as marketing profiles and intelligence on terrorism. Such a shift from producing to formatting content leads to what I call the “epistemology of search,” where knowledge is produced by discovering and/or constructing meaningful patterns—formats—from vast reserves of raw data, through, for instance, the algorithms of search engines like Google or Yahoo. Under these conditions, any quantum of data might lend itself to several, possibly contradictory, formats.

The artist Seth Price has implicitly articulated—though never, like Serra, explicitly published—his own “list” of transitive actions appropriate to the epistemology of search. I will focus on three of Price’s “routines”—or procedures of formatting—each of which lends itself to subdivision: “to disperse,” “to profile,” and “of effects.” Together, they sketch an answer to the question: what to do with pictures?

5. For me, one of the most powerful examples of the consequences of data formatting is Colin Powell’s presentation of supposed evidence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq to the U.N. in 2003. The question of evidence and documentary truth-value has been a major one in recent art practices. For an important account of this, see Carrie Lambert-Beatty, “Make-Believe: Parafiction and Plausibility,” *October* 129 (Summer 2009), pp. 51–84.

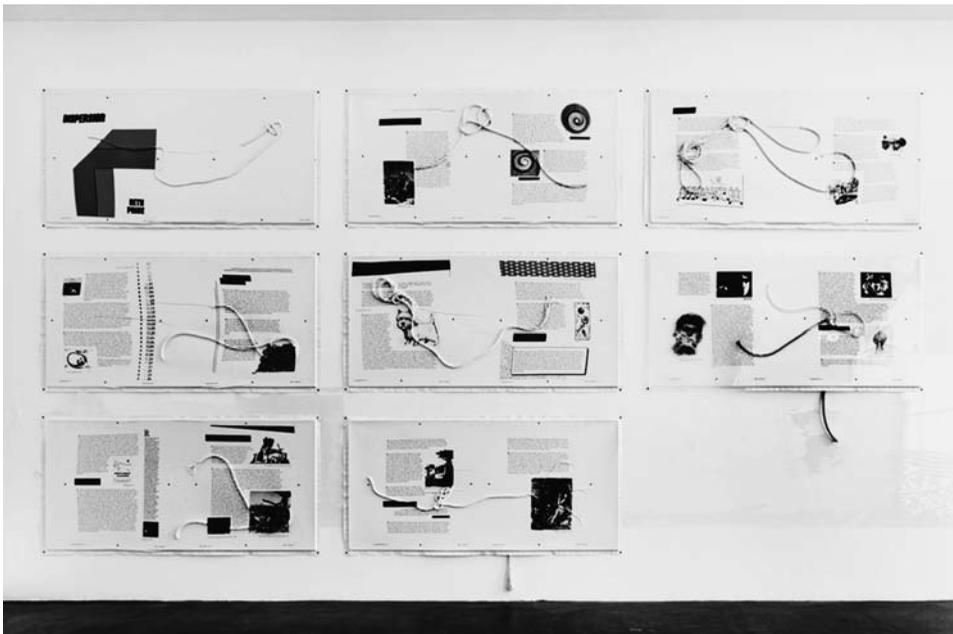
To Disperse

Price's best-known work of criticism is probably his 2002 book *Dispersion*, which, like many of his texts, is freely downloadable, making it a model of dispersion as well as a theoretical account of it. In a sense, the title says it all: to disperse is to shift emphasis from creating new content to distributing existing content. As Price writes, "Suppose an artist were to release the work directly into a system that depends on reproduction and distribution for sustenance, a model that encourages contamination, borrowing, stealing, and horizontal blur."⁶ Several aspects of this passage repay close reading: first, for Price, dispersal diminishes rather than enhances a work's value. As he puts it in a subsequent passage, "what if [the work] is instead dispersed and reproduced, its value approaching zero as its accessibility rises?"⁷ In fact, while it seems logical that scarcity should enhance art's value (and conversely, that accessibility would cause it to drop to zero), this presumption is incorrect when it comes to actual contemporary image economies (including the art market),



Seth Price. *Dispersion*. 2002–.

6. Seth Price, *Dispersion* (2002), downloaded from www.distributedhistory.com, n.p.
7. Ibid.



Price. *Essay with Ropes*. 2008.



Price. Hostage Video Still with Time Stamp. 2005–.

ing), and another indicates the illicit or licit transfer of property (i.e., stealing and its innocent twin, borrowing). According to these characterizations, Price sees dispersion as a mode of transfer whose poles are marked by innocuous exchanges (borrowing) and their virulent converse (contamination). As the latter term suggests, dispersion can also carry a biopolitical connotation. And indeed, Price declares it to be “a system that depends on reproduction and distribution for *sustenance*” (my emphasis). Networks, in other words, provide life support for the individual images that inhabit them; and as in the human body, failure of the circulatory system will lead to death.

Finally, Price introduces the condition of “horizontal blur.” Blur occurs when something or someone moves too fast from one place to another for it to register optically as a bounded form, making it a privileged figure of transitive action. Price stages such blur spatially in an ongoing series of works begun in 2005 titled *Hostage Video Still with Time Stamp* made on unfurled rolls of clear polyester film, known colloquially as Mylar, upon which are silkscreened degraded reproductions of an image taken from the Internet of the severed head of the American Jewish businessman Nicholas Berg, who was decapitated by Islamic militants. In these pieces, the physical effects of dispersion are manifested in three ways: first, a computer file—the germ of an artwork, as in many of Price’s pieces—is rendered nearly illegible, the result of several generations of reproduction, as Price digitalizes, compresses, downloads, blows up, and then screen-prints original footage. Second, while bolts of the printed Mylar are sometimes unrolled flush to the wall, at some point in their installation the material is twisted or tied into crumpled configurations that serve as a spatial metaphor for the ostensibly “immaterial” traffic of images online—as though successive screen views on a monitor had piled up continuously like a disorderly comic strip rather than being constantly “refreshed.” Finally, third, the grisly and horrible physical violation of

where the massive distribution of reproductions—whether of the Mona Lisa or Lady Gaga—is precisely what confers value. As Price defines it, however, dispersion is a drag on circulation, a form of counter-distribution, where value is purposely diminished as opposed to accumulated through the dissemination of images.

A list of three transitive actions is included in the passage I quoted above: contamination, borrowing, and stealing. One possible pairing of these three refers to destructive events (i.e., contamination and steal-



Price. Hostage Video Still with Time Stamp. 2005–.



Berg is an explicitly biological form of “dispersion,” in which a head is parted from its torso. The catastrophe of his decapitation results in the abject wasting of a body. It is the object of a perverse fascination for the artist (and the viewer) that verges on the erotic. As Price writes in another context, “Locating pleasure in benign decay is a perversion, for these structures are useless and wasteful, a spilling of seed, like gay sex, like gay sex.”⁸ While some gay people might object to this characterization (I am not among them), Price’s romanticizing (and even caricaturing) rendering of gay desire nonetheless asserts something important: a nonproductive relationship to distribution, the violence of which is aggressively expressed by Berg’s decapitation.⁹

8. Seth Price, *Was ist “Los”* [a.k.a. *Décor Holes*] (2003–05), downloaded from www.distributedhistory.com.

9. In an era when demands for marriage rights have become the signature issue within gay activism, the characterization of “gay sex” as nonproductive feels a little nostalgic. I, for one, however, agree that one of the strongest political accomplishments of some gay and much queer activism is a critique of normative forms of *production* for which biological reproduction often served as a privileged model.

The normative goal of distribution is to saturate a market. Once the dissemination of an image reaches a tipping point, it sustains itself as an icon (celebrity is the paradigmatic model for self-perpetuating images). Price, on the other hand, represents the failure to saturate, a perversion of distribution he calls “dispersion.” Dispersion is slow, while standard forms of commercial distribution are fast. As Price puts it, “Slowness works against all of our prevailing urges and requirements: it is a resistance to the contemporary mandate of speed. Moving with the times places you in a blind spot: if you’re part of the general tenor, it’s difficult to add a dissonant note.”¹⁰ Staging different rates of circulation is one type of routine appropriate to art in digital economies—it’s a tactic for escaping the “blind spot” that results from moving along at the same rate as the market. Forms of critique that once would have been conducted through dissonant content are here reinvented as variable velocities of circulation. In other words, the core of Price’s project has less to do with what he represents—even when that representation is inflammatory, as with the Nick Berg decapitation—and more to do with the transitive actions to which he subjects this content. In Serra’s art, transitivity is expressed as force—the force necessary to mold matter. But, following an important distinction that Hannah Arendt makes between violence as the exertion of force and power as the effect of human consensus, we can recognize a difference between Serra and Price’s transitive art.¹¹ The latter’s object is populations of images rather than quantities of matter: he seeks to format (and not merely “reveal”) image-power. One way he does this is to slow down the circulation of images¹²: in *Hostage Video Still with Time Stamp*, Price curbs the frictionless motion and instantaneous spatial jumps characteristic of navigation on the Internet and allows them to pile up in unruly masses; the gruesome decapitation he represents is also the figure of an acephalous media.

To Profile

There are few things more ubiquitous in contemporary life than profiles: some are composed voluntarily to be posted on social-media sites, but many, and perhaps most, are involuntary, like the data trails left by every purchase, cursor click, and mobile phone call one makes. Silhouettes have existed for ages, but profiling is modern—dating from the nineteenth century.¹³ A silhouette is a bounded

10. Price, *Dispersion*, n.p.

11. Arendt makes this distinction in her important essay “On Violence,” in Hannah Arendt, *Crises of the Republic* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1972). In this essay, she writes, “Power corresponds to the human ability not just to act but to act in concert. Power is never the property of an individual; it belongs to a group and remains in existence only so long as the group keeps together” (p. 143). On the contrary, “Violence . . . is distinguished by its instrumental character. Phenomenologically, it is close to strength, since the implements of violence, like all other tools, are designed and used for the purpose of multiplying natural strength until, in the last stage of their development, they can substitute for it” (p. 145).

12. In my book *Feedback: Television Against Democracy* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2007), I refer to this as “slowing down the trajectory.”

13. On nineteenth-century forms of aesthetic profiling, see Allan Sekula, “The Body and the Archive,” *October* 39 (Winter 1986), pp. 3–64.

shape that sharply delineates an inside from an outside: the information it carries lies entirely in partitioning a field. The verb “to profile” denotes the imposition of such a finite shape onto a set of perceived statistical regularities, as when scientists plot a straight line through an irregular array of data points, disciplining and abstracting inchoate (or sometimes merely imagined) patterns. The implicit violence of such projections is conveyed by the connotation of profiling in police work, where persons who belong to particular groups—be they organized by ethnicity, age, economic status, or gender—are believed to be more likely to commit a crime and consequently are more frequently treated as criminals. Profiling imposes a profile on populations of data (including visual data).

In his highly inventive practice, Price has developed two tactics related to profiling. In one, which is closely related to his strategies of dispersal, he makes large centrifugal works generated from small “icons” drawn from the Internet—each picturing a gesture of touching such as lighting a cigarette, kissing, or writing. These motifs emerge unsteadily, like optical puzzles, on blank expanses of wall bounded by several irregularly shaped “continents” of rare wood veneers laminated behind clear acrylic plastic. Because these giant puzzle pieces, which resemble landmasses in a wall map, are themselves free-form, it is not easy to recognize—let alone to remember—the motif they partially delineate (I admit that the first time I saw one, I failed to



Price. Untitled. 2008.

recognize the generating kernel at all). Michael Newman has beautifully described the effect of these works as that of a “‘frame’ [that] invites the viewer to project an image into the emptiness, and this emptiness bleeds into the surrounding space of the wall with an extension that is potentially infinite.”¹⁴ As in Price’s model of dispersion, where the circulation of images is slowed down, in this series of pieces the normative centripetal logic of profiling (which is aimed, as I have argued, at crystallizing a “concentrated” profile from an amorphous field of data) is opposed by a centrifugal form of dispersal, where the possibility of generating an intelligible silhouette is interrupted, slowed, and possibly even arrested. At the same time, the appropriated “icons” upon which they are based—all intimate moments of touching—deracinate face-to-face contact by transforming tactility into absence. Needless to say, this is precisely an effect of digital communication.

Price’s second approach to profiling seems the opposite of his first in that it represents whole as opposed to fragmentary objects. A series of vacuum-form works are molded over things or human body parts (rope, breasts, fists, flowers, and bomber jackets); sometimes they literally encase readymade lengths of rope that might spill out below the vacuum-form surface. These illusionistic reliefs adopt the logic of packaging, where a plastic shell molded to a commodity’s contours both protects that commodity and constitutes its seductive surface. But while these profiles may be “whole,” they are hollow—functioning as what Price likes to call a “hole.” In this sense, they resemble the wood and acrylic wall pieces, where form is organized around a structuring absence. Indeed, the “hole” for Price is precisely not an absence, in the sense of a passive empty space, but an “event” within a rich surface or field of data. A profile is simultaneously empty and full, a hole and a whole. As he states in his largely appropriated book, *How to Disappear in America*:

There is the possibility that in the future people may be identifiable by their purchasing habits. Granted the point-of-sale data collected by computers would need to be immense, yet eventually pattern-recognition software may some day be able to provide authorities with perhaps 100 of the best possible “hits” on people matching your known buying habits. When—if ever—that becomes a reality, you can be sure you won’t know about it until it’s shown on cable television . . .



14. Michael Newman, “Seth Price’s Operations,” in *Price, Seth* (Zurich: JRP/Ringier Kunstverlag, 2010), p. 44.



Price. Cherries. 2011.
Opposite page: Price. Vintage Bomber. 2008.

So alter your buying habits. You need to discard as many predictable patterns as possible. One of the most common mistakes is maintaining old habits. If you're a smoker, stop. If you don't smoke, start. If you enjoy hot and spicy foods, stop purchasing those items and change to mild foods. If you frequent bars, stop. This may seem an unusual step but patterns are predictable. Break them.¹⁵

The theory of profiling is that human subjectivity is a pattern bereft of interiority. The unconscious is a hole.

Of Effects

In *Digital Video Effect: "Holes"* (2003) and *Digital Video Effect: "Spills"* (2004), Price frames found JPEGs and video footage with digital masking effects that generate autonomous "events"; a variety of "holes" (such as round paper punch-outs) open in a black ground to reveal pinpoint views of a horrific image that is only revealed in its entirety momentarily, when the different views fuse together for a split second. A video image spills onto black ground and is succeeded by black amoebic forms that spill back onto the image, rendering it a kind of liquid. The

15. Seth Price, *How to Disappear in America* (New York: Leopard Press, 2008), pp. 37–38.



Price. Digital Video Effect:
“Holes.” 2003.

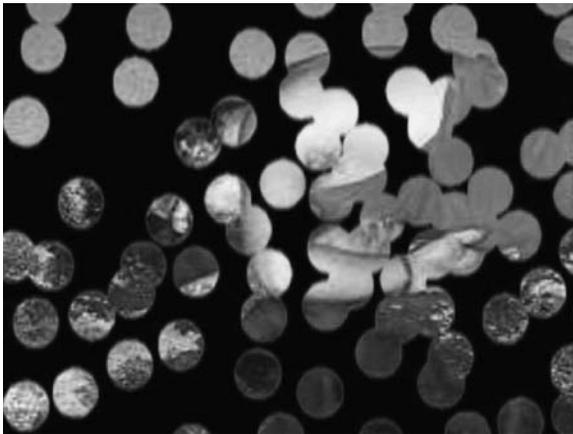
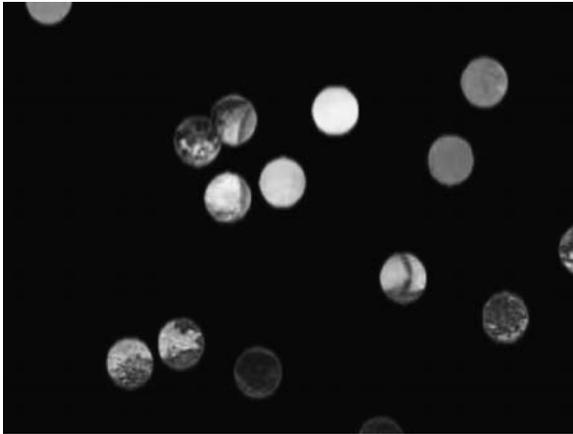
ultimate expression of this amorphous, aqueous (literally mercurial) sort of image comes in *Untitled Film, Right* (2006), an endless four-second loop of a wave purchased as stock footage that is nauseating yet mesmerizing. Tim Griffin has described Price’s effects in the following terms:

as a simulation device, the “effect” posits a kind of chronology where there is none—suggesting some precipitant action responsible for the visual and aural phenomena taking place before the eye and ear. The “effect” creates nothing so much as a rhetorical hole in time, but only in order to fill that hole in advance with some false history or phantom memory for the individual viewer . . .¹⁶

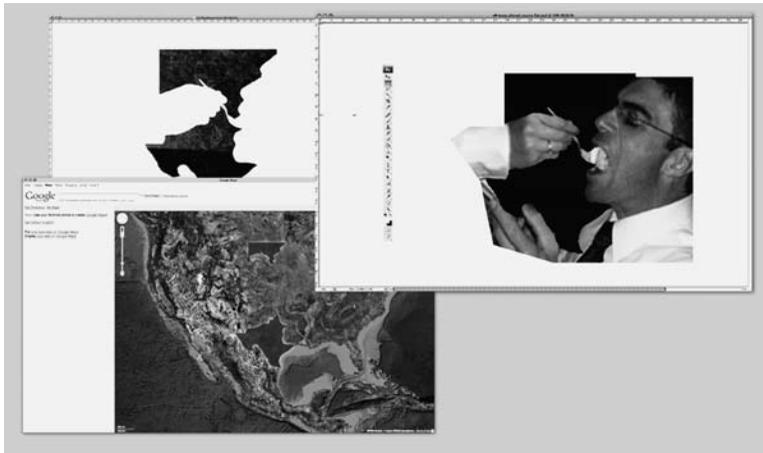
Griffin’s association of effects with an absent or invisible agency—a hole in time—is not only essential for understanding Price’s work, it also points to a broader tendency in contemporary sculpture. In the open “scenarios” of artists such as Liam Gillick, Pierre Huyghe, and Rirkrit Tiravanija, who design environments that may or may not be activated through the presence of scripted or unscripted events, spatial structures are consecrated to hosting social effects. Such principles are also present in the new modes of sculptural composition exemplified by Isa Genzken and Rachel Harrison, where tangential connections between things reverse the centripetal effect of earlier twentieth-century montage and assemblage (to use terms I have applied already to Price), in favor of centrifugal tornadoes of divergent associations.

I wish to supplement Griffin’s definition with two additional valences of effect. First, “special effects,” as practiced by Hollywood cinema, render narrative as pure motion—often a virtually unbroken trajectory initiated in the opening scenes of a film and coming to rest only with the last credit. Blockbuster plots are

16. Tim Griffin, “The Personal Effects of Seth Price,” *Artforum* 47, no. 10 (Summer 2009), p. 288.



Price. Digital Video Effect:
"Holes." 2003.



*Price.
Redistribution.
2007-.*

no more than conventional grids: what matters are the texture, velocity, and point of view with which spectators are carried through a standardized sequence of events. Such movies are not so much watched as navigated—like computer games where motion is frictionless, continuous, and defiant of gravity. The “effect,” as Hollywood renders it, is almost pure transitivity in the absence of a direct object (unless that object is the spectator herself). Second, effects are literally a posteriori. They are, to put it plainly, consequences that cannot be fully anticipated during the phase of aesthetic production. And here, too, we may note a wider aesthetic shift. Artists like Price are primarily interested not in producing new content but in submitting existing pictures (moving and still) to various “ecological” conditions in order to see how they behave. This is why he can call *Redistribution* (2007–), a videotaped version of the kind of artist’s talk given at art schools or museums, a work: in his practice, works are inextricable from their dissemination. It is also why he habitually reframes and remixes his texts, music, and



Price. Untitled Film (Right). 2006.

images, as well as making many of them available online on his website. A contemporary art devoted to circulation, is, of course, a creature of a specific ecology: the market. But instead of either giving up or selling out, Price, like more and more artists, games the market by surfing it. This leads to all kinds of effects: variable velocities, catastrophic jamming, viral proliferation, etc., etc.¹⁷

17. This is the model of aesthetic politics I attempt to delineate in *Feedback*.

Coda: Image Power

If one subscribes to Arendt's definition of power as the effect of a public, then populations of images might possess their own species of image-power—by saturating markets, on the one hand, or “going viral” on the other. This implies a shift in how the relationship between politics and art is conceived. Indeed, significant changes have occurred in this critical relationship over the past century—from avant-garde modes of revolution in the early twentieth century to postmodern, or neo-avant-garde, critique in the late twentieth century, to what I would call image-power in the early twenty-first century (a time when divisions between commercial and fine-art images are more and more difficult to draw). This is an art devoted to seizing circulation as a technology of power: *to disperse, to profile, and of effects.*