

Pushing Books: The Bookwork as Democratic Multiple in the Late Capitalist Era

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ABSTRACT

Pushing Books: The Bookwork as Democratic Multiple in the Late Capitalist Era

Shane McCord

This thesis examines the development of artist's books and other similar mass-produced art works in the codex form. More specifically, the object of investigation in this thesis focuses on the position of such art works as democratic multiples. This development is traced through three case studies on the works of Edward Ruscha (b.1937), the artist collective General Idea (1969-1995), and Matthew Barney (b.1967). The thesis argues that though artist's books are often characterized as being polemical towards capitalist production, these bookworks achieve their most democratic results when making use of the techniques of the capitalist market, rather than working against it.

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Introduction

The 1960s is often discussed as a time of artistic innovation. During this decade there was a proliferation of artistic practices aimed at critically addressing the authority of galleries, museums and critics and concerned with the nature, definition, and public conception of art. Many artists at the time spoke out against being categorized or labelled by art critics, rejecting a secret language used to talk about artists that artists themselves had little to do with.¹ Artists began to express a desire to somehow remove their field of production from this context. This move toward situating artistic practice outside of the art institution was widespread. These circumstances raised the question of where and how artistic practices could continue in way that escaped the established field of production, as well as the economic and intellectual conditions entailed. For many artists, circumnavigating the institutionalized artworld meant simply merging life and art to such an extent that neither would be distinguishable from the other. The proliferation of new technologies during the middle of the twentieth century presented artists with distinctly new media, such as video, and greater facility in the construction of older media, as was the case with the publication of books. These new opportunities were seen by some as the means of escaping the art market and its accompanying institutions. In comparison to more traditional avenues of dissemination, the possibilities offered artists by the codex form, either as a book or magazine, were seen as not only more democratic in terms of who could showcase their art but also in terms of access to the work.² Many scholars have viewed this democratic impulse, and the desire to escape the increasingly

¹ Sol LeWitt, "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art," *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*, Eds. Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1999), 14.

² Clive Phillpot, "Book Art Digressions," *Artists' Books*, Ed. Martin Attwood, (London: Arts Council of Great Britain, 1976), 19.

commercial nature of the art world as the roots of the contemporary artist's book movement.³ While many artist's books, or bookworks, do attempt this task, an examination of the early works in the book form by American artist Edward Ruscha (b. 1937) show that the bookwork was used not as a means of rejecting and escaping the commodification of the art object, but rather to directly embrace it. Indeed Ruscha's works can be seen as an attempt to create the perfect mass-produced commercial art object. Here the bookwork could be seen to blend a traditional commodity form with the art object, thus freeing the art object from the false pretences that art could be anything other than a form commodity production, if one imbued with cultural history.

Joanna Drucker and others have traced the presence of the book in the history of art from the nineteenth century through to the avant-garde of the 1920s and 1930s, but the contention of this study is that it was with the appearance of the bookwork in the 1960s by artists such as Edward Ruscha that the medium realized a certain potential. Prior to the critical consciousness of the 1960s that lead to a widespread questioning of the limitations of art institutions and the art object itself, the medium of the book was taken up and assimilated according to the conventions by which modern art was generally assessed. That is to say that despite the fact that artists were making works of art in the form of books, these books were understood as unique objects, hand-crafted and often considered within the realm of fine printing. The difference here lies in a coupling of artistic intention and technological possibility. Clive Phillpot has observed that in the 1960s artists were beginning to realize the "democratic" potential of creating works in book form, that "Mass-production methods might lead to potentially unlimited editions,

³ See Joan Lyons, "Introduction and Acknowledgements" *Artists' Books: A Critical Anthology and Sourcebook* (Rochester, New York: Visual Studies Workshop Press, 1985), 7; and Johanna Drucker, *The Century of Artists' Books*, (New York City: Granary Books, 2004), 72.

low prices, the end of the art work as a separate unique object, and a wider, participating audience.”⁴ While Phillpot alludes to the technological side of producing bookworks, he fails to mention that the very mass production methods that were becoming increasingly available to artists were a comparatively new phenomenon in themselves. The importance of technology in changing the means by which artists employed the medium of the book in the 1960s is something that Drucker acknowledges, stating, “The proliferation of works which use the small format and inexpensive production methods bespeaks the transformation of print technology as much as the transformation of conceptual sensibility which promotes this expansion.”⁵

This disagreement has helped fuel the debate surrounding what constitutes a bookwork. Questions have surfaced surrounding mass production as a qualifying factor in determining the status of bookworks. Without a clear understanding of the definition of a bookwork, the origins of the medium are very difficult to pinpoint. This debate will be rehearsed as part of the literature review that follows, before focusing on the main point of this thesis which is the somewhat more neglected issue of how the medium of the book as art began to represent the complete synthesis of art and the capitalist market of commodities.

This thesis aims at tracing this phenomenon in three case studies that roughly span the last four decades of the twentieth century and continue on into the early years of the twenty-first. I will begin by looking at the work of Edward Ruscha, an American artist who arguably helped to instigate the use of the book as a mass-produced art objects. I will then turn to the work of the Canadian artists' collective, General Idea (1969-1995),

⁴ Phillpot, “Book Art Digressions,” 19.

⁵ Johanna Drucker, *The Century of Artists' Books*, 12.

as a means of exploring how a second generation of book artists took up the idea of reaching beyond the 'artworld' in an attempt to occupy the larger space of commercial culture, and in so doing found themselves oscillating between forms of institutional critique and a broader project aimed at questioning a burgeoning commodity market. Acting as a segue between the first two and final case studies is a chapter that I have dedicated to addressing a theoretical understanding and approach to the economic superstructure that some scholars, such as Frederic Jameson, have termed "late capitalism."⁶ This brief discussion will make reference to Antonio Gramsci's notion of the "war of position" in order to clarify and expand upon the concept of "critical distance" that Jameson sees as closely related to attempts to circumvent or critically address the capitalist superstructure.⁷ This chapter will not only provide a deeper understanding of the projects initiated by Ruscha and General Idea, but will act as a foundation upon which one might work to comprehend the significance of the bookworks produced by the American artist, and contemporary media darling, Matthew Barney (b.1967). In the case of Barney, one finds an artist working with the medium of the book who has fully accepted the impossibility of critical distance from the capitalist superstructure, and indeed incorporates with great success the conventions that govern the present consumer society. The two artists and one collective to be discussed here have been selected because they all in some way emphatically deal with their bookworks as commodities. Both Ruscha and General Idea specifically, when interviewed and in their own writings, as shall be discussed below, address this aspect of their work. Barney does

⁶ Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), xx.

⁷ See Antonio Gramsci, "State and Civil Society," *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, Eds. & Trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowelle Smith, (New York: International Publishers: 2003), 235; Jameson, *Postmodernism or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, 48.

not overtly address this issue, but he represents an instance of the increasingly common blockbuster artists whose work is created without embarrassment or restraint, somewhat like a commercial film. Moreover while Barney's work may be philosophically and politically disconnected from the work of the previous artists, he is indebted to both Ruscha and General Idea for the specific way that he attempts to use the commodity form to cross the boundaries between art and life, and consequently his work forms the natural conclusion of the trajectory that begins with Ruscha and General Idea..

Literature Review

The scholarly dialogue to which this thesis is indebted can be broken down into three related categories. First, it will be necessary to review the often impassioned debate which has grown to surround the bookwork as a medium. Subsequently, it will be beneficial to look at the writings that focus specifically on the two artists and the collective who produced the works to be addressed in my three case studies. Finally I will turn to the work of Frederick Jameson, the postmodern cultural theorists whose work touches on the notion of the impossibility of critical distance from the capitalist superstructure in late 20th and early 21st century.

The Wider Context of the Artist's Book/Bookwork

Scholarship on the artist's book is generally accepted to have begun in 1973 when the term artist's book was first used as the title of an exhibition at the Moore College of Art in Philadelphia.⁸ Then, as now, one of the central problems for both scholars and artists interested in exploring the book was finding a definition for the field, and the development of a vocabulary suited to the specific concerns of the bookwork. Authors sought to delineate the categories within the larger field understood as the book arts. The artist's book, or as Clive Phillpot amongst others has termed it, the 'bookwork' is not to be understood, as the same as works of Fine Printing or the *livre d'artiste* otherwise known as the *livre deluxe*.⁹ Bookworks (as they will be subsequently referred to) are not necessarily finely printed volumes, which displayed the craft of the bookmaker in the tradition of William Morris's edition of *Canterbury Tales*, nor are they monographs that

⁸ Stefan Klima, *Artists Books: A Critical Survey of the Literature*, (New York City: Granary Books, 1998), 7, 12; Ulises Carrion, "Bookworks Revisited," *Second Thoughts*, (Amsterdam: Void Distributors, 1980), 66.

⁹ Clive Phillpot, "Recent Art and the Book Form," *Artists' Books: From the Traditional to the Avant Garde*, (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University, 1982), 2.

focus on particular artists. Though bookworks can have similarities to fine printing and the *livre d'artiste*, most writers in the field agree that what differentiated the bookwork from these two traditions was that the book produced, no matter what it contained, or looked like, was a work in itself. This project of defining what a bookwork is has been a concern of almost all who have written on the subject. However, as mentioned above, at the centre of this discussion since 1976 has been the work of Clive Phillpot. Throughout these debates authors have constantly taken issue with one definition or another because these definitions are seen to be too restrictive in one way or another. Indeed the frustration felt by scholars in this regard was perhaps best expressed by Renée Riese Hubert who stated that "any definition of an artist's book [...] becomes irrelevant."¹⁰ However provisional definitions can be useful to provide a sense of context. For the purposes of this thesis, drawing upon an early definition supplied by Philpot, the bookwork is to be understood as an artwork in, or using the codex form.¹¹ While for broader discussions of the nature of the medium, this definition may be considered overly restrictive it can be applied to all of the works to be discussed in the present work.

The provision of definitive terms to the field of the bookwork has, of course, not been the sole preoccupation of scholarly writing on the subject. Of particular importance to this study is the early introduction of the notion of the bookwork as a "democratic multiple." The catalogue which accompanied the 1973 exhibition, entitled *Artists Books*, includes two essays, "Slices of Silence, Parcels of Time: The Book as a Portable Sculpture," by Lynn Lester Hershman, and "Some Thoughts on Books as Art," by John Perreault. In both of these pioneering essays on the subject, the authors bring up the

¹⁰ Renée Riese Hubert, "An Introduction to the Artist's Book: The Text and Its Rivals," *Visible Language* 25. 2/3 (Spring 1991): 120.

¹¹ Clive Phillpot, In Klima, *Artists Books: A Critical Survey of the Literature*, 22.

notion that the book is a “democratic multiple.” Bookworks according to Hershman embody the “democratization of culture in which nothing is high or low, but merely a mingled sensibility that is accessible to all.”¹² This theme occurs again and again in reference to the bookwork, particularly in relation to works that were produced by means of commercial reproduction (i.e. offset printing, Xerox, or mimeograph). This notion of the democratic nature of the bookwork can be found repeatedly in the literature produced on the subject during the late 1970s and the early to mid 1980s.

One publication in which this concept of the bookwork as a democratic multiple was of central importance was the influential collection of essays entitled *Artist's Books: A Critical Anthology and Sourcebook* (1985) edited by Joan Lyons. Notable among these are two essays by Lucy Lippard, “The Artist’s Book Goes Public,” (1977) and “Conspicuous Consumption: New Artist’s Books” (1985). These two essays by Lippard foreshadow a change of stance regarding the bookwork, a change which was to become more pronounced as time passed. The shift that Lippard elucidates through these two essays forms a portion of the development of the bookwork that I wish to map out here by following it into the present day. In the first of these two essays Lippard describes the potential for the bookwork to “circumvent the commercial gallery system.”¹³ Indeed she goes as far as saying that, “it is considered by many the easiest way out of the art world and into the heart of a broader audience.”¹⁴ She goes on to state that the “artist’s adaptation of the book format for works of art constitutes a criticism of criticism *as well*

¹² Lynn Lester Hershman, “Slices of Silence, Parcels of Time: The Book as a Portable Sculpture,” *Artists Books*, (Philadelphia: Moore College of Art, 1973), 8-14.

¹³ Lucy Lippard, “The Artist’s Book Goes Public,” *Artist’s Books: A Critical Anthology and Sourcebook*, (Rochester, New York: Visual Studies Workshop Press, 1985), 45.

¹⁴ Lippard, “The Artist’s Book Goes Public”, 45.

as of art-as big business."¹⁵

It is against this position that this thesis will argue as an attempt to point out that bookworks, beginning with the work of Edward Ruscha, are the ideal vehicles for art as-big-business. Perhaps unwittingly Lippard supplies evidence for this argument by discussing the problem of dissemination, which she explains can partially be solved by the opening of the quintessential instrument of capitalism, the shop, in this case Printed Matter, a not-for-profit organization founded by Lippard and others to promote the medium of the bookwork.¹⁶ This foreshadows the position taken by Frederic Jameson, to be discussed below, that it is impossible to achieve a critical distance from the capitalist superstructure.¹⁷ Despite Printed Matter's position as a not-for-profit organization, a brief glance at the organization's website proves its status as a veritable emporium of saleable art, which is undeniably attached to the consumer market.

In her 1985 essay "Conspicuous Consumption: New Artist's Books," Lippard acknowledges that much of what she stated regarding bookworks in 1977 has not come to pass. The vaunted democratic art object remained a consumer good for a very specific audience, frequently composed of those same collectors who were part of the art market which the bookwork was intended to circumnavigate in the first place. Indeed Lippard goes so far as to describe the hopes that she articulated in the 1977 article, for the wide and quotidian distribution of artist books, as a fantasy.¹⁸ Despite the failure to achieve the nearly ubiquitous dissemination of bookworks that Lippard once envisioned, she concludes her later article, by maintaining that the bookwork remains an alternative to the

¹⁵ Lippard, "The Artist's Book Goes Public", 45, Emphasis added.

¹⁶ Lippard, "The Artist's Book Goes Public", 47.

¹⁷ Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), 48.

¹⁸ Lippard, "Conspicuous Consumption: New Artists' Books," 50.

“art world mainstream.”¹⁹ This vision of the bookwork as a being distinct and somehow separate from the art world as a whole, is repeated throughout the Lyons anthology, perhaps nowhere more obviously than in the Barbara Moore and Jon Hendricks article, “The Page as Alternative Space: 1950 to 1969,” where the view of the bookwork as somehow separated, or distanced from the art world is used as a unifying theme.²⁰

The essays included in *Artist's Books: A Critical Anthology and Sourcebook* were enormously influential. In 1990, Nancy Tousley, in an essay accompanying the exhibition *Learn to Read Art: Artist's Books*, acknowledges the reality taken up by Lippard in her later essay in reiterating her stance that the seemingly democratic medium had not actually caught on with the wider public.²¹ This disaffected position continued to be felt and articulated by scholars as is reflected in Buzz Spector's work, *The Book Maker's Desire: Writings on the Art of The Book*, in which he argues for a consideration of the book as a unique sculptural object and decries the multiple bookwork that had become associated with the conceptual art movement as a “retrograde fetishization of the book form.”²² At the same time, however, one of the most significant contributions to the literature on bookworks was made by Johanna Drucker.

In 1995 Drucker published *The Century of Artists' Books*, which was the sole monograph on the subject for seven years. In this exhaustive work Drucker examines over three hundred works in book form, in an attempt to loosely delineate the field and to highlight the importance of the medium during the 20th century. Of particular importance

¹⁹ Lippard, “Conspicuous Consumption: New Artists' Books,” 56.

²⁰ Barbara Moore and Jon Hendricks, “The Page as Alternative Space: 1950 to 1969,” *Artist's Books: A Critical Anthology and Sourcebook*, (Rochester, New York: Visual Studies Workshop Press, 1985), 87-95.

²¹ Nancy Tousley, “Artists' Books,” *Learn to Read Art: Artists' Books* (Hamilton, Ontario: Art Gallery of Hamilton, 1990), 5

²² Buzz Spector, *The Book Maker's Desire: Writings on the Art of the Book*, (Pasadena, California: Umbrella Associates, 1995), 13.

to this study is Drucker's chapter on the "Artist Book as a Democratic Multiple." Here she outlines the historical background of the notion of the mass-produced bookwork, then delves into examples of the genre where she makes specific mention of Ruscha's early bookworks.

Subsequent to Drucker's book the next notable publication on the subject of bookworks was Stefan Klima's 1998 book, entitled *Artists Books: A Critical Survey of the Literature*, in which he provides an indispensable synthesis of the dialogue that has surrounded bookworks since the early 1970s. A variety of other publications on the subject exist as Rob Perrée's *Cover to Cover: The Artist's Book in Perspective*, and David Guss and Jerome Rothenberg's *The Book, Spiritual Instrument*.²³ However for the most part, these publications address material that can be found in either Lyons's *Artist's Books: A Critical Anthology and Sourcebook* or Drucker's *The Century of Artist's Books*.

Ruscha, General Idea, Barney

The literature surrounding the two artists and one collective whose work will be examined in this study is as diverse as the oeuvres of the artists themselves. As concerns General Idea and Matthew Barney, the wide range of issues that the artists touch upon in their work has resulted in scholarly discussions which focus on certain aspects of the works while overshadowing others. In the case of both General Idea and Matthew Barney the focus has been primarily given over to the content of the work rather than the

²³Rob Perrée, *Cover to Cover: The Artist's Book in Perspective*, Rotterdam: NAI Publishers, 2002; David Guss and Jerome Rothenberg Eds. *The Book, Spiritual Instrument*. New York: Granary Books, 1982.

formal aspects of the object.²⁴ Literature surrounding the work of General Idea revolves primarily around issues of homosexuality and later on, the Aids crisis. Where Barney's work is concerned the problem is more pronounced. The complex visual narrative of his films has intrigued all who explore his work to the point that the formal means by which the work is present has almost been overlooked, particularly in relation to his bookworks.

It is my intention to address these works in the context of bookworks, and the literature that I have examined is reflective of this choice. This is not to say however that the formal presence of the works is unrelated to conceptual or content based concerns, for as I hope to reveal the formal concerns of the book are directly related to the semiotic content the artists wish to convey. Simply speaking, it is my primary intention to investigate the methods chosen by these artists to disseminate their work, while giving less consideration to the already popularly explored ideas surrounding their works.

The case of Ruscha here is far simpler for although, like the other two producers, his work is prolific and imaginative, and explores a wide range of subjects, scholarly focus has been brought to bear on the importance of the book in Ruscha's work in several instances. Indeed a great deal has been written about Ruscha particularly over the span of the last ten years. Of particular importance is the book *Leave Any Information at the Signal: Writings, Interviews, Bits, Pages, Ed Ruscha*, edited by Alexandra Schwartz with the participation of Ruscha himself. This book is vital to any study of Ruscha's work. It is divided into three sections, the first devoted to writings by Ruscha, from points throughout his career; the second in composed of transcriptions of forty-nine interviews

²⁴ I realize that the conceptual division of form and content is largely a superficial one however the terms have been used here because in the case of both the work of General Idea and Matthew Barney as there are significant issues which are sometimes overtly addressed through imagery, while other issues are related more subtly through the nature of the media used.

with Ruscha between the 1965 and 2000. The third section presents a collage of writings by Ruscha in various forms. The book amounts to “an artistic and intellectual autobiography.”²⁵ In this book Ruscha comments numerous times on his books and on the practice of making books in the context of art. Most strikingly, and appropriate to this study, is Ruscha’s comment, “I want to be the Henry Ford of book making.”²⁶

While Ruscha’s name has not quite achieved the level of fame of Henry Ford, he has gained a high level of recognition. This is perhaps demonstrated by the fact that despite having produced a work on which was written “I Don’t Want No Retro Spective” three large retrospective exhibitions of Ruscha’s work have been held. The first, *The Works of Edward Ruscha* in 1982, held at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, traveled to Vancouver, San Antonio and New York, and was accompanied by a catalogue with an introduction and essays by Anne Livet, Dave Hickey and Peter Plagens. These three essays are symptomatic of much of the writing on Ruscha’s work. Livet's introduction examines the artist’s work with regard to semiotic concerns, while Hickey provides a very interesting biographical piece based on his presumptions about Ruscha’s character made during various encounters with the artist, drifting regularly to the subject of the art objects themselves in favor of trying to create a literary counter-point to the works rather than addressing them in detail. Plagens’s essay attempts to describe Ruscha’s relationship to various historical and geographic movements (i.e. Abstract Expressionism, Surrealism, Pop, California Funk and the L.A. scene).

The concerns expressed by Livet, Hickey and Plagens in these exhibition

²⁵ Alexandra Schwartz (Ed.), “Introduction,” *Leave Any Information at the Signal: Writings, Interviews, Bits, Pages*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2002), XV.

²⁶ Edward Ruscha, “From Common Scenes: Mr. Ruscha Evokes Art,” interview with Douglas M. Davis, *Leave Any Information at the Signal: Writings, Interviews, Bits, Pages*, Ed. Alexandra Schwartz, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2002), 28.

catalogues are expanded upon by Lisa Pasquariello in her 2004 PhD dissertation, *“Good Reading”: the Work of Ed Ruscha, 1958-1970*. Here she presents a close study of Ruscha’s works, notably devoting a chapter entirely to his bookworks. Pasquariello focuses her examination of Ruscha’s books through comparing and contrasting the works and the artist’s statements about them, to various ideas such as the dematerialization of the art object and notions of seriality that are closely tied to conceptual art movement of the 1960s and 1970s. Pasquariello also addresses Ruscha’s books in regards to the notion of the bookwork as a democratic multiple. She indicates how Ruscha seems undecided about this, examining the low cost of the books, his desire to have them as widely disseminated as the Model-T and yet at the same time his attempt to finish his books with a veneer of commercial professionalism.²⁷ She also summarizes much of the critical discourse surrounding the supposed failure of this attempt to democratize the art object by the Conceptualists with particular reference to the critical work of Benjamin Buchloh. She does not however investigate the notion that it is the very commercialism of these books that could actually be evidence of their democratic nature.

Another important commentator on Ruscha’s bookworks is Clive Phillpot whose work was mentioned above in relation to scholarship on the subject of the bookwork in general. Phillpot has written numerous articles touching on Ruscha, including “Twentysix Gasoline Stations that Shook the World: The Rise and Fall of Cheap Booklets as Art,” and “Some Contemporary Artists and their Books.”²⁸ These articles

²⁷ Lisa Pasquariello, *“Good Reading”: the Work of Ed Ruscha, 1958-1970*, 2004 Ph.D. dissertation, Stanford University, United States, California. Retrieved October 21, 2007, from ProQuest Digital Dissertations database (Publication No. AAT 3128452), 277-281.

²⁸ Clive Phillpot, “Twentysix Gasoline Stations that Shook the world: the Rise and Fall of Cheap Booklets as Art,” *Art Libraries Journal* 18.1 (1993):4-13; “Some Contemporary Artists and their Books,” *Artist’s Books: A Critical Anthology and Sourcebook*, (Rochester, New York: Visual Studies Workshop Press,

frequently use Ruscha's work as a starting point for an exploration of various types of bookworks but do not take it up as a central focus. Phillipot however has contributed significantly to the scholarship on Ruscha and the most notable instance of this contribution may be his essay "Sixteen Books and then Some," in *Edward Ruscha: Editions, 1959-1999: Catalogue Raisonné*, edited by Siri Engberg in which he examines in some depth Ruscha's bookworks in chorological order.

The format of the catalogue raisonné has also been invaluable to the literature on General Idea. A particularly useful source can be found in the book *General Idea Editions 1967-1995*. This book which was published in 2003 was edited by Barbara Fischer and, apart from a large selection of excellent reproductions of the collective's work, the book includes a number of informative essays. Among them are several contributions which had previously only appeared in languages other than English.²⁹ Of particular value to this thesis is the inclusion in this book of several essays which directly address either the collective's approach to the multiple, or to the bookwork itself.³⁰

Editions, also includes contributions from the group's sole surviving member, AA

1985), 97-132.

²⁹ Jean-Christophe Ammann, "The 1984 Miss General Idea Pavillion," *General Idea Editions 1967-1995*, Trans. Barbara Fischer, (Mississauga, Ontario: Blackwood Gallery University of Toronto at Mississauga, 2003), 261-264; Lionel Bovier, "Figures of Discourse in General Idea," *General Idea Editions 1967-1995*, Trans. Timothy Barnard, (Mississauga, Ontario: Blackwood Gallery University of Toronto at Mississauga, 2003), 265-268; Christophe Cherix, "General Idea's *Nazi Milk*: Nothing Exotic," *General Idea Editions 1967-1995*, Trans. Barbara Fischer, (Mississauga, Ontario: Blackwood Gallery University of Toronto at Mississauga, 2003), 271-265; Diedrich Diederichsen, "An Alternative to the Alternative Press," *General Idea Editions 1967-1995*, Trans. Barbara Fischer, (Mississauga, Ontario: Blackwood Gallery University of Toronto at Mississauga, 2003), 279-282; Stephan Trescher, "The Perfect Little Pleaser: General Idea's Pla@bo Pin," *General Idea Editions 1967-1995*, Trans. Barbara Fischer, (Mississauga, Ontario: Blackwood Gallery University of Toronto at Mississauga, 2003), 296-299.

³⁰ Cathy Busby, "Remaining Viral," *General Idea Editions 1967-1995*, (Mississauga, Ontario: Blackwood Gallery University of Toronto at Mississauga, 2003), 270-272; Joshua Decter, "Replicate," *General Idea Editions 1967-1995*, Trans. Barbara Fischer, (Mississauga, Ontario: Blackwood Gallery University of Toronto at Mississauga, 2003), 275-278 ; Diedrich Diederichsen, "An Alternative to the Alternative Press," *General Idea Editions 1967-1995*, Trans. Barbara Fischer, (Mississauga, Ontario: Blackwood Gallery University of Toronto at Mississauga, 2003); Philip Monk, "Money was the First Multiple," *General Idea Editions 1967-1995*, Trans. Barbara Fischer, (Mississauga, Ontario: Blackwood Gallery University of Toronto at Mississauga, 2003), 293-295.

Bronson, both in the form of an essay entitled, “Copyright, Cash and Crowd Control: Art and Economy in the Work of General Idea, and a transcription of an interview with Mike Kelley.

Writings by Bronson, or texts authored by the collective, are perhaps the best guide to the work of General Idea and can frequently be found in the actual works they create such as *FILE Magazine*, *XXX Voto*. Another valuable resource on the collective that includes writing by AA Bronson is *In Search for the Spirit: General Idea 1968-1975*. This catalogue accompanied an exhibition of the collective’s work at the Art Gallery of Ontario held 1997-1998. The catalogue which includes an essay by Christina Ritchie entitled, “Allusions Omissions Cover-Ups: The Early Days,” is largely based on the work of Fern Bayer who developed unique knowledge of the collective’s material when she was asked by Bronson to assist with the organization of the group’s “archive” or as she puts it the “assemblage of images, documents, drawings, etc. that were the result of their twenty-five year long collaboration.”³¹ Bayer synthesises this knowledge of the collective’s activities into a hundred-page essay entitled, “Uncovering the Roots of General Idea: A Documentation and Description of Early Projects 1968-1975,” which comprises the heart of the catalogue. In this essay she provides an extremely detailed account of the collective’s activities during the specified dates. The value of this essay is historical. Rather than pronouncing judgment on the works of the collective, Bayer’s account of the group’s activities includes detailed reconstructions of exhibitions and events in which the group took part and thus provides an invaluable sense of context to anyone not present on these occasions.

³¹ Fern Bayer, “The Search for the Spirit,” *The Search for the Spirit* (Toronto, Ontario: The Art Gallery of Ontario, 1997), 10.

Exhibition catalogues are key resources on General Idea's work: a detailed list can be found in *General Idea Editions 1967-1995*. Beyond *The Search for the Spirit*, however I would like to mention one other catalogue, *General Idea's Fin de Siècle*. This catalogue accompanied an exhibition which travelled to various cities in Germany, Spain, Canada, and the United States. Of particular value to this thesis is the inclusion in this catalogue of Joshua Decter's essay, "The Theatrics of Dissemination: A General Idea Model," which specifically discusses the issue of dissemination in regard to *FILE Magazine* and the collectives' multiples.³² In particular Decter focuses on the broad public reaction to these sorts of works. Another essay included in *General Idea's Fin de Siècle* which deals specifically with the topic of this thesis is Friedemann Malsh's, "The Other Reality: The Multiples of General Idea," in which the author outlines a chronology of the group's production of multiples and then succeeds to analyze the group's "media strategy" and their use of the multiple as an artistic product which explicitly and exclusively addresses art historical discourse.³³

As with General Idea, exhibition catalogues are an integral resource on the subject of Matthew Barney's *Cremaster Cycle*. Of particular use is the catalogue entitled *The Cremaster Cycle*, produced by the Guggenheim for the 2002 exhibition of the completed cycle. This catalogue is essential to developing an understanding of *Cremaster Cycle* for several reasons. First among these is that the catalogue includes a visual glossary compiled by Neville Wakefield. This glossary provides a key to understanding Barney's sometimes obscure and wide ranging cultural references. This exhibition catalogue also

³² Joshua Decter, "The Theatrics of Dissemination: A General Idea Model," *General Idea's Fin de Siècle* (Stuttgart: Württembergischer Kunstverein, 1992), 15-26.

³³ Friedemann Malsh, "The Other Reality: The Multiples of General Idea," *General Idea's Fin de Siècle* (Stuttgart: Württembergischer Kunstverein, 1992), 28-35.

includes an essay, entitled “Only the Perverse Fantasy Can Still Save Us,” written by Nancy Spector, that situates the *Cremaster Cycle* in Barney’s oeuvre and presents a detailed description and analysis of each instalment in the cycle. Perhaps most interestingly the catalogue also includes a series of statements by people who were involved in the creation of the Cycle. Most importantly for this study, are comments made by Tony Morgan, who assisted Barney with elements of book design for the majority of the bookworks which accompanied the *Cycle*. Beyond this catalogue much of the material that has been published about *The Cremaster Cycle* is of little value to this thesis. This is because the range of issues that Barney touches upon in *The Cremaster Cycle* is so broad that his bookworks have largely been ignored. One article however which has been absolutely essential to this study is Alexandra Keller and Frazer Ward’s article, “Matthew Barney and the Paradox of the Neo-Avant-Garde Blockbuster.”³⁴ In this article the authors specifically address how *The Cremaster Cycle* is a paragon of capitalism as profit-making machine that manages to maintain its ties to the avant-garde. Though the authors do not specifically mention the bookworks that are produced as a part of the cycle they do briefly make mention of the products that spin-off Hollywood blockbuster production, and consequently they provide a conceptual structure from which it is possible to see Barney’s bookworks as a sort of artworld “happy-meal” toy.

Jameson, Critical Distance and Commodified Dissent

The work of cultural theorist Frederic Jameson covers a very broad range of

³⁴ Alexandra Keller and Frazer Ward, “Matthew Barney and the Paradox of the Neo-Avant-Garde Blockbuster,” *Cinema Journal* 45.2 (Winter 2006): 3-16.

subjects. His early publications deal fairly exclusively with literary concerns;³⁵ however with time his focus has broadened to include all forms of artistic production. It is not my intention here to address Jameson's prolific oeuvre in its totality, but rather to focus particularly on his conception of the impossibility of critical distance within the confines of late capitalist or postmodern society. This notion is articulated by Jameson in several texts, first appearing in an article published in 1984 by the *New Left Review* entitled "Postmodernism or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism." The notion of critical distance reoccurs in Jameson's oeuvre in his 1991 book of the same title, which includes a reprint of the 1984 article. This notion of the impossibility of critical distance received its most notable critique from Linda Hutcheon, who, in her 1988 book *A Poetics of Postmodernism* suggests that critical positions are indeed possible in late capitalist society. Hutcheon cites the practices of irony and parody as forms through which critical perspectives are voiced.³⁶ Jameson conversely takes the stance that these practices together with all other methods of cultural expression have been colonized by capitalist society, with the result that parody, for Jameson, becomes pastiche which he describes as a neutral practice of mimicry.³⁷ This debate between Hutcheon and Jameson has yet to be resolved and to a certain extent can be seen as a simple matter of quibbling over definitions.³⁸ What is of particular concern to this thesis however is the notion pioneered by Jameson that all modes of dissent and revolution have been colonized by the capitalist superstructure and its various marketing strategies, and that consequently the positions artists might wish to take in order to voice their dissent are indistinguishable from the

³⁵ See Fredric Jameson, *Sartre: The Origins of Style* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1961); *Marxism and From: Twentieth Century Dialectical Theories of Literature* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1972).

³⁶ Linda Hutcheon, *Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (New York: Routledge, 1988), 19.

³⁷ Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 17

³⁸ Linda Hutcheon, *Poetics of Postmodernism*, 39

capitalist superstructure itself. This concept has perhaps been fruitfully explored by Thomas Frank both in his book *the Conquest of Cool* and in the journal *The Baffler* founded by Frank in 1988 which states in its mandate that, “The cultural crisis of our time cannot be understood without reference to the fact that the modes of a cultural dissidence that arose in the sixties are today indistinguishable from management theory. The distance between the new species of business thinkers and rebel stars who populate our national firmament is almost zero.”³⁹ The notion of the impossibility of critical distance and the attached Jamesonian concept of the colonization of dissenting practices acts as the foundational principle of Frank’s *the Conquest of Cool* and for the authors of the many articles published by *The Baffler*. Frank and the writers for *The Baffler* do not specifically address the artists under discussion here; however their explorations of the commodification of dissent have provided a strong impetus for my own investigation of the development of the artist’s book from a form, originally aligned with practices of dissent prevalent in the 1960s, to its current fully commercialized position.

³⁹ Thomas Frank, “About the Baffler,” *The Baffler* [magazine online] (accessed 7 March 2005) available from <http://www.thebaffler.com/about.html>; Internet.

Chapter 1

The initial appearance of the bookwork in North America is frequently attributed to Edward Ruscha, and in particular his 1962 work *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* (Fig.1,2). However, as Johanna Drucker has pointed out, it is difficult to pinpoint the exact moment at which an artistic movement begins; to that end, she cites precedents for Ruscha's work dating as far back as the poetry of Stephane Mallarmé (1842-1898).⁴⁰ Regardless of whether Ruscha's work can be considered the first instance of the bookwork in North America, it is generally accepted as an example of the medium in its earliest stages. In 1962, *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* set a precedent for the genre of the bookwork as a whole, and also served as a model that Ruscha would return to in the creation of subsequent bookworks. The artist himself stated, "Each [book] could be plugged into the system I had. It's like a system of expression."⁴¹ This chapter builds on Ruscha's statement by treating *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* as the mould from which Ruscha's own later works were created, as well as a model for other bookwork artists. *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* and Ruscha's other bookworks from the 1960s will occupy the bulk of this initial investigation. To begin, I examine the physical properties of Ruscha's bookworks in the period between 1962 and 1970, all works that represent many of the same ideas and share a family resemblance to *Twentysix Gasoline Stations*. Ruscha's bookwork production was drifting into a dry spell in 1971, and the sole bookwork produced in that year, *Coloured People*, does not significantly add to or change the oeuvre as a whole.⁴² After this, Ruscha did not make any bookworks except in

⁴⁰ Johanna Drucker, *The Century of Artists' Books*, (New York City: Granary Books, 2004), 11

⁴¹ Ed Ruscha, "Ed Ruscha: An Interview," interview by Henri Man Barendse, *Afterimage* 8.7 (February 1981): 9.

⁴² In an interview with Willoughby Sharp, Ruscha himself mentions, "When I got *Coloured People* back

collaboration for some twenty-five years, and his work after this long break is significantly different.⁴³ The discussion here will not address Ruscha's collaborative works *Royal Road Test*, or *Crackers*, as the collaborative nature of these works and their inclusion of a traditional narrative structure, make them considerably different from the bookworks that fit into the *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* mould. I then turn to a detailed examination of what Ruscha has said about these works in interviews, in order to elucidate his preoccupation with achieving a mass-produced commercial aesthetic and to draw out the subversive aspects of his work. *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* and Ruscha's other early bookworks set the stage for the co-optive strain of the history of the medium; these works also function to subvert a capitalist mode of production and the landscape of commodities in which they are displayed. I conclude this discussion by showing how Ruscha's work at the earliest stage of the medium presages the tendency within the medium to co-opt the logic of the capitalist spectacle for its own counter-hegemonic ends.

Twentysix Gasoline Stations is a small book (18cm by 14cm) which includes reproductions of photographs of twenty-six gasoline stations, as its prosaic title indicates. The book has forty-eight pages, made of twenty-four sheets, and likely cost between one to two dollars (US) a copy to produce.⁴⁴ *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* was initially produced in a limited edition of four hundred, each signed and numbered. Ruscha quickly recognized this as being inconsistent with his intentions. In a 1965 interview with John Coplans, Ruscha stated that, "[o]ne mistake I made in *Twentysix Gasoline*

from the press I yawned I just yawned." For full interview see Ed Ruscha "...A kind of a Huh?" An Interview with Edward Ruscha," interview by Willoughby Sharp, *Avalanche* 7 (winter-spring 1973): 30-39.

⁴³ The change in Ruscha's work over this period is of interest to this study however, and will be briefly addressed after the discussion of works by General Idea and Matthew Barney in the intervening years.

⁴⁴ Drucker, *Century of Artists Books*, 72.

Stations was in numbering the books.”⁴⁵ In 1967, Ruscha produced another edition of five hundred, and two years later, a print run of three thousand was released. Notably, these later editions were not numbered. Ruscha, unlike many of the book artists he inspired, did not fabricate these bookworks himself, but entrusted the job to a professional printer. Ruscha mentions in an interview that, “[w]hat I really want is a professional polished clear-cut machine finish [...] I am not trying to create a precious limited edition book, but a mass produced object.”⁴⁶ The simplicity of the work’s title, in red serif majuscule lettering on an uncluttered white background, gives the work the appearance of a mass-produced training manual or instruction book. The clean, austere, machine-made appearance of *Twentysix Gasoline Stations*, and of Ruscha’s other books in approximately the same format, is of central importance. It is clear that with *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* Ruscha strove to create a book which had the properties of manuals and paperbacks on the market at the time. Ruscha’s departure from the unique art object is an early example of the critique of the art market – the cult of genius and the object itself – that would be reiterated by many artists associated with Pop and Conceptual art.

The photographs in *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* were taken along Route 66 (which has since been changed primarily into Route 40) between Los Angeles where Ruscha lived, and Oklahoma, where his parents lived. The photographs do not represent every gasoline station on this route, nor does the sequence in the book correspond to their geographic location. Ruscha initially photographed sixty or seventy stations, and then pared the selection down with the specific intention of avoiding a narrative sequence to

⁴⁵ Ed Ruscha, “Concerning *Various Small Fires*: Edward Ruscha Discusses his Perplexing Publications,” interview by John Coplans, *Artforum* 5 (February 1965): 24.

⁴⁶ Ruscha, “Concerning *Various Small Fires*,” 25.

the series of images.⁴⁷ One commentator has discussed these images as a kind of travelogue;⁴⁸ however, Ruscha himself has stated that he viewed the project more as a manual for people “who want to know about those sorts of things.”⁴⁹ Ruscha also mentions that his choice to represent gasoline stations was not particularly important.⁵⁰ He claims not to have any specific message about gasoline stations, or even American car culture, a subject to which he frequently refers.⁵¹ Indeed, he notes that his first concept for the work was the cover, specifically mentioning that he appreciated the typographic qualities of the number ‘twenty six’ and the words ‘gasoline stations’.⁵² The importance of the exterior of this bookwork was highlighted by the fact that a year after the book’s production Ruscha made a drawing of the cover, *Twenty Six Gasoline Stations, (Book Cover)* and also took two photographs, *Hand Showing Book Cover*, and *Hand Showing Book Spine*; in 1964, he made a three-part drawing showing three different views of the exterior of the book.⁵³ Ruscha’s comment, “[t]he book is the look”⁵⁴ seems to explain the motivations for these derivative works. Clearly he wished to emphasize the importance of the external or formal qualities of the work as a book.

Ruscha frequently enjoys maintaining a mysterious façade in regards to his subject matter. For instance, in the decision to examine gasoline stations, he states, with

⁴⁷ Clive Philpot, “Sixteen Books and then Some,” *Edward Ruscha: Editions, 1959-1999: Catalogue Raisonné*, Ed. Siri Engberg, (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 1999), 63.

⁴⁸ Dave Hickey “Edward Ruscha,” *Artforum International* 35.5 (January 1997), 60.

⁴⁹ Ed Ruscha, “Ruscha as a Publisher [or All Booked Up],” interview by David Bourdon, *Art News* 71 (April 1972): 33.

⁵⁰ Ruscha, “Concerning *Various Small Fires*,” 24.

⁵¹ Ed Ruscha, “The Artist and Politics: A Symposium,” *Artforum* 9 (September 1970): 39; Jaleh Mansoor presents an interesting if contentious discussion of Ruscha’s relationship to car culture in “Ed Ruscha’s One-Way Street” *October* 111 (Winter 2005): 127-142.

⁵² Ruscha, “Concerning *Various Small Fires*,” 24.

⁵³ The two photographs mentioned here originally appeared in *Artforum* and their particular circumstances will be examined in detail subsequently.

⁵⁴ Ed Ruscha, “Words with Ruscha,” interview by Howardina Pindell, *Print Collector’s Newsletter* 3. 6 (January-February 1973): 127.

typical sardonic humour, “I had to choose something I thought was art.”⁵⁵ However, on his decision to work with books, Ruscha has been quite forthcoming. Perhaps most notable among his various statements concerning his use of the medium is, “I want to get the price down [in reference to high priced limited edition art works], so everyone can afford one. I want to be the Henry Ford of bookmaking.”⁵⁶ Clearly, Ruscha was conscious of the potential for wide-ranging dissemination presented by the book medium. The decision to use the book to reach a wider public is not solely an idealist notion that art should be made available to a wider public than was currently able to afford it; the book presented the possibility for the commodified art object to break free from its peculiar art market niche and pushed artworks into the realm of other commercial items.

When considering this phenomenon, there are two distinct ways of viewing the expanded nature of the art object. One perspective might suggest that Ruscha is simply capitalizing on the market draw of his neo-Dadaist work in order to exploit a wider market. The other perspective, one which motivates this thesis, is that the work only achieves its significance through participation in the commodity market. Ruscha states in an interview with Willoughby Sharp in 1973, “I realized that for the first time this book [*Twentysix Gasoline Stations*] had an inexplicable thing I was looking for, and that was a kind of a “Huh?” That’s what I’ve always worked around”.⁵⁷ Inquiring as to the meaning and nature of ‘Huh’, Sharp asked Ruscha for examples; he replied, “I don’t know, somebody digging a hole out in the desert and calling it a sculpture. You know it’s a surprise to people.”⁵⁸ To expand on Ruscha’s metaphoric reference to Land Art, the

⁵⁵ Ruscha, “Ed Ruscha: An Interview,” 8.

⁵⁶ Ruscha, “Mr. Ruscha Evokes Art,” 1.

⁵⁷ Ruscha “...A Kind of a Huh?,” 30.

⁵⁸ Clive Philpot, “Sixteen Books and then Some,” 65.

paperback and general commodity market comprise the desert in which Ruscha's *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* model functions as the hole. Ruscha uses the commodity market created by the capitalist system to place his work in context. The work's commercial appearance: its replication of the style of the manual or technical book, suggests that, like so many other commodities, it will serve a purpose, and improve the consumer's life. However, when the consumer goes beyond the commercial exterior of the book and finds strange, apparently useless images of service stations, swimming pools or small fires, he or she is left with precisely the sense of "Huh?" which Ruscha mentions. It is by co-opting capitalist techniques that Ruscha is able, if only momentarily, to throw a wrench in the commodity fetish-driven bookstall browser's mind. If Ruscha had chosen to create *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* or his other books with a Xerox machine, by hand, or by any other non-industrial method of publishing, the consumer would be alerted to the unusual nature of the book by its appearance, and might not even take the time to contemplate the work, let alone purchase it. The casual experience of leafing through a doppelgänger bookwork, and finding something unusual about it would not materialize as a surprise in a handmade book, whereas it does in Ruscha's slick bookworks of this period.

Twentysix Gasoline Stations's unusual position of only making sense within a market of other objects, with which by comparison it appears nonsensical, is a theme continued in the other books produced by Ruscha during the 1960s. His second bookwork, *Various Small Fires* (Fig. 3-5) produced in 1964, maintained the same dimensions. Here again the cover displays text on a white background, although in this case the title was printed in black, rather than the red type used in *Twentysix Gasoline*

Stations. By opening the book to its title page, one discovers that the book is in fact called *Various Small Fires and Milk*. Like *Twentysix Gasoline Stations*, the book includes reproductions of photographs of exactly what the title indicates will be examined. The book contains sixteen images, fifteen of various small fires and the sixteenth of a glass of milk. The content and the quality of the individual photographs is not particularly important to Ruscha; in fact, the artist has mentioned in an interview that he went to a stock photograph shop and looked for images for this book. Indeed, in the same interview, Ruscha states that he believes “photography to be dead as a fine art.”⁵⁹ The significance of the photographs comes from their inclusion in what is ostensibly an object of commerce. The seeming triviality of the images, together with the visual non-sequitur of the final image, creates that sensation of “Huh?” discussed above. It is that sensation which calls into question the various myths which propagate commodity fetishism.

The third book produced by Ruscha, *Some Los Angeles Apartments* (1965), more closely resembles *Twentysix Gasoline Stations*, with even fewer deviations than seen in *Various Small Fires*. Here again, the book (Fig.6) contains images of what is described in the work’s title. It maintains the manual-like appearance of the 1962 book and achieves the same effect. In 1966, Ruscha released a variation on his standard format. This was his book entitled *The Sunset Strip*, or as the title page states, *Every Building on the Sunset Strip* (Fig.7). In this bookwork, the established industrial or manual-like style becomes more severe in appearance. The exterior of the book is still made from the same white material as the earlier books; however, the font of the title is much smaller, and printed along the book’s superior edge, rather than in the centre, as was the case

⁵⁹ Ruscha, “Concerning *Various Small Fires*,” 23 -25.

previously. The pages inside *The Sunset Strip* also depart from the form of the previous books. The exterior of the work appears to take on the traditional codex form of a book; however, the pages take the form of a twenty-seven-foot fold-out, showing in a continuous strip all of the buildings on the Sunset Strip. It is perhaps in its formal differences that *The Sunset Strip* functions in the same manner as the other books. Unlike *Twentysix Gasoline Stations*, which avoids linearity through an apparently random organization of stations, *The Sunset Strip* systematically represents a geographic location at a particular time, and thus can be seen to have a particular use value in that it can serve as a visual record of a place at a certain time. It is the excess, verging on absurdity, of a twenty-seven-foot fold-out to display this information, which resembles the absurdity in adding a photograph of a glass of milk to a collection of images of fires. Through the unusual construction of *Sunset Strip* Ruscha achieves the subversive “Huh?” effect first mentioned in his interview with Willoughby Sharp.

Ruscha’s next book also achieves this “Huh?” effect through a manipulation of the form of the book. As Phillipot amusingly points out in his essay “Sixteen Books and Then Some,” *Thirty-four Parking Lots* (1967) has the quality of “a distinctive yapping puppy in that it contains a strange foldout tab at the end at the book.”⁶⁰ Instead of reducing a particular image to fit the size of the book, Ruscha had the image run onto a small flap. In a 1972 interview with David Bourdon, the artist referred to this element of *Thirty-four Parking Lots*: “I like the idea of a little flap coming out like that [...] I worked very hard at that little thing at the end, and it cost a lot of extra money to put that little extra thing in there.”⁶¹

⁶⁰ Phillipot, “Sixteen Books,” 68.

⁶¹ Ruscha, “Ruscha as a Publisher,” 33

In 1968 Ruscha published his next solo bookwork, *Nine Swimming Pools, or Nine Swimming Pools and a Broken Glass*. This book bears an obvious resemblance to *Twentysix Gasoline Stations*, and is even closer to *Various Small Fires*. Like the latter work, the title *Nine Swimming Pools* is displayed on the cover, while the interior title page reveals the full title, with the addition of “and a broken glass.” This 1968 book differs from its predecessor in that it has sixty-four, as opposed to forty-eight, pages. The book also has fewer images than the previous works, leaving a relatively large number of seemingly superfluous blank pages. Perhaps this is the most visibly subversive example of the “Huh” effect in Ruscha’s books. Not only do the images contained within the object have little or no commercial value, but the vast majority of the work’s pages are blank, showing no particular commodity value at all. Yet regardless of this lack of use value, the work exists within the commodity market, and through this mimicry, draws into question the capitalist system

Ruscha took his co-optation of capitalistic techniques beyond the appearance of the artwork itself, at least in the case of *Twentysix Gasoline Stations*. The official response to the work was quite negative, so much so that even Philip Leider, then managing editor of *Artforum*, a journal not only aimed at a sympathetic audience, but one to which Ruscha himself was closely tied through his position designing the journal’s covers, stated the book was “doomed to oblivion.”⁶² In 1964, Ruscha prefigured the advertising business’ colonization of rebellion by taking out an advertisement in *Artforum*.⁶³ It is a reproduction of the image mentioned above of a hand holding

⁶² Philip Leider, “Twentysix Gasoline Stations,” *Artforum* 2.3 (September 1963): 57.

⁶³ A colonization which interestingly has been mapped by to Thomas Frank, in his book *The Commodification of Cool* (Chicago : University of Chicago Press, 1997) , as occurring during the same period examined in this study, where the Cool [or at least the unusual] in the form of the bookwork

Twentysix Gasoline Stations, with text, “Rejected/ Oct. 2, 1963 by the Library of Congress Washington 25, D.C.,” and then proceeds to give the contact information for Ruscha’s publishing company, National Excelsior, as well as a New York book dealer.⁶⁴ The use of an advertisement by an artist (not the dealer) obviously suggests that despite the moderately socialist ideals associated with the production of a work in the form of a cheap multiple, the artist has no compunctions about using the means provided by the ‘spectacular’ superstructure, capitalism. This advertisement further enhances the notion that, although Ruscha’s work seems to thwart the capitalist system and the concomitant fetishization of commodities, it does so by co-opting the very means provided by the system it criticizes. It is through this co-optation that Ruscha’s covertly political work can be seen as “the enemy within” not in a particularly national context as the phrase was originally used in relation to American Senator Joseph McCarthy’s Communist witch hunt, but within the very heart of the capitalist system, the commodity market.

Ruscha’s *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* and the other books he produced in the 1960s foretell an interesting future. The works are multiple, and indeed were published privately, rather than commercially. However, they do have the appearance of industrially produced, commercial objects. They do not stand in absolute opposition to the capitalist superstructure, as represented by the commodity market, but rather enter into that market, and thus develop their subversive connotations in relation to other commodities. Ruscha’s books act as subtle jesters in the court of commodities. The scholarship which dominates the field of bookworks, though it claims not to put forth an absolute definition of the bookwork, has placed an emphasis on the artist’s exploration of

colonizes commodification.

⁶⁴ Ed Ruscha, “Rejected/ Oct. 2, 1963,” *Artforum* 2. 9 (March, 1964): 55.

the book as a physical form.⁶⁵ Ruscha's work, at the very beginnings of the medium's contemporary form, suggests that this interest should focus on the formal characteristics of the book (i.e. its relation to the form of the codex and so on) for, as we have seen, Ruscha's books are formally generic. It is the nature of the book as a commodity, as an object which moves from place to place frequently, and at least initially, through some form of capitalist exchange that *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* attains its significance. By using, and in fact highlighting, the commercial nature of the book, Ruscha is not only able to insert art objects into the commodity market at a reasonable price, thus criticizing the art market and its ever rising prices, but also to draw into question the commodity market itself. This insertion into the market opens the path for many artists, most notably *General Idea*, who attempt to contaminate the market with "image viruses."

⁶⁵ For a more complete discussion of this dialogue see Drucker, "The Artist's Book as Idea and Form," *Century of Artist's Books*, 1-21; Klima, "Definition," *Artists Books: A Critical Survey of the Literature*, 21-41.

Chapter 2

In 1969, the artist collective General Idea (GI) was formed by Jorge Zontal (Jorge Saia), Felix Partz (Ron Gabe), and AA Bronson (Michael Tims), though later they claimed the date to be 1968.⁶⁶ The group's interest in commerce and commodities is evident, before even examining any of the work they produced. The artists chose to abandon their individual identities and to form a collective, thus mimicking the nature of the corporation.⁶⁷ According to Barbara Fischer, "the site of their interest [was] the unprecedented burgeoning of the culture industry in the late 20th century."⁶⁸ General Idea's field of production was by no means limited to bookworks. As a group, the three artists worked in most artistic mediums, from painting, drawing and sculpture to performance, installation and video. Most important to this thesis is their vast production of multiples. Indeed, though my study focuses on bookworks (a medium which can be viewed as a sub-category of the multiple), it will be necessary to examine other media used by the collective, since their approach to any kind of multiple is indicative of their approach to the bookwork. Before beginning this examination of General Idea's work in earnest, it seems important to stress that the group was not working in isolation, and that numerous artists in Canada and elsewhere were working in a similar vein: examples include the N.E. Thing Co. (1967-1978) and Les Levine (1935-). However, General Idea articulated their intentions in texts which facilitate understanding of this artistic phenomenon overall. It is also important to note that General Idea's work was often highly collaborative, as in the case of *FILE Magazine* (Figs. 9-14), which was not only

⁶⁶ Fern Bayer, "The Search for the Spirit," *The Search for the Spirit*, (Toronto, Ontario: The Art Gallery of Ontario, 1997), 10.

⁶⁷ Barbara Fischer, "Introduction," *General Idea Editions 1967-1995*, (Mississauga, Ontario: Blackwood Gallery University of Toronto at Mississauga, 2003), 20.

⁶⁸ Fischer, "Introduction," 20.

an artistic project initiated by the group, but also provided a forum for expression for numerous artists with similar objectives. Indeed, *FILE Magazine* represented General Idea's attempt to unify and connect a trans-Canadian, and even an international, community of artists who had similar artistic goals and perspectives.⁶⁹ General Idea also provides an interesting example of the bookwork as a multiple, as their interest in the idea of an "image virus" creates a tidy metaphor for the parasitic role frequently played by the bookwork through its co-optation of capitalism. This biological metaphor of the bookwork, or multiple, as a viral insertion in the larger social system provides an intriguing point of comparison with more recent instances of the multiple or mass-market bookwork, particularly in the case of Matthew Barney. Situated in its time, General Idea's work manifests a dualistic character and two-pronged attack. Their principles and ideas criticized the established counter-culture of the hippies, as well as main-stream culture.⁷⁰ At the same time, the cornucopia of visual decadence presented in General Idea's work made a true union between the commercial world and the 'counter-cultural' fine arts impossible. General Idea's work was simply too radical to achieve popular success in the commercial world. The various multiples, specifically in the form of magazines, posters and bookworks, produced by General Idea, mark a mid-point between Ruscha's use of the bookwork as a subtle comment on capitalism's commodification of the artwork and Matthew Barney's bombastic manipulation of that system.

This chapter will examine several aspects of the collective's work, beginning in light of a text by AA Bronson that explores the group's intentions, especially the notion

⁶⁹ AA Bronson, "The Humiliation of the Bureaucrat: Artist Run Spaces as Museums by Artists," *Museums by Artists*, Eds. AA Bronson and Peggy Gale (Toronto: Art Metropole, 1983), 30.

⁷⁰ AA Bronson, "Myth as Parasite/Image as Virus: General Idea's Booklist 1967-1975," *The Search for the Spirit* (Toronto, Ontario: The Art Gallery of Ontario, 1997), 17.

of the 'image virus' or the viral infection of popular consumer culture. I then turn to the early work of the group, in particular their "window dressing" displays of 1969 which are indicative of their shared interest in commercial culture and their humorous and yet polemical approach to it. An examination of the early Miss General Idea Pageants and some of the various works which can be considered under the rubric of the *1984 Miss General Idea Pavilion*, including *File Magazine*, follows in order to demonstrate how the collective's attitude towards commercial culture and the commodity nature of the art object changed, and especially, how often the work produced drifted away from their stated intention of introducing a "viral infection" into mass culture. Works produced during late 1960s to the mid 1970s show how the group's critical approach towards commercial objects began to target the art world, rather than a broader popular audience. During this same period, General Idea's conception of the multiple changed, and in some instances, the notion of the edition became the grounds for a parodic fiction. Their deviation from their stated intentions and their increasing focus on the specific part of popular culture which can be understood as the 'art world,' are mirrored by the development of Art Metropole, a bookwork and multiple distribution center founded by GI in Toronto. This change in the group's focus from a more critical perspective on general popular culture and consumer goods, to a self-referential or, reflexive attitude (artists commenting on the art world), risked polarizing their audience. However, during the final few years of GI's activities, while producing variations on the AIDS theme, the group once again turned its focus toward an audience that did not necessarily need to be *au courant* with developments in the contemporary art world. The AIDS project and the multiples produced during this period succeeded, to a large extent, in their intention of

virally infecting mainstream culture. It is during this last period of General Idea's work that they created the pla©ebo pin which one scholar has called "the perfect multiple."⁷¹ This work and those that follow its essential logic lay the foundations for future multiple and bookworks.

The members of General Idea have published a great deal concerning their artistic endeavours. The sole surviving member, AA Bronson, has written with the intention of explaining the ideas behind General Idea's work. In his essay, "Myth as Parasite/Image as Virus: General Idea's Bookshelf 1967-1975," Bronson states:

We abandoned bona fide cultural terrorism, then, and replaced it with viral methods. We realized that the structure and surplus of our society was such that we could live, like parasites [...] We chose [...] the viral method utilizing the distribution and communication forms of mass media and specifically of the culture world, we could infect the mainstream with our mutations, and stretch that social fabric."⁷²

This notion of the viral method is clearly another way of stating that the artists who were part of General Idea intended to co-opt the methods of capitalist commercial culture in order to gain success. Bronson's statement of intent raises the question of why this study of the bookworks' co-optation of capitalist techniques does not conclude with a discussion of General Idea and their various contemporaries. The reason is this: while General Idea did indeed co-opt commercial culture, this co-optation did not result in a seamless synthesis with commercial culture, something later artists would achieve. To continue the viral metaphor, the virus remained clearly distinct from the host. There are three main reasons why General Idea's "viral infection" of mainstream culture remained

⁷¹ Stephan Trescher, "The Perfect Little Pleaser: General Idea's PLA©EBO Pin," *General Idea Editions 1967-1995* (Mississauga, Ontario: Blackwood Gallery University of Toronto at Mississauga, 2003), 299.

⁷² Bronson, "Myth as Parasite," 18.

partially distinct from that culture. The first and most obvious is that much of the thematic material (queer, punk, and erotica/exotica) explored by General Idea was considered offensive by more conservative elements in mainstream culture. However, this factor is also the most easily dismissed, in that the outrage of conservative elements in society has frequently been shown to be the first sign of a mass-media star. In order to explain why General Idea's work does not result in a seamless integration with mainstream consumer society, it will first be necessary to examine how General Idea attempted this viral infection of mainstream culture, looking at what they produced, and how they went about disseminating it.

Opening a Closed Shop: The Window Dressings

In 1969, the three artists were living together with another friend, Daniel Freedman, at 78 Gerrard Street West in Toronto. Fern Bayer has shed light on the nature of their living quarters in her essay, "Uncovering the Roots of General Idea: A Documentation and Description of Early Projects 1968-1975." She states that "[A]ccording to the artist's accounts, the three-story house with the big front window had once been a store."⁷³ The three artists "created attention-grabbing satires of consumerism" by placing various objects including modified dolls, jewellery, second-hand novels and vinyl record albums on display in the window.⁷⁴ According to Bayer, anyone wishing to enter the premises was met with a sign perpetually announcing the return of the proprietors in five minutes.⁷⁵ This early example of General Idea's work is

⁷³ Fern Bayer, "Uncovering the Roots of General Idea: A Documentation and Description of Early projects 1968-1975," *The Search for the Spirit* (Toronto, Ontario: The Art Gallery of Ontario, 1997), 29

⁷⁴ Bayer, "Roots of General Idea," 29.

⁷⁵ Bayer, "Roots of General Idea," 29; Friedemann Malsh, "The Other Reality: The Multiples of General

indicative of the direction in which the collective was moving, particularly in regards to their polemical mimicry of consumer society. By setting up a window display in the manner of a shop, the members of General Idea were certainly co-opting the methods of capitalist society for the purposes of artistic display; however, the prankish “Back in five mins” highlights the fact that this display, intended to attract the eyes of consumers, is a fake construct. General Idea co-opted the methods and stylings of a capitalist distributor to create art as a polemical gesture calling upon consumers to take a second look at the structure of society and the nature of commodity fetishism. The creation of a fake, or mythological, consumer sphere within capitalist society, which found its beginnings in the group’s window dressings, would be brought to bombastic and spectacular new levels with the development of the *1984 Miss General Idea Pavilion*.

Art Party: Miss General Idea, Pageants and Pavilion

Deliberate inauthenticity is something that was present from the beginning, and ran throughout all of the projects created in the name of Miss General Idea by the members of the collective. Although in theory the first pageant was held in 1970 under the title *The 1970 Miss General Idea Pageant*, the artists constructed precedents for the event, embodied in two previous Miss General Ideas. Mimi Page and Granada Gazelle were declared the winners for the year 1968 and 1969, even though no pageants had taken place, and despite the fact that all of the members of the group had not yet met in 1968. These previous crownings lent the 1970 pageant the mythological strength provided by a sense of history. Although this aspect of the pageant was completely imaginary, the collective did not dispense with the many trappings and rituals that are

Idea, “*General Idea’s Fin de Siècle*, (Stuttgart: Württembergischer Kunstverein, 1992), 35.

often associated with beauty pageants. The 1970 *Miss General Idea Pageant* held true to most of the conventions of a traditional beauty pageant, with judges and flowers, together with the over-the-top inclusion of several of the evening's guests wearing bear costumes. Although very little material evidence remains of this first manifestation of the Miss General Idea theme, its beginnings were integral to the false mythology upon which the Group would build. In 1971, General Idea staged *The 1971 Miss General Idea Pageant*. This time, the pageant was held at the Art Gallery of Ontario, a decision that, as noted by Bayer, "was indeed no accident." The 1971 pageant directly addressed "the art world, its stars and hierarchy."⁷⁶ It also addressed consumerism and the various material techniques of capitalist marketing at the time. The gallery system and the Canadian contemporary art scene bore the brunt of the group's critical humour. General Idea selected David Silcox, a former visual arts officer of the Canada Council, and Dorothy Cameron, an art consultant, as "judges" for the pageant. With the Art Gallery of Ontario as venue, and the selection of judges from prominent positions within the Canadian art world, their satirical intentions were clear. Silcox and Cameron's unofficial positions as arbiters of taste are no longer subtexts hidden behind a façade of a bureaucratic necessity. Following Bayer's reconstruction of the event, "limousines and arriving celebrities; audience, judges and contestants; film and video cameras; a Master of Ceremonies and musical entertainers," it is easy to see the 1971 Pageant as a deliberate blowing out of proportion of the typical high culture exhibition opening.⁷⁷ Bayer concludes that,

The beauty pageant format provided General Idea with a basic vocabulary of contemporary cultural clichés and allowed them to express their ideas about

⁷⁶ Bayer, "Roots of General Idea," 65

⁷⁷ Bayer, "Roots of General Idea," 75.

glamour [...] culture nature interfaces, the role of the artist as an inspirational cultural device, the body of myths surrounding the art world, and the relationship of the artist to the media and the public.⁷⁸

Indeed, General Idea found the format so conducive to the ideas that they wished to convey that much of the work they produced until the early 1980s fell within the “frame of reference” of the Miss General Idea Pageant.⁷⁹

The *Miss General Idea Pageant* and the project of the *1984 General Idea Pavilion*, which evolved from it, were conceptually and thematically aimed at the art world, rather than at popular culture as a whole. However, the group did not completely forget the larger viral notion that, according to Bronson, was an inspiration of their work from the very beginning. Drawing on this early idea on April 15, 1972, General Idea published the first edition of *FILE Magazine*. I will first examine the various ways in which *FILE* is in keeping with the notion of the democratic multiple, and General Idea’s notion of a viral infection of popular culture. This being done, it will be shown that this self-same viral metaphor actually inhibits a true synthesis of popular culture and fine art through the form of the multiple, in that much of the material of *FILE* is, a) distinctly counter-cultural, and b) marketed towards a specific art oriented audience rather than popular culture.

File *FILE* under Art

FILE Magazine bears many of the hallmarks of the doppelgänger art object, co-opting the techniques and stylings of traditional printed objects. In this regard, the

⁷⁸ Bayer, “Roots of General Idea,” 75.

⁷⁹ Carmen Lamana Gallery, *General Idea’s Reconstructing Futures* (Toronto: The Gallery, 1977), 21.

publication's most salient feature is its title. In its initial conception, the 'Megazine's' title and logo mimicked the once ubiquitous *LIFE* magazine. The exterior format and size were so similar to that of *LIFE* as to be indistinguishable. Each edition of *FILE* throughout the 'megazine's' existence from 1972 was published in a print run of three thousand, excluding the final issue in 1989, which was published in an edition of 1989. Despite the fact that the level of distribution in no way matched that of *Life*, it cannot be considered unsubstantial. What is notable about these figures is that, unlike many other commercial periodicals, its print-run never increased or decreased regardless of demand, aside from the special circumstances of the last issue. The subject matter that the publication explored set *FILE* apart from other magazines, and effectively made a wider distribution impossible. In an essay entitled "The Theatrics of Dissemination: A General Idea Model" in the catalogue for General Idea's "Fin De Siecle" show, Joshua Decter describes this situation:

You have been seduced into leafing through the pages of this weird magazine that bears an uncanny resemblance to *LIFE*; upon further scrutiny, it is soon discovered that this is no mainstream publication. You observe, in a slightly bewildered and confused state, that File is filled with an accumulation of photo-text materials which seem to maintain little relationship to your expectation of 'normative' contents.⁸⁰

This statement is not entirely true, particularly with regard to *FILE*'s earlier issues that adopted the format of a mainstream gossip column. The difference was that the figures about whom the gossip was written were not the usual Hollywood stars and socialites, but

⁸⁰ Joshua Decter, "The Theatrics of Dissemination: A General Idea Model" *General Idea's Fin de Siècle* (Stuttgart: Württembergischer Kunstverein, 1992), 15.

instead the comparatively unknown members of the Canadian contemporary art scene, and frequently the friends of General Idea. What Decter's text reveals about *FILE* is perhaps most clearly articulated through a brief comparison with Ed Ruscha's *Various Small Fires*. As mentioned in the previous chapter, Ruscha creates a series of relatively similar images and then concludes his book with a seemingly random image; the glass of milk in a book which otherwise depicts images of small fires, produces a startling sense of 'Huh?' General Idea creates a similar effect. In the case of *FILE*, however, as with many of the collective's works, the subtlety found in Ruscha's work is abandoned in favour of much more controversial, sensational and intentionally bombastic content. This results not so much in a sense of 'Huh' but rather what may best be described as the feeling that accompanies the declaiming of an impersonal interrogative pronoun followed by a choice expletive. The unconventional visual and textual material found in *FILE* is taken up by Art Perry, then art critic for the British Columbia newspaper, *The Province*: "*FILE* has shown images of fluff, fantasy and fetishes that would never make the pages of a non-art magazine. Their frame of reference has always been art."⁸¹ Perry is quite correct in making this statement. *FILE*, in the doppelgänger tradition of the democratic multiple, does mimic some of the formal characteristics of more standard commercial objects, as can be seen by their imitation of the *LIFE* logo; however, the insertion of *FILE* into consumer culture does not truly indicate a desire to merge art with consumer culture, but rather to use the mass media to set up opposition to the pre-existing culture. With this in mind, it will be illuminating to return to some of the ideas mentioned above. First, the parody of *LIFE* magazine embodies the dichotomy created by General Idea's polemical parody of popular culture. The mimicry is so close to the original that it

⁸¹ Art Perry, "General Idea off the Wall," *The Province* (Vancouver), 25 June 1984, 30.

cannot be seen outside of its intentional offence to the creators of *LIFE* magazine and its readership. Indeed, in 1976, General Idea was sued by the Time-Life Corporation for its imitation of *LIFE*. The dichotomy or contradiction can be outlined as follows: first, General Idea produces a simulation or parody of a commercially popular object, which in its accuracy shows itself to be too polemical to be received with the passivity of traditional consumer products. Second, the choice to produce the early issues of *FILE* following the format of a gossip magazine shows a desire on the part of the artists not to merge with a pre-existing culture, that of the star-system, but rather to replace it altogether with a star-system that has General Idea itself at the centre.

Here it is useful to return to the notion of the viral infection of society articulated in Bronson's text, "Myth as Parasite," cited above. It is true that General Idea "abandoned bona fide cultural terrorism," but the viral metaphor more accurately represents their choice to parasitically mimic and appropriate the techniques of popular culture. It cannot be forgotten that the virus is malignant towards its host. This malignant aspect of General Idea's work, particularly with *FILE*, surfaces with the intent of supplanting an existing popular culture with its own. The virus, in this case *FILE Magazine*, cannot truly merge with popular culture and remains entirely distinct from it. It merely becomes yet another specialized periodical addressing a market that is limited to those involved in the art world. It is relevant to a smaller audience in the same way that any other trade journal appeals to its audience and remains largely inaccessible to those who are neither professionally, nor personally involved with the subject at hand. *FILE*'s failure to merge with popular culture, and its relegation to the art world, is most evident with the twenty-sixth issue of 1986, in which *FILE*, having abandoned its use of

its *LIFE*-like logo, has appropriated the cover design of *ARTnews*, a magazine which, like *FILE*, is about art, and is intended for a segment of the population who actively pursue art-oriented publications. This is a complete turnabout from the imitation of the general-interest periodical *LIFE*.

Selling Out: From Bookstore to Museum: Art Metropole

General Idea's inability, or unwillingness, to extricate itself from the established niche market of the art world is highlighted by the development of Art Metropole, the distribution center for bookworks and multiples founded by the group in 1974. Initially, Art Metropole was developed as an archive of the various projects initiated in the pages of *FILE Magazine*, through the so-called 'transcandada' art network which *FILE* propagated. The group developed a large collection of bookworks and multiples, and Art Metropole was founded as a shop for the distribution of these articles. In 1975, with the assistance of Peggy Gale, a staff member of the Art Gallery of Ontario, Art Metropole also began distributing video works by artists. In the late 1970s, Art Metropole began publishing books of its own. In 1982 Art Metropole held its first exhibition, "Museums by Artists." By this point, the one-time "shop" had a curatorial board and its transformation, from commercial outlet to a gallery with a mandate to collect ephemera, had become clear to the public. This has been observed in John Bentley Mays's article, "Thriving Art Metropole Throws a Birthday Bash," for the *Globe and Mail* in February of 1984. The birthday bash about which he is writing "signal[s] the end of Art Metropole's slow transformation from the Yonge Street bookstore it once was into the

[...] resources, archive and rather unusual museum it has become.”⁸² During the late 1980s, Art Metropole began a programme of exhibitions. Finally, in 1997, Art Metropole transferred their permanent collection to the National Gallery of Canada. This brief history of Art Metropole is meant to highlight the transformation of a slightly unusual bookstore into a highly specialized exhibition space and collecting institution. The bookstore’s initial ability to disseminate bookworks and multiples to the public, and to circumnavigate the elitist gallery and museum system, resulted in the creation of a highly specialized museum-like institution and research facility. Rather than an infiltration of popular culture, Art Metropole, as can be seen by the merging of its collection with the National Gallery’s, became a sub-branch of the very museum system it was originally intended to bypass. Like *FILE Magazine*, Art Metropole began with the hope of disseminating bookworks and multiples to the general public by adopting the methods of dissemination of other commercial products; however, both *FILE* and Art Metropole eventually resulted in increasing the degree of specialization that members of the public must attain in order to gain access to these works.

Viral Representations: The AIDS Project

Towards the end of General Idea’s career, the collective created some of their most powerful and affective works. Two members, Jorge Zontal and Felix Partz, were infected with HIV. In 1987 the group produced the work *AIDS*, consisting of a silkscreen mimicry of Robert Indiana’s famous *LOVE* painting from 1966. It was with this work and subsequent works created as part of their AIDS project that the notion of the viral

⁸² John Bentley Mays, “Thriving Art Metropole Throws a Birthday Bash,” *The Globe and Mail* (Toronto), 25 February 1984, 5 (I).

infection of popular culture achieved its most complete realization. The AIDS pandemic in the 1980s was an issue that affected not only the members of General Idea, but was felt all across the western world, as issues surrounding the terminal illness began to surface on the global stage. The self-referential and art historical allusions that had been present throughout the collective's career, and which had in the past prevented them from truly merging with popular culture, were still present, but the counter-cultural aspect of their work fell into second place behind the overwhelming issue of AIDS. General Idea's long-held concept of the image virus and the viral method of infiltrating popular culture took on new proportions when mixed with the subject matter of a deadly global virus. Initially, General Idea used their AIDS rendition of American Pop artist Robert Indiana's *LOVE* (Fig.14) as a poster project to infect public spaces with their AIDS image. In 1987, hundreds of AIDS posters were placed in various parts of New York, and in 1988 the same project was carried out in San Francisco, Toronto and Berlin. The group expanded on the theme, making various different objects using the same *LOVE*-based AIDS imagery in stamps (1988), sculptures (1989) and, as a Public Art Fund Project in New York, they placed the image in every second car of the New York City subway system (1989). In addition to this, they created an animated version of the logo for the Spectacolor board in Times Square (1989). The AIDS image virus spread throughout the western world on buses, as billboards and on T-shirts. Where possible, the group used the same three colors (red, blue and green) that they had used in the original instance of the work. These colors began to symbolize the project, and they began to use the colors themselves to 'infect' other works of art— for instance the *Infe©ted Rietveld* (1994), the famous modernist chair which, in this instance, featured the colors of the AIDS project.

General Idea used the multiple, and the notion of the image virus, to mimetically represent the rapid proliferation of an actual virus. With this project, the means of the mass media was synthesized with material the collective wished to convey to its audience. No longer did they try to use the media to realize an idealistic art culture in opposition to main-stream society, but rather, they found a perfect fit in the replicative and repetitive methods of commercial production to represent the self-reproducing and self-propagating virus. However, none of the multiples (aside from the initial AIDS poster project) were created on a scale truly intended for mass consumption. Editions of the various objects produced in the project rarely ran above five hundred, and only a few objects passed beyond the prototype stage, though the edition might have stated it as virtually unlimited. Nevertheless, these were the group's most successful multiples that laid the ground work for artists to follow in their footsteps.

From its beginnings, General Idea showed a strong interest in the borderline between the commercial object and art. This interest first surfaced in the form of the "window-dressing" works. With this project, the group showed not only their interest in art as commodity, but also revealed the satirical edge which would flavour their work throughout the collective's existence. With the *Miss General Idea* pageants/pavilion and *FILE*, the group's exploration of the commodity nature of the art object expanded to the point where their critical approach actually began to appear to be an institutionally recognized discourse. What began as a practical joke turned into a specialized reflexive critical branch of the art world itself. The criticisms they voiced were so specific to the art world that their mockery of the museum system and the art market actually resulted in the transformation of museums and art galleries which embraced their work. This is

perhaps best exemplified by the transformation of Art Metropole, from a small bookstore to a gallery in its own right, and finally, to a special collection held by the National Gallery of Canada. GI's co-optive techniques thus far had, in their criticism, proposed an idealist-Marxian alternative to both the current commercial culture and to the art world. But their art historically informed counter-culture required a certain degree of specialization in art historical discourse, and consequently the group's efforts to insert their ideas into popular culture resulted in another degree of specialization for those already initiated into the art world. Though they wished to insert art into popular culture, the result was not inclusion, but alienation of art from popular culture through the arcane and specialized nature of their work and its distribution through Art Metropole. Only when they turned their attention away from the vain and reflexive discipline of art, a discipline built to a large extent by Modernism, towards the more pressing issue of AIDS were they able to truly synthesize the methods of the mass media with the material that they wished to represent. This resulted in the creation, or at least the conceptual outline, for the most successful multiples of their career, which broke free, to a certain degree, from the strictly art referential discourse that they had been engaged with in with their early works, and succeeded in influencing popular culture in way that previous works could not have. Tragically, the AIDS epidemic affected the group personally, and multiples which might have had immense distribution were left in limited editions that for the most part were acquired by museums and galleries. However, the group's approach to the multiple left a legacy that would help subsequent artists to co-opt the techniques of commercial culture, break free of specialized art discourse, and to successfully insert themselves into popular culture.

Chapter 3

The AIDS epidemic undeniably brought about a significant turning point in the work of General Idea. As thematic material, HIV/AIDS was powerful enough a subject to drive the collective to abandon their exclusive, oppositional, or contrarian stance. This polemical position, that is presented only in a subtly and understated manner in Ruscha's work, is clearly evident in the work of General Idea and in the work of many artists producing multiples and bookworks inspired by the cultural revolution of the 1960s. Opposition techniques, whether forthright, or imitative and parodic as in the case of General Idea, often result not in the propagation of a chosen perspective within a broad range of popular culture, but rather in relegation to a marginal, fractious periphery that is unable to affect the reigning cultural hegemony. In this chapter, I address these theoretical concerns in regard to the development of the democratic multiple. First, I introduce notions of cultural hegemony and historic blocs, drawing largely on the work of Italian political theorist and historian Antonio Gramsci. I then turn to the work of Frederic Jameson and his determination of the impossibility of critical distance from the capitalist superstructure. This theoretical investigation is intended to shed light on the cultural change that occurred during the latter half of the 20th century through an acknowledgement of the impossibility of critical distance from the hegemonic bloc of contemporary capitalism. It will also serve to shed light on the development in the field of the bookwork as democratic multiple, from the work of Edward Ruscha through to Matthew Barney.

The Italian political theorist Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937) revolutionized leftist conceptions of power structures with theories developed primarily in relation to Italy and

the wider European context of the early twentieth century. Despite Gramsci's own insistence on geographic and historical specificity in the construction and development of political theory, his concept of hegemony and the historical bloc have seen, and still show promise of wider application. In particular, his conceptions of hegemony and the related notion of the historical bloc have attracted much scholarly interest, and will act here to provide a basis from which it will be possible to understand the nature of the power structures which form the environment in which the bookwork developed as a democratic multiple. I begin with a brief introduction to the notion of hegemony and its history; I then provide an outline of Gramsci's somewhat amorphous approach to this concept, drawing from the author's own writings and from several of his commentators. I then briefly address the notion of the historical bloc, and provide a few remarks on its relevance in late twentieth-century North America. It should be remembered that this discussion is intended to facilitate a fuller understanding of Frederic Jameson's notion of the impossibility of critical distance.

The term 'hegemony' is derived from the ancient Greek word *hegemonia*, meaning 'leader,' and from the corresponding verb *hegeisthai*, to lead. According to Perry Anderson in his essay "The Antinomies of Antonio Gramsci," the term first came into modern usage in the 1880s in the work of Russian Marxists, who used it to describe an alliance between the working class and the peasants to bring down the Tsar.⁸³ In these conditions, the term began to be understood as a method for the working classes to gain support.⁸⁴ Gramsci would expand the concept from this strictly revolutionary context.

⁸³ Perry Anderson, "The Antinomies of Antonio Gramsci," *The New Left Review* 100 (November 1976-January 1977): 15-17 and Roger Simon, *Gramsci's Political Thought* (London: Lawrence & Wishart 1991), 23.

⁸⁴ Roger Simon, *Gramsci's Political Thought: An Introduction*, (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1991), 23.

Perhaps his clearest articulations on the subject can be found in his unfinished essay of 1926, entitled "Some Aspects of the Southern Question," which remained unfinished as a result of his imprisonment. Here, he begins to outline the idea that hegemony is, by no means, a tool available only to the revolutionary movement. He suggests that in order for a class (at this point he does speak of the proletariat), "to become the dominant class, it must succeed in creating a system of class alliances."⁸⁵ Gramsci then goes on, by way of anecdote, to demonstrate that the fascist state of Italy had, to an extent, set up such an alliance with the peasant classes of southern Italy. Gramsci follows this assertion with the idea that, "No mass action is possible unless the mass itself is convinced of the ends it wishes to achieve and the methods to apply."⁸⁶ Then, through an analysis of the social roles of the intellectual and the priest in northern and southern Italy, he explains how the dominant bourgeoisie can achieve a complicit alliance with the peasant classes, through the mediation of the 'intellectual' class, and thus create a hegemonic alliance that leaves control of the productive power of peasants in the hands of the bourgeoisie.⁸⁷

From this background, the Gramscian understanding of hegemony becomes clear. Effectively, it is the complicit agreement, among a variety of classes and socially distinct groups, upon a certain worldview. For Marxist revolutionaries, and indeed for all aspiring revolutionaries, it means convincing the population that the status quo is unsatisfactory, and that change must be brought about. The opposite view was held by the dominant capitalist class, of both Gramsci's time and our own; the goal being the preservation of a belief in the validity of the status quo. This is achieved by the state,

⁸⁵ Antonio Gramsci, "Some Aspects of the Southern Question," *Gramsci: Pre-Prison Writings*, Ed. Richard Bellamy, Trans. Virginia Cox Cambridge (New York, Melbourne, Cambridge UP 1994), 316.

⁸⁶ Gramsci, "Some Aspects of the Southern Question," 316.

⁸⁷ Gramsci, "Some Aspects of the Southern Question," 321.

through the maintenance of the various organizations of civil society. According to Gramsci, the result of the recognition of hegemonic power structures (during a time when the Third International still held at least the pretence of effecting world change) was a “War of Position.” This term, as it has been defined by the British Gramscian scholar Roger Simon, is the “strategy of building up a broad bloc of varied social forces, unified by a common conception of the world.”⁸⁸ Gramsci outlines his notion of a hegemonic ‘war of position’ against what he calls a ‘war of manoeuvre,’ which is a war on more physical lines, such as the Russian revolution of 1917. In a ‘war of position’ according to Gramsci, “the superstructures of civil society are like the trench-systems of modern warfare.”⁸⁹ Among other things, this implies that the ‘war of position’ is, in part, a cultural and ideological war, making it the theatre of operations for the three artistic producers discussed in this study. In Gramsci’s *Prison Notebooks* (1930-34) he prophetically noted that “in politics the ‘war of position’ once won, is decisive definitively.”⁹⁰ Gramsci’s notion of hegemony and wars of position form the concepts necessary to discern the power structures in contemporary society. After the collapse of the Soviet bloc in the late 1980s and its ultimate demise in 1991, it became clear that capitalism had achieved hegemonic global dominance.

It is in the context of capitalism’s hegemonic ubiquity that I turn to the writings of Frederic Jameson, and in particular his critique of postmodernism as it appeared in the 1984 article in the *New Left Review* entitled, “Postmodernism or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism,” the 1991 book of the same name, as well as “*Postmodernism and*

⁸⁸ Simon, *Gramsci’s Political Thought*, 25.

⁸⁹ Antonio Gramsci, “State and Civil Society,” *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, Eds. & Trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffery Nowelle Smith, (New York: International Publishers: 2003), 235.

⁹⁰ Gramsci, “State and Civil Society,” 239.

Consumer Society,” published in 1988, which presents an adaptation of the 1984 essay. Jameson’s critical focus is wide ranging; here I focus on Jameson’s writings concerning the notion of the impossibility of critical distance and its application to the work of Edward Ruscha and *General Idea*.

Jameson’s notion of the impossibility of critical distance is one which presupposes that capitalism has indeed decisively won the ‘war of position’ for hegemonic dominance. The capitalist system and the structures of ‘civil society’, to use Gramsci’s phrase, which support it, are so deeply entrenched that it is impossible for production, cultural or otherwise, to take place outside of, or in true opposition to, the established hegemonic bloc. The ubiquity of capitalism in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century has had a particularly intense effect on cultural production, which, in earlier forms of capitalism and in pre-capitalist societies, enjoyed a semi-autonomous position from other aspects of life. The colonization of this position by the hegemonic bloc of capitalism resulted not in the disappearance of the cultural sphere, but rather in a cultural suffusion with the reigning superstructure.⁹¹ However, this complete sublimation of the cultural sphere by the dominant hegemonic bloc of capitalism has had a momentous effect on radical, or critical culture, or any cultural production which seeks to regain a foothold in the Gramscian ‘war of position,’ Jameson’s position is that any attempt at such a ‘war of position’ in the era of late capitalism is impossible, as capitalism has indisputably vanquished all opponents. In Jameson’s own words,

[S]ome of our most time-honoured radical conceptions about the nature of cultural politics may thereby find themselves outmoded [...] No theory of cultural politics currently on the left today has been able to do without one notion or

⁹¹ Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 48.

another of a certain minimal aesthetic distance, of the possibility of the positioning of a cultural act outside of the massive Being of capital from which to assault this last.⁹²

Jameson indicates that this critical distance “has very precisely been abolished in the new space of postmodernism.”⁹³ He develops involved examples indicating how this situation came about. For our purposes here, the most effective is his position regarding the changing nature of parody and pastiche in the era of late capitalism.

According to Jameson, “Both pastiche and parody involve the imitation or, better still, the mimicry of other styles,” he continues to define parody as “capitaliz[ing] on the uniqueness of [...] styles on their idiosyncrasies and eccentricities to produce an imitation which mocks the original [...] the general effect of parody is [...] to cast ridicule on the nature of these stylistic mannerisms.”⁹⁴ Pastiche, conversely, is according to Jameson, “a neutral practice of [...] mimicry, without parody’s ulterior motive, without the satirical impulse.”⁹⁵ Pastiche is for Jameson a hallmark of the postmodern or late capitalist era. Jameson’s notion of the impossibility of critical distance is clearly at play in his contested understanding of pastiche and parody.⁹⁶ With pastiche, the critical or subversives aspects that were possible with parody are no longer present. In the context of the bookwork and the multiple, it is possible to understand the form of the commodity as the essential idiom of capitalist society. On one hand, Ruscha’s works can effectively be understood as a pastiche of commodity that did not realize its potential as a democratic art object only

⁹² Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 48.

⁹³ Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 48.

⁹⁴ Fredric Jameson “Postmodernism and Consumer Society,” *The Culture Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern 1983-1998* (London and New York: Verso, 1998), 4.

⁹⁵ Jameson “Postmodernism and Consumer Society,” 5.

⁹⁶ See Linda Hutcheon, *Theory of Parody: the Teachings of Twentieth Century Art Forms* (New York: Methuen, 1985).

because of its limited production. The images found in his books are far from bombastic or subversive; they are banal and as Ruscha has indicated can be used as “a manual for people who want to know about such things.”⁹⁷ The nature of the images however is unimportant as the lure of the books for the consumer derives not from the value of the artistic or informational content but rather from their oddity within the market of objects, the sense of ‘huh’ that they possess, something which can strike the fancy of art world initiate just as easily as any other consumer. On the other hand, General Idea’s subversive imagery and distinctly critical stance result in an attempt at parody in a time during which parody is becoming outmoded. The critical positions or indeed, pretensions, presented by the collective, in their works in the codex form, defeat the strengths of their chosen medium, the democratic multiple. Consequently these works do not successfully reach the public because the nature of the attempted critical stance acts as a form of micromarketing of their art towards a specific audience resulting, unintentionally, in a form of elitism as a result of the impossibility of critical articulations within the capitalist superstructure. The only possible path for the achievement of the authentically democratic multiple then was to abandon the critical approach taken by General Idea and other artists with similar intentions. The only way to truly bring the artwork, in the form of the bookwork and the multiple to a vast section of the population was not through a critical examination of and knee-jerk reaction to the effects of capitalism on the art object and the art market, but rather through a co-optation of the methods of capitalist production and distribution which had already proved capable reaching all ranges of society. It is with this in mind that I would like to turn to the work of Matthew Barney.

⁹⁷ Ed Ruscha, “Ruscha as a Publisher [or All Booked Up],” interview by David Bourdon, *Art News* 71 (April 1972): 33.

Chapter 4

It is not immediately apparent that Matthew Barney's *Cremaster Cycle* has any overtly political aspects, particularly with regard to commodity production. The gargantuan work of the *Cremaster* cycle touches on such a wide variety of subjects, in such a spectacular way, that, as the literature reflects, it is extremely easy to get caught up in the many elements which form the narrative of the cycle. The massive scale of the cycle, encompassing hundreds of sculptures, drawings, and other pieces, which can all be analyzed as individual works, together with the fact that the cycle was produced over a ten-year period, have made it difficult to assess the cycle as a whole. This difficulty is compounded by the simultaneous release of *Cremaster 3*, the final instalment of the cycle chronologically, and the launch of the only exhibition in which all five parts were shown together. This resulted in many viewers focusing primarily on the new work, rather than viewing the cycle as a whole. The spectacular nature of the work, and the vast number of pieces included, have also led to critical oversight of the bookworks produced alongside the cycle. However, it is my contention that these bookworks represent a new approach to the genre, which at once synthesizes the democratic urge to bring artwork into the hands of a wider audience that would not generally be considered part of the art-buying public and the spectacular methods of capitalist production. In order to completely articulate the complexities of Barney's approach to the bookwork, it will first be necessary to present a synopsis of the *Cremaster Cycle* and its various aims. I will then move on to a more detailed analysis of the bookworks that were created as part of the *Cremaster Cycle*. I begin with an analysis of the particular method used by Barney to integrate the fictitious world of the *Cremaster Cycle* with our own contemporary reality,

while illustrating the way that Barney's bookworks are more than simple commodities promoting the Cycle – they are sculptural extensions of the Cycle. I then review an artistic response to Barney's works, in the form of the Canadian artist Derek Sullivan's bookwork entitled *Cremaster 4—Mathew Barney*. This example highlights the fact that, although Barney's bookworks do not subscribe to admirable ideals, they are truly democratic. I then address Barney's bookworks in the context of the notion of the democratic multiple. Finally, I conclude by responding to the article "Matthew Barney and the Paradox of the Neo-Avant-garde Blockbuster," by Alexandra Keller and Frazer Ward, in an attempt to illuminate the parallels between the so called 'neo-avant-garde blockbuster' and Barney's approach to bookworks.

The *Cremaster Cycle* is composed of five parts. Each part consists of a variety of sculptures and drawings which are elements in a film corresponding to that section of the Cycle. According to Barney, the films form a narrative body explaining the sculptures. The five sections of the film were created in the following order: *Cremaster 4* in 1992, *Cremaster 1* in 1995 and then, *Cremaster 5*, 2 and 3 respectively produced in 1997, 1999 and 2002. The Cycle, according to Barney, is a continuation of his exploration of the concept of change or growth through the enactment of some stress or trauma. Barney and others have used the way that athletes develop muscles, through first breaking down the existing muscle in order to build it again, as a metaphor for this process.⁹⁸ In particular, the *Cremaster Cycle* explores this notion in relation to the period in the life of a foetus during which it develops a gender. It is from this basic metaphor of the development of human sexuality that the *Cremaster Cycle* derives its name, as the cremaster muscle is the

⁹⁸ Nancy Spector, "Only the Perverse Fantasy Can Still Save Us," *Matthew Barney: The Cremaster Cycle* (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 2002), 4.

muscle which raises and lowers the testicles in response to external stimulus, and the point where the foetus becomes male is the first use of this muscle. This development is played out through the Cycle, both in the narratives of the films, and in through the cycle's presence in, and relationship to, the empirical world. The development is one which Barney views as cyclical, and consequently, the cycle has multiple points of entry. The first instalment of the cycle to be produced was *Cremaster 4*, and it is quite possible to follow the cycle, through its chronological development, or through its numeric and thematic development. Here however, I will present the cycle chronologically.

Cremaster 4 represents the penultimate stage in the metaphoric development of foetal sexuality through a depiction of a surrealistic motorcycle race on the Isle of Man. The fortunes of the competitors in the race (named the Ascending Hack and the Descending Hack) are linked to the action of a third character, played by Barney himself, called the Loughton Candidate, (after the Loughton ram, an animal which is native to the island, and which possesses two sets of horns, one ascending and the other descending). The Loughton Candidate aims to reach the finishing point of the race before either of the two Hacks arrive, in order to halt the process of differentiation and to maintain a state of biological equilibrium between the two impulses. The Loughton Candidate fails however, and the instalment ends with a guarantee of full descent.

The second film created in the *Cremaster Cycle* was *Cremaster 1*, which represents the first stage of the conflict-ridden process of sexual differentiation. The narrative moves back and forth between two scenes. The first is the Bronco Stadium in Boise, Idaho, above which float two Goodyear blimps. The action begins with an actor who appears to be a female Hollywood starlet but who is actually a hermaphroditic fetish

model who plays the role of Goodyear in this film.⁹⁹ Goodyear is shown to be simultaneously in the cabin of both blimps. These cabins can only be told apart by the presence of green grapes in one cabin, and red grapes in the other. Goodyear obtains the grapes through a difficult process, and then begins to place them in patterns on the floor of the cabin before her. Chorus girls on the blue AstroTurf field below mimic the patterns made with the grapes in a series of Busby Berkeley-like dances. The final result of these kaleidoscopic dance movements instigated by Goodyear's placements of the grapes is the outline of a foetus in its completely androgynous state. Thus *Cremaster 1* can be seen as the initiation of the cycle.

Following *Cremaster 1*, which can be viewed as the opening of the cycle, the next instalment completed by Barney was *Cremaster 5*, which represents the completely descended, fully differentiated state of the cremaster muscle. From one perspective, *Cremaster 5* can be viewed as the end of the cycle, since it represents the results of the biological process which the cycle depicts. The instalment centers on a tragic love story set primarily in Budapest. The narrative of the film follows the actions of several characters. The first to be introduced is the Queen of Chain, played by Ursula Andress. Subsequently; the central characters are The Queen's Magician, The Queen's Diva, and finally The Queen's Giant, all of whom are played by Barney. The action commences as the Queen begins to sing. As she sings, the Diva starts to climb a garland that covers the proscenium arch of an opera house. The Queen is reminiscing over her love, the Magician. As her song progresses, the Diva continues to scale the proscenium and the Magician is shown traveling towards a bridge. The Queen's attention is directed towards holes below her throne, where she is able to look into the luxurious Gellért Baths. The

⁹⁹ Arthur Danto, "The Anatomy Lesson," 276.17 *The Nation* (5 May 2003): 26.

Giant is shown entering the baths, and the humid atmosphere of the baths forces the dropping of his testicles. As this happens, the Queen ends her aria, the Diva falls from the proscenium arch and literally splatters onto the stage, while the Magician is shown jumping, shackled off the bridge. The Queen herself falls, and small drops of liquid drop from her mouth and through the holes below her throne, into the baths where the now dead giant is to be found. These drops of liquid begin to form a new substance as they mix with the water of the baths, showing both the end of the cycle, and the possibility of it beginning again.

The second to last instalment to be made in the cycle, *Cremaster 2*, is intended to portray that stage where conflict is introduced into the static equilibrium of the foetus as it was introduced in *Cremaster 1*. It is with the introduction of conflict that the process of differentiation begins. *Cremaster 2* has been described as a gothic western.¹⁰⁰ Two narrative structures are played out in relation to each other. The first is loosely based on the life of Gary Gilmore, a convicted murderer from Utah who was given the death sentence, and then had to fight the legal system to have that sentence carried out. Barney relies primarily on upon Norman Mailer's account of Gilmore's life as it was portrayed in his 1979 novel *The Executioner's Song*. The second narrative that this portion of the cycle is based on is Harry Houdini's performance at the World's Columbian Exposition; the stunt performer is played by Norman Mailer. Both stories are interconnected through three themes, which are represented by shared motifs. These themes are; the landscape as witness; Gilmore's will to death; and the life of bees.¹⁰¹ All of these themes, according to Barney, relate to the notion that foetal organisms resist sexual differentiation, and make

¹⁰⁰ Spector, "Perverse Fantasy," 36.

¹⁰¹ Spector, "Perverse Fantasy," 36.

an attempt to remain in the equilibrium of the initial undivided stage. “*Cremaster 2* embodies the regressive impulse through its looping two-step narrative and genealogical structure, moving from 1977, the year of Gilmore’s execution, to 1893, when Houdini, who may have been Gilmore’s grandfather, performed one of his great escapes at the World’s Columbian Exposition”.¹⁰² *Cremaster 2* is set in the Bonneville Salt Flats, and in the Rocky Mountains. The narrative begins and ends with shots of glacial chasms that, as Nancy Spector writes, “metonymically suggest the migration of a glacier from northern Utah to southern Canada”.¹⁰³ “Both Gilmore’s kinship with Houdini and his correlation with the male bee (or drone) are established in a séance conception at the beginning of the film”.¹⁰⁴ The film depicts Gilmore’s execution by having him tied to a bull and forced to ride, as in a rodeo, until both Gilmore and the bull are dead. This is followed by a scene in which Houdini/Mailer meets Baby Fay La Foe, who is Gilmore’s grandmother; this role is played by yet another fetish model; in this case a woman who is exaggeratedly wasp-waisted. Thus *Cremaster 2* encapsulates the cyclical nature of the *Cremaster Cycle* as a whole showing Gilmore’s death being immediately preceded by events which are understood to lead to his birth.

The final instalment of the series, though it does not represent the final stage in the process of sexual differentiation, can be viewed as the climactic conclusion of the cycle. However, it should be noted that despite *Cremaster 3*’s centrality and importance to the cycle, it was perhaps the least well-received instalment.¹⁰⁵ *Cremaster 3* is set primarily in the Chrysler building in New York. The building itself represents the

¹⁰² Spector, “Perverse Fantasy,” 35.

¹⁰³ Spector, “Perverse Fantasy,” 36.

¹⁰⁴ Spector, “Perverse Fantasy,” 36.

¹⁰⁵ Danto, “The Anatomy Lesson,” 26.

organism undergoing the process of differentiation. The action of the film follows the construction of the Chrysler building in an ascent rife with Masonic symbolism, references to the Young Ireland movement of 1848, and Depression-era organized crime.¹⁰⁶ As the Entered Apprentice (played by Barney) rises through the building, he sets out to accomplish the various degrees of Masonic ritual. These degrees are accomplished through tasks which represent the apprentice's contribution to the construction of the Chrysler Building. However, the apprentice cheats at one of his tasks and the completion of the building is sabotaged. The Apprentice continues his ascent and, as he does, the diegesis reveals the character of Hiram Abiff (played by Richard Serra), the architect of Solomon's temple and foundational figure of Masonic lore. The narrative turns back to the Apprentice, who pauses in his ascent when he reaches the building's bar, the Cloud Club, on the sixty-sixth floor. Here he seeks refreshment, but the barman is unable to serve him as the bar itself is slowly being displaced. This displacement is caused by the Entered Novitiate (played by Aimee Mullins), who sits in a room opposite the bar slicing potatoes with blades attached to her prosthetic feet. She then wedges the potatoes under the corner of the bar. The narrative then jumps to the Saratoga Springs, a horse racing track, where the Apprentice, accompanied by the Novitiate, places a bet on the race to be held. Five zombie horses appear to be the contestants in the race. The horses and their respective jockeys wear the emblems and colours of the five instalments in the cycle. The race is run, and the apprentice loses his bet. He is then taken by several thugs, who place a decorative horse's bit in his mouth and proceed to bash his teeth out. The narrative then returns to the Chrysler building; where the now wounded apprentice is accosted by three Masonic Masters who proceed to perform a surreal dental operation on

¹⁰⁶ Spector, "Perverse Fantasy," 43.

him. Hiram Abiff/Serra is then shown climbing two towers he has constructed (representative of the two pillars of Masonic wisdom; Joachim and Boaz) to the highest floor of the Chrysler Building. Here numerous men in Depression-era costumes are performing a Beltane rite which will conclude by raising the pinnacle of the Chrysler building; notably, this pinnacle was the element which, for a time, made the Chrysler Building the tallest building in the world. The Apprentice recovers from his operation and again begins his ascent, though now with stealth, as he is stalking Abiff/Serra. The Beltane rite reaches its completion and the needle-like tip of the building is raised. Here the main narrative of the *Cremaster 3* pauses and moves to an interlude called *The Order*, which depicts a summary of the Cycle played out as a bizarre sporting event within the confines of the New York Guggenheim's rotunda. The narrative then returns to the top floor of the Chrysler building, where the Apprentice meets Abiff and re-enacts the legendary murder of the architect, using Masonic tools. Before the body of the architect can fall to the floor, the Apprentice himself is killed by the needle of the Chrysler building, which comes crashing down as a result of the Apprentice's earlier sabotage. The film in its entirety is bracketed by a coda which tells the story of the meeting of two giants, which ends with one of the giants throwing a large rock into the sea which becomes the Isle of Man, thus linking this final instalment to *Cremaster 4*, the first to have been completed.

As this brief summary of the Barney's work indicates, the *Cremaster Cycle* is filled with intertextual relations. A key point in this study is the way in which Barney blurs the lines between the fictional world created in the Cycle, and the world as we know it outside the Cycle. An obvious example of this is having the characters of Harry

Houdini and Hiram Abiff played by Richard Serra and Norman Mailer, respectively. Mailer plays both Houdini and himself in the complex narrative of the Cycle, in that Houdini is presented as the physical and spiritual progenitor of Gary Gilmore, while Mailer himself can be understood as one of Gilmore's creators, in that it was his novel, *The Executioner's Song*, that brought significant public attention to Gilmore. Other figures like Richard Serra, Aimee Mullins and even Marti Domination, can be seen to function in the same way. Dual roles, where reality and fiction interact, are not restricted to human characters. Notable examples of this mixing can be seen with the Chrysler building in *Cremaster 3*, which plays a role as a character within the film. The *Cremaster Cycle* in itself is envisioned by Barney as a vast organism with tentacles touching down in various parts of the globe. This is illustrated by Barney's preparatory sketch showing the various geographic locations used in the Cycle, and the way in which these locations are linked. This interplay between fiction and reality is not restricted to characters or geographic locations; it applies as well to the sculptures that are made in conjunction with the films. For instance, the very discs containing the information that allow the filmic portion of the *Cremaster Cycle* to be viewed, are turned into sculptural objects, contained in elaborate boxes and displayed in unique and equally sculptural vitrines. This melding of the fictional world of the *Cremaster Cycle* with the quotidian world, with which we are all familiar, is most interestingly and successfully pursued in the bookworks produced alongside the Cycle.

Barney produced five bookworks for the *Cremaster Cycle*, one corresponding to each of the five instalments of the Cycle. These bookworks bear the same title as the instalment in the series to which they correspond. The books were conceptually designed

by Barney, with technical assistance provided by Tony Morgan for the design of *Cremasters* 1,2,3,5 and with James Lingwood providing similar assistance for *Cremaster* 4. All five books have a slick commercial feel. In particular, the bookwork for *Cremaster* 2 (Fig.16-18) is, like so many mass-produced objects, is contained within a plastic cover that is inseparable from the binding. Similarly, *Cremaster* 5 (Fig. 18) is partially covered by a plastic wrapping upon which Barney's trademark field emblem,¹⁰⁷ as it was adapted for this instalment, is centrally placed as though it were a corporate logo. However, there is nothing tongue-in-cheek about these works. The pages faithfully relate the narratives of the installments to which they correspond (Fig.20), through full colour reproductions of production stills with numerous fold-out spreads. Though neither the Barbara Gladstone Gallery nor Artangel, the publishers of the books, would release information regarding how many books were produced in each edition, all of the books were mass-produced and reasonably priced. In particular, *Cremaster* 3, arguably Barney's biggest public success, as well as his biggest critical failure, is still in print five years after its original publication and selling for approximately forty-five dollars Canadian. Though this price is certainly not cheap, it is certainly superior to the one hundred and fifteen dollar price tag of an edition of *File Magazine*, or the now priceless *Colour Bar Lounge* book by General Idea.¹⁰⁸ More importantly, Barney and his publishers have made the *Cremaster* bookworks widely available to the mass market. In particular, *Cremaster* 3 (Fig.21) may be purchased on mass market web sites, such as Amazon.com, or in Chapters outlets across North America. Capitalism is unquestionably

¹⁰⁷ The field emblem is "an ellipsis bisected horizontally by a single bar" See Spector, "Perverse Fantasy," 7.

¹⁰⁸ At the time of writing a single issue of *FILE Magazine* could be purchased from Art Metropole for one hundred and fifteen dollars, while the *Colour Bar Lounge* was not available for purchase.

the means used to disseminate Barney's bookworks. General Idea's notion of infecting popular culture through an image virus has been most effectively carried out by Barney with the *Cremaster Cycle*. This was accomplished, not through an attempt to spread a counter-culture, but rather through making use of the already established systems for mass dissemination of object— that is, the capitalist market.

The success of Barney's bookworks as democratic multiples in the eyes of some may still seem dubious, and indeed there are strong critics of his work; however, these critics only serve to emphasize Barney's success in this regard. An example that perfectly proves this point is the 2006 bookwork by Canadian artist Derek Sullivan. Sullivan's 2006 work entitled *Cremaster 4—Matthew Barney* (Fig.22) initially seems like an honest critique of the capitalist and spectacular excess of the *Cremaster* bookworks. Sullivan's work is a facsimile of the bookwork for *Cremaster 4* (Fig.23), with some important differences. The cover is hand-coloured in crayon, the pages within the binding are both loose, and blank, and most importantly, the print-run of this self-published item amounts to a total of eight. Moreover, each of these editions includes a faked Matthew Barney signature. This limited edition bookwork sells for the not inconsiderable price of two hundred dollars Canadian, and can only be purchased through the artist's dealer, or through Art Metropole. The resulting bookwork only perpetuates the elitism of the art market, since it is produced only in limited edition, is priced beyond the means of most consumers, and, in its eight editions, has a severely restricted area of dissemination. Furthermore, though it may be ironic that Sullivan has filled his book with blank pages, in doing so, he makes the book fairly incomprehensible to uninitiated viewers, leaving them perhaps only with a sense of 'Huh' similar to the effect of the blank pages in

Ruscha's bookworks, but without necessarily aiming to create that sense. Barney's books on the other hand, arcane though their iconology may be, regardless of the viewer's level of initiation into art-world discourse, cause some reaction through their provocative imagery. Sullivan's critique of Barney work is idealistic, but ineffective. It effectively proves the Jamesonian notion of the impossibility of critical distance from the capitalist system, from which it would be possible to pose such a critique. When the salient features of Sullivan's work are compared to Barney's, it is clear that Barney's work is in the end a far more successful and effective democratic multiple. It should however be noted that while Sullivan's work in itself does not represent an instance of the democratic multiple, his critique is not without some democratic qualities. It is an unsolicited and honest reaction to Barney's work from Barney's broad audience.¹⁰⁹ While Sullivan may be making quite a valid point by filling his imitation of the bookwork for *Cremaster 4* with blank pages, it seems here that Sullivan's work serves more to prove the success of Barney's work. The *Cremaster Cycle* was so efficiently and effectively disseminated that any critique of the work needs no introduction.

In their article "Matthew Barney and the Paradox of the Neo-Avant-Garde Blockbuster," Keller and Ward trace what they call the "double genealogy" of the *Cremaster Cycle*, by relating it to the performance art of the late 1960s and 70s and the Hollywood blockbuster.¹¹⁰ In adopting this genealogy, the authors view the *Cremaster Cycle* as simultaneously stripping the tradition of performance art of its critical

¹⁰⁹ Sullivan has indicated that he did not contact Barney regarding this work for permission or for any other purpose. Derek Sullivan, "Re: Questions about *Cremaster 4*—Matthew Barney." interview by author, e-mail correspondence, 23 March 2008.

¹¹⁰ Alexandra Keller and Frazer Ward, "Matthew Barney and the Paradox of the Neo-Avant-Garde Blockbuster," *Cinema Journal* 45. 2 (Winter 2006): 3.

reflections and stripping the blockbuster of its purpose of generating massive profits.¹¹¹ With reference to the sculptural pieces that are part of the *Cremaster Cycle* (though with no mention of the bookworks), they view “the films as workshops for the production of expensive commodity goods [...] animated by the films.”¹¹² Considering only those objects which are available to the public through the mediation of the museum or gallery they claim that, “there is nothing remotely humble about these commodities.”¹¹³ Keller and Ward go on to say that, “Barney’s elaborate and expensive productions can hardly be seen to participate in the critique of the commodity, but rather in its celebration.”¹¹⁴ Though Keller and Ward restrict their examination of the *Cremaster Cycle* by assessing it in the context of the development of performance art since the 1970s and the Hollywood blockbuster, it is still possible to see the element of celebration they identify as being Barney’s response to Jameson’s point concerning the impossibility of critical distance from the capitalist superstructure. This celebratory aspect becomes all the more clear when Barney’s bookworks are taken into consideration. To repeat Keller and Ward’s words about the other sculptural objects which are part of the *Cremaster Cycle*, “there is nothing remotely humble” about Barney’s bookworks.¹¹⁵ These objects belong, as Keller and Ward state with humour about the *Cycle* as a whole, “in a gallery far, far uptown.”¹¹⁶ The essential point is that Barney’s bookworks are not restricted to a gallery of any sort, but rather they are available for purchase, and can be found in the home rather than the gallery. Recognizing the impossibility of a truly effective critique, either of the capitalist system, or of the gallery system, Barney accepts the situation for what it is, and in doing

¹¹¹ Keller and Ward, “Matthew Barney Blockbuster,” 4.

¹¹² Keller and Ward, “Matthew Barney Blockbuster,” 8.

¹¹³ Keller and Ward, “Matthew Barney Blockbuster,” 9.

¹¹⁴ Keller and Ward, “Matthew Barney Blockbuster,” 9.

¹¹⁵ Keller and Ward, “Matthew Barney Blockbuster,” 9.

¹¹⁶ Keller and Ward, “Matthew Barney Blockbuster,” 11.

so, he disseminates his complex narrative to far more viewers in a shorter amount of time than either Ed Ruscha or *General Idea* achieved.

Considering this fact, the bookworks of the *Cremaster Cycle* can then be seen as among the most successful democratic multiples of the genre. In order to summarize how this success is achieved, it will be useful to return to Ruscha's thoughts on the bookwork, and to compare this with Barney's work. Ruscha, in an oft-quoted passage, discusses how he likes to imagine where his books have ended up, and he gives several amusing examples, such as *Various Small Fires* being used as a peanut tray.¹¹⁷ From its inception then, the final destination of the bookwork, in the possession of the consumer, has been part of the bookwork's nature. For Ruscha, the quality of chance within the mass market supports the central point of his bookworks, that eloquent yet simplistic 'Huh' quality, which is achieved as much through blank pages and visual non-sequiturs, as through the possibility of the artworks being used as peanut trays. For Barney, working several decades later, this approach of the consumer's possession of the bookwork becomes far more complex. Just as Norman Mailer, the Chrysler building, and the various geographic locations used in the filming of the *Cremaster Cycle* serve to intertwine fiction with reality, and to ground his narrative in the empirical world, the bookworks serve a similar purpose. Here it is useful to view the *Cremaster Cycle* metaphorically as an organism, whose centre is in New York, where the crowning instalment of the Cycle took place, and which extends its tentacles both east and west, to Idaho and to Budapest. These central tentacles however are not all of the organism, but the dissemination of the various objects which are part of the cycle, and that act as

¹¹⁷ Edward Ruscha, "My Books End Up in the Trash," interview by A.D. Coleman *New York Times* 121.41 (August 27, 1972): D12.

smaller tentacles spreading the *Cremaster Cycle* across the globe, by infecting the now international circulatory system which is multinational capitalism. Viewing the work in this way, it is possible to see that Barney's bookworks are indeed the ideal multiples, like General Idea's *Infect* pin mixing artistic content with its methods of production and dissemination. Yet they are far more successful, in that they reach a far wider audience by accepting the impossibility of critical distance. It is perhaps most appropriate to close by quoting an anonymous reviewer of the *Cremaster 3* bookwork from Amazon.com, who stated, "[a]rt should intervene and disrupt. And if it cannot erupt into the public sphere, it should erupt all over it."¹¹⁸

¹¹⁸ Anonymous, "Review: Cremaster 3" *Amazon.com* [store on-line] (accessed 2 February 2007); available from http://www.amazon.com/Matthew-Barney-Cremaster-3/dp/0892072539/sr=8-2/qid=1172008282/ref=pd_bbs_sr_2/103-8518738-8832655?ie=UTF8&s=books; Internet.

Conclusion

The works discussed in this thesis, by Edward Ruscha, General Idea and Matthew Barney, form points in a trajectory in the development of the bookwork and the relationship of this medium to capitalism and the consumer market. Ruscha's works use the commercial world as the background for their statement. His books, following the model of *Twenty-Six Gasoline Stations*, make use of commercial design techniques as well as commercial distribution methods. Rather than making a polemical statement against capitalism and the art market, as so many of his contemporaries chose to do, Ruscha's works show an acceptance of the de facto prevalence of capitalism. He chooses to make use of the techniques made available by that system for disseminating his work, rather than rejecting those techniques outright. Initially, the work of General Idea follows in Ruscha's footsteps by making use of commercial techniques as they did with their early window dressing projects. However, as the group developed, their work became both more polemical towards such techniques and simultaneously more elitist. Works like the window dressings were essentially democratic, and the irony of the perpetually closed shop could be popularly perceived, if not universally appreciated. The common trend here was that, through using the techniques of the commodity market, both Ruscha and General Idea were able to produce what could be understood as democratic art objects. Despite the inequities of the distribution of wealth within the capitalist system, it cannot be denied that money has an equalizing and democratizing effect on material objects. Ruscha answers the question of how to escape the elitist art market by simply moving his sphere of production directly into the broader commercial market. The viral strategy theorized by General Idea initially suggests that the collective

desired to create works that would achieve similar results as Ruscha's early bookworks. The collective's insistence on maintaining an overtly critical and polemical stance towards consumer and mass culture meant that their works would not or could not pique the interest of the broader public. These works centered on very specific topics which resulted in their being consumed by a very specific audience rather than a genuinely democratic broader public. With the development of the Miss General Idea pageant, the collective began to address a specific cultural sphere, the art world, which requires of its initiates a specific kind of cultural capital or knowledge, and is therefore essentially elitist, and not accessible to the broader public. This is to say that there is something about this artistic field of cultural production which cannot be purchased by money alone, and consequently there was something about GI's works from this period which clashed with capitalist democracy, and which promoted a form of elitism rather than the greater equality that has traditionally been the goal of the political left.

This is not to say that General Idea were not making use of, or at least emulating, capitalist marketing techniques in the creation of their multiples, bookworks and *FILE*, as micromarketing is certainly a capitalist technique. Rather it is to say that their approach to disseminating their works was not truly democratic. These works were not saturating the market as a whole but only a particular section of the art market. With regard to dissemination then, the use of the codex form as a 'democratic multiple' did not significantly broaden the consumer audience for contemporary art. In order to achieve a broader audience it was necessary, as Ruscha early works indicate, to abandon the distinctly polemical positions, and imitate mass consumer products to such a degree as to be indistinguishable from them.

This is effectively what occurs with the bookworks of Matthew Barney. Despite the complex and sometimes grotesque imagery he uses in the *Cremaster Cycle*, when the long films are broken down into short segments by reviewers, or in the form of the bookwork, these obscure and grotesque images resemble a combination of two immensely popular forms of mass culture, the music video and the science fiction blockbuster. Indeed this resemblance is perhaps most distinct in the one filmic portion of the *Cremaster Cycle* that Barney makes available for public consumption on DVD, *The Order*. *The Order* is, as mentioned previously, a DVD which presents a small segment of *Cremaster 3*. Similarities to popular culture abound in this section of the *Cycle*. This segment of the broader project is intended to resemble a sporting event, complete with astro-turf, scantily clad women and popular rock bands. *The Order* and indeed the *Cremaster Cycle*, as a whole, is a saleable 'Superbowl' like event with the added veneer of 'art'.

In the midst of the trajectory that this thesis has outlined is Jameson's point that, within the current system of capitalism, critical distance necessary to affect true critique is impossible and that all attempts at critique essentially result in the creation of more goods for the capitalist market. However abhorrent this may seem, it follows that, in order to make any valuable and interesting articulation, it is necessary to work within the capitalist system rather than to perpetuate the illusion that the creation of commodities can somehow occur outside of that system. The bookwork in its multiple form is an ideal format to accomplish this, and when its creators do not shy away from the reality of their work as a commercial product, it can successfully be used as a method of democratizing art by bringing it to a much wider public as Barney's *Cremaster Cycle* has demonstrated.

The historical trajectory of bookworks and multiples I have outlined above is one that demonstrates that such art objects can only achieve their status as 'democratic' when they fully embrace capitalism, rather than standing in opposition to it. To build on Slavoj Žižek's recently coined phrase "resistance is surrender"¹¹⁹ it is possible to see that resistance is not merely surrender, but rather resistance amounts to supporting the opposition, the elitist divisions among a population, rather than promoting a sense of equality. While it may be unpleasant for the political left to accept the production of cheap goods for mass consumption (a quintessentially capitalist form of production), under the current circumstances, it is also the most convenient way of creating democratic works of art. As bookworks such as Barney's are being mass produced, Lucy Lippard's once stated dream of seeing bookworks in supermarket appears closer to reality than ever.¹²⁰

¹¹⁹ Slavoj Žižek, "Resistance is Surrender," *London Review of Books* 29.22 (15 November 2007): 7.

¹²⁰ Lucy Lippard, "The Artist's Book Goes Public," 48.

Appendix:

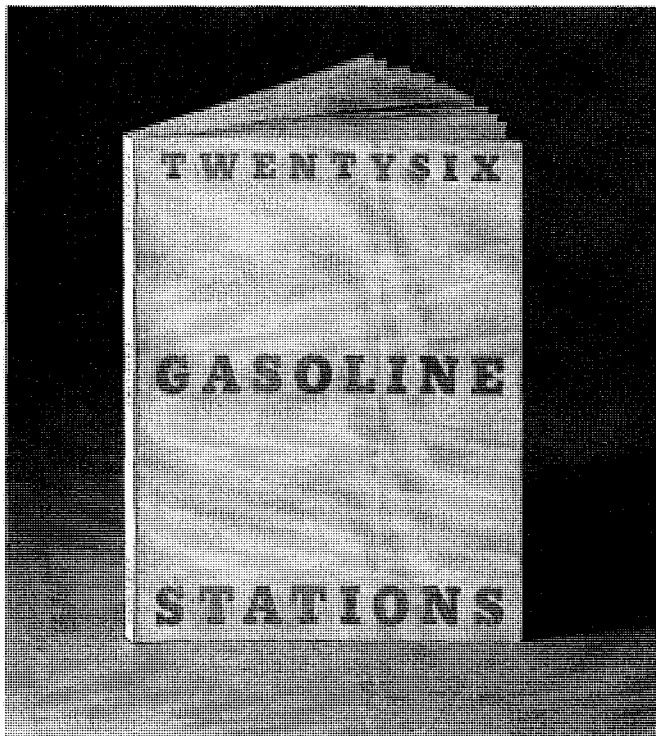


Fig. 1

Ed Ruscha, *Twentysix Gasoline Stations*, 1963 (book cover)

Image from: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, *Public Information: Desire, Disaster, Document*. San Francisco: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 1995, 99.

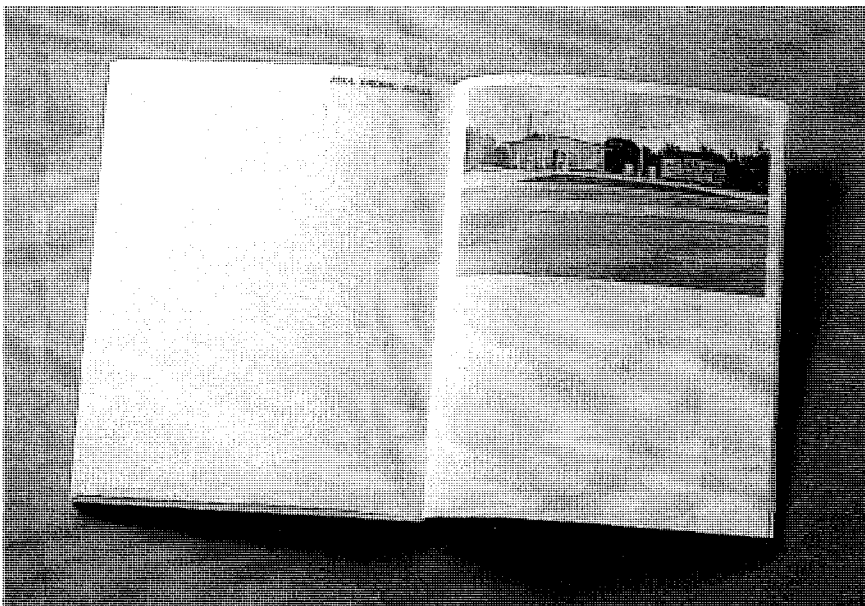


Fig. 2

Ed Ruscha, *Twentysix Gasoline Stations*, 1963 (detail)

Image from: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, *Public Information: Desire, Disaster, Document*. San Francisco: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 1995, 99.

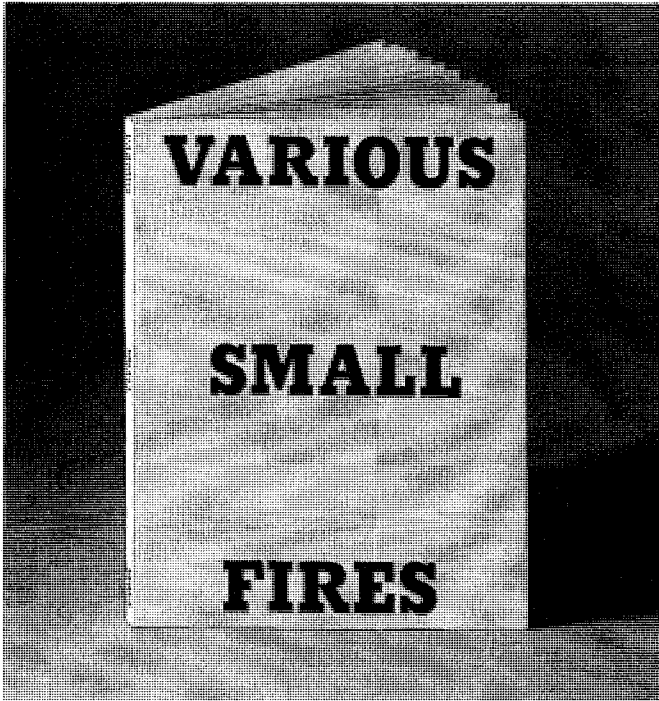


Fig. 3

Ed Ruscha, *Various Small Fires*, 1964 (book cover)

Image from: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, *Public Information: Desire, Disaster, Document*. San Francisco: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 1995, 100.

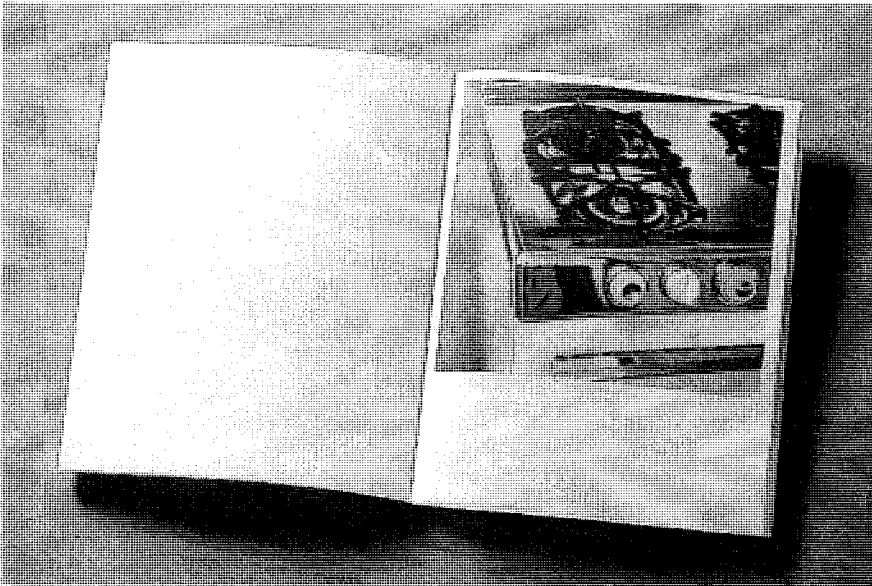


Fig. 4

Ed Ruscha, *Various Small Fires*, 1964 (detail)

Image from: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, *Public Information: Desire, Disaster, Document* (San Francisco: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 1995), 100.

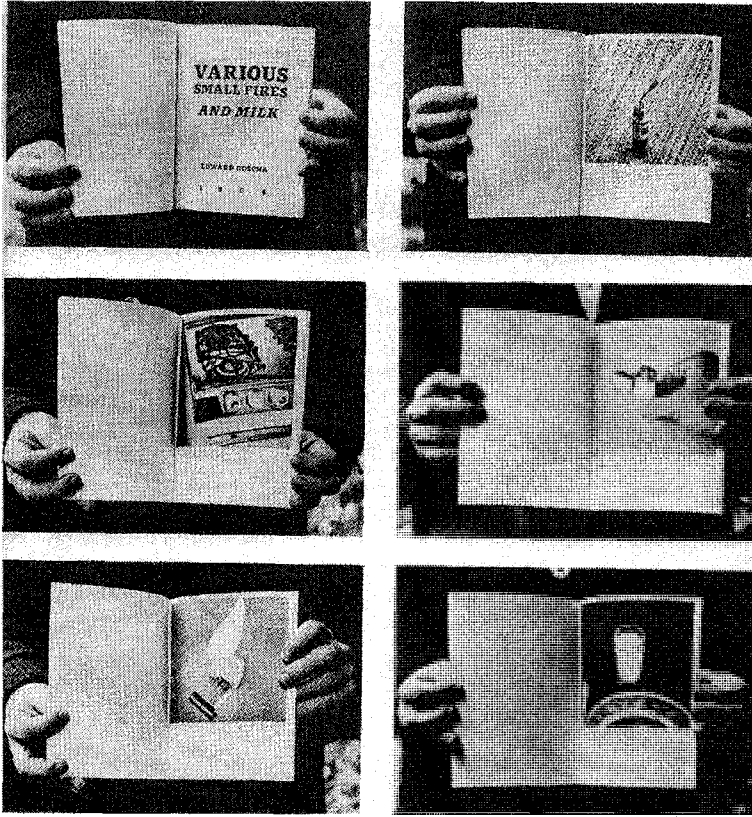


Fig. 5

Ed Ruscha, *Various Small Fires*, 1964Image from: Ursula Meyer, *Conceptual Art* (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1972), 207.

Fig. 6

Ed Ruscha, *Some Los Angeles Apartments*, 1965 (book cover)

Image from: author.

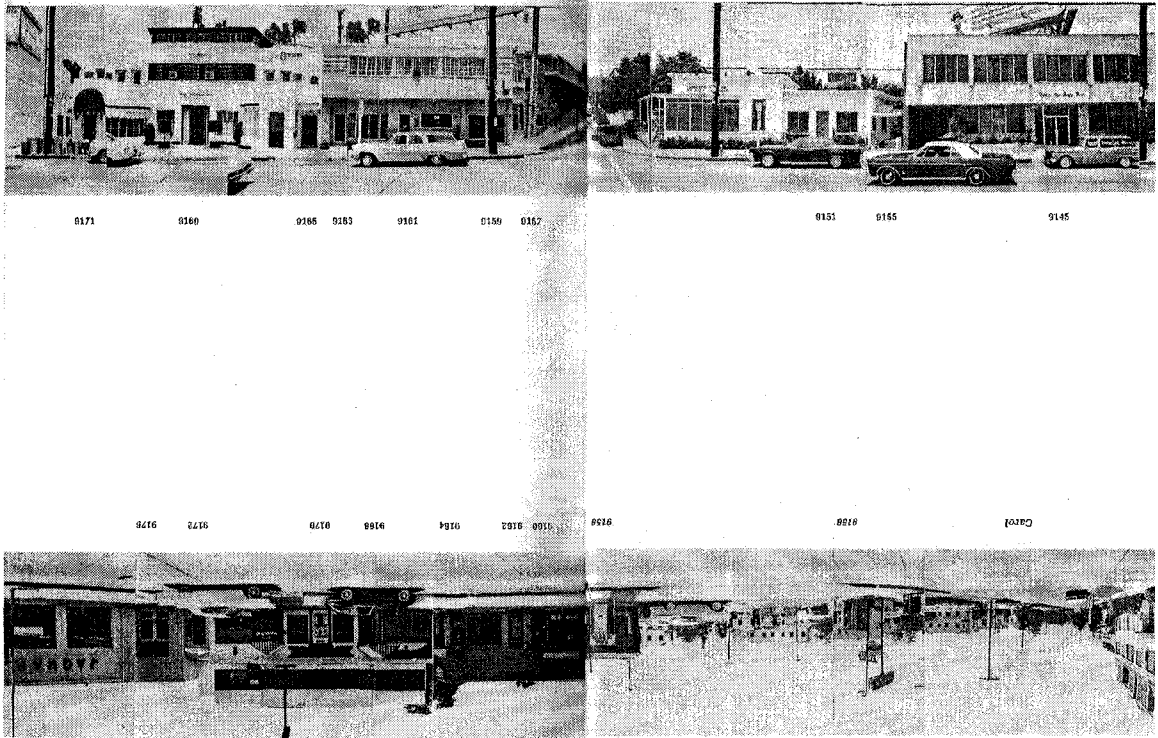
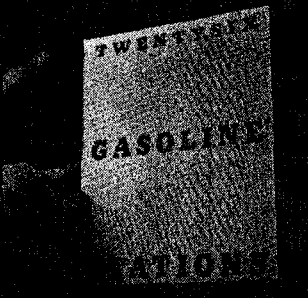


Fig. 7
 Ed Ruscha, *Every Building on the Sunset Strip*, 1966 (excerpt)
 Image from: Ursula Meyer, *Conceptual Art* (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1972), 208-9.

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 1018 Madison Avenue
 New York 21, New York

Fig. 8
 Ed Ruscha, "Rejected/ Oct. 2, 1963," *Artforum* 2. 9 (March, 1964): 55

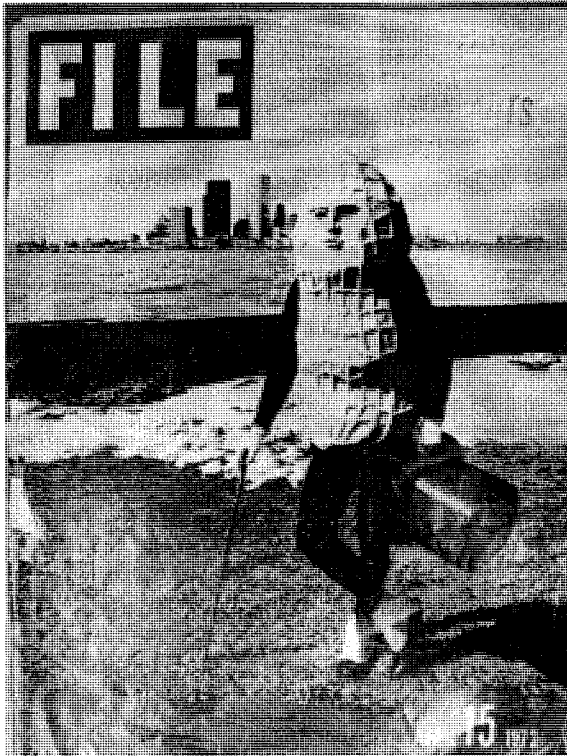


Fig.9
File 1.1 (15 April 1972) (cover).
 Image from: author



Fig. 10
File 2.4 (December 1973) (cover).
 Image from: author

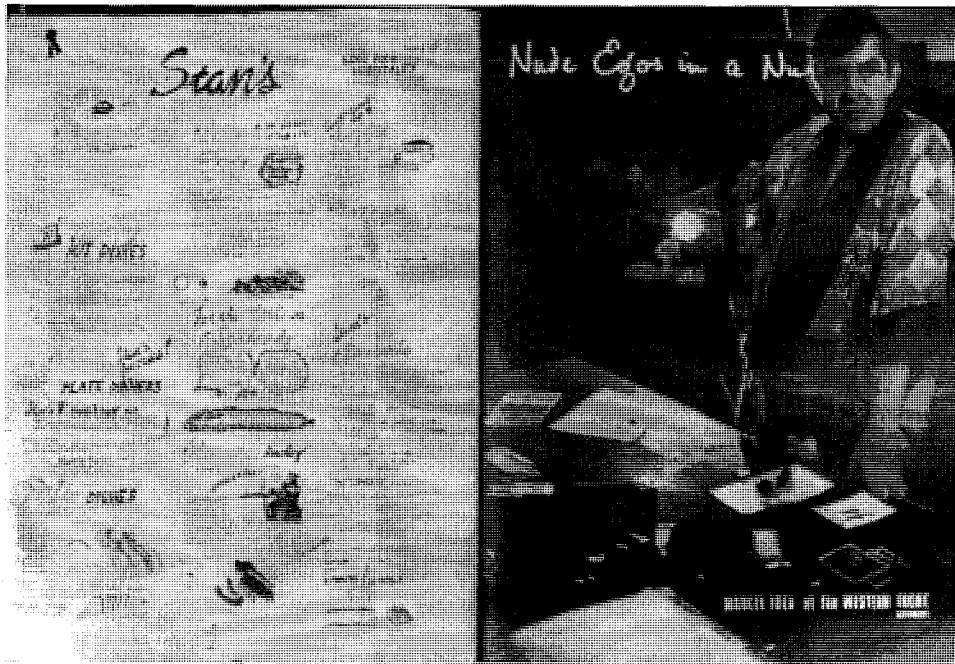


Fig.11
 File 2.4 (December 1973).
 Image from: author



Fig.12
 File 2.5 (February 1974)
 Image from: author



Fig.13
 File 3.1 (autumn 1975) (cover).
 Image from: author

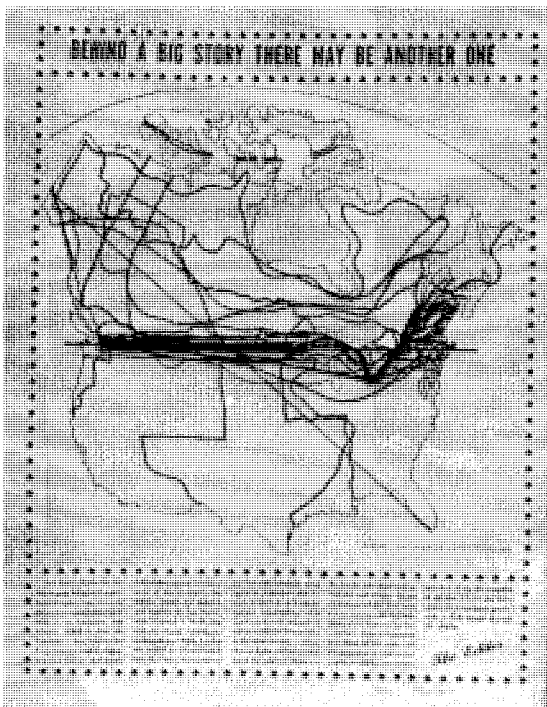


Fig.14
 File 3.1 (autumn 1975)
 Image from: author

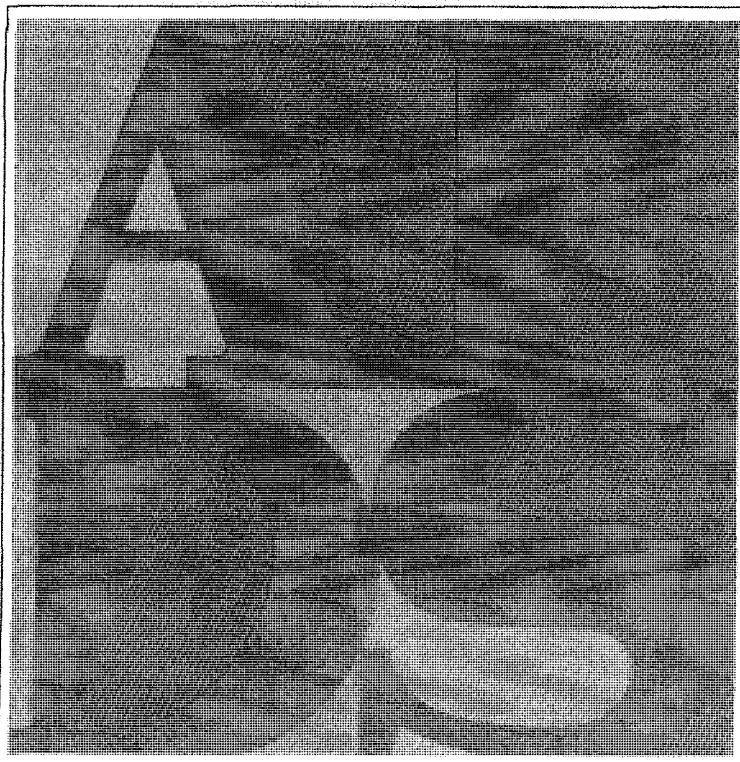


Fig.15
General Idea, *AIDS*, 1987, Screen Print on Paper
Image from: Barbara Fischer, *General Idea Editions 1967-1995* (Mississauga: Blackwood Gallery, 2003),
172.

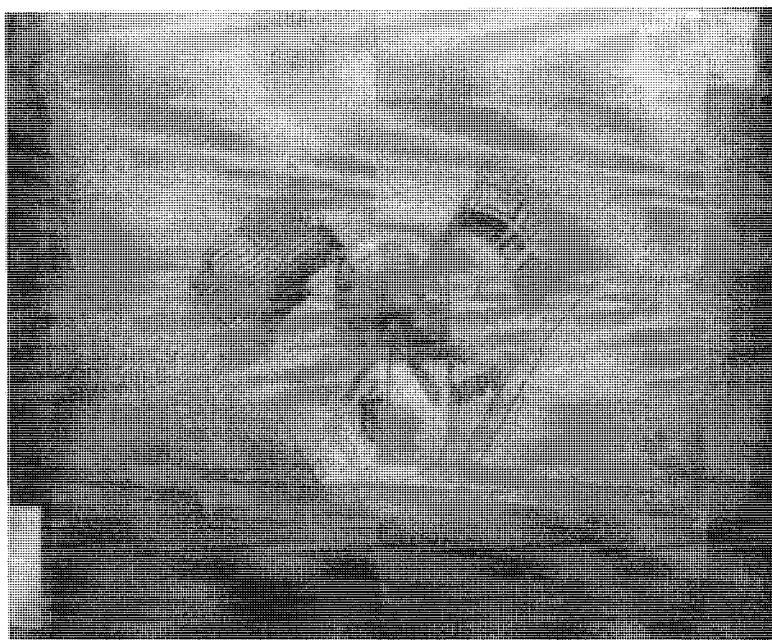


Fig.16
Matthew Barney, *Cremaster 2*, 1999 (front cover)
Image from: Author

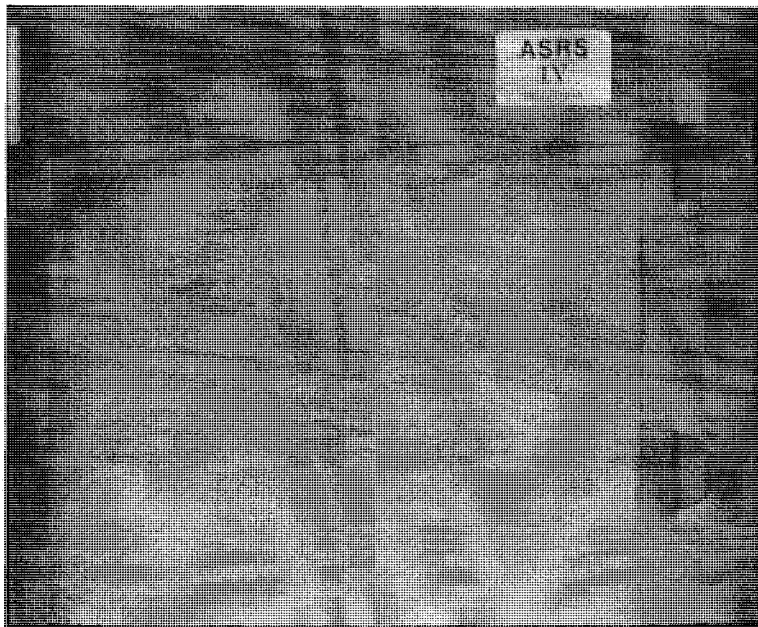


Fig.17
Matthew Barney, *Cremaster 2*, 1999 (back cover)
Image from: Author

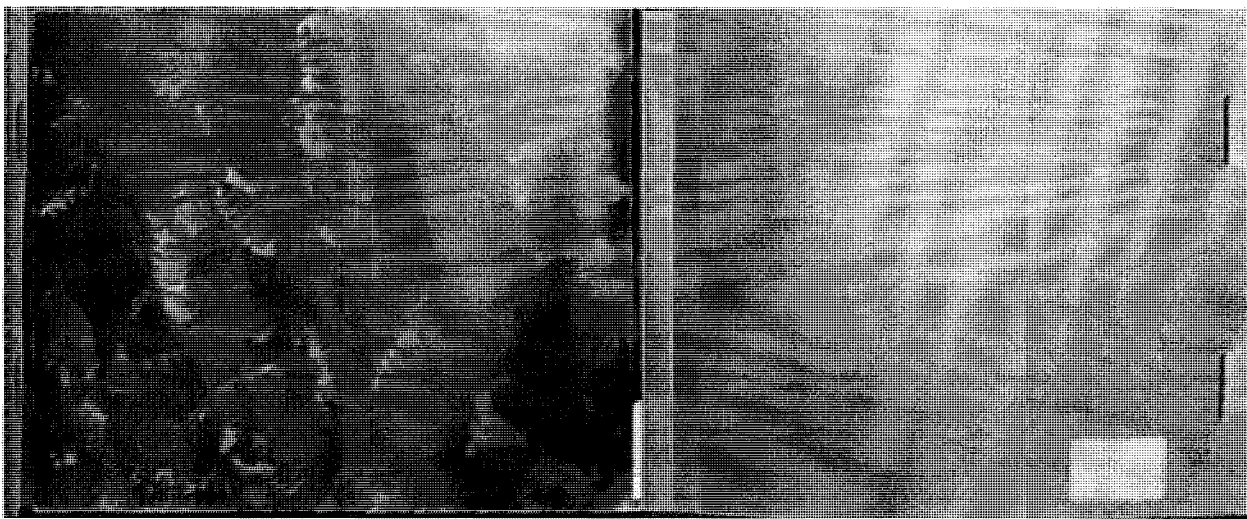


Fig. 18
Matthew Barney, *Cremaster 2*, 1999 (cover)
Image from: Author



Fig. 19
Matthew Barney, *Cremaster 5*, 1997 (front cover)
Image from: Author

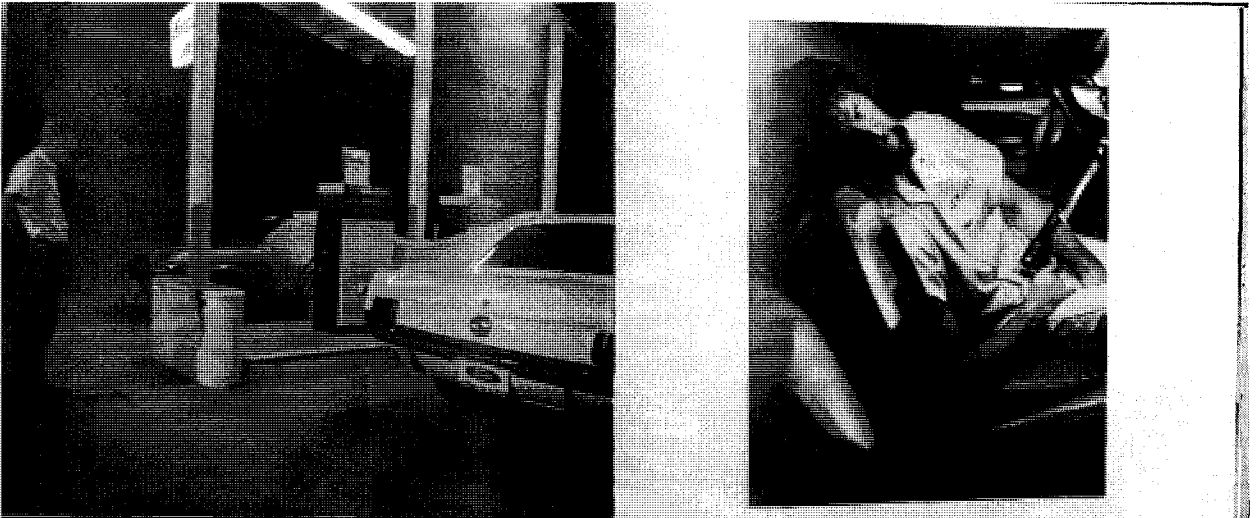


Fig. 20
Matthew Barney, *Cremaster 2*, 1999 (two page spread)
Image from: Author

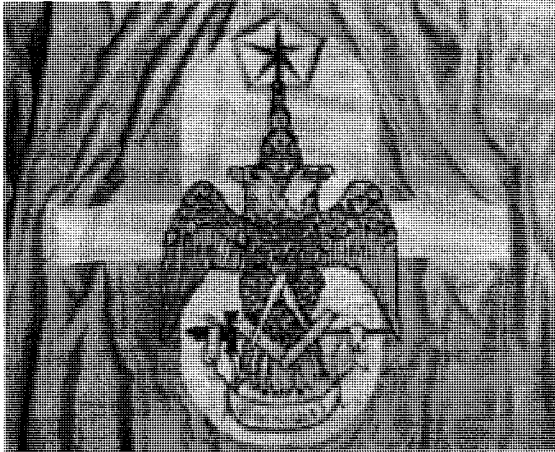


Fig. 21
Matthew Barney, *Cremaster 3*, 2002 (front cover)
Image from: Author

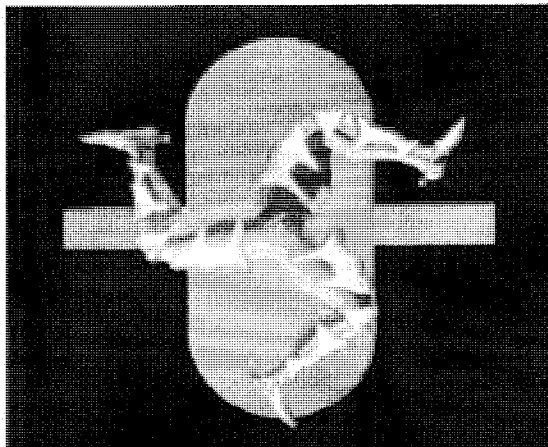


Fig. 22
Matthew Barney, *Cremaster 4*, 1992 (front cover)
Image from: Author

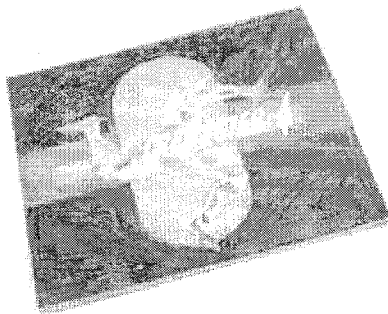


Fig.23
Derek Sullivan, *Cremaster 4—Mathew Barney*, 2006, Pencil crayon, collage on paper
Image From: Art Metropole [catalogue online] (accessed 11 April 2008); available from
http://www.artmetropole.com/index.cfm?fuseaction=shop.FA_dsp_browser_details&InventoryUnitsID=22d4dba5-e389-4b71-a445-44a4b00b8640&CategoryID=75f24fd3-42d5-4f94-a069-7bda786b584b; Internet.

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