

Literature

By Steve Zultanski

YOUNG, ADULT,

Fiction is no match for reality, and here's all the dis-proof you need. A mash-up of poetry, polyphonic musings, drawings, and bitter irony, Seth Price's new book, *Dedicated to Life* (2020), is a perfect mirror of our twisted present, and his self-imploding mind.

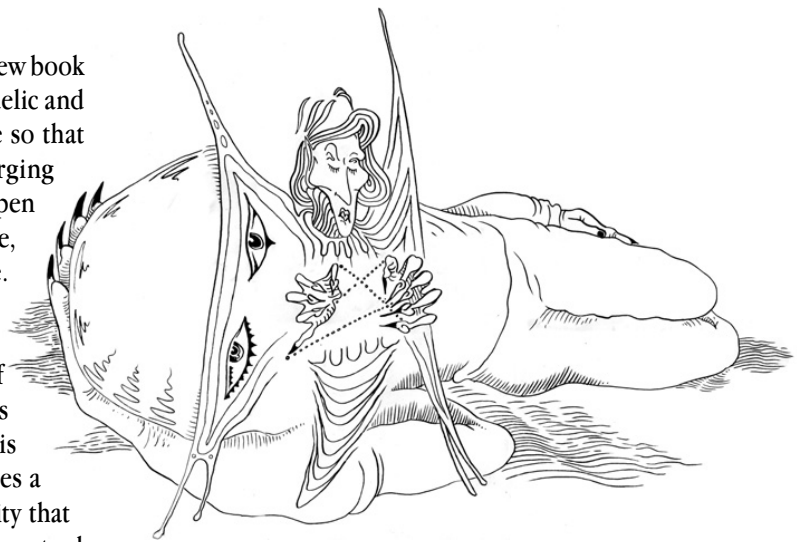


Clockwise, from top right: Seth Price, *Arm Flute*, Graphite on paper, 18.5 x 25 cm.
IV Tat, Graphite on paper, 45.5 x 61 cm. *Head Pull*, Graphite on paper, 18.5 x 25 cm (all 2020)

The drawings reproduced in Seth Price's new book of poems and fictions are vaguely psychedelic and a tad grotesque, with a lot of white space so that the figures seem suspended in, or emerging from, voids. In one, a ghostly body tears open its own chest to reveal a pair of dice inside, like terrible organs that literalise chance. Much of Price's work has dealt with corporeality and intimacy – as in the high-resolution photos of skin, or the moulds of bomber jackets that suggest absent bodies – but it is in his drawings that he reveals his true existentialist streak. There, one senses a straightforward vulnerability and perversity that can help illuminate his cooler, more conceptual projects.

Price's writings perform a parallel vulnerability, but in a much more self-reflexive and even self-deprecating fashion. In his novel, *Fuck Seth Price* (2015), he writes through his complicity with a decadent and unjust art market, while skewering his own hand-wringing about this complicity – he knows full well that admitting one's guiltiness is part and parcel of toothless liberal politics – and his response is to render this guilt in such a convoluted way that it's hard to tell whether it's a critique, or a critique of a critique, or a critique of a critique. It's not so much about mirroring ambivalence as it is an attempt to follow the endless twists and turns of ideology. *Dedicated to Life* continues in this vein, but with less performative self-scrutiny and more expansive curiosity; there's still art-world introspection, but the heart of the book is its broader cultural inquires, and even personal reflections, though the writing is too collaged and ironised to be unequivocally autobiographical. According to the introduction, Price took a year-long break from art-making in 2013 to work on an experimental Young Adult (YA) novel, which he finished but abandoned, "a heap of debris". Many of the texts in this book were supposedly built from salvaged lines and passages from that failed project.

The YA material is pretty indiscernible, and one gets the sense that the original text barely resembled a YA novel anyway. But it works as poetry. Outside of an art context, the poems hold up as literature – they're deftly written, funny, surprising, and unashamed of making big, oblique statements that come off as profound. They tend to juggle pop citation and philosophical rumination, as in this excerpt from "Rereading", a poem that opens by positing that one says that one is "rereading"



Butterfly, 2020
Graphite on paper, 45.5 x 61 cm

a book: it is a performance of learned familiarity and sophisticated dedication to reconsideration.

"I was rereading Harry Potter" suggests "we" all passed / Through some educational vale of tears during which we ingested books, but this was only the preliminary stage / In a longer process, / Only the first of several multiple stomachs / In a digestive system that requires we shepherd these spheres / On a journey from the vestibule into the great room, and then Onward to the mud room, / Eventually to be deposited on the back porch in great bundles tied with string.

Here, Price jumps from musing on the social value produced by a mildly pretentious affectation to a dense and lyrical passage about the fate of knowledge. His metaphors are comically mixed: the movement of knowledge through a person is compared first to digestion, and then to architecture. In just a few lines, the body is transformed into a building, and knowledge is recast as waste that is eventually expelled, left out in the cold, forgotten.

In its concern with ubiquitous cultural consumption, *Dedicated to Life* resonates with a number of other recent-ish poetry books that probe the conditions of metropolitan affluence, education, and taste. Tan Lin's *Seven Controlled Vocabularies*

and *Obituary* 2004. *The Joy of Cooking* (2010) is a self-consciously ambient work that theorises about the aesthetics of high-end restaurants, architectural theory, bar codes, shopping, and book design. Lin's sentences on these subjects are often contradictory but lacking in tension, and that's the point: there is no real contradiction in consumption, everything is accessible and exchangeable, and aesthetic enjoyment is experienced as a feeling of distant observation. In a different key, Andrew Durbin's *Mature Themes* (2014) writes through the glossiness of TV shows, movies, and signifiers of wealth, eagerly embracing both the pleasures of mass culture and the pleasures of critiquing mass culture.

Like these poets, Price's texts are narrated by perceptive speakers with unstable identities and flat affects who repeatedly break from their tone of deadpan commentary to blurt out seemingly personal statements or rhapsodise about their delectation of a particular commodity. Near the end of "Who Dreamt the World", a poem that begins by historicising the aggressively neutral decor of boutique hotels ("I pondered the relationship between chill beats / And cream-colored couches"), the speaker earnestly appreciates the uncanny emptiness of wealthy urban life:

I really like Manhattan / I like how completely blank it is / How cruelly empty it feels / It feels empty of feeling / All the feeling was sucked out through leak-holes / In tourists and rich people, / And natives who extract feeling cues from tourism and luxury / And everything else that does not care.

For Price, this indifference is intimately connected to – and perhaps inextricable from – the fast-paced circulation of knowledge in both media and cities. Throughout his works, the problem of "knowing", in the sense of connoisseurship, is one of his big subjects. He astutely observes the proliferation of judgment and opinion as part of the continuous flow of data, products, and money that became, in the US, even more unrelenting during an economic boom coterminous with a long war. In this light, Price is interested in how taste is constructed, how value is bestowed, and how historical reality is rewritten by entertainment and fashion.

This exploration into how aesthetic objects are framed and consumed involves historicising the seemingly ephemeral (video game soundtracks, ranch dressing, art movements) in terms of large

events (9/11, the 2008 financial crisis, technological shifts). But such explanations are also, of course, the work's limitation – popular culture is already obsessed with reading itself, lightly historicising itself, and think-piecing itself to death. Ceaseless interpretation and self-reflexivity are built into the marketing and reception of even the most seemingly insignificant products. Of course, Price knows this, and *Dedicated to Life* almost cheerfully joins in this endeavour, fully embracing the fact that it's a dead end – partially because there's a perverse pleasure in that impasse, and partially because the labyrinthine analysis of culture is simply an aspect of many people's daily experience, part of a common texture of life.

In one poem, "Talking to an Old Gent", Price explicitly thematises this problem and points to his own obsolescence. In this text, the narrator chats with a wealthy older man who obsessively historicises and mythologises past trends. For example, he complains that cars are no longer sold in as many exciting colours as they once were, because they have become more functional and less artistic: "Cars back then had to do with interiority and home design, / And a kind of minimal gesture of personal expression." Price's narrator listens to this speech without comment, and it's clear that the narrative voice of the book is a younger version of this "old gent": soon enough, the poems' clever commentary will seem just as dusty and irrelevant.

Dedicated to Life is one of my favourite recent poetry books. I wish it were more widely available, because I think that it would be eagerly read beyond an art world context. That said, it's important that the author is an artist, because only a purely visual aspect of the work points outside of the circular cultural logic that the book embodies: the drawings, reproduced intermittently throughout, are intimate, imaginative, and charmingly surreal. They suggest that the world described by the poems is not fully – not yet – submitted to the repetitive machinations of commerce, taste, and knowledge. While the text spins in place until it's dizzy, the drawings offer a respite. They don't beg for interpretation.

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