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# Matthew Barney and the Paradox of the Neo-Avant-Garde Blockbuster

by Alexandra Keller and Frazer Ward

*Abstract.* Analyzing the connections between Matthew Barney's *Cremaster* series and a double genealogy—performance art of the 1960s and 1970s and blockbuster film and museum culture—this essay argues that the series' investment in the blockbuster serves to spectacularize performance in ways that undermine its historical relations to protest culture.

Over the last ten years, Matthew Barney has produced the five-part *Cremaster* cycle, culminating in *Cremaster 3* (2002), a three-hour film shot partly in—and shown at—the Guggenheim Museum in New York.<sup>1</sup> Barney's work, we are told, somehow metaphorizes “the embryonic processes of sexual differentiation,”<sup>2</sup> and of course we are all grateful that we now know that the cremaster is the muscle by which the testicles are suspended. Barney himself refers to the work as sculpture,<sup>3</sup> and although he is consistently regarded not as a filmmaker but as an artist working with film, *Cremaster* is symptomatic of the blurring of a number of institutional boundaries in current neo-avant-garde film and video practice.<sup>4</sup>

Our intention here is to investigate Barney's *Cremaster* cycle (1994–2003) in relation to a double genealogy: performance art of the 1970s and its documentation and the Hollywood blockbuster.<sup>5</sup> On one hand, *Cremaster* opts for a relatively “marginal” heritage: the work of performance artists including Marina Abramovic, Vito Acconci, and Chris Burden, whose ephemeral “pieces” remain only as relics and documents in the form of film, video, photographs, and artifacts. On the other hand, *Cremaster*'s lush aesthetic is shot through not just with references to but nostalgia for the film styles of a number of Hollywood moments—including some that are themselves similarly nostalgic. In addition, its epic running times, monumental sets, and huge budgets place *Cremaster* clearly in line with a blockbuster cinema that starts with *Star Wars* (George Lucas, 1977) and has reached its apotheosis,

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so far, in *Titanic* (James Cameron, 1997).<sup>6</sup> Deliberately numbered out of order, (it starts with *Cremaster 4*, 1992), the cycle offers up the apparent paradox of the neo-avant-garde blockbuster franchise. This paradox simultaneously invests in and negates the institutions the films reference.

Mining the history of performance for monumental ends, Barney's work largely strips that history of its critical reflections on the mediation of the body (reflections perhaps born of a relation to the protest culture of the period). Looking to blockbusters as a production model, Barney has adopted and adapted their scale, style, and costs, but, unlike blockbusters, whose purpose is to generate massive profits, *Cremaster* is shown not at a multiplex but at a museum.

**The *Cremaster* Series and/as "Sculpture."** Barney sees the success of the *Cremaster* project in its creation of "a family of objects."<sup>7</sup> His reference to his work as "sculpture" seems straightforward enough, except that during the last four decades, at least, the category of sculpture has become unstable; that category has changed from a relatively discrete, bounded, discursive object, into something altogether baggier, which is now asked to contain a whole range of practices that may have little in common, from site-specific and media-based works, to performances, to architecture.

Rosalind Krauss defined sculpture in an "expanded field" in 1979,<sup>8</sup> and since then art historians have understood that a trench cut in the desert—Michael Heizer's *Rift* (1969), for instance—might operate in the place of, or in place of, "sculpture"—somewhere between the landscape and its other. More pertinently for our discussion, since the late 1960s, performance art has developed out of and in relation to sculptural practices—principally minimalism—leading to the destabilization of sculpture as an object (both physical and discursive). The dissolution of sculpture has been enormously productive of and for performance; so while Barney's claim to his films' generative effects relies rhetorically on the instability of sculpture as a category, to claim performance—and film—as sculptural, and to see them as "a family of objects," as Barney does, might be curiously retrograde. Barney's claim to the sculptural status of his films is not consistent with a by-now familiar postmodern hybridity (e.g., Tony Oursler, Stan Douglas, Douglas Gordon, and Isaac Julien); instead, it subsumes *Cremaster's* hybridity in a hierarchy of sculpture over film, high over low.

Earlier, we mentioned performance that developed in relation to minimalist sculpture: minimalism's simple, recognizable geometric forms—in Robert Morris's version, for example, artlessly if well made of affectless materials (gray painted plywood)—outran both traditional *and* modernist notions of the relations between viewers and sculptural objects. (A cinematic analog would be Peter Kubelka's *Arnulf Rainer* [1959].) Objects stripped of internal compositional relationships whose intrinsic visual interest was quickly exhausted left viewers to negotiate the relations between themselves, these objects, and their shared, immediate physical contexts. Viewers, so the rhetoric goes, were to become more reflexively aware of themselves as terms in the aesthetic equation.<sup>9</sup>

Minimalism, that is, issued a call to understand the experience of art as public, in the sense that viewers were to discover the meaning of the object in their interaction

with its context, and to understand the experience of art as embodied and therefore temporal, because this interaction was dependent on viewers' physically grounded awareness of themselves in a space. Even if this now seems a counterintuitive effect for what might be seen as somewhat inert and passive objects, in the mid-1960s, with overblown modernist hymns to the purity and specificity of aesthetic experience ringing loud, many artists found this call compelling. Still, as Anne Wagner has observed, minimalist sculpture automatically administered its "dose of perceptual stimuli, come what may," regardless of differences among viewers, or of contexts broader than the white cube.<sup>10</sup> It was left for broadly postminimal (e.g., Acconci, Burden, Bruce Nauman) and feminist artists (e.g., Lynda Benglis, Joan Jonas, Martha Rosler, Carolee Schneemann) to specify and mediate the bodies in question.

**Performance Art and the Spectacle of the Body.** One such postminimal artist, Acconci, has expressed his relation to minimalism in straightforwardly Oedipal terms, much as Barney does in *Cremaster 3* in relation to Richard Serra, who, in the role of Hiram Abiff, throws vaseline against the retaining wall of the ramp of the Guggenheim, instead of molten lead against the wall of Leo Castelli's warehouse. For Acconci, minimalism was "the father art," and for him to find his own voice in the face of this work that meant so much to him, he had to find and overcome the flaw in its nature. The flaw was that it "appeared as if it was there, forever—where did it come from? So, okay, could I go to the source?" The source was the body. Acconci credits Serra with helping him recognize this: in Serra's "prop" pieces of the late 1960s, the work of the artist's body was implicit, "because, obviously, if something is propped, someone propped it."<sup>11</sup>

Acconci would introduce his own body into a minimalist space in his notorious *Seedbed* of 1972 (aspects of which he reiterated in the video work *Undertone*, also 1972). Under a ramped floor formally resonant with a range of minimalist wedges, Acconci masturbated for six hours a day, two days a week, responding verbally as well as physically to the sounds made by "viewers" above him. Acconci's body, but especially his voice, brought male, autoerotic fantasy into the public space of negotiation with context, but the activation of this fantasy required the witting or unwitting collaboration of gallery-goers. It is important that Acconci's body, the supposed ground of this experience, remained hidden from view. Granted, the collaboration *Seedbed* invoked was to some extent forced, but it is a far cry from the spectacularization of private fantasy in cinematic idioms that require only one's passive attention.

Burden is another artist whose transition into performance was mediated by minimalism; like Acconci's, Burden's performance work can be seen to be both enabled by and critical of minimalism. Immediately before his earliest performances, Burden made recognizably minimal sculptures and a series of interactive works, like slightly peculiar gym equipment.<sup>12</sup> In Burden's account, "The only problem with this body of works was that the apparatus was often mistaken for traditional object sculpture. . . . I realized I could dispose of the apparatus and simply have the actual physical activity as the sculpture."<sup>13</sup>

Burden acquired a reputation for works of considerable physical intensity (which makes him an important precursor to Barney)—notably with *Shoot* (1971), in which

Burden arranged to be shot in the arm—but more of his performances required a different kind of endurance as Burden's body took on the passivity and inertia of minimalist sculpture. Burden's performance career was driven, in part, by a canny reflection on a reputation that not many artists have to deal with.

*Back to You* (1974) explicitly addressed Burden's media avatar. In response to tabloid publicity that suggested "he's coming to New York, he's going to do something, and this time he's going to DO IT TO THE AUDIENCE,"<sup>14</sup> Burden did a piece that required a volunteer from the audience to stick push-pins into Burden's body; this can be seen as a way of deflating his own myth. Thus, Burden's work provides one model for thinking about the relation between a practice and its media mythification. It is particularly relevant here because, while Burden, like Barney, refers to his work as sculpture, his work also problematizes the status of the body as a sculptural element. This was fundamentally the issue in *Bed Piece* (1972), a performance in which Burden lay on a bed in a gallery for twenty-two days, having left no instructions to the staff, who had to work out his needs on their own. Burden's gloss on this is telling, in terms of the relations between performance and its objects: "I wanted to force [the director of the space] to deal with me by presenting myself as an object. But I'm not an object, so there'd be this moral dilemma."<sup>15</sup> The dilemma of the body served to mutually destabilize Burden's performance and sculpture; one can clearly view Burden's working through of the uncertain status of the body, posited against the media myth of "Chris Burden" (and the myth of the artist more generally), as a commentary on conditions in the culture industry.

The myth of the artist as Protean creative force is certainly present—some might say overbearingly so—in Barney's work. (In *Cremaster 3*, we see his Entered Apprentice supplant Serra's Hiram Abiff as the artist at the top, literally, of the Chrysler building.) However, while there are lugubriously comical elements to its expression, Barney's work offers no comparable institutional commentary or critique.

*Cremaster's* genealogy in endurance works has a dual articulation: in performance art, endurance is often explicitly connected to physicality; in avant-garde film practice, the duration is often purely temporal. That is, for Burden or for Abramovic, endurance works can be physically grueling. Yet it was hardly a physical hardship for the Empire State Building to be filmed for eight hours in Andy Warhol's *Empire* (480m, 1964), or even difficult for John Giorno to nap for more than five hours in *Sleep* (1963).<sup>16</sup> In such cases, the physical endurance is transferred in a less arduous form to the spectator, who may be able to come and go from a Warhol film but is expected to sit through three hours plus of Michael Snow's *La Région Centrale* (1971) or Chantal Akerman's *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (1973) and like it.

Each *Cremaster* is longer than the one released before it, but, although *Cremaster 3* offers up avant-garde duration (3 hours and 2 minutes), it spectacularizes the endurance of avant-garde performance, as, true to its other set of roots in blockbuster movies, the tasks Barney performed—a *Die Hard*-like stunt with an elevator shaft, climbing the curved interior of the Guggenheim, killing a leopard woman, and scaling a skyscraper—have much more in common with fantasy, action, and adventure movies. If Warhol's *Factory* was a commentary on the Hollywood

studio system, and his “superstars” were live commentaries on Hollywood stars,<sup>17</sup> it is less easy to read Barney as engaged in a loving critique. Rather, one has to see Barney’s embrace as something more like an amorous half Nelson.

Barney’s earlier work more clearly suggests a relation to historical performance art, but the *Cremaster* films have divorced themselves from any emphasis on an initial moment of “real” performance, so that both presence and any interrogation of the status of the body dependent upon problematizing that have become wholly absorbed in a hermetic system of representation. By contrast, among Barney’s antecedents, Burden’s work provides one of the more thorough analyses we have of the dispersal of performance, and of sculpture, in time. In *Sculpture in Three Parts* (1974), Burden, playing the role of a sculpture, constantly attended by photographers waiting to catch the inevitable moment, sat on a chair atop a pedestal for forty-three hours, until he fell off. He was then photographed, a chalk outline was drawn around his body, in which Burden wrote *Forever*, and a small sign describing how long he sat there was placed on the pedestal.

Burden was very aware of the *presence* of performance; he has spoken of his primary audience as the people who were in attendance, even if they were only passersby or his assistants. At the same time, he well understood that the majority of viewers belonged in his secondary audience, the people who would subsequently experience his work in the form of its documentation.<sup>18</sup>

In *Sculpture in Three Parts*, we “see,” in the photographs, the body demonstrating its inability to be an object and, as a consequence, the markers of (and stylized reflection upon) its absence. This is how *Sculpture in Three Parts* persists through time, which is integral to its structure. Thirty years later, we experience the documentation, which makes much of the fact that this event once happened in a specific set of circumstances.

Much performance art of the 1960s and 1970s, incorporating into its production the form of its distribution, set up such a tension between presence and absence, between an event and its dispersal through time, the effect of which was to invite us to consider the relations between the body and the ways in which it is mediated. This mediation depended to some extent on the claim to realness of the initial performance (even if, as Acconci has said, the “real” of performance is “for performance’s sake”<sup>19</sup>). Again, by contrast, this more subtle status of the body is replaced in the *Cremaster* series by something more akin to the iconic status of the movie star’s onscreen body—that is, absorbed into a mythologizing system of representation. Indeed, returning to the spectacular actions of the *Cremaster* series (other installments depict motorcycle races and stunts that include a slow-motion leap off a bridge into icy water), performance here is not so much what the body does and how it is mediated but what the body can do so that it can be (pleasingly) mediated.

***Cremaster, Guggenheim, Relics, and Readymades.*** Performance documentation functioned as proof, even if its reliability should not be taken for granted. The ephemeral character of performance in the 1960s and 1970s (such that it required proof), can be tied to the question posed by artists during that period of whether there needed to be any object at all for there to be an artwork (a question with obvious and

profound implications for sculpture, although one almost always already worked out in film, since the presence of the film typically marks the absence of that of which it is a trace). This question, in turn, is bound to a broader critique of the commodification of art. For instance, the commodities that were generated by performance art tended—if not exclusively—to be very straightforward, black-and-white photographs, single-channel videotapes, or other somewhat abject leftovers. Think of the pieces of glass that Burden crawled over in *Through the Night Softly* (1973) or the nails hammered through his hands into the roof of a VW bug in *Trans-Fixed* (1974). “Relics,” Burden called them, which maintain their status as evidence but that are not to be seen as valuable in and of themselves. Still, historians continue to debate the relations between performance and its objects, and the value of those objects.<sup>20</sup>

Barney’s insistence that the function of his films is “to generate sculpture” provides an interesting turn on this set of conditions.<sup>21</sup> Such a function would, obviously, evacuate the historical critique by making the films into workshops for the production of expensive commodity goods. The objects are animated by the films, so, although they are not, technically, props and sets, they nonetheless function as traces, analogs for the relics of performance art. We usually see such relics in small vitrines, but perhaps the *Cremaster* films provide the contemporary form of the reliquary. What does this make of the museum in which the reliquary film is presented? (It is worth recalling that Frank Lloyd Wright’s intention in presenting the curved surfaces of the Guggenheim at ground level, without any steps for the museum-goer to mount, was to obviate the templelike quality of museums like the Metropolitan just up Fifth Avenue, thereby bringing the viewer from the status of pilgrim to that of patron.) As much prop as set, the building in *Cremaster 3* becomes at once relic and reliquary for itself.

Consider another, more historically proximate instance of video, performance, and relic: Janine Antoni’s *Loving Care*, last performed in 1995, the year Barney released *Cremaster 1* (the Busby Berkeley/football field/Goodyear blimp/grape-spitting shoe *Cremaster*) and the year after *Cremaster 4* (the Isle of Man/tap-dancing satyr/women made up to look like men made up as women *Cremaster*). In *Loving Care*, Antoni, referring every bit as much to such feminist antecedents as Shigeko Kubota and Mierle Laderman Ukeles as Barney does to Burden et al., mops the gallery floor with her hair, leaving abstract expressionist-like traces as she goes through this very arduous performance. These “brushstrokes” are the trace of the performance; however, among these relics, which remained in a corner of the gallery after the performance, were something else: bottles and bottles of used hair dye, plastic application gloves, and a bucket.

Nails, pieces of glass, hair dye . . . in spite of their having been corralled into the service of performance, these everyday objects have, even as relics, another name: the readymade. The radical nature of Marcel Duchamp’s intervention was to take similar humble commodities out of their context of use and put them into the museum, without obviating their potential utility. Likewise, Burden’s nails and Antoni’s hair dye might still serve their purpose, but they are radically recontextualized by being useful almost against their own use: nails in hands, hair dye as high art paint. But always still, they are nails and hair dye.

In an anti-Duchampian gesture, Barney's props, and thus his relics, are no longer everyday items; they are *custom-made*—there is nothing remotely humble about these commodities. Even Barney's version of the everyday object has had its use-value stripped away by the attention he puts on two things: luxury (which is to say the utter and ostentatious waste of surplus capital) and the ebullient addition of something to the object that literally stops it in its tracks. Two particularly effective (which is to say *ineffective*) prop-relics will do as examples: the pink spare tire from *Cremaster 4*, which cannot turn because there is a scrotal attachment, and the stiletto heels from *Cremaster 1*, which cannot be used for walking because one of them has a spout where dancing grapes come out.

The ready-made has certain obvious material affinities with cinema, particularly its mass-produced and reproduced properties. As Duchamp suggested in 1961, "Another aspect of the 'Readymade' is its lack of uniqueness. . . . The replica of the 'Readymade' delivering the same message, in fact nearly every one of the 'Readymades' existing today is not an original in the conventional sense."<sup>22</sup> Ninety years after the bicycle wheel, Barney's relic-props have done an end run around Duchamp. By replacing "real" objects with expensively custom-made, unique, or short-series versions, whose redesign makes them impossible to use, Barney has reinvested cinema with a Benjaminian aura far more literally than did the Hollywood star system.<sup>23</sup>

Barney's use of the relic has assumed an even more abstract meta-level. At present, the cheapest and easiest way to get a trace of *Cremaster* is to buy the DVD of *The Order*, which is a version of the last half-hour of *Cremaster 3* (the *Cremaster* that in its evocation of giants, race horses, tartans, secret societies, sadistic dentistry, monumental architecture, and classic cars manages to evoke *Lord of the Rings* [Peter Jackson, 2001], *Seabiscuit* [Gary Ross, 2003], *Braveheart* [Mel Gibson, 1995], *Highlander* [Russell Mulcahey, 1986], *Marathon Man* [John Schlesinger, 1976], *The Fountainhead* [King Vidor, 1949], and *Tucker: The Man and His Dream* [Francis Ford Coppola, 1988] all at once). Rather than considering *The Order* an excerpt of Barney's last film, it is more like a relic of the entire five-part series.

**Luxury Bomb.** Barney's elaborate and expensive productions can hardly be seen to participate in the critique of the commodity but rather in its celebration. And here is where the other half of *Cremaster's* genealogy becomes more apparent. As much as they may claim to take from minimalist sculpture and performance art, Barney's films owe as much to—because they are just as much—blockbuster films. This is the other system *Cremaster* simultaneously thwarts and fulfills. In *Titanic* (1997), James Cameron produced what entertainment market analysts call "the holy grail" that appeals to all quadrants of any potential audience.<sup>24</sup> But in producing the most expensive and most profitable film of all time, whose audience, both lay and expert, attended as much to the film's numbers as to its story, Cameron also produced a portrait of pure capital.<sup>25</sup> Barney has done the same in *Cremaster*. But if Cameron could not afford to bomb at the box office, Barney could—and by Hollywood standards has. *Cremaster 3*, rumored to have cost almost \$8 million to make, has grossed about \$515,000.<sup>26</sup> In the context of the art world, though, this is an enormous success.



That the budget for *Cremaster 3* is a rumor is itself telling. The Barbara Gladstone Gallery, which represents Barney and produced the *Cremaster* films, has declined to discuss the films' budgets. This puts an interesting tension into play. *Cremaster's* aesthetic is inextricably bound up in expenditure and luxury. And, while it is rare that a Hollywood studio is accurate in assessing a film's budget, to refuse to give a number at all is rarer still, because to do so is also to give up the hoped-for bragging if the film becomes a blockbuster. On one hand, staying mum about the budget plays into the myth that art, while relying on market forces to circulate, is priceless and above such concerns. Jackson Pollock might have used \$50 worth of materials to make a painting, but that has no bearing on its market value. On the other hand, Barney seems to suggest that outlay is an integral part of the aesthetics and meaning of his films, in much the way that the thrill of an action movie is not just the car chases and explosions but the massive capital expended to create them. Unlike most avant-garde films, Barney's are not distributed for or to the public.<sup>27</sup> Instead they are sold as limited editions of ten, as part—if certainly the central part—of a vitrine/sculpture that includes an elaborate case for special silk-screened and signed DVDs. The price of these editions is not public, but it represents one-tenth of the budget of the film.<sup>28</sup> There is something hysterical about the idea of such a rarefied blockbuster. Given that the word *cremaster* refers to the raising and lowering of balls, we might ask whether Barney has produced in his five *Cremaster* films a kind of testicular hysteria that might form its own subgenre.

**Hard Body Redux.** This potential hysteria is borne out in the relentless reconfiguration of Barney's body into guises other than that of a normative heterosexual male; however, the nonnormative is, over the course of the series, recuperated into something familiar from the action films of the 1980s. In *Cremaster 4*, Barney is not altogether human, although he is dapperly dressed in a cream-colored suit and two-tone wing tips. In *Cremaster 5*, one of his three roles is as a diva, who if not female is certainly not a conventionally heterosexual male either. In *Cremaster 2*, Barney's Gary Gilmore is heterosexual, but this is qualified for two reasons: first, he is doomed to execution, and second, his paternity is in question (Gilmore's grandfather may have been Harry Houdini, played here by Norman Mailer, whose own writing is deeply preoccupied with American masculinity).

Barney does not appear in *Cremaster 1*, but in *Cremaster 3* (the last he made, but, as the series chronology goes, *in medias res*), Barney returns to (something like) the version of masculinity that Susan Jeffords clearly articulated as a Reagan-era model: the Hard Body.<sup>29</sup> This action-hero body, defined centrally by Bruce Willis in the *Die Hard* series (John McTiernan, 1988, 1995; Renny Harlan, 1990), Mel Gibson in the *Lethal Weapon* series (Richard Donner, 1987, 1989, 1992, 1998), Arnold Schwarzenegger in the *Terminator* (James Cameron, 1984, 1991; Jonathan Mostow, 2003), and Sylvester Stallone in the *Rambo* series (Ted Kotcheff, 1982; George Pan Cosmatos, 1985; Peter MacDonald, 1988), is significantly defined by what the white, heteromascuine heroic body can *endure*. This endurance—a for-profit, spectacularized (and utterly unaware) version of that found in Burden et al.'s work—lasts through any narrative in which the various protagonists are not only bloodied and

bruised at the end of the film but also triumphant, after having restored patriarchy, U.S. capitalist hegemony: the status quo. The expectation is built from film to film that this suffering and endurance are embedded in, and even foundational to the definition of Reagan-era cinematic masculinity and of the blockbuster action movies that were the mark of the age—the one in which Barney grew up.

If Barney is overt about his debt to performance art in interviews, his debt to action films is expressed in the *mise-en-scène* (football fields, skyscrapers, motorcycle races) and in the way that action for his male protagonists is about the repeated endurance of procedures that tax the body: tapping endlessly in circles on a pier (*Cremaster 4*), forcing himself through long, tight, tunnel-like spaces (*Cremaster 2*), or plunging off a bridge in chains and traversing the three sides of a proscenium stage by hand-climbing a rope (*Cremaster 5*). In *Cremaster 3*, he specifically recreates 1980s blockbuster action film tropes—most obviously in the way his movements through the infrastructure of the Chrysler Building echo those in *Die Hard*. Even the way that Barney's Entered Apprentice is given outsized dental fixtures made of the remains of crashed cars renders him part machine, like the Terminator. The Entered Apprentice/Barney's drive to supersede Hiram Abiff/Richard Serra does not precisely correspond to the vanquishing of German terrorists, Soviet military torturers, South African drug dealers, or new and improved cyborg models,<sup>30</sup> but the Oedipal trajectory, which involves the reassertion of a spectacular, capital-driven heteronormative masculinity, still obtains.

**Cremaster, the Franchise.** Is it possible to make a politically progressive, formally experimental blockbuster? *Cremaster* suggests, with some reservations, that it might be. By eschewing the last step of the blockbuster formula—in which it makes tons of money at the box office—Barney has structurally provided an institutional critique of blockbuster culture. Except that, of course, he hasn't. Just as *Batman* and *The Matrix* exist as much to sell themed Happy Meals, action figures, Halloween costumes, and Heineken as to entertain at the multiplex, so the *Cremaster* franchise—and it is a franchise—exists at some level to produce the objects necessary to the films' articulation: *Cremaster* motorcycles, high heels, honeycombs, and caber-tossing bars that are exhibited and sold. The model for this behavior is twofold: the Los Angeles County Museum of Art's King Tut exhibit and *Star Wars*, both from 1977.<sup>31</sup> That *Star Wars*, with its familiar mythological syntax but its apparently original semantic organization of characters—whose names and appearances are as much exoticized as science fictionized—might be a cultural template for Barney's *Cremaster* series is apt. Both force space and timeframes up against each other by mixing historical modes, and *Cremaster* goes *Star Wars* one better on the postmodern pastiche scale by mixing myth and historical personages, some of them playing themselves. *Star Wars* is a long time ago in a galaxy far, far away. *Cremaster* is once upon a time in a gallery far, far uptown.

**Protest Culture to “Free Speech Zones”:** Images Washing over Us. One of the reasons that the performance art of the 1960s and 1970s remains interesting to younger artists and to scholars is its perceived resonance with the protest culture of

the period (even if—or even because—the actual or immediate effectiveness of that culture has been mythologized). Here one might think of Yoko Ono's *Cut Piece*, first performed in 1964, in which she sat on a stage in her best clothes. Audience members then mounted the stage and used a pair of scissors to cut away at her clothing. *Cut Piece* may be seen as a work that links Ono's identity as a woman with her identity as Japanese, in the wake of the atom bomb and during the Vietnam War.<sup>32</sup>

Even more apposite to Barney's films is Carolee Schneemann's *Meat Joy* (1964), which blended elements of Busby Berkeley-style choreography and Jack Smith-type spontaneity in a feminist "erotic rite." Schneemann's *Snows* (1967)—in telling contrast with Barney's work because it was scavenged from department-store trash—had performers working against projected images of the Vietnam War, as well as a borrowed feedback system set up so that audience members' reactions affected the performers' cues.<sup>33</sup> Burden's *Shoot*, his small-scale investigation of the ability of gun violence to hold an audience rapt, has to be seen against the background of representations of the war in Vietnam. In *Rhythm 5* (1974), set in Belgrade, Marina Abramovic lay down in the center of a five-pointed star filled with wood shavings and then set fire to that symbol of Tito's Yugoslavia.

Paul Sharits's *T,O,U,C,H,I,N,G* (1968) can be read ahistorically, as is sometimes the temptation with a structural materialist film (if it's about structure and material, and the structure and material are innate, then why worry about history?). But as with *Shoot*, the Vietnam context expands the field of meaning of the repetition of the word destroy, the cutting of a man's tongue with scissors, and the violence of the flicker effect, which exceeds the retinal.

Such resonances and claims are entirely absent from Barney's work, which has neither the ephemeral character nor the accompanying mobility of performance. Despite the hermeticism of Barney's fabulous imagery—and the claims for some undifferentiated state of pure pregendered creative potentiality—the trajectory of the films is a familiar one: in the quest for masculine identity, there are obstacles to be overcome, which requires coming to terms with a series of role models and father figures, so that an Oedipal, generational, symbolic order may be restored. *Cremaster*, whose very name and refusal of cardinal order suggests a resistance to stable sexual differentiation, and to the heteronormativity that comes with it in popular culture, inevitably not only embraces the symbolic order but, as in *The Order*, the relic/fragment that concludes the six-hour-plus epic, runs screaming toward it, shouting, "Save me from myself!"

Interestingly, a much more sustained, successful, and cost-effective investigation into identity, sexual difference, and the relationship of these things to the codes of popular culture is to be found in Mandy Morrison's 4½-minute *Desperado*, a video work made the same year as *Cremaster 5* (in which Ursula Andress [as the Queen of Chain] keeps Jacobin pigeons and makes out with Harry Houdini [played by Norman Mailer]) and *Titanic*. In *Desperado*, Morrison, drawing on the coincidence of her last name with John Wayne's real name (Marion Morrison), performs a variety of iconic traditional and contemporary cowboy maneuvers (drawing a pistol, riding a mechanical bull, effecting the familiar Wayne swagger), all while wearing a two-

dimensional photo cutout mask of Wayne and a prosthetic set of genitals that are shaped like a penis and testicles but are in fact an extremely distended vulva.

Given that we are served—and as a nation swallow—pictures, moving and otherwise, of the president landing on an aircraft carrier to announce the end of major hostilities, this is the wrong time to let images wash over us, as critics have suggested was the upside to not understanding the complex symbolism in *Cremaster*.<sup>34</sup> Rather than reading *Cremaster*, we are encouraged to consume it as high-end eye candy, whose symbolic system is available to us but hardly necessary to our pleasure: meaning, that is, is no longer a necessary component to art production or reception. Left to its own devices—and it is all devices—*Cremaster* places us in a framework of mutually assured consumption, consuming us as we consume it.

Now, of course, Matthew Barney should not make work other than his own; we would wish this freedom on artists everywhere, and neither can we criticize Barney's work for not being art or film of a particular kind. However, art happens in contexts. The *Cremaster* cycle situates itself in relation to sources that are not easily reconciled; in spectacularizing performance, it lends itself to description in mythical terms, the “let images wash over us” school of criticism. Devoid of any self-generated call to the spectator to be attentive to the meaning of these images—or to the institutional structures in which they are produced, distributed, and received—they congeal into spectacle in Guy Debord's sense: “The spectacle is *capital* to such a degree of accumulation that it becomes an image.”<sup>35</sup>

An early version of this article was delivered as a talk at the Guggenheim on the eve of the inevitable second Gulf War. Outside, antiwar protesters were being corralled in “free-speech zones.” If Barney's work is one of the important—because it is high profile—sites in which the legacy of the performance art of the 1960s and 1970s is currently being worked out, then it may be perfectly symptomatic for a contemporary moment in which how we imagine the status and effect of protest is an open and pressing question.

## Notes

Earlier versions of this essay were presented to a Guggenheim Museum panel, “Sculpture and the Object,” organized by Nancy Spector, March 2003, and to the Society for Cinema and Media Studies Conference, Atlanta, March 2004.

1. “Matthew Barney: The Cremaster Cycle,” Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, February 21–June 11, 2003.
2. [www.guggenheim.org/exhibitions/past\\_exhibitions/barney/introduction/index.html](http://www.guggenheim.org/exhibitions/past_exhibitions/barney/introduction/index.html).
3. “If you ask him, he will tell you that his work is sculpture.” Calvin Tomkins, “His Body, Himself,” *New Yorker*, January 27, 2003, 50.
4. Art history, perhaps more than film history, tends to accept a distinction between a historical avant-garde, primarily associated with Dada and the surrealism of the 1920s, and a post-1945 neo-avant-garde. This is described—albeit in a narrative of capitulation and failure—in Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), first published in German in 1974. For a summary and critique of the punctual, linear aspects of Bürger's thinking (and that of some of his

critics), see Hal Foster, "Who's Afraid of the Neo-Avant-Garde?" in Foster, *The Return of the Real* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996), 1–34.

5. The narrative events of any *Cremaster* film have no real bearing on the relationship of one film to the next, or to any other. While there are certainly thematic and character elements that emerge through all of them, event is so spectacularized as to be relevant only for event's sake—something one would certainly not say of the narratives of the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy or the *Terminator* or *Lethal Weapon* series. In *Cremaster 4*, Barney's satyr-cum-rum-like Loughton Candidate tap dances his way through the floor of a seaside pier into the surf beneath, and this is intercut with a two-motorcycle race around the Isle of Man and a picnic attended by several gender-nonspecific fairies wearing formal frocks and heels. In *Cremaster 1*, a large blimp hovers above a football stadium on which a Rockette-like team of precision dancers march in Busby Berkeley–like formation, while inside the blimp are two different teams of flight attendants, dressed to evoke Pan Am of the 1960s. In *Cremaster 2*, the Utah salt flats are the staging ground for a rehearsal of the story of Gary Gilmore, and country-western and road-movie iconography meet as Gilmore (played by Barney) moves delicately and laboriously from one muscle car to another through a fleshlike connector tube made mostly of semihardened Vaseline. This storyline is interlaced with that of Harry Houdini (Norman Mailer) performing at the Columbian Exposition. In *Cremaster 5*, Barney plays three roles: a diva, a giant, and finally a magician, whose shackled leap off a bridge in Budapest is woven together with his romance with the Queen of Chain (Ursula Andress). In *Cremaster 3* (the most overtly narrative film), Barney is the Entered Apprentice, who scales the Chrysler Building, undergoes a transformation administered by a secret Masonic order, and then scales the inside walls of the Guggenheim, eventually encountering Hiram Abiff (Richard Serra). For complete synopses, see [www.cremaster.net](http://www.cremaster.net).
6. *Titanic* is the single text that represents current blockbuster culture conditions. The aspect of *Cremaster* that is dependent on seriality puts it as much in line with the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy (Peter Jackson, 2001–03), with which it also shares an investment in a grand mythology, special effects, and invented, not-quite-human creatures. If the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy is an obvious adaptation, the *Cremaster* cycle is no less based in preexisting texts, although these are sculptural and performative, as well as cinematic.
7. As Barney has said:

It's probably worth talking about what may be the third experience, which is to see how the moving image has created a family of objects. That, for me, is the success of the project. That's what it set out to do in the first place, and I think that was quite consistent—its ability to generate sculpture. So, when I look at them side by side, that's the first criteria [*sic*] for me in terms of judgment. If I separate them and judge them as individual films, I would experience that same sort of schism that you're talking about. Scott Foundas, "Self-Portraiture Meets Mythology: Matthew Barney Talks about His *Cremaster Cycle*," [www.indiewire.com/people/people\\_030515barney.html](http://www.indiewire.com/people/people_030515barney.html).

8. Rosalind Krauss, "Sculpture in the Expanded Field," *October* 8 (spring 1979): 30–44.
9. "One is more aware than before that he himself is establishing relationships as he apprehends the object from various positions and under varying conditions of light and spatial context." Robert Morris, "Notes on Sculpture," in Gregory Battcock, ed., *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology* (New York: Dutton, 1968), 232.
10. Anne Wagner, "Performance, Video, and the Rhetoric of Presence," *October* 91 (winter 2000): 73.

11. Unpublished interview with Vito Acconci at Acconci's studio, Brooklyn, New York, April 1997.
12. Gym equipment, such as harnesses and restraints, have been used by several artists, including Burden, Carolee Schneemann, and Howard Fried, and by Matthew Barney in his early works.
13. "Interview with Jose Antonio Sarmiento: 'Hacer arte es verdaderamente una actividad subversiva,'" trans. Chris Burden, *Sin Titulo* 3 (September 1996): 58.
14. "Chris Burden in Conversation with Jon Bewley," in Adrian Searle, ed., *Talking Art 1* (London: Institute of Contemporary Arts, 1993), 19.
15. Jim Moisan, "Border Crossing: Interview with Chris Burden," *High Performance* 2, no. 1 (March 1979): 36.
16. Given the generally Oedipal cast of the *Cremaster* series, especially *Cremaster 3*, that Barney sets most of it in the Chrysler Building—that era's other famous New York skyscraper—might well be seen as a way of taking on Warhol.
17. One might say these were commentaries that would not shut up. See Stephen Koch, *Stargazer: The Life, World, and Films of Andy Warhol* (New York: Marion Boyars Publishers, 1990), esp. "The Talkies," 63–79.
18. "Chris Burden in Conversation with David Ross," Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, April 8, 1997.
19. Vito Acconci, "Performance after the Fact," *New Observations* 95 (May–June 1993): 29.
20. See, for instance, Amelia Jones, "'Presence' in Absentia: Experiencing Performance as Documentation," *Art Journal* 56, no. 4 (winter 1997): 11–18, and Paul Schimmel, "Leap into the Void: Performance and the Object," in *Out of Actions: Between Performance and the Object, 1949–1979* (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art/Thames and Hudson, 1998), 17–120.
21. Foundas, "Self-Portraiture Meets Mythology," [www.indiewire.com/people/people\\_030515barney.html](http://www.indiewire.com/people/people_030515barney.html).
22. Marcel Duchamp, "Apropos of 'Readymades,'" in Michel Sanouillet and Elmer Peterson, eds., *The Writings of Marcel Duchamp* (New York: Da Capo, 1989), 142.
23. Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," trans. Harry Zohn, in Hannah Arendt, ed., *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken, 1968), 217–51.
24. Edward Jay Epstein, "Annals of Commerce: Multiplexities," *New Yorker*, July 13, 1998, 37.
25. Alexandra Keller, "'Size Does Matter': James Cameron as Blockbuster Auteur," in Gaylyn Studlar and Kevin Sandler, eds., *Titanic: Anatomy of a Blockbuster* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1999), 132–54.
26. [www.the-numbers.com/movies/2003/OCRM3.php](http://www.the-numbers.com/movies/2003/OCRM3.php).
27. Whether or not it's true, the *Cremaster* films look like the most expensive artists' films there are (excluding films for mainstream cinematic distribution made by directors who happen also to be artists, such as Robert Longo's *Johnny Mnemonic* [1995] or Julian Schnabel's *Before Night Falls* [2000]). Again, this brings Cameron to mind, almost any of whose movies are at the moment of release the most expensive ever made. Almost all can also be found on the list of most profitable films of all time. Barney's blockbusters, by contrast, are still relatively difficult to see and do not reach the mass audience on which Hollywood blockbusters depend. Barney's blockbusters forge ahead as Cameron's do, right up until the crucial final step, at which point they head not to the Googleplex but to the Guggenheim.
28. This information was provided by Barbara Gladstone Gallery. Unconfirmed reports from art-world professionals suggest that some combination of the DVD and objects from *Cremaster 2* sold for \$500,000 in a private sale.

29. Susan Jeffords, *Hard Bodies: Hollywood Masculinity in the Reagan Era* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1994).
  30. The T-1000 (Robert Patrick) of *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (1991) is superior to Schwarzenegger's "old-fashioned" Terminator in part because its metal alloy is so flexible that it can assume the shape of any organic life it touches, including women, rendering the machine all the more menacing for the polymorphousness of its gender performance, however temporary the transformations. Indeed, one subtext of *T2* sets Schwarzenegger's bulk against the relative litheness of Patrick's T-1000 as a way of reasserting a traditional paradigm of heteromascularity—even though, as machines, neither is understood to have sexual desire of any kind. Barney's gender polymorphousness, although differently articulated, is both of the same cultural moment and no less spectacular.
  31. If there is one museum exhibit and one film to which *Cremaster* can be traced back, one must also look forward to the larger institutional context in which the films are received. Beyond the blockbuster film, there are vast multiplexes to hold them. Beyond blockbuster museum shows, there has recently developed the category of blockbuster museums and galleries, including the Bellagio Gallery of Fine Art, at the Bellagio Casino in Las Vegas (opened in 1998) and the Guggenheim Hermitage Museum (designed by Rem Koolhaas) in the Venetian Resort in Las Vegas, housing art from the permanent collections of the Guggenheim in New York and the Hermitage in St. Petersburg.
  32. See Julia Bryan-Wilson, "Remembering Yoko Ono's *Cut Piece*," *Oxford Art Journal* 26, no. 1 (2003): 99–123.
  33. For details, see Carolee Schneemann, *More than Meat Joy: Performance Works and Selected Writings* (New York: McPherson & Co., 1979).
  34. "The *Cremaster Cycle* doesn't ask to be understood . . . but rather to be surrendered to." Foundas, "Self-Portraiture Meets Mythology," [www.indiewire.com/people/people\\_030515barney.html](http://www.indiewire.com/people/people_030515barney.html). "You can struggle to discern meanings through Mr. Barney's signposts and images. Or you can just sit there and let all that extraordinary imagery wash by." John Rockwell, "Man vs. *Cremaster*: The 10-Hour Test," *New York Times*, March 23, 2003, archived at <http://select.nytimes.com/gst/abstract.html?res=F40A11FB3E550C708EDDAA0894DB404482>. These are examples of the open-mouthed response that has characterized much of the mainstream "criticism" of Barney's work, perhaps taking its cue from Michael Kimmelman's declaration that Barney was "the most important artist of his generation," a meaningless journalistic accolade (most important at what?) that Kimmelman was pleased to repeat and elaborate: "Hands down, he is, at just shy of 36, the most compelling, richly imaginative artist to emerge in years." Kimmelman, "Free to Play and Be Gooey," *New York Times*, February 21, 2003, archived at <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9500EFD8153DF932A15751C0A9659C8B63>.
- Jerry Saltz at least had the sense to acknowledge that since first seeing Barney's work, Barney could do no wrong by him, "exactly the kind of unequivocal wet kiss from a critic I hate." Saltz, "Swept Away," [www.artnet.com/magazine/features/saltz/saltz2-25-03.asp](http://www.artnet.com/magazine/features/saltz/saltz2-25-03.asp).
35. Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle* (Detroit: Black & Red, 1983), paragraph 34, originally published as *La Société du spectacle* (Paris: Editions Buchet-Chastel, 1967).