

Seth Price interviewed by Barbara Clausen and Kristin Poor, November 19, 2020

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Kristin Poor: Today is November 19th, 2020. This is Kristin Poor and Barbara Clausen from the Joan Jonas Knowledge Base and we are here today with Seth Price to talk about his work with Joan Jonas. Seth, thank you so much for doing this.

Seth Price: I'm so happy to be here talking about Joan.

Kristin Poor: So how did you meet Joan and when?

Seth Price: I don't remember the exact meeting, but it would have been in the late nineties when I was working at Electronic Arts Intermix. How is this microphone level?

Barbara Clausen: It's great. It's totally good.

Kristin Poor: Yeah.

Seth Price: So it probably would have been 1998 or 1999, on one of the times when she came in for routine business with her dog, probably Zena at that point. And it's really lost to me, though, what the course of our friendship was, where it came from. It probably came about in the editing room, but I can't remember those first encounters.

Kristin Poor: When did you start working at EAI?

Seth Price: In [19]98, probably late spring of [19]98.

Kristin Poor: And how and in what capacity did you work with Joan at EAI?

Seth Price: Well, my job was technical, which had to do with duplicating the master tapes for clients and also editing, in the editing suite. When I started, there was no widespread use of Final Cut Pro or any other digital tools. And artists were still renting the facilities, which included tape to tape editing. And there was an option to pay for an editor if you didn't know how to use the equipment. And that was me. So there were a lot of clients outside of EAI, artists who were sometimes actively putting together reels, things like that. And from time to time, the artists from the collection would come in because they wanted to re-edit something old or put together something new, which was

incredible because it meant... I was twenty-five and I'd be sitting in the little room with Dan Graham or whomever, so Joan must've come in for one of these reasons.

Kristin Poor:

We're specifically interested in hearing about your experience working with her on *Mirage*, when she brought the old footage, and how that process started. If you want to talk generally about that, that'd be great. We also have some specific questions. Do you remember how that project started?

Seth Price:

I'm trying to recall. I remember that Joan brought in boxes of old video tape reels that she hadn't looked at in decades. And she had Electronic Arts Intermix oversee the conservation, cleaning, and remastering of those videos. And then they were sitting in a box by my feet, basically. And I started looking at them. I think at some point she wanted me to start logging footage. These were Betacam cassettes, so not the kind of thing that she could look at home. And I'm not sure if she even really wanted to.

I remember sitting in the room with her and I don't think she was overwhelmed. Although, it might be hard to tell when she's overwhelmed, sometimes she keeps her cards close to her chest. But they mixed artistic experiments and totally personal passages, I want to say.

And I think she wanted me to look through for items of interest. So this was hours of footage. And I would spend time on the shuttle knob, forwarding through these images. Sometimes it would just be a blank wall because she had left the camera recording in her loft and gone to make dinner or something. And so you forward twenty minutes and maybe you stop and watch and listen and you could hear kind of domestic sounds from elsewhere in the loft. And there might be a moment where she had people over and friends of hers, including some now famous artists, who were going in front of the camera and making faces and telling stories.

I'd often kind of slow down the tape and say, "so I saw this, Joan, this looks kind of interesting," and she would say something like, "yeah, uh-huh, we were hanging out in the loft. Yeah, why don't you forward a little bit?" And that was the end of that. We didn't have to dwell on it. I think I started to get a sense of what she was interested in and not interested in. She didn't care that I was looking at all of this.

[audio recording cuts out and resumes]

Barbara Clausen:

Seth, tell us about how you started working with Joan for the video, *Mirage*.

Seth Price:

Well, Joan had asked EAI to conserve and transfer this huge cache of old videotapes on reels and canisters. And we had them cleaned and had this big cardboard box of Betacam cassettes. And I think, Joan, I don't know where the impulse came from, I can imagine that it was house cleaning. I don't think she knew what was on them, beyond vaguely what was on them. Which is to say, this whole mix of personal and artistic material, because I think she had the Castelli video camera for quite some time. And so there were tapes where there was just raw vacation footage, a la Joan—somebody with an artistic sensibility—with her and Serra in, I think, Sardinia. And there were nights in her loft with friends telling stories or making faces in front of the camera. Or there are long passages where the camera was trained on a wall.

So it was almost diaristic. I don't know what the time span was, but certainly months, if not a couple years of material. I was tasked with doing a very rough assessment of what was on these tapes. So it might just say "minute thirty to fifty, figures in landscape, Serra?" And then Joan would make an appointment and come in and I would have my notes, and I showed her things that I thought were particularly interesting. And one of them I know she ended up using, which was the footage of her and Pat Steir, performing, really, down by the Stock Exchange, I think it was. I didn't know the context, I didn't know it was Pat Steir. But the scene stood out because the composition, the lighting, and of course what they were doing, was all magical. And she said, "Oh yeah, that was Pat. Yeah, we were down by the Stock Exchange." She was very brusque, often, with her explanations and comments. But very open, very fluid.

She would say, "Oh, do you like that?" And I'd say, "Yeah, I think that's great." And she'd be like, "Ah, oh, okay. Good, good. Yeah. Maybe I should use that." Very open to suggestions. And then there was also a lot of off-air footage. I think she had been just shooting video off the television, advertisements. There was a Western TV show or something. And that all caught my eye because I had done a lot of film and video at school, I had just graduated in [19]97, and it was still all fresh in my head. And I was less interested in the video strain—I'm sorry, less interested in the performance strain of video art than I was in found footage and appropriated footage and montage.

So the things that I had been really interested in were works by Leslie Thornton, Chris Marker, Alexander Kluge, Godard's video works. So I was tuned in to this kind of footage, and I told Joan,

"You *have* to use the TV footage." Which I think just stood out to me, I thought it was fantastic that she was shooting this stuff off the TV. There was also a segment where she was maybe reading a police blotter, or a news report or something.

And I remember doing editing where I was really approaching this like the image and the sound are on separate tracks. And we do have these large chunks of footage, and I don't want to detract from that, she wants to use this entire piece, but in terms of putting it together I was thinking about Godardian disruption, and running the sound slightly over another image; sometimes the sound and the image drifting, or having a discordant dance with each other. This is all stuff that was going through my head, or through my fingertips on the editing wheels, at that time. And Joan's such an open collaborator that if something is interesting she'll go with it. I think her directions came at an earlier stage, in terms of what we were going to use or not use. I don't think she wanted to use the footage in her apartment, in her loft with friends, although we had a chuckle watching it, but that was omitted almost immediately.

Kristin Poor:

So you said that you started very quickly to get a sense of what footage she was interested in and what wasn't, how would you characterize the footage that she was more interested in?

Seth Price:

Open footage that's situated a crossroads, meanings are free to rub up against each other. Footage that's at the edge of two things, indistinct meanings. This is why I wasn't sure she'd go for the news footage, because it's really one kind of thing, but she was into it. It was so far outside of most of the rest of these very diaristic, impressionistic shoots, where she has a camera in landscape or on a person, and it's very subjective, experiential. And once you train the camera gaze on the TV screen you have this flattened space, this media space, which I don't generally associate with her work. But because it was this older footage, it was maybe okay to use it, because it was from the period when she shot all this other material. And I think there was maybe an impulse to allow in the social, and the American scene, in this work: not just landscape, but also the televisual landscape. So that all fits somehow.

Barbara Clausen:

I mean, she's called *Mirage*, I think specifically or summarized too, like one of her most political works. She's referred to it as that. So that use of other media would fall into that. I'm wondering, Seth, when you were editing with her, going through that process, do you feel that she had a sense of if she was going to use this footage as a single channel or as a projection? Or did

you feel there was a sense of how that would relate to space or how it would be shown within the installation?

Seth Price:

I'm sure she had her own inclinations, or let's just say feelings or intuitions. If I had to guess or put together a hunch about it, I think she came in and said, I want to make a new video using this old footage. And that's probably, that was the parameter. I don't think maybe she herself knew how that was going to go down, because in the end, her...she has a lot of different methods of presenting video and presenting installation. And I'm not sure that she has those decisions mapped out that early. It was more about trying to see if there was energy in all this stored material. And I'm sure that she was pleasantly surprised because it was this box of old, literally almost moldering plastic, and it could have just been a wash, right? But it turned out to be pretty fertile.

Barbara Clausen:

I think it's also the sense of living with your archive and working and living with your archive in one space that probably comes into play here. I mean, that's also something that we see in the process of establishing the Joan Jonas Knowledge Base. How that layered approach of working with materials, saving materials, keeping materials, reconfiguring them into new ways. There's something really inherent to also how she works through, and she constantly changes her installation performances. I was wondering about that. If you, also being an artist, how you felt, how you read that as being essential for her work or not.

Seth Price:

I think I have a lot more understanding and also personal artistic sympathy for her work and the way she works now than I did twenty years ago. It's daunting. There's a quality of wilderness to it, to her work. And in the sense that a forest is new life and death and dying all mixed up, right? Jumbled up. There are new shoots coming out of a dead stump. And it's hard, it's a very undifferentiated kind of heterogeneous field, even though it has a feeling to it. And there's something of that quality to her work. And I think that comes out of the fact that the work is about transformation and change: personal, societal. The way that you can change an object, the object changes you; this idea that I am in the universe, the universe is in me. These fluid boundaries. A sculpture becoming a prop in a video, the video being shown next to the sculpture as now a... I actually had the opportunity to see the *Mirage* installation at MoMA a week or two ago. Of course, it's beautiful. So strange to see it in MoMA because it is maybe necessarily inert, or more inert than it would be in its long life as a video, a video with a film, a reinstalled installation here. And then as part of a performance series over here. And

now it's come to rest in a way. So there's something sad, to see the cone and everything so beautifully presented there. I mean, the room looks amazing, I don't want to say anything other than that, in the end.

Barbara Clausen:

But that perhaps brings me to something, going back into the importance of EAI for Joan's work. Because she continues to have this really close relationship to EAI, almost like Lori Zippay, who I just interviewed, said for some artists it was almost like their second studio to go in and really work there. How do you see that? How do you see Joan's relationship to EAI? And were there also other experiences of her work at EAI that you could tell us about?

Seth Price:

I think it probably depends on the artist's relationship to the archive. I mean, as a broader concept or in a more personal way. And for Joan, I don't think she's interested in the kind of naming and categorizing as a discipline that needs to administer the archive. But she is somebody who generates so much material that has this very complicated and almost esoteric interrelationship that it's handy that EAI has kept all this stuff very well archived. And so the retransfer of the tapes and then being able to make an intervention with me, that's an example. And Barbara, you had asked at the end of that question about other experiences at EAI with Joan, is that right?

Barbara Clausen:

Yeah. Yeah. Because you working with her on this re-editing *Mirage* was very particular. But there was also, I think at some point, especially in preparation for the presentation that was organized in 2000 on the rooftop, there was also a performance and there was also a whole... I think there was a lot about the conservation of some tapes. But, as again, if you maybe recall some other instances.

Seth Price:

Yeah. I mean, I think... Are you talking about the film screening on the Dia rooftop?

Barbara Clausen:

For example.

Seth Price:

Yeah, that was something that I can't remember the details. But in my memory it's something that I was really part of initiating. And I just have this horrible memory because I went and found this projectionist at the Guggenheim, because I think we just organized everything from scratch with Joan's blessing. And then the projectionist seemed like a nice guy, was in the end a nice guy, but was incompetent. Because I remember we did all the rehearsals, and then during the screening we were watching *Wind* and it burst into flames. And he was up on the scaffolding

and nobody watching, I think, had any idea that this was a problem, because it looked like some seventies materialist experimental film.

Barbara Clausen:

Magic trick.

Seth Price:

I could just hear him, he was up on the scaffold going, "Seth! Seth! Seth! What do I do? Seth!" And I was like, "shut the fuck up." And just scrambled up there, and blew out the flames. I mean, that was the end of the evening for me, I felt like I completely... Of course, it wasn't the original master and it didn't really matter, there was another print somewhere.

Barbara Clausen:

But I feel especially, Joan, for moments like these, I've had several moments like these are very quick improvisation. Or [I] witnessed them. And I feel Joan is so apt to deal with these situations in the best ways. Right? She'll turn it and she'll just make something else out of it. And there's a sense of control and at the same time improvisation that I think is also interesting, especially with her use of moving image.

Seth Price:

She was very level-headed, which I appreciated in that moment.

Barbara Clausen:

Seth, you were describing her openness to suggestion and to your opinions when you were in the editing suite together, could you speak a bit more about her approach to video editing or your approach to editing her work with her? What was the collaborative process like? Did she know what she wanted from the beginning or was it more organic? Did she have strong feelings about technical or timing concerns? The kinds of sound bleed that you were talking about, where the sound from one image would go into the next, is that something that she was interested in, that she had strong feelings about? Those kinds of details will be really helpful for our listeners.

Seth Price:

I can't attest to any of the edits right now, because I can't remember those particulars. But she was fairly hands off. She didn't jump onto the controls herself. It was organic. I remember her just almost saying in this tone of genuine surprise, "oh, you like that? You think that's cool. Oh, okay. Okay. Right." And just feeling, "how strange is that, I'm twenty-five years old." But now I can understand, as somebody in my forties, that there is this interesting perspective that comes from somebody who's in their twenties that is to be respected and appreciated. And I don't think I understood that at the time. I was kind of bewildered by why she was listening to me, or had any respect for what I was saying.

But again, I think I had fairly strong opinions based on my own experience with moving image work, and my own proclivities. And I'm guessing that she probably responded to that. It was quite different from her approach. I would not call her someone who is heavily into the editing. I don't think the editing is the hot zone for her, I think it happens somewhere else or on some other level. Whereas somebody like Leslie Thornton, who I had studied with, the editing room is the--that's the zone of energy. That's where it all happens.

So I was bringing that approach and I think she, because she's a strong and intuitive creative mind, I think she welcomes something that comes from a different direction. It has something to offer her. So that's how I would explain her openness with me. And at that moment I think she went along with a lot of the ideas I had, partly because she had the knowledge that this was not going to be a single channel tape for sit-down beginning, middle, end screening. It's not playing at a video festival. It's not a movie. So she was probably more free with some of these things, because if at minute twenty-four the sound bleeds over onto the next shot, that's fine. If it feels good here in the editing room, and in the end this is all part of a much larger construction: these decisions, why get hung up on them?

Barbara Clausen:

Yeah. And I think also that Joan sometimes goes back and re-edits and reevaluates all these processes. I'm also thinking, I had a question of the shift of media. Because you were mentioning in the beginning Final Cut Pro, that few people had this media. I mean, if you think about it, [19]98, [19]99, 2000, those were such pivotal years for going online, so to say. And Joan always could then go into GoPro, and her sensitivity towards using new development and technology, and incorporating that. Do you feel that was a moment that she, maybe intuitively, maybe consciously, grasped when she was re-editing *Mirage*? Do you think that's the beginning to use Final Cut?

Seth Price:

Well, 2000 was the year that EAI purchased a computer and a Final Cut Pro package. They put it on my desk and said, "please figure this out." So I took the opportunity to figure it out by making a bunch of my own videos. Since I did not own a computer, I did not have a studio. But that was happening that year. So I don't think we had really opened it up to working with clients yet, because I was still figuring out the technology. And that's my explanation for why we did tape-to-tape editing. The other thing is, with the *Mirage* work, the old footage was transferred to Betacam. And that was the old way of doing it. That was the idea of what the archival master was. It was a tape.

Maybe it was a digital Betacam, but it still recorded on a reel, from tape to tape.

So we would've had to digitize all that material into the computer to even get started with Final Cut. And I don't think we had the time or the memory for that. We could be quicker and more flexible, kind of fleet of foot, by going tape to tape. And then I think it probably appealed to her later on to be able to do this stuff from her loft.

Barbara Clausen:

Yeah, I think it actually started with *Lines in the Sand*, because she was commissioned to do that, at Documenta in 2002. And I think that's where she shifted.

Seth Price:

Was *In the Shadow a Shadow*, was that--

Barbara Clausen:

Or maybe it was *In the Shadow a Shadow*, which was just before. Right?

Seth Price:

Well, I think it was when she started shooting on MiniDV. Because MiniDV was on a cassette, but it was already in the digital realm and you could easily hook it up to Final Cut Pro and import the footage almost automatically. And I think it probably has to do with when she got the MiniDV video camera. Because that was the package at that point, was that camera, a Macintosh, and Final Cut Pro.

Kristin Poor:

Seth, did these encounters with Joan have an influence on your own work?

Seth Price:

Maybe not at that time. I was pursuing something really different. But over the years, I think Joan's model of fluidity, transformation, change, without being a "personal" artist, for lack of a better term. That's been something I think about.

Barbara Clausen:

Well also I concretely am thinking about, of course, *Digital Video Effect: "Spills"* in 2004. Can you speak about that work?

Seth Price:

Yeah, that was using some of the footage I saw on those old reels. It was one of the personal travel diary passages that I had pointed out, and she had totally forgotten about it and thought it was very interesting. But I don't think she could use that herself for anything. And one of the things that made it interesting for me was precisely this quality of being hard to use, because it's almost unassailable, it's an art historical document. So how do you put that in a work of art, in a way where the artwork doesn't get overwhelmed by it? So it's not corny, or it's not simply pedagogical. And at the time I was interested in

working with appropriated material that was challenging to use, where it presented a problem: how do you use this material, as a maker?

And so I had used quite violent and disturbing photographs from the internet in 2003, images of torn apart bodies in war zones, things like that, and made *Digital Video Effect: "Holes,"* which was the same idea: presenting it as if it's a demonstration of a commercial video effect that you could maybe buy and plug into your own editing setup. And it just happens to be using these horrible images to demonstrate the transition. And then in 2004, I thought I would try the same move by using this art historical material, which is the thing you want to see, you don't want to see what's been done to it, you want to watch Smithson and Serra and Nancy Holt in this art collector's home, or it's Joe Helman, with Warhol on the wall in the background. That's what you want to see. You don't want to see what the twenty-five-year-old artist has done to it. So that was the challenge in that case, and Joan was totally gracious and said I could use it.

Barbara Clausen:

Remember we showed it in Vienna, amongst many other places this work was shown, and it was also a very particular way of presenting it.

Seth Price:

Yeah.

Barbara Clausen:

Right?

Seth Price:

Right. The *Holes* video and the *Spills* video were shown on new televisions in their own box, so that you could gather around and look down on it like it's a reflecting pool or something. And for me that was also because I weirdly, although I studied film and video, I've never been able to really watch film and video in a gallery or museum context. It's not my favorite thing to do. And I'm not a cinephile. So I have my own issue with making film and video. And so I think this was my solution...I didn't want to make something that depended on the black box, because I found that annoying. And I didn't want to make something that was a TV with headphones on a pedestal, because I found that alternative annoying. And this was a way of turning the video work into a sculpture that you could walk around, that you didn't really feel compelled to reward with any of your attention. You could walk right by it, it's not asking for your attention. In fact, it's down at the level where you can kick it.

Kristin Poor:

And it being in the box is really pointing to the TV's as a commodity and object as well.

Seth Price: Yeah, I think it was more about... that's part of it, that's in there, but I think it was about being able to tell the gallery or the institution, just go get a TV. And all you have to do is open the box at the top. And because these were cathode ray tubes they wouldn't be able to balance on their own, on their backs. So by keeping them in their Styrofoam packaging in the box, it gave it a frame and a way of just standing upright. At the same time as it brings it down, it kind of lifts it up and gives it context, and it also puts it in its place. And I liked all that, and I liked the simplicity of that. Of course, then they stopped making those, so that's a whole new problem.

Kristin Poor: I'm thinking about the importance of how to present video in a gallery space is a nice segue into one of our last questions, which is based on your experience. What advice would you give to curators and conservators and other technicians who'll set up Joan's exhibitions and installations in the future? In particular, with regard to video. How much interpretive authority do you think they should have? Or do you have any thoughts on the way that her videos should be presented based on your experience working closely with her?

Seth Price: Well, of course there's always the precedent of the installation as it's been executed before. Right? Which— we have good documentation, so people will obviously fall back on that. I don't think it makes sense to get too uptight about that with Joan's work though. Because my sense is the room at MoMA with *Mirage*, for example, could be almost entirely reshuffled. And I think it would still have a lot of the same impact. Maybe new connections would be teased out or emphasized. And that's a tall order for curators. In fact, I've had a lot of trouble myself, when I've tried to give more authority to the curator in terms of how to arrange the artworks. Because I think generally they'd always rather go with very precise instructions. But my sense is that Joan's work only benefits from being shown in different configurations.

Barbara Clausen: She once said something interesting to me when I was installing. We showed part of the Biennale piece in Montreal. And when we were installing it, from 2015, they come to us. And at one point there was this discussion if the screen sizes could be reduced or the dimensions could be changed. And I remember Joan saying, "I can't believe that I still have to argue about the question that, of course the dimension of a projection is closely related to the content. And if it were to be adapted or were to be changed, everything else...it would kind of have a ripple effect on all other conceptual elements within the work." And it makes sense, right? If you go back to painting, which Joan

doesn't do, but which is extremely important for her. Like the sense of the indexicality of the gesture, there's an interesting sense of that when you think about how Joan's work could be shifted or take on a different form when presented.

Seth Price: Mm-hmm. Would that make you have second thoughts about readjusting an installation, what she told you?

Barbara Clausen: Yeah, I think Kristin and I, we've really looked at every installation of—and all the team—we've looked at every installation of *Mirage*, every installation of *Organic Honey*, and it has a paradox. It's a very rigorous layout in the beginning, and then there's always a moment of adaptation and change that might even come across as dramatic in the end. But there's a really sense of...you start out with a very, very constrained, almost set, and then you move on. And I think this is interesting to ask you this question, because you are an artist and you've worked in various ways with moving image, and thinking about the politics around that. That's why we wanted to finalize the interview, basically, with that question.

Seth Price: Well, going back to this installation that is at the Museum of Modern Art right now. It seems to be made of a group of elements that refer to each other. And I think I take your point that the work on the monitor should be on a monitor, right? The work she's chosen to project should be a projection. I guess the question is, how much can those components be shuffled within the space, right? She's in a room which has two doorways, and a particular layout. That presents the initial problem, right? So she has certain walls to work with. The platform has to go over here. The platform is painted black. There's a chalkboard here maybe, or a conical sculpture over here. But could the room be symmetrically reversed with the doors in the opposite areas? Yes. We would agree, yes, you could do that, right? And then you would reconfigure it based on that. Barbara, I think you're both muted.

Yeah. I see, you have to be very intuitive as a curator to know. Because I think you don't honor the work probably in the end by being too uptight about the re-staging of it. On the other hand, you have to be faithful to the things that are important to her about that work. For example, that the footage of lava goes over here by itself. And the other two-screen projection is off to the side. So yeah, I see. It's difficult because it could feel like mindreading is required. I don't envy that job!

- Kristin Poor: Well, thank you for that. Do you think there's anything that we missed about your experience with Joan at EAI that you wanted to talk about? Just to wrap up.
- Seth Price: Let me think about that for a moment.
- No, I think within the walls of EAI it was all very—aside from some pleasantries—it was all very businesslike in the best possible way. It was a lot of fun too, but we were there to work. And then outside of EAI, we might have dinner or go out to an opening. And we were in a show together in France that was very nice. So there's a lot of stuff outside of the editing room, but that's a different story.
- Kristin Poor: Well I think we should stop there. Thank you so much, Seth. We really appreciate it.
- Seth Price: Thank you. It was a lot of fun talking to you.
- Barbara Clausen: Thank you so much.