Networked Collectivities: North American Artists' Groups, 1968–1978

by

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To Jeremy

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Abstract

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Chair: Alexander D. Potts

In the late 1960s and '70s, hundreds of artists across North America banded together into small groupings, sometimes two, sometimes ten, seeking alternatives to the single-artist model prized since the Renaissance. Many of these "collectives" drew support and methodologies from countercultural political movements invested in feminist and queer politics, Chicano and African-American identity, ecological advancements, and new media, to name a few. This study demonstrates that, despite differences in location, media, and political views, they shared goals and strategies. Most importantly, they sought to change the networks in which their art was produced and distributed, and thereby fashion new artistic identities for themselves and interpellate different publics for their work.

Taking three such groups—Asco, Ant Farm, and General Idea—as case studies, this dissertation considers several central issues relating to artistic practice in the 1970s: collaboration and artistic identity, conceptual art outside the frame of the art world, intersections of art and consumer society, and political art in the wake of an exhausted politicized subculture. By examining archival material—photographs, manuscripts, video- and audiotapes, grant applications, notebooks, reviews, props, clothing, financial records, and installations—I reconstitute these groups' often ephemeral practices, discovering the ways in which they seized, interrupted, and re-configured the discursive networks in which contemporary art was embedded. Rather than being merely supplemental or secondary materials, as they are often construed, these

forms constitute the core of their intermedial practices, an approach that significantly expanded the conception of artistic medium.   Establishing new infrastructures, such as artist-run centers, independently published periodicals, and correspondence networks, they generated alternative arenas of practice and interpretation and experimented with systemic solutions to the problem of institutionalized minoritization.

In arguing that collectives' approaches changed, from the utopian premises of 1960s communal movements to an interest in developing communications networks for an increasingly global and technological society, this study offers a different lens through which to understand the supposedly "in between" decade of the 1970s. I contend that ambivalent, networked, intermedial artistic forms developed during the period, have a distinctive character, and are neither simply extensions of 1960s counterculture nor anticipations of 1980s postmodernism.

Chapter 1
Introduction

"Friends, we are from Canadada to celebrate the one million and eleventh anniversary of the birth of art. We plan to have a marvellous time tonight. Don't worry about art, there will be plenty, there will be art out of your ears, nose and Private Partz. Art was life and in the next decade we hope it will be the same again."[1] With this tongue-in-cheek introduction, after some initial patter from the masters of ceremonies A.A. Bronson and Flakey Rose Hips, artist Michael Morris (as Marcel Idea) commenced the festivities of the Hollywood DeccaDance awards presentation.[2] Individual artists and groups had convened in Los Angeles on February 2, 1974, to celebrate the 1,000,011 anniversary of the birth of art in a lavish ceremony held at the jazz-age landmark, the Elk's Building. A chorus of dancers performed a Busby Berkeley-inspired dance number, *The Gold Diggers of '84,* outfitted in Dada-like shark-fin suits (**figure 1**). The main event, the Sphinx d'Or Dadacademy Awards, reproduced the general format of the Oscars, replete with scripted chatter, self-congratulations, inside jokes, dance numbers, and, of course, the predictable teaser, "may I have the envelope please?" Like the awards presentations after which it was modeled, the Hollywood DeccaDance is notable for bringing together luminaries of the field; in this case, the crowd represented a veritable who's who of the correspondence art scene in North America. "Celebrity" presenters announced the nominees and winners for awards in

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In quoting from archival documents in this dissertation, I have been faithful to the originals in spelling, punctuation, and mechanics. Only where confusion might result have I placed a designator [*sic*] to indicate that I am quoting the source verbatim. Many of these idiosyncrasies reveal word play, as in the portmanteau "Canadada" to indicate the individuals' country of origin and the Dada sensibility they adopted.

[1] "Mondo Artie Episode No. 1681," *IS.* 17 (Fall 1975): n.p. See also the shooting script, Western Front Film and Video, "Mondo Artie Episode no. 1681," shooting final, 2 February 1974, Art Metropole Collection, Library and Archives, National Gallery of Canada (hereafter referred to as Art Metropole Collection). The Art Metropole Collection contains the operational records for the center founded by General Idea in 1974 (known as the Art Metropole fonds) as well as collections of artworks, books, and ephemera amassed between 1971 and 1996. Kitty Scott and Jonathan Shaughnessy exhibited a selection of these items in 2006 in *Art Metropole: The Top Ten,* for which a catalogue is available.

[2] James Minton, attending for *Artweek,* describes how the Decca Dance starts with the film *Shuckin' an' Jivin'* made by Mr. Peanut, Dr. Brute, and Lowell Darling for Vancouver television; then Don Davis and his band performed *O Canada* and *The Star Spangled Banner,* which was followed by A.A. Bronson and Flakey Rose Hips' recitation of Robert Filliou's *Whispered Art History.* The scripts for the Decca Dance in *IS.* and in the Art Metropole Collection do not mention the film.

Minton produced a series of three articles entitled "Decca Dancing in the City of Los Angeles" for *Artweek* in 1974: 23 February (page 7); 2 March (page 6); 9 March (page 2), in which he also describes Kathleen and Lowell Darling's divorce ceremony.

various categories (**figure 2**), among them "best animal impersonation" (Irene Dogmatic), "best alias" (a tie between Willoughby Sharp for Mighty Mogul and Lowell Darling for Dudley Finds), "best xerox art" (Les Petites Bonbons for Meet Andy and David), and "best contribution to art deco in 1984" (Ms. Rhonda). At the affair, pseudonyms, double entendres, and wordplay abounded, as in the event's title, a pun on a decadent dance celebration and a millennial anniversary of art.

This event is a particularly fitting introduction to this study, because in it a certain type of 1970s aesthetic practice is crystallized. In providing a forum for artists who knew of one other by word of mouth and through postcards to meet in person, the Hollywood event showcased the growing importance of networked activity to those seeking an alternative to the conventional art world channels of established galleries, museums, and magazines. The DeccaDance was a node in this loose, decentralized framework, and the participation of some eight hundred people indicated that such a structure based on circulation—of words, of letters, of people—offered a viable alternative to more mainstream models of artistic connectivity and success.[3] It provided a space for individuals to perform different identities, such as Willoughby Sharp spoofing a powerful art impresario or Lowell Darling assuming the role of an art school administrator, and it recognized those performances as artistic expressions. In celebrating the "birthday" of art, the event also invoked Fluxus artist Robert Filliou, whose whispered art history from 1963 established the beginnings of art with the origins of mankind, and who had commemorated Art's Birthday in 1973 with a celebration in Aachen with the intention of "returning art to the people" (**figure 3**).[4] Through playful references—to Dada, to Filliou—the DeccaDance validated a burgeoning alternative arts scene and acknowledged the irony of its need to do so when it reproduced the awards ceremony format from the entertainment business, the means of bestowing the industry's highest accolades.

The DeccaDance reveals the type of multi-faceted, multi-media projects undertaken in the 1970s and made possible through collaboration. As an event involving the cooperation of numerous individuals and artists' groups, it exists in different registers, as a one-night social gathering, a dance performance, and awards presentation; as video art screened after the fact; as published script; as souvenir ephemera. The presence of so many artists' groups at the DeccaDance points to a resurgence in collaborative activity in this period, and thus it marks an

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[3] "Hollywood Edition Art's Birthday," an insert in General Idea's *FILE,* indicates the attendance was 800. Since the individuals involved were prone to hyperbole and fantasy, this number could be a realistic accounting or a gross guesstimate of the audience that day.

[4] Filliou suggested this idea in *Erforschung des Ursprungs/Research on the Origin* (Dusseldorf: Stadtischen Kunsthalle, 1974).

apt moment with which to begin the present study, which zeroes in on three such groups to tease out the factors that contributed to the emergence of this type of artistic collaboration in the 1970s and the significance of these groups' practices then and now.

The DeccaDance raises questions at the center of this dissertation, about collaboration and artistic identity, about conceptual art outside the frame of the art world, about the intersections of art and consumer society, about a political art in the wake of an exhausted politicized subculture, and about the relationship between modernism and postmodernism. If there is art in the DeccaDance, as Marcel Idea assures us, then where is it and why does it matter? Is this just a big in-joke among disenfranchised youths who mail banal postcards to one another and call them "art" and themselves "artists"? Is it a selling out of authentic subcultures in favor of buying into camp celebration? Is it an early harbinger of the post-modern, that hall of mirrors specter that reduces everything to appearances?

The 1950s cast a shadow over much of the artistic production of the 1960s and '70s. In as much as the Pop artists embraced the consumer products of postwar society (whether in irony, celebration, or both), the initial period of "hard" conceptualism that followed them rejected the imbrication of art and commodity culture. As the movement progressed, conceptual strategies in the mid-1970s could be seen to echo aspects of consumer culture while remaining attractive as undercutting the "aura" long attached to high art. For the many of the attendees at the DeccaDance, their childhoods were saturated with messages and images in a variety of forms (newspapers, magazines, comics, movies, radio, and television), and they tapped into this consciousness for the subjects of their art.[5] They were fascinated by the spectacles of modern society, such as the Academy Awards, beauty pageants, Hollywood movies, and car culture, and displayed no real concerns about making use of commercial culture in the creation of their art. One aspect that distinguishes the three artists' groups that are the focus of this study—Asco, Ant Farm, and General Idea—from others of the period is their exploration of rituals publicized by the mass media.

At a time in the early 1970s when a Marcusian pessimism loomed large over the cultural front, condemning most endeavors critical of mass culture as always-already part of the larger

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[5] Writing in 1964, Alvin Toeffler notices that a "rapprochement is under way in between businesses and art in America, and it threatens to undo the cherished alienation of the artists as it changes the position of art in the American context" (92). He observes the increase, in the 1950s, of corporate patronage of the arts, with corporations playing active roles as patrons, entrepreneurs, vendors, and buyers of art the arts (97). The "culture sell" arose in response to the new "comfort class" battened by the post-war boom, prompting the recognition that culture "can be exploited to help move other products" (98). Hans Haacke's work of the 1970s and 1980s, for example, is at the forefront of exposing this form of cultural marketing. Toeffler, *The Culture Consumers: A Study of Art and Affluence in America* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1964).

system, these groups side-stepped the false binary of such a stance, and staked out a productive in-between position. During the groups' formative years in the early 1970s, whole-hearted commitment to revolutionary counter-cultural politics was no longer, if ever, feasible, and a model that openly recognized its own implicit co-optation by the "culture industry"—and, moreover, was not limited in its actions by this realization—heralded the way of the future. In straddling a borderline between the demands of established arts institutions and the nascent underground, between the realm of art and mass culture, and between critique and a sense of its inefficacy, artists' groups, I argue, carved out a small space of action within a developing alternative arts scene (that would soon, with their efforts, become a mainstream), approximating what literary historian Marianne DeKoven has described as the "utopia limited" of the 1970s.[6] This ambivalent position is crucial for assessing the relationship of the artistic attitudes of the early-mid 1970s to post-modern developments at the end of the decade and in the 1980s.

The artists' groups taken as case studies here, Asco, Ant Farm, and General Idea, all worked in a range of media, from drawings and collages to photography and video to performance to installations and sculptural objects to the publishing of journals and the formation of art centers—seeming embodiments of the pluralist 1970s. Yet unlike artists who produce discrete works in various media, these groups' practices entailed creating projects that were necessarily realized through the interactions of different media, such that the practices themselves can be said to be intermedial. The chapters that follow examine how each of these groups carved out a particular type of related intermedial practice, what I term *cinearte* to describe Asco's practice, *collateral* for Ant Farm's, and *networked archival* for General Idea's. These groups' intermedial practices question not just the autonomy of the single auteur, but also challenge the autonomy of the work of art and the material conditions we conventionally refer to as "medium."

The period examined in this study, from 1968 to 1978, represents a moment when an intermedial approach was fully realized. An expanded concept of artistic medium had been percolating for decades, with the introduction in both Pop and Fluxus of "vulgar" materials, subjects, and attitudes as legitimate art as an important precedent for the re-evaluation of the experience of artistic form that Minimalism brought with its emphasis on literal materiality, a move that anticipated the process-oriented and anti-form sensibilities of earth artists. Although by the mid-1960s, well before the interventions of Asco, Ant Farm, or General Idea, many artists were working in ways that could be or have been described as hybrid or intermedial such as Andy Warhol, Allan Kaprow, Nam June Paik, and Dick Higgins, to name just a few recognizable

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[6] Marianne DeKoven, *Utopia Limited: The Sixties and the Emergence of the Postmodern* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).

practitioners, it was artists' groups who realized the full *collaborative* potential of intermedia, and adopted an intermedial sensibility partly as a way of making use of the varied talents and interests of their members. In Ant Farm, Doug Michels' and Chip Lord's training as architects showed in their meticulous plan and elevation designs and in their readiness to engage with sites; Curtis Schreier, schooled as an artist, produced free-form drawings and was the go-to guy for technological solutions, such as customizing the interior of their Phantom Dream Car to contain a complicated camera system to enable the drivers to steer the vehicle during their *Media Burn* event (1975; **figure 97**)*.* This is not to reduce these groups' interactions to the individualized performances of discrete roles; as Schreier's note to Michels (in a drawing, **figure 65**)—"Doug, fill in some fantasies here"—suggests, the groups' resulting projects were true collaborations, involving not just the skills of their members, but deriving from the integration of every member's input, ideas, and experiences. Ant Farm's Chip Lord reinforces this concept when he sums up the power unharnessed in productive collaboration: "When it's successful, it creates work that adds up to more than the individual contributions."[7] What results from this type of collaboration is best described by William Burroughs' and Brion Gysin's term "third mind," an idea that captures the moment when a truly new entity emerges from collaboration.[8] Most importantly, the resulting works produced by Ant Farm, Asco, and General Idea were themselves intermedial; while previous artists had moved across different media—working in painting, performance, and printing, for example—these groups brought different practices into orbit in single projects.[9]

The intermedial practices that developed out of these groups' collaborations came to signify an important aspect of their breed of 1970s artistic politics. Unlike instances of artistic cooperation, where individuals united temporarily for a shared cause, such as Angry Arts Week, the Artists Protest Committee, and Art Strike, or those that targeted institutional policies or the frame of the institution, as in the Art Worker's Coalition, these artists came together having lost faith in late 1960s activist tactics and sought new means of making artistic and social change. "We had abandoned our hippie backgrounds of heterosexual idealism, abandoned any shred of belief that we could change the world by activism, by demonstration, by any of the methods we

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[7] Lord in Marita Sturken, "Cultural Icons and Technological Change," *Afterimage* (October 1988): 8.

[8] They describe this as "the complete fusion in a praxis of two subjectivities, two subjectivities that metamorphose into a third; it is from this collusion that a new author emerges, an absent third person, invisible and beyond grasp, decoding the silence." William S. Burroughs and Brion Gysin, *The Third Mind* (New York: Viking Press, 1978), 18. See also Robert Sobieszek, *Ports of Entry: William S. Burroughs and the Arts,* exh. cat. (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, distributed by Thames & Hudson, 1996).

[9] While Warhol's Factory could be said to be such an intermedial project, it was not presented to the public as such.

had tried in the 1960s—they had all failed," General Idea co-founder A.A. Bronson recounted in a 1997 essay. The members of Asco also felt disappointed with early activist strategies, as they were very much involved initially in the Chicano Movement, participating in the 1968 student walkouts when they were in high school, producing street murals, and contributing to *Régeneracion,* a publication that endorsed Chicano cultural nationalism. Chapter 2 explores Asco's subsequent creation of "No Movies," photographs and texts that they circulated as if they were evidence of actual Chicano films, in the shadow of the Chicano Movement, and shows how the group sought to suggest a more complex identity for Mexican Americans than the more one-dimensional representations of Chicanos in the media, Los Angeles culture, and movement rhetoric.

Shaping a new collectivity constituted these groups' politics. These were artists' *groups,* not *collectives* per se, and this semantic distinction is worth noting, because of the distance it places between a communist ethos and the groups' own forms of cooperative individualism. Although some of the groups shared communal living and working arrangements, these models owed more to their hippie counterparts than they did to Soviet farms.[10] During their active periods, the groups produced work solely under a collective name, yes, but they maintained (and performed) individual identities as well. Their collaborative philosophies stemmed from the consumerist individualism that fed their youth, from the rise in social movements of their teen years, and from their recognition of the need for the individual within—and connected to—the whole.[11] They enacted through their various projects a new connectivity among artists in the 1970s, yet this model differed from ideas of the "open work" as espoused by Umberto Eco in 1962, from Allan Kaprow's desire to eliminate the theatrical staging of his earlier Happenings by transforming audience members into committed participants in his later events, and from the "collapse of social preconceived ideas, of separations of groups, social classes etc." through dance that Brazilian artist Hélio Oiticica sought in the mid-1960s.[12] Putting their intermedial

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[10] In some cases, such as Ant Farm, some of their projects involved re-envisioning existing economic structures to return to a barter-like system, but their model of collaboration nonetheless resembled more of a cohesive group than a communist collective.

[11] As artist Alan W. Moore has observed, two forms of "artistic" collectivity, one on each coast, were publicized and spectacularized in the news media: Ken Kesey's Merry Pranksters in San Francisco and Andy Warhol's Factory in New York; both formations were built on individualized participation within a collective group. See Moore, "Artists' Collectives: Focus on New York 1975–2000," in *Collectivism after Modernism: The Art of Social Imagination after 1945,* ed. Gregory Sholette and Blake Stimson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 194.

[12] Umberto Eco, "The Poetics of the Open Work" (1962) in *The Open Work,* trans. Anna Cancogni (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989), 1–23; Allan Kaprow, "Notes on the Elimination of the Audience," in *Assemblages, Environments and Happenings* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1966), 187–198; Hélio Oiticica, "Dance in My Experience (Diary Entries)," trans. Michael Ashbury, in *Participation: Documents of Contemporary Art,* ed. Claire Bishop (London: Whitechapel; Cambridge, Mass : MIT Press,

works in circulation, the groups sought to connect people and artists through the practices of everyday life, via a mobile trucking network for nomads, as Ant Farm sought, by interrupting the circuits by which Chicanos are represented in the media, as Asco did, or through the participation in the correspondence network by reading or contributing to *FILE,* General Idea's periodical.

In the late 1960s, debates raged over the place of political content in art. Many artists, such as Ad Reinhardt and Ed Ruscha, spoke against artists using their art as "weapons," most notably in the 1970 survey published in *Artforum,* "The Artist and Politics: A Symposium," calling instead for artists' personal political commitments not to suffuse their artistic products. Others attempted to integrate their political messages into the content of their work, as in Leon Golub's *Vietnam* and *Napalm* series and Nancy Spero's *Torture in Chile* and *The Torture of Women* series. Many African-American, Chicano, and feminist artists sought to use their art to produce artworks that might speak to and about their experiences, an approach which was a contrast with the mainstream, New York-centered and generally male cache of artists who opted to avoid overtly political topics in the content of their work. While this debate could be seen as a showdown between two modes of practice--abstraction and representation—as Ann Gibson has shown, it suffused the reception of even ostensibly "abstract" work by artists from populations underrepresented in the art world.[13]

Against this backdrop, several artists and groups came to prominence in the late 1960s and early 1970s who could be seen to be making art that had political effects, but was not invested with explicitly political content: Hans Haacke, Joseph Beuys, Gordon Matta-Clark, Dan Graham, and Marcel Broodthaers, to name a few other than the groups mentioned in this study. The effects of their works on audiences—the reception of it—caused intense scrutiny of the mechanisms of the art world, the institutional parameters governing art production and consumption, and the status of the art object in its relationship to society. Lucy Lippard considers these artists within the realm of conceptual art, and notes that the tie that binds most conceptual practices is that the *form*, rather than content, that carried a political message. She emphasizes that these artists were engaged in producing work that was anti-establishment and anti-commodification, and was instrumental in restructuring the relationship between art and the information systems in which it was often disseminated and displayed. Because of the emphasis on underlying structure, many of these artists have often been grouped into the category of "institutional critique," and, indeed, it is not wrong to argue that these artists are profoundly

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2006), 106. Oiticica's diary entries from 1965 and 1966 were first published in Portuguese in Luciano Figueiredo, Lygia Pape, and Waly Salomão, eds., *Hélio Oiticia: Aspiro ao Grande Labirinto* (Rio de Janeiro: Rocco, 1986), 72–76.

[13] Ann Eden Gibson, *Abstract Expressionism: Other Politics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997).

engaged with investigating the institutional parameters that support, valorize, and restrict artistic production. Yet these artists were also working out ways to think about the relationship of the political to art, and consider how to make a viable impact on the art world and, possibly, as a result of investigations of art world practices, an intervention into the mechanisms of post-war society.

Thus artists' groups represent what we might think of as a distinctly mid-1970s political stance, one that acknowledged the need to do *something,* but recognized the limitations of the 1960s-era strategies. "Protest today is not, as in the past, restricted to demands for economic advantage or political power," Forrest Wilson declared in a 1970 editorial for *Progressive Architecture.* "It centers, instead, around the demand for other relations among men and it strikes at the very root ideas from which our society grows."[14] Successful political agitation in the 1970s sought structural change, and a new constructive sensibility that emphasized the production of alternative institutions and the formation of community groups arose out of admittedly defeated, disorganized, sometimes anarchistic sensibilities that permeated the subcultural political climate at the start of the decade.

Unlike more stridently political groups, a sense of wit and play suffused the work of these artists. In that respect they truly embodied the "Eternal Network" (*la fête permanente*), Robert Filliou's conception of a model of global, connected creative activity whereby the communication of artists and their audiences produces shared artworks. For Filliou art was embedded in daily life, and as such it was as a "form of organized leisure" (*organisierter Musse*), an idea that, as Sharla Sava has shown, was inextricably linked with the ideas circulating about work and play in 1960s France where he lived.[15] Thus, in Filliou's "poetical economy," creatively spent leisure time held the potential to generate "a potentially revolutionary set of values."[16] It suggested a re-thinking of artistic labor, a notion also being renegotiated by conceptual artists, as in Edward Kienholz's *Concept Tableaux.*[17] Filliou's philosophy is instructive, not just because the artists in

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[14] Forrest Wilson, "Editorial," *Progressive Architecture* (July 1970): 70.

[15] Filliou, *Teaching and Learning*, 23; Sharla Sava, "The Filliou Tapes—from Political to Poetical Economy," in *Robert Filliou: From Political to Poetical Economy,* exh. cat. (Vancouver: Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery, University of British Columbia, 1995), 22.

[16] Filliou, *Teaching and Learning*, 22.

[17] Keinholz's *Conceptual Tableaux* were realized in three stages; in the first, he generated a plaque bearing a proposal for a possible art works; the plaque could be purchased by a buyer who could simply retain the plaque as a conceptual object, or who could pay for the second step, a drawing of the proposed work. The final stage is the full realization of the work, for which the patron would be responsible for materials and hourly wages. This system recognized the artist as both a man of ideas—a conceptual visionary—and a hired, hourly craftsperson. Several of Kienholz's most celebrated installations were realized through this method, among them *The State Hospital, The Portable War Memorial,* and *The Art Show.* See Edward and Nancy Reddin Kienholz, *Kienholz: A Retrospective,* exh. cat (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, in association with Distributed Art Publishers, 1996).

Canada and the United States who considered themselves members of the Eternal Network were informed by it, but also because it offers insight into the way many artists and even philosophers of the postwar period conceived of the relationship between art and life. In Europe the Situationists' belief in art as a transformation of daily reality informed Henri Lefebvre's thoughts on the subject, while in the United States, Kaprow's Happenings and writings became the most well-known explorations of the tension between art and nonart.[18] Filliou's, and others', willingness for art to become an extension of life helps to explain the proliferation of play and wit in the art of this period, and also suggests one reason for the renewed intersections between art and what is best termed "lifestyle" in the late 1960s and '70s. Lifestyle was conceived in broader terms than just "bohemian artist" or cronies gathering for drinks and conversation at the local pub, and represented a wholesale commitment to rethinking one's relationship to work, play, and the environment. These artists were not just discussing their practice, but rather were living it— Ant Farm after all carried out some of their proposed *Truckstop Network,* taking to the roads in their customized "media van" full of video-recording equipment and setting up at each stop on the tour their portable inflatable structures. Publications like *Guerrilla Television, Steal this Book,* and the *Whole Earth Catalog* encouraged this sensibility, as they provided information about tools for living that sparked a reconsideration of the consumer attitudes manufactured in the post-war period. The do-it-yourself ethos espoused in them offered a pointed rejection of mass production that boomed in the 1950s, a time that also gave rise to intensifying anxieties about the effects of mass production.[19]

Invoking the term "lifestyle," today as in the 1970s, elicits questions of identity and sexuality, and these were important to all of the groups examined in this study in different ways. Yet what distinguishes them from the more conventional politically motivated collectives of the late 1970s and 1980s is that these groups resisted definition by a single issue. Identity for them was fungible, negotiated, and performed. The aliases that many of the individuals assumed, either temporarily or more permanently, and the mystery enveloping the origins of them extended this sense of the mutability of individual and group identity and the way that it is lived. General Idea

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[18] See Tom McDonough, ed., *Guy Debord and the Situationists International: Texts and Documents* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2004); Sadie Plant, *The Most Radical Gesture: The Situationist International and After* (London: Routledge, 1992); Henri Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life,* trans. John Moore (New York: Verso, 1991). On Kaprow see Eva Meyer-Hermann, Andrew Perchuk, and Stephanie Rosenthal, eds. *Allan Kaprow—Art as Life* (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2008), and in particular in that volume, Alex Potts, "The Aesthetics of Non Art: Writing the Happening," 20–31; Kaprow, *Essays on The Blurring of Art and Life,* ed. Jeff Kelley (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).
[19] Lewis Mumford's critique of modern industrial and technological machine culture achieved a wide resonance at this juncture, a theme he developed in *Technics and Civilization* (1934) and reprised in *Art and Technics* (1952). Hannah Arendt's dim appraisal of modern society, informed by her own experiences with totalitarianism, also circulated widely through the publication of *The Human Condition* in 1958.

explored these questions in complex ways, as chapter 4 reveals, mocking how people become their public identities by buying into myths perpetuated by consumer culture (and yet acknowledging at the same time how the group's own success was predicated on this very process).

The playfulness these groups cultivated became a defining characteristic of what I refer to as their "lifestyle politics." This concept differs from "identity politics," a term loosely applied to the ideas that grew out of the large-scale political movements of the second-half of the 20th century—second-wave feminism, black civil rights, gay and lesbian liberation, and the Native American movements, for example—that waged claims about societal inequalities and political and social injustices committed against particular groups. These social movements are supported by and advance a philosophical body of work that questions the nature, source, and futures of the identities being asserted and defended. In the 1960s the term "lifestyle" suggested a different approach, sometimes connoting a depoliticized hippie pursuit, a practice of "dropping out" fueled by play and drugs. In fact, the counterculture had always been linked with the personal gratification and hedonistic consumption of the early 1960s, and was, even later in the decade, imbricated within a complex relationship of the media, business entrepreneurs, and commodity culture.[20] Ant Farmer Chip Lord acknowledges this subtext when he described their work as "research and experimentation in living patterns," and then cautioned, "I hesitate to use the over used phrase life-style."[21] Yet living one's politics was a viable strategy—even if it was called "research and experimentation in living patterns"—as long as the behavioral changes coincided with new infrastructures.[22] In *Steal this Book,* Yippie Abbie Hoffman exhorted, "Smoking dope

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[20] Bill Ogersby cites Jackson Lears' argument that the appropriation of consumer culture "neutralized" the counterculture's oppositionality, such that the "politics" of counterculture individuals became reduced to mere style. In doing so, Ogersby acknowledges that this contention is simplistic (as Lear also admits) and complicates it by noting how the counterculture was always "locked into a symbiotic relationship with the media, commercial entrepreneurs, and market institutions"; Bill Osgerby, *Playboys in Paradise: Masculinity, Youth and Leisure-style in Modern America* (New York: Berg, 2001), 181. See also Jackson Lears, "A Matter of Taste: Corporate Cultural Hegemony in a Mass-Consumption Society," in Larry May, ed., *Recasting America: Culture and Politics in the Age of Cold War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 53.

[21] "What Is Ant Farm?" from *4*2 Maro* book proposal, Ant Farm archive, Berkeley Art Museum, 2005.14.243.3.

[22] Martin Duberman, writing in 1969, saw the importance of these alternative lifestyles less in terms of building new infrastructures and more in how they refuted a rationalist, individualist sensibility:
The sources and manifestations of the revolution lie…in a bewildering grab bag that includes hallucinatory drugs, bisexuality, communal pads, dashikis and blue jeans, rock and soul, Eastern mystics, scientology, encounter groups, macrobiotic foods, astrology, street theaters, and free stores…. But though the mix may be unpleasant, shifting and inchoate, if it continues to locate its center in the senses and emotions, in participation and sharing, in the unexplored, the spontaneous, the casual, the experimental, we may well be witnessing a decisive break with our society's hitherto dominant values of rationalism, Puritanism, materialism, and invididualism.

and hanging up Che's picture is no more a commitment than drinking milk and collecting postage stamps. A revolution in consciousness is an empty high without a revolution in the distribution of power."[23] For Hoffman this level of commitment involved jamming capitalist culture to render its eventual destruction. Like Hoffman, many artists' groups recognized that information structures and distribution systems were central to the operations of the current regime, yet unlike the nihilist Yippie, the strategies of the groups I am examining promoted the creation of alternative organizations rather than an obliteration of existing ones.

The above distinction with Hoffman suggests something of the ambivalence courted by these groups, and is characteristic of 1970s artistic politics more broadly. Even Hoffman realized the practical limitations of the rigid position he advocated (and the impossibility of complete extrication from the "system") when he acknowledged that although *Steal this Book* was self-published (because thirty publishers rejected the manuscript he submitted), it had a North American distributor: "To pull a total solo trip, including distribution would have been neat, but such an effort would be doomed from the start."[24] While some, like Hoffman, shifted their sharply defined political stance to accommodate social realities, others, like Robert Filliou, went further to recognize that even the principles we hold dear today are fated to change over time. He appreciated the tenuous nature of promoting any such rigid position (it could potentially devolve into orthodoxy) in his book, *Teaching and Learning as Performing Arts*, and makes a provision to guard against it: "Built in in the book must be its own satire, contradiction, and eventual obsolescence."[25] Thus even as he promotes participation techniques gleaned from artistic endeavors to foster a more catholic sense of teaching and learning, he understands that ultimately they too will become outmoded. Asco, Ant Farm, and General Idea also recognized that the speed of the new "Information Age" rendered ideas old hat faster than before, and they applied this approach to their own work, always allowing for "satire, contradiction, and eventual obsolescence."

The themes introduced above—intermediality, collaboration, circulation, mass media rituals, lifestyle politics, and ambivalence—establish parameters for appreciating the new connectivity of the era. They also provide entry points for re-examining an overlooked moment within art history, what has been sometimes dismissed as the "pluralism" of the 1970s. What follows is a more in-depth exploration of the histories, ideas, and artists that contribute to our

Duberman, "Young Radicals: Politics or Culture?" *New York Times,* 23 March 1969, reprinted in *Left Out: The Politics of Exclusion 1964–1999* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), 232–233.
[23] Abbie Hoffman, *Steal this Book* (rpt. New York: Four Walls Windows, 2002), xxiii.
[24] Indeed much of the book offers ways to scam, jam, and live off the detritus or imperfections in the system, an outlook discussed with respect to Ant Farm in chapter 3; ibid*.,* xxiv.
[25] Filliou, *Teaching and Learning,* 12.

understanding of the hybrid, collaborative practices of this moment and why they came to a head at that particular time.

"A New and Unsettled Connectivity": Pluralism, Intermedia, and Medium

"We are all looped together in a new and unsettled connectivity," Lawrence Alloway declared in 1966.[26] In "Art and the Communications Network," the British critic explained how, with the advent of reproduction techniques, traveling exhibitions, *catalogues raisonnés*, and assorted other periodicals, the new communications network gave rise to a radical pluralism and a different approach to artistic experimentation (rather than contributing to stagnation, as some detractors contended).[27] He championed the potential networks held for generating new viewing contexts and pluralist aesthetics, which to succeed "would have to relinquish pyramidal and stratified forms of order to allow multiple possibilities and real oppositions of direction within the general field of art."[28] For Alloway, this decentralized system of art communication indicated a new aesthetic climate fueled by recent developments in technology (for example, the reproduction of art works, the traveling exhibition, and the faster speed of communication). According to Alloway, a proliferation of new more heterorogeous and intermedial forms of pratice resulted from artists being brought into greater contact with one another's work and ideas through new technologies.

Not all critics took such a salubrious view of the heterogeneity of 1970s art.[29] Calling it "diversified, split and factionalized," Rosalind Krauss opined,

> Unlike the art of the last several decades, its energy does not seem to flow
> through a single channel for which a synthetic term, like Abstract Expressionism,
> or Minimalism, might be found. In defiance of the notion of collective effort that

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[26] Lawrence Alloway, "Art and the Communications Network," *Canadian Art* 23, no. 1 (January 1966): 35.
[27] Pluralism refers to the profusion of art in different media and styles in the 1970s, and in some ways the categorization of art in the period as "pluralist" extends from the desires of journalists, critics, gallerists to be able to articulate (or latch onto, depending on one's view point) a defining artistic movement or period, even when one could not be identified. For example, in *The Pluralist Era: American Art 1968–1981* (New York: Harper & Row, 1984), Corinne Robins chronicles installation, performance, video, earth works, conceptual art, painting, and sculpture.
[28] Alloway, "Art and the Communications Network," 37.
[29] Clement Greenberg characterized the influx of multi-media and performance into the domains of painting and sculpture as an "invasion," chalking it up to the reign of the "tradition of the new" (Harold Rosenberg's phrase) and what he viewed as its corresponding "anything goes" ethic. All of this is a harbinger for Greenberg of a decline in standards and taste that have come with the new audiences intermedia art has brought; Greenberg, "Intermedia," *Arts Magazine* 56, no. 2 (1981): 92–93.

operates behind the very idea of an artistic 'movement', 70s art is proud of its own dispersal.[30]

In Krauss' credo pluralism merely reflects an ethos of individual freedom from the constraints of a collective style, as distinct from the "non-heroic populist stance" others saw in it.[31] Yet contrary to Krauss' contention, the participants in the DeccaDance embraced measures of individual freedom *within* collaborative or collective practices. In their versions of it, plurality was less about different artists working in a variety of media and styles such that no "movement" could be discerned, and more about working within a spectrum of possibilities—of media, of collaborators, of projects, of ideas.

Pluralism is an art historical frame, an attempt by critics and scholars to categorize the heterogeneity of practices in the 1970s. Yet artists, in pointed contrast to the critics, embraced this diversity, and some incorporated it into their own practices, such that their projects involved a variety of media and techniques. Thus rather than pluralism, a defining characteristic of 1970s practice might be said to be "intermediality." Fluxus artist Dick Higgins famously introduced the term in several statements from the mid-1960s in which he discusses how the rise of television, radio, and literacy had affected viewers' sensibilities; the new intermedial forms allowed artists to "find the ways to say what has to be said in the light of our new means of communicating."[32] To do this, he announced, "we will need rostrums, organizations, criteria, sources of information." Higgins emphasizes infrastructure and information as priorities for succeeding in a newly technological society, and cautions artists to use existing media "appropriately and effectively." In this formulation, intermedia is a useful *approach* to artistic practice in a newly mediated world, rather than an end in itself or climax to the circular discussions on medium specificity that had governed much critical discourse.

Writing only a few years after Higgins, film critic Gene Youngblood described an "intermedia network of cinema and television, which now functions as nothing less than the nervous system of mankind."[33] Unlike Higgins' articulation of an intermedia approach,

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[30] Rosalind Krauss, "Notes on the Index, Part I," in *Originality of the Avant Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1985): 196.

[31] Corinne Robins is one such supporter.

[32] Dick Higgins, "Statement on Intermedia," *Décollage* 6 (July 1967): n.p. Another statement titled simply "Intermedia," written in 1965, was published in Higgins' 1969 collection *Foew&ombwhnw: A Grammar of the Mind and a Phenomenology of Love and a Science of the Arts as Seen by a Stalker of the Wild Mushroom* (New York: Something Else Press, 1969), 11–29.

[33] Gene Youngblood, *Expanded Cinema* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1970)*,* 41. Youngblood's remarks anticipate present-day discussions about the internet as a social nervous system. See for example, Joshua-Michéle Ross, "The Rise of the Social Nervous System," *Forbes,* 9 March 2009, and various responses to it by bloggers, such as Kendall Brown at Online Spin, a MediaPost blog; Jim Jansen; various posters at gyre.com; and Tim O'Reilly at O'Reilly Radar.

Youngblood viewed the new media culture as "a service environment that carries the messages of the social organism," an extension of man's body, which was a prescient recognition of the seemingly indispensible function technology holds today for many Americans, with cell phones attached as appendages and website profiles broadcasting personal preferences and one's actions at any given time.

More recently J. Sage Elwell combined the technological sense of Youngblood's characterization with the experimental approach Higgins promoted. Elwell identified what he believes are two salient properties of intermedia: "'conceptual fusion' of media" and an embrace of technology (although he notes that specifying its attributes goes against its very definition).[34] Intermedia, Elwell affirmed, "precludes the possibility of separating the various media from one another, while simultaneously preserving the integrity of either the constitutive elements or the work itself."[35] Since 1966, "intermedia" has been used by artists and critics variously, sometimes as nothing more than a synonym for "mixed media," which Elwell cautioned against. This usage negates the in-betweenness of the term conveyed by the prefix "inter" and minimizes its significance.[36] For this reason I use "intermedial" to refer to the "expanded" practices of collectives and artists in the 1970s. Yet it is not simply that they work in between different media, which they do; rather it is that seemingly discrete intermedial projects are inextricably related, such that their methods of working can also be said to be networked or allusive.

Intermedia has marked an intervention in art historical discourse, a particular response to discussions about medium specificity, the cornerstone of modernist art since Clement Greenberg's "Towards a Newer Laöcoon" in 1940. In 2006, Rosalind Krauss rethought medium in a "post-medium" age, and considered "technical support" as the most suitable concept to apply her breed of formalist criticism to multimedia works such as video. The term recognizes how outdated discussions of traditional mediums (like painting and sculpture) have become to contemporary art, and it "also welcomes the layered mechanisms of new technologies that make a simple, unitary identification of the work's physical support impossible."[37] What Krauss holds

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[34] J. Sage Elwell, "Intermedia: Forty Years On and Beyond," *Afterimage* 33 (March/April 2006): 25.
[35] Ibid.
[36] In fact, the neologism "intermedia" is perhaps unnecessary, because, as Pamela Lee has astutely observed, the word "medium" itself means "middle condition" (*Chronophobia: On Time In the Art of the 1960s* [Cambridge: MIT Press, 2004], 51). Because the word "medium" has been conventionally used within art historical discourse to indicate an artwork's material support, the term intermedia will be used in the present study to suggest a position in-between.
[37] Rosalind Krauss, "Two Moments from the Post-medium Condition," *October* (Spring 2006): 56. In many ways this change in terminology is but a semantic shift to allow contemporary works to become part of the modernist canon. Krauss says as much:

    If the traditional medium is supported by a physical substance (and practiced by a specialized
    guild), the term 'technical support,' in distinction, refers to contemporary commercial vehicles,

onto by seizing "technical support" as an appropriate hermeneutic category is the need to have a firm footing when analyzing these contemporary works—they must have some form of support, be it material or technical, otherwise they devolve into non-art. Yet artists' groups like Ant Farm, Asco, and General Idea did not long for such terra firma; rather they were fascinated by the products of intermedia and how such a practice based on it tapped into the emerging artists' networks and allowed for multiple, shifting frames of reference.

The DeccaDance is an example of an intermedial form, articulated across different registers. First was the preliminary material: the notes, scripts, and advertising for the event. General Idea's "Mondo Nudo: Nude Egos in a Nude Era" issue of *FILE* advertised the event with a letter from Michael Morris inviting guests to attend the dinner (**figure 4**), and *SpaceCo 1984,* Dana Atchley's mail art periodical, also included a preview of the "gala event" alongside a picture of a nubile pin-up in a bath of oranges captioned, "Hollywood starlet prepares herself for the first annual decadance [*sic*] in Los Angeles."[38] In a two-page advert in *FILE,* John Jack Baylin promoted the event's coverage in his publication, *Fanzini Goes to the Movies* (**figure 16**); the issue tied for best glossy 'zine in the Sphinx d'Or Dadacademy Awards with General Idea's *IFEL* number (an imagined *FILE* goes to Paris). In addition to the promotional material, the DeccaDance shooting script was published in the fall of 1975 in an issue of *IS.* edited by Victor Coleman, providing more or less a transcription of the event for those who wanted to relive it or who could not attend (**figure 5**). *FILE* also published an eight-page insert, "Hollywood Edition Art's Birthday." Props and souvenirs added to the kitschiness of the DeccaDance, such as the *Be an Artist—Draw in the Faces* placemat which adapted Ray Johnson's "bunny" graphic to various animal forms, asking the artist-diner to fill in the identities. The placemat also reconfigured the various DeccaDance contributor's works as an alphabet of entrees, fleeting pleasures to be savored as they are consumed; thus "Mr. Peanut's baba borscht" is served up alongside "A.A.'s iced tongue" (**figure 6**). Then there was the event itself, of which there is film and video documentation and participants' commentaries after the fact. Filmed footage includes *Art's Stars in Hollywood,* a 60-minute video made by Chip Lord from Ant Farm and Megan Williams from TVTV; *Art's Stars Interviews,* Willoughby Sharp's conversations with Marcel Idea and Mr.

such as cars or television, which contemporary artists exploit, in recognition of the contemporary obsolescence of the traditional mediums, as well as acknowledging their obligation to wrest from that support a new set of aesthetic conventions to which their works can then reflexively gesture, should they want to join those works to the canon of modernism (57).

[38] *SpaceCo 1984, Spacepak 5* (1973): n.p., Art Metropole Collection, Artist Box (Atchley), 11569. The DeccaDance was also advertised by flyers: John Pashdag recounts noticing an ad for the DeccaDance at University of California. Pashdag, "Art Is Where You Find It," *Coast Magazine* (July 1974);17, Projects Series, Art's Birthday Binder, General Idea fonds, Library and Archives, National Gallery of Canada, box 3.

Peanut of Image Bank, A.A. Bronson of General Idea and Flakey Rose Hips from the Western Front, Dr. Brute and Lady Brute of Banal Beauty Inc., among others; and *The Decca Dance,* Kerry Kelowna's 20-minute 16mm black-and-white film. The two videos were advertised in various catalogues, such as *Environmental Communications* and those published by General Idea's Art Metropole, which increased their visibility; moreover screenings dubbed as "General Idea Remembers Art's Birthday" occurred at A Space in Toronto on April 21, 1974 (**figure 7**). [39] The DeccaDance also received mention in the regional and national press; in *Coast Magazine* John Pashdag characterizes the spectacle as "Los Angeles' contribution to Andy Warhol's *Interview*'s gossip column" and "the Ringling Brothers with an art degree."[40] Pashdag's description pinpoints the intermedial aspects of the event; it exudes the chattiness of the rumor mill and cadences of the published column, the pedigree and "artiness" of M.F.A. student exhibition, and the three-ring spectacle of the circus. The works circulating around the event, and the correspondence practices that gave rise to it, become part of the dense nexus of activities integral to the DeccaDance and epitomize the type of intermedial, networked practices of the groups in this study.

James Minton, who reviewed the event for *Artweek,* considered the Decca Dance to be "a mode of behavior rather than a single event," seeing it as one of the many "delivery formats," such as film, books, magazines, and correspondence, taken up by artists at this time.[41] In this way it was, in essence, a meta-event. As a networking vehicle, Minton deems it akin to "a multiple, synchronized, *collective* mailing."[42] Thus the Decca Dance represented not only an intermedial event but more importantly an experimental, hybrid, dispersive, and collaborative outlook on art-making.

The intermedial practices of these groups force scholars to contend with different discursive histories in order to parse the artworks and understand their significance. Many studies of collaborations in this period compartmentalize the art into sub-categories based on location and medium. Study of the collective Asco, for example, remains within Chicano art history, a field separated from scholarship on contemporary and American art; recent exhibitions have drawn attention to their work, but always within the frame of Los Angeleno or Latino(a) culture.[43]

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[39] A flyer advertising the screening, "General Idea Remembers Art's Birthday," is in the General Idea artist document file, book 1, Library and Archives, National Gallery of Canada.

[40] Pashdag, "Art Is Where You Finds It," 17.

[41] Minton, "Decca Dancing," *Artweek* (9 March 1974), 2.

[42] Ibid.

[43] Asco's work was featured in *Visual Politics: The Art of Engagement* at the San Jose Museum of Art from 20 November 2005 to 5 March 2006 and at the Katzen Arts Center, American University, Washington, D.C., from 9 April to 29 July 2006. Peter Selz authored the related catalogue, *Art of Engagement; Visual Politics in California and Beyond,* in which he allocated to Asco a paragraph in his chapter on "Racism,

General Idea, one of the most well-known groups of artists in Canada (second only to the Group of Seven), has experienced a similar fate, acknowledged for their role within pioneering video practices and Canadian art, but generally neglected for their participation in a larger international artistic culture.[44] Even the work of Ant Farm, which has probably received the most mainstream attention in the United States, fails to merit consideration in studies of conceptual art or surveys of the period, garnering mention instead in histories of video and architecture.[45] This type of scholarly framing neutralizes the heterogeneity of the groups' practices; focusing on Ant Farm's video, for example, overlooks their textual, graphic, and architectural production. Even when scholars attempt to tackle their production in its entirety, which several recent studies do

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Discrimination, Identity Politics," in a subsection on the Chicano Art Movement; he also profiles separately the individual work of Patssi Valdez and Gronk. Asco's work was also included in *Phantom Sightings: Art after the Chicano Movement* at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (6 April–1 September 2008), for which a catalogue exists, and in *Arte≠Vida: Actions by Artists of the Americas 1960-2000,* an ambitious exhibition organized by El Museo del Barrio, New York, in 2008. In her introduction to the exhibition catalog, curator Deborah Cullen explains the exhibition title's disavowal, "What is proposed through these many works is that while art affirms and celebrates life with a regenerative force, and sharpens and provokes our critical senses, artistic actions that address inequalities and conflicts are not equivalent to real life endured under actual repression." What Cullen does not emphasize here is that many of the artists included in the exhibition *were* working under repressive conditions, such as those experienced by Asco in East Los Angeles.

[44] Early on General Idea cultivated this sense of importance, crowning themselves "Sucksessors to the Group of Seven" in 1971. See Projects Series 1968–1971, General Idea fonds, box 1.

General Idea's art has been the focus of several monographs, among them *Search for the Spirit: General Idea 1968–1975,* a catalogue that explores the group's early years by emphasizing previously unpublished archival documents. A career retrospective of General Idea's work, *General Idea: Editions 1967–1995,* curated by Barbara Fischer opened in 2003 at the Blackwood Gallery, University of Toronto at Mississauga; for the next four years, the show circulated to 18 venues in the United States, Canada, and Europe (one tour stop was the Andy Warhol Museum in Pittsburgh). Accompanying the exhibition was a catalogue edited by Fischer, containing a detailed accounting of the group's multiples, prototypes, and even related ephemera, compiled by Fern Bayer, and short essays by curators and art historians. Also included in the catalogue is a conversation between Mike Kelley and A.A. Bronson, and a brief look back on his group's work by Bronson. In "Copyright, Cash, and Crowd Control: Art and Economy in the Work of General Idea," Bronson sees General Idea's work clearly in retrospect, acknowledging how they were "at once complicit in and critical of the mechanisms and strategies that join art and commerce, a sort of mole in the art world"; Barbara Fischer, ed. *General Idea Editions 1967–1995* (Mississauga, Ont.: Blackwood Gallery, University of Toronto at Mississauga, 2003), 27.

[45] The Ant Farm retrospective organized by the Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive—*Ant Farm 1968-1978*—traveled from the Berkeley Art Museum (21 January–26 April 2004) to the Santa Monica Museum of Art (2 July–14 August 2004); the Institute of Contemporary Art at the University of Pennsylvania (10 September–12 December 2004); the Blaffer Gallery, the Art Museum of the University of Houston (15 January–13 March 2005); Zenstrum für Kunst und Medientechnologie, Karlsruhe, Germany (30 April–24 July 2005); and the Yale University School of Architecture Gallery, New Haven (29 August–4 November 2005), where I was able to see it. Included in the accompanying exhibition catalogue is an interview with the members of Ant Farm, Chip Lord, Doug Michels, and Curtis Schreier, and Constance Lewallen, the show's co-curator. An international exhibition *Ant Farm* opened in 2007 and a catalogue was published by Éditions Hyx to coincide with the show. Felicity Scott's richly illustrated and assiduously researched book on Ant Farm, *Living Archive 7: Ant Farm: Allegorical Time Warp: The Media Fallout of July 21, 1969* (Barcelona: Actar, 2008) publishes archival material related to the group's *Truckstop Network* project for the first time.

admirably, such projects are monographs. Although working out of Los Angeles, as Asco did, San Francisco and Houston, as was primarily the case with Ant Farm, and Toronto, where General Idea was headquartered, and very much shaped by the specific practices in those cities, their work also spread to other areas, and they fully participated in the larger network of activity occurring across North America. Asco, Ant Farm, and General Idea's hybrid practices question this art historical bounding, because their highly allusive artworks and rich archives reveal intersections with other locations, artists, audiences, and bodies of literature, constituting what I consider their discursive intermediality. This is what makes them so hard to place or characterize in surveys of art of the period, and yet this is one of the most significant aspects of their art. Bringing them together in a comparative study highlights this intermediality and reveals it to be representative of 1970s art more broadly. The larger issue that lies at the heart of this study is as follows: how do these artists' groups' various intermedial practices engage with their concerns about mass media and its mechanisms to propose new identity roles, promote experimental understandings about a work of art relative to an entire oeuvre, and interpellate different publics in this post-Vietnam context?

A "Redefining of the Creative Process": Discursive Intermediality and the Archival Mode

This discursive intermediality emerges from the various groups' archives, ephemera preserved in other network members' collections (as in Lucy Lippard's papers, where I first spied *FILE*), through their published work, in reviews and essays from the 1970s, and from others' interviews; it is within this nexus that I insert the present study.[46] During the past five years or

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[46] I initially thought I would interview the surviving members of each group; once I began research, I decided not to privilege their accounts and instead consulted interviews conducted when everyone in each group was still alive. For some of these pertaining to Asco, see Jeffrey Rangel's individual oral histories in 1997 with Harry Gamboa, Jr., Gronk, Willie Hérron, and Patssi Valdez; Philip and Amy Brookman's 1983 interview with Asco in CALIFAS: Chicano Art and Culture in California, transcripts, volume 3; Marisela Norte and Harry Gamboa, Jr.'s conversation in *El Tecolote* 4, no. 2 (July 1983): 3, 12; Jennifer Sternad-Flores and Rita Gonzalez's interview with Gronk, 31 August 2004, transcript, Gronk Collection, Chicano Studies Research Center, University of California, Los Angeles.

Ant Farm's interview with Constance Lewallen for the Berkeley Art Museum's exhibition catalogue, *Ant Farm 1968–1978,* offers insight into the group's dynamic and provides the group's assessment of their works some twenty-five years later. An interview with Curtis Schreier and Chip Lord not too longer after the group disbanded, assesses the group's ten-year career; Lord explained the sense of relief that accompanied the burning of their studio in 1978: "It was a museum, and being there was like a museum." The material accumulation of their practice had by 1978 ceased to function as a living network of traces; instead it had turned into a vehicle for the preservation of a past art. Schreier echoed Lord's sentiment, "I felt like I'd been living in a closet." (Ellin Stein, in "Ant Farm: The Last Interview" in the September 1980 issue of *Boulevards* [a copy is available in the Ant Farm archive, Berkeley Art Museum, 2005.14.239.a-c.])

so, exhibitions including the work of Asco, General Idea, and Ant Farm have displayed long shelved works, some for the first time. In the last decade, institutional libraries have also catalogued and made their personal archives available to the public.[47] Because, as I argue, the archive shaped these groups' practices and constituted the art they produced, the ephemeral material contained in them assumes a central place in my research.

My approach to this archival material has been enriched by the significant body of scholarship on "visual culture." Visual culture studies as a field has challenged the distinctions art historians have traditionally placed between "high" and "low" art forms, and this legitimization and expansion of the objects of study has shaped my understanding of the groups' approach to their own work and to cultural signifiers more broadly.[48] Indeed, the groups themselves, encouraged by contemporary trends that de-emphasized an artwork's material properties, did not differentiate on the basis of quality among the various iterations of their works. Patricia Johnston's emphatic declaration that visual images are "not transparent windows" guided my approach to the archival material, as it prepared me to see the ephemeral traces as *agents,* cultural artifacts that had accrued various meanings throughout their circulation within various networks—of artists, in the alternative press, within museological and art historical scholarship— and over time.[49] These traces mark "the point at which a network of significations whirlpools

General Idea was interviewed with some regularity in Canada in the 1970s and abroad in the 1980s; for a few of these that touch on different aspects of their practice, see Judy Annear, "An Interview with General Idea," *Art & Text* (Summer 1982): 49–56; Arielle Pélenc, "General Idea," *Public,* no. 3 (1985): 10–19 ; Mary Anne Staniszewski, "General Idea," *Shift* # 6 vol. 3, no. 2 (1989): 14–19.

[47] Stanford University Library purchased Harry Gamboa, Jr.'s papers from the artist in 1995. The Chicano Studies Research Center at University of California Los Angeles acquired Gronk's papers in 2006; unfortunately they were not catalogued and made available until I was well into the writing stage of this dissertation.

The General Idea fonds were donated to the National Gallery of Canada Library and Archives in 1999 and were subsequently processed by Fern Bayer; the Berkeley Art Museum acquired the Ant Farm archive in 2005 and catalogued it two years later.

[48] See, for example, Patricia Johnston, ed., *Seeing High and Low: Representing Social Conflict in American Visual Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006). *Visual Culture: The Reader,* edited by Jessica Evans and Stuart Hall (London: Sage in association with the Open University, 1999), with its insistence on examining the discursive contexts in which culture is produced, offers an important caution not to privilege production at the expense of the other factors that contribute to our understanding of how cultural objects make meaning.

The emergence in the last two decades of visual studies as an academic field has sparked intense debate among its proponents and art historians. In 1996, *October* published a rather reactionary questionnaire on the topic, a move on the part of art historians to attack the status of visual culture studies as a discipline separate from art history ("Visual Culture Questionnaire," *October* 77 [Summer 1996], 25–70.) Although the questionnaire prompted some scholars, such as Margaret Dikovitskaya, to explain their approach in light of the criticisms it raised, many have moved beyond the terms set forth by the *October* survey more than ten years ago. Dikovitskaya, *Visual Culture: The Study of the Visual after the Cultural Turn* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2005).

[49] Johnston, "Introduction: A Critical Overview of Visual Culture Studies," in *Seeing High and Low,* 1.

about a convenient image," to borrow General Idea's definition of a fetish.[50] Equally influential were studies of visual culture that urged us to look at the "unseen" as much as the seen—to discern what intangibles emerge from collected traces to shape our beliefs—such as Martin Berger's approach to "whiteness" in 19th- and early 20th-century culture.[51] In this respect Asco, Ant Farm, and General Idea were themselves interpreters of "visual culture" in that they sought to reveal how images guide our interpretations of the world.

Adding another dimension to these archival traces is that the groups actively shaped their own reception and history by publishing collectively and as individuals. Thus *Automerica* bears the collective imprint of Ant Farm, yet Chip Lord also wrote "Backward Look at the Forward Look" for *Rolling Stone* in 1974 under his own byline. General Idea authored editorials and accounts of their own work in *FILE*, while A.A. Bronson also contributed to various scholarly projects, such as *Museums by Artists, Video by Artists,* and *From Sea to Shining Sea.* In Asco, Harry Gamboa, Jr., was the most visible and vocal member, publishing articles in the popular press and also writing scripts for the group's performances; his writings were collected in an omnibus volume in 1998. That members of the groups published texts under their own names created a tension in the public expression of individual and collective identity, particularly in the case of Asco, where some scholars have singled out Gamboa as the face of Asco.[52] Moreover, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the groups' efforts were publicized mainly in the alternative press and "little magazines"; these outlets often shared the artists' agendas and provided sympathetic fora for appraisals of their art (one such example is garibaldi's interview with Ant Farm, where the group dictates the process and the interviewer good naturedly goes along; another is Yippie Paul Krassner's review of *Media Burn*). These reviews and articles indicate how the groups reached and were received by various subcultures, a revelation which must be balanced against the outlets' investments in realizing new social and artistic cultures.

These groups, or in the case of Asco, individual members of them, also actively collected the traces of their work and organized them into archival collections. The specialist term "fonds" might be useful here, because it designates a collection that originates from a single source and that has been created as a whole. These groups' fonds offer many of the documents we have

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[50] "Surfacing on the Subliminal," [ca. 1975], Manuscripts Series, General Idea fonds, box 46.
[51] See, for example, Berger's introduction to his book *Sight Unseen: Whiteness and American Visual Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 1–10, in which he pushes us to see "whiteness" as a category that shapes our values and beliefs, even when it is not ostensibly present.
[52] See, for example, S. Zaneta Kosiba-Vargas, "Harry Gamboa and Asco: The Emergence and Development of a Chicano Art Group, 1971-1987" (Ph.d. diss., University of Michigan, 1988). General Idea noted the tendency for the press to privilege more vocal members of the group, and thus they made the decision to present themselves as a unified threesome, choosing whenever possible to be interviewed and photographed collectively.

today to piece together their practices, and they also provide an index of the group's sensibilities at the time. Thus we can speak of the General Idea fonds or Ant Farm fonds or Harry Gamboa, Jr., fonds, and understand that this means that they were conceived of and created by those individuals as records of their works.

Yet these collections are not simply repositories of objects and records, but represent a common approach to art-making. They share this sensibility with other artists of their period, such as N.E. Thing Co. and Image Bank, among many others. According to Image Bank, their archive is a "reflection of responses, attitudes and positions that have been part of the constant redefining of the creative process in our time."[53] In the case of these groups, their fonds embody their process and even become part of their artworks, or works in their own right. With Asco, the No Movie serves as such a frame for their entire practice, and with General Idea the 1984 Miss General Idea Pageant Pavillion fulfills a similar role. Ant Farm's archival bent manifests itself in formats such as their calendarLOG *20:20 Vision* and in their various iterations of the Ant Farm Timeline. Thus these groups' (and others') versions of conceptual art are characterized, not necessarily by the "aesthetic of administration" that Benjamin Buchloh described in a 1990 essay on 1960s conceptualism, but by an archival mode that guides not only how they retrospectively frame their works for reception, but how they create as well.[54] Moreover, these groups' experimental, intermedial practices result directly from this archival mode as it informs their production and the way they cast their works into circulation.

Because this is a study of artistic networks, correspondence occupies a position of primacy in providing an index of that networked activity. By correspondence I mean not only missives exchanged between individuals, but also any document that suggests its own circulation—letters to the editor, postcards and flyers advertising a group's work, images found in multiple archives (as is the case with General Idea and Ant Farm), annotated scripts or texts for publication, editorial mock-ups, fan mail, and performance transcripts. These images in motion—or *moticos,* the term preferred by the "grandfather" of the mail art network, Ray Johnson—allow us to re-constitute these groups' practices and imagine their reception then and now. They invite us into the conversation, so to speak.

These traces in motions, collected as they are in archival collections, also allow us to travel back in time and to rebuild the networked activity of the 1970s—it structures the archival

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[53] *Hand of the Spirit: Documents of the Seventies from the Morris/Trasov Archive* (Vancouver, B.C.: University of British Columbia Fine Arts Gallery, 1994), 6. Moreover, their archive "is meant to be considered as a work of art, or perhaps more accurately, as a vehicle for artistic research, as a working model for research as art, art as research." (5).

[54] Benjamin Buchloh, "Conceptual Art 1962–1969," *October* (Winter 1990): 105–143.

process just as the groups' self-consciousness about their place in history shaped their own collecting. Time was a significant preoccupation of these artists' groups, one they likely developed in response to what Pamela Lee has characterized as 1960s artists' "chronophobia," a suspicion of the new speeds of communication and, more broadly, of the relationship between time and technology brought about by the "information age."[55] These groups diverge from the 1960s-era practices that harken back to a Machine Age aesthetic, such as the popularity of kinetic art in the period, or an insistence on reinforcing the present moment. Instead they reveal themselves to concerned with both representations of the past, particularly 1950s culture, images they might have seen as children on television, in movies, or in magazines such as *Life*, and representations of the future from the past, most notably those staged in spectacles such as world's fairs. These reveal the groups to be looking backwards, and they were, in attempts to situate their present moments within the frameworks that past representations inevitably provide. Yet often they did so while projecting into the future, a trope both Ant Farm and General Idea latched onto in relying on 1984 and 2020 as symbolic years. Yet their temporal preoccupation—anticipating, reversing, and re-framing the past and future through the present—do not quite reach the "schizophrenia" or collapse in temporal continuities that Jameson contends is a defining characteristic of postmodernism.[56] Instead the groups hover in between the two models—1960s chronophobia and later schizophrenia—betraying their fascination with time as a structuring device, as another framework that codes how we process the world around us and representations of it.

"Communities of Discourse": Collaboration, Circulation and Artistic Identity

Although in the 1970s artists were tapping into new technologies to appeal to a wider audience, as in the popularity of video projects, many individuals opted for a low-tech, seemingly retrograde means for building communities: the postal system.[57] The individuals gathered in

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[55] Lee, *Chronophobia,* especially the preface and introduction.

[56] Jameson builds on Lacan's understanding of schizophrenia as a language disorder—a breakdown in the relationship between signifiers. A sentence is the interrelationship of several signifiers that, when read together, generate a "global meaning." Because we process a sentence (a conjunction of various signifiers) in time, Jameson argues, we apprehend "a lived experience of time." However, the schizophrenic processes signifiers in isolation, in a series of perpetual presents. In this case, the signifier, rather than pointing to an external signified, turns in on itself, and reinforces its own material or literal construction. See Jameson, "Postmodernism and Consumer Society," in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture,* ed. Hal Foster (Port Townsend: Bay Press, 1983), 135–141.

[57] Several thorough sources on correspondence art exist, including Chuck Welch, ed., *Eternal Network: A Mail Art Anthology* (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 1995); Michael Crane and Mary Stofflet, eds., *Correspondence Art: Source Book for the Network of International Postal Art Activity* (San Francisco:

Hollywood to commemorate art's birthday at the DeccaDance had largely been in contact through the mail, sending letters, postcards, and other items back and forth. General Idea and Ant Farm corresponded with one another directly, and had even met up in Toronto several years before the DeccaDance.[58] At the Hollywood event, members of T.R. Uthco, who were to collaborate with Ant Farm the following year, were in attendance, as well as Megan Williams and Allan Rucker of TVTV, a video collective that also involved members from Ant Farm. Although to my knowledge no members of the group attended the DeccaDance, Asco was nonetheless plugged into the correspondence network; member Gronk is an apparent alumnus of the fictitious Fat City School of Finds Art, a position adopted by those who sent mail to Dudley Finds (better known as Lowell Darling). Gronk also corresponded with Jerry Dreva, member of Les Petites Bonbons, who were active participants in the mail art scene (the Bonbons even received an award at the DeccaDance for "best xerox art") and the two's letters were exhibited at Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions (LACE) gallery in 1978 as *Dreva/Gronk 1968–1978: Ten Years of Art/Life*.[59] Thus a Chicano group from Los Angeles (Asco), a band of nomadic artist-architects roving from California to Texas (Ant Farm), and a trio of Canadians (General Idea) found themselves connected to the same loose network of concerns, linked with one another based on shared friends and interests.

Like any elaborate stage production, the DeccaDance was a truly collaborative effort, requiring the cooperation and input of different individuals as videographers and documentarians, as publicists, as presenters, as organizers, as scriptwriters, as emcees, as performers, as awardees, as nominees, as interviewees.[60] Indeed, some 47 people are credited as the "cast" in the shooting script. Nominee Anna Banana described it as "the most incredible collaboration between artists from Toronto, Vancouver, New York, San Francisco, and Los Angeles, that I have ever

Contemporary Arts Press, 1984); and John Held, Jr., *Mail Art: An Annotated Bibliography* (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1991). See also John Held, Jr., Mail Art Periodicals 1970–2001 Archive, Museum of Modern Art Library, New York.

[58] The General Idea fonds include correspondence from the members of Ant Farm to General Idea, and photographs of some members, such as Chip Lord and Hudson Marquez. In addition, Art Metropole collected items pertaining to Ant Farm and distributed their videos; an artist file from the Art Metropole archive has postcards, notices, and even the Media Burn souvenir booklet.

[59] For more on Gronk and Dreva's relationship, see chapter 2; see also Max Benavidez, *Gronk* (Los Angeles: UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center Press, 1997), 51–60.

[60] Among those in attendance were Marcel Idea and Mr. Peanut of Image Bank (also known as Michael Morris and Vincent Trasov), A.A. Bronson and Felix Partz of General Idea, Granada Gazelle (Sharon Venn), John Jack, Irene Dogmatic, Noah Dakota, John Dowd, Marcia Herscovitz, Pascal, Ms. Rhonda, Judy D'or, David Young, Lowell Darling, Willoughby Sharp, Lady Brute, Dr. Brute, Mince Edwards, Anna Banana, Futzie Nutzle, Phil Harmonic, Clifton Martin, Dana Atchley, Opal L. Nations, the members of Les Petites BonBons, Sandy Stagg, Victor Coleman, Hank Bull, the Oinga Boinga Band, Kerry Kelowna, Megan Williams, and Chip Lord from Ant Farm. A thorough list of attendees is included in "Mondo Artie Episode no. 1681," shooting [script] final.

witnessed."[61] This spirit of collaboration pervaded what was often referred to as the "Eternal Network," Filliou's term adopted by mail artists to describe the connections they forged with others via correspondence. Artworks initiated by one individual or artists' group were often added to by others, resulting in collaborative projects that developed as they circulated through the mail. Some of these projects mimicked popular epistolary formats, such as chain letters, surveys, fan mail, personal ads, or pen pal missives.[62] The Eternal Network prized dialogue, collaboration, and "the community of discourse," values sometimes antithetical to those of the mainstream art world as participant and Fluxus West artist Ken Friedman noted.[63]

The number of individuals involved in the Eternal Network (some 920 entries were listed in the 1974 artists' directory published in *FILE* "megazine") made clear that circulation was central to the collaborative ventures these artists sought.[64] Many individuals met face to face for the first time at the DeccaDance, although they had been in contact through what they sent via the postal system and what traveled by word of mouth or through the efforts of shared friends.[65] Throughout the network, motifs, ideas, artworks, phrases, and pseudonyms circulated, accruing new significance as they were added to, modified, and taken up in different contexts. For example, the Hand of the Spirit wielded by the Corres Sponge Dancers at the DeccaDance (**figure 8**) had first been found in a rubbish bin by Vincent Trasov of Image Bank. A stylized hand-shaped wand that was subsequently made into different materials, it decorated Marcel Dot in his winning entry for the 1971 Miss General Idea Pageant (**figure 9**), and was subsequently

[61] Anna Banana, "Mail Art Canada," in *Correspondence Art*, 250. She deems the event as the "grand finale" of the "first wave" of correspondence art.

[62] For example, General Idea mailed approximately 85 questionnaires out to friends and correspondence buddies asking them to complete the confession, "If I live to be a hundred, I will never forgive myself for…." The instructions suggested that recipients cut the mailer along the dotted lines, glue the edges, and send the completed form back. General Idea received 43 responses, many annotated with rubber stamps, drawings, and collage elements (although only 21 were cut as directed). This project suggested the merging of public and private in this type of correspondence practice, with personal expressions of regret circulated as semi-public statements. In another such project, General Idea sent out hundreds of postcard "splits"—cards cut in half and recombined; they received many that were split again and assembled with new images, which they then re-circulated. The term "split" is derived from Ray Johnson's use of "spit" for similar chain mailing projects. "Dear General Idea, if I live to a hundred" and "The Great Canadian Split Project," Projects Series 1971–1973, Genera Idea fonds, box 2. See chapter 4 for more on General Idea and the origins of mail art.

[63] Ken Friedman, "Foreword: The Eternal Network," in *Eternal Network*, xvi.

[64] The entries do not necessarily refer to 920 discrete individuals, as some artists are listed by pseudonyms. For example, Victor Coleman is listed under his given name and under Vic D'Or and Felix Partz of General Idea is also included under his birth name, Ron Gabe (and entries exist for the group, their magazine, and Art Metropole.) See "Annual Artists' Directory" issue of *FILE* (February 1974).

[65] As Terry H. Anderson persuasively argues, "the movement" for social change in the 1960s and early 1970s was provisional, changing, and expansive, less a series of decisions by leaders or organizations and more a "kaleidoscope of activity," of anti-establishment and activist sentiments winding throughout the United States with which people felt loosely allied; Anderson, *The Movement and the Sixties* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

appropriated by General Idea, who integrated it into their performances (such as *Going thru the Motions* from 1975, **figure 10**) and into their various mythologies, such as the "search for the spirit" and the 1984 General Idea Pavillion (seen in their friend Sandy Stagg's modeling Hand of the Spirit make-up, **figure 11**). Both General Idea and Image Bank collected pictures and advertisements that related to the form, which established correspondences between their fetish object and others in contemporary culture (for example, the Buddha or an array of hand mannequins, **figure 12**). The imagery circulated throughout the network and others picked it up; it was incorporated into Glenn Lewis' 1974 project, *The Great Wall of 1984,* an archive of various objects received from mail artists that offer a tangible document of the correspondence art network, for which he solicited contributions at the DeccaDance (**figure 13**). Marcel Idea donned a Hand of the Spirit "talisman," a silver pendant handmade in the recognizable shape (**figure 14** and **figure 15**). In an advertisement for John Jack Baylin's *Fanzini Goes to the Movies,* the Hand of the Spirit was rendered as the "spirit of manipulation," a masturbation aid, aligning it with his fetish theme (**figure 16**).

What was a wand for the Corres Sponge Dancers, a item of jewelry for Marcel Idea, an artifact for Glenn Lewis, a sexy toy for Baylin, and a glove for General Idea was transformed by Kate Craig (one of the members of the Canadian duo Banal Beauty, Inc.) into wings for her performance, *Flying Leopard* (1974; **figure 17**), and for the prints she made to commemorate it in 1977.[66] Subsequently the "hand of the spirit" imagery has been used to frame discussions about Image Bank and General Idea in catalogues such as *Search for the Spirit,* published by Art Gallery of Ontario (1997) and *Hand of the Spirit: Documents of the Seventies from the Morris/Trasov Archive,* published by the University of British Columbia Fine Arts Gallery (1994). As it appeared in the arts of different individuals and groups, the Hand of the Spirit assumed various roles, as prop, fetish, inspiration, framing device, consumer artifact, cultural form, logo—as an icon in motion, it represents the significance of circulation to the type of art that evolved out of a networked practice.

The DeccaDance brought issues of artistic collaboration squarely into focus, even as it revealed the flourishing of individual identities possible within the network. The anonymity of the mail—one could be anyone or anything he or she wanted—allowed individuals to assume alternate identities. Even well known personalities, such as Willoughby Sharp, could play a role

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[66] As Lady Brute, one half of the duo Banal Beauty, Kate Craig, cloaked in a leopard-spot outfit adorned with Hand of the Spirit wings, flew along a cable that extended from an anchored ship to Al Neil's home near Deep Cove, Vancouver. See Luis Jacob's account in *Golden Streams: Artists' Collaboration and Exchange in the 1970s* (Mississauga, On.: Blackwood Gallery, University of Toronto at Mississauga, 2003), 43.

different from the one he ordinarily did, as the Eternal Network operated largely outside the sanctioned art world as represented by for-profit galleries, mainstream art publications, and museums.

This was expressed most saliently in the naming practices of many of the individuals and groups involved. Many adopted pseudonyms in order to reconfigure a past identity, to forge a connection with another group, legacy, or idea, or to perform different gender roles. For example, Michael Morris of Image Bank assumed the name Marcel Dot when he renounced painting for a less material, more conceptual output, ostensibly in homage to Marcel Duchamp (and the French artist's own cultivation of an alter ego, the punning and gender-bending Rrose Sélavy). After being crowned the winner of General Idea's 1971 beauty pageant, Morris assumed the portmanteau Marcel Idea, the name he used at the DeccaDance. This nom d'artiste not only suggests Dada influences and conceptual art sympathies, but also his role as a participant-collaborator in General Idea's project, and thus any reference to "Marcel Idea" necessarily invokes the other group's work, forming another mediation of General Idea's intermedial practice.

The pseudonyms also allowed for a reconceptualization of the role of the individual artist. Many individuals adopted names that implied a greater entity, and other artists actually came to forswear their individual artistic identities to produce work almost entirely under the group name. These assumed aliases often reflected a parody of corporate culture, such as General Idea, Raindance Corporation, Banal Beauty, Inc., N.E. Thing Co., Crystal Egg Productions, Gross Enterprises, Northwest Mounted Valise, Lost Lady Mining Co., Project Inc., and T.R. Uthco, to list a few. A subset of this was the reference to banks and archives, reconfiguring them as cultural repositories of sorts in titles such as Image Bank, Chicken Bank, Bum Bank, and Hoo Hoo Archives. Even as they spoofed corporate culture, these groups and individuals drew on the official-sounding nature of their names to validate their own enterprises; referring to one's collection of image files as a "bank" provides a measure of cultural significance rarely accorded to the personal archives of relatively unknown artists. Others relished in the resonances with music subculture, choosing names that sounded as if they could refer to rock stars or bands, such as the catchy names Ant Farm, Les Petites Bonbons, and Space Angel. Some sought to reinforce formative influences in their names, spawning Dadaland (also known as Daddaland), Neo-Dada Gymnasts, Dada Sawing, Free Dada Trust, New York Dadaist-Anarchist Coalition, Fluxus West, and Fluxus West in England. Revealing a reinterpretation of the idea of the artistic "school," a label similar to "movement," individuals and groups adopted names that implied others committed to the same ideals, such as the Fat City School of Finds Art, Art's Famous School of

1937, Avenue B School of Art, Ecole d'Art Infantile, New York Correspondence School, New York Correspondence School of Chicago, and New York Corres Sponge School of Vancouver. A few names tapped into the popularity of social formations, such as official supporters and clubs: Friends of the Reasonable Hand Drawn Facsimile, New Era Social Club, and John Dowd Fan Club. Whether they were artists who worked under an alternate name that implied a collective body or those who actually produced work under the auspices of a group, all of these artistic practices challenged the authority of the individual artist, a legacy of modernism that had largely been upheld in the purist forms of conceptual art; for an art form where the idea is paramount, the originator of the idea is central to the practice. The pseudonyms reveal these individuals' and groups' active re-framing of artistic identity within conceptualism to incorporate collaboration and circulation. That "best alias" was recognized at the Dadacademy Awards hints at a celebration of the outsider, even criminal, status that those involved both perceived and cultivated for themselves.

Much has been made of the hegemony of the solitary artistic genius, and much of the discussion of collectives or collaboration pits those efforts as David against Goliath with history on the latter's side. Yet as Gregory Sholette, drawing on Gilles Deleuze, contends, "'collectivity' in one form or another is virtually an ontological condition of modern life."[67] If we agree with Sholette (and Deleuze's) logic, and I do, it behooves us to move beyond the individual-versus-collective binary and instead consider how certain practices, whether enacted by individuals or groups of them, might challenge the stability of categories such as "artist," "identity," and "community," and how this deconstruction might lead to productive re-consideration of them. Michael Morris as Marcel Idea as Miss General Idea very subtly and effectively suggests the fluidity of gender roles by destabilizing the notion that a beauty pageant contestant (and winner!) must be female or if not, it must be some form of political protest, a bully pulpit from which to decry sexism, objectification, and women's rights or to voice gay rights. Morris expects the audience's appreciation of Marcel Duchamp's alter ego, Rrose Sélavy, to contribute to the constellation of influences and individuals that realize the success of "Miss General Idea 1971." Although his is an individual performance as Miss General Idea 1971, he fulfills the promise of "collectivity" set forth by Sholette, in the spectrum of positions between individual and society.

These naming practices also point to the appreciation throughout the network of puns as transformative. Participants recognized words as signs that accrued meanings via circulation, and thus through new spellings and pairings could be linked to a host of projects and practices. They

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[67] Gregory Sholette, "Counting on your Collective Silence," *Afterimage* (November/December 1999): 18. Sholette cites Deleuze, "Post-Script on the Societies of Control," *October* 59 (Winter 1992): 3–7.

were conjunctive devices, nodes that linked individuals and artworks in the era of new "connectivity." Wordplay, then, formed a central component of these artists' intermedial practices, serving as hyperlinks to different ideas and artworks.[68] The Corres Sponge Dancers, for example, hail from the New York Corres Sponge School of Vancouver, which in turn invokes Ray Johnson's New York Correspondence School, which many historians and practitioners consider the founding vehicle for mail art; their participation in the DeccaDance necessarily calls to mind some of the other participants in the event, in particular those intricately involved in planning it, such as General Idea, Image Bank, Banal Beauty Inc., Willoughby Sharp, and Lowell Darling, and those who helped document it, such as Kerry Kelowna 's film crew and Chip Lord from Ant Farm and Megan Williams from TVTV. The DeccaDance also recalls Robert Filliou (because of his declaration of the birthday of art), which of course draws Fluxus into the mix and directs attention to those influential practices by Fluxus artists that contributed to the realization of an event like the DeccaDance. The Corres Sponge Dancers' performance, referred to as "The Gold Diggers of '84," not only alludes to General Idea's eponymous 1972 mail art project (a certificate stating the inclusion of General Idea's art in various private and public collections, which were the very collections to which they had mailed the certificate, **figure 18**) and others' projects based on the Orwellian year, but also to the 1933 musical billed as "the Greatest Show on Earth," which itself was based on a Broadway play and spawned sequels in 1935 and 1937.[69] The Corres Sponge dancers performed on what they deemed "L'Escalier d'Honneur," which was also the name General Idea gave to one of the first elements they envisioned for *The 1984 Miss General Idea Pavillion*. In 1973 the group had held a photo shoot with Marcel Idea as Miss General Idea 1971 on the staircase of the Pilkington Glass Company Showroom in Toronto to generate imagery for their Pavillion.[70] The levels of connections and allusions spiral out infinitely from the single stimulus, creating a matrix of mental references that come together in different forms in the minds of individual interpreters based on their own cultural knowledge and mindsets.

The constitution of a whole constellation of references solely in the mind of a viewer introduces another concept central to these artistic practices—the need for a framing device. Because they often circulate outside the conventional arenas that frame art as art, such as the

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[68] The idea of art as a game was promoted by Fluxus artists, who produced FluxKits and FluxGames; for more on this topic, see Celia Pearce, "The Game as Art: The Aesthetics of Play," *Visible Language* 40, 1 (2006): 66–89. Pearce explains that Maciunas and other Fluxus artists appreciated the "lowly" status of games, because they offered "'ludus populi,' a play of the people that provided the perfect platform for bringing art to a mass audience" (72).

[69] "Gold Diggers of '84," Projects Series 1972–1973, General Idea fonds, box 2.

[70] "L'Escalier d'Honneur," Projects Series 1972–1973, General Idea fonds, box 2.

pedestal, the studio, the museum, and the trade journal, these groups recognized the importance of framing devices to condition the reception of their art, and thus all of them consciously take up the metaphor of the frame in their works. *General Idea's Framing Devices* (figure **137**) is emblematic of how all the groups sought framing devices and conceived of them as instrinsic to their process and to their works' structures as a whole. In *Framing Devices,* General Idea visualizes the circularity of the five concepts they identified to shape their projects and the tremendous overlap between frame and work—The 1984 Miss General Idea Pageant is both heuristic label and work in its own right. The image also suggest something of the open-ended nature of these groups' artworks—they have no end-points. Even seeming circularity or tautologies open up to create webs rather than circles, byproducts of the archival nature of the groups' projects. Thus the framing devices allow viewpoints into the works, means of accessing them, but they do not shut down the discursive sprawl that the groups' intermedia practices engender.

"Assembling": Artist-Run Initiatives

The idea of the "Eternal Network" offers a frame for much of these practices, and a handy descriptor for those, like myself, who seek to reference readily a number of individual and group practices without providing a laundry list of names and pseudonyms every time. Yet the Eternal Network by its nature fails to denote a geographic region of activity and includes an always variable and contingent list of members. To boot, it offers nothing specific about the type of art practiced within it, or whether art is practiced at all (despite Morris' assurances that "there will be plenty" of art at the DeccaDance). This recalls the claims of the critics of pluralism, who decried the situation in the 1970s when style could no longer function as a category for historicizing art, for tracing genealogies, and for validating a work's importance. Without style as a meaningful framework for the appraisal of new work, the institutions and apparatuses of the art world gain even greater significance in the making of artists' reputations. Thus, artists are elevated by their mention in prominent publications such as *Artforum,* by the display of their works in exhibitions, by their participation in interviews, by their attendance at openings and other events, and by the promotion of their work by galleries and museums.[71] Artists in the

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[71] In her dissertation, Gwen Allen traces the redefinition of the art magazine in the 1960s and 1970s, showing how it moved from a periodical that discussed and reproduced artworks to one which became a primary vehicle for the display of art to publics; Allen, "From Specific Medium to Mass Media: The Art Magazine in the 1960s and Early 1970s" (Ph.D. diss., Stanford University, 2004).

1970s—and not just those who considered themselves part of the Eternal Network—recognized the centrality of these artistic "institutions" to the production and reception of art, and thus they tackled them with a vigor not seen in previous incarnations of anti-art-establishment rhetoric.

A panoply of artist-sponsored initiatives resulted from this anti-establishment sentiment. Alternative exhibition venues, including periodicals, public spaces, artist-run centers, and unconventional distribution modes, such as the postal system and cable and broadcast television, formed some of the tools of artists who sought to critique the gallery-museum model.[72] Artists' publications and 'zines flourished in the 1970s, with some seeking to draw audiences away from established journals or to provide alternate voices to the perceived "authorities," reasons that made the magazine an important vehicle for small groups and organizations in this period.[73] For example, the periodical *Avalanche* founded by Liza Bear and Willoughby Sharp boasted artists' interviews to countermand the emphasis on critical appraisals in publications such as *Artforum.*[74] Others provided tangible representations of the network or served as clearinghouses for the display of new works or collaborations; some cropped up as a public means of display for the mail art circulating privately. Moreover, the magazine, as Michael Andre, editor of the small literary magazine *The Unmuzzled Ox,* succinctly observed, "has the aspect of a community."[75] Depending on its contributor policies, topics covered, and audiences sought, the "little magazine," as these publications were sometimes diminutively called, offered an effective model for bringing people together to share in a common vision and feel part of *something* (which explained the efflorescence of alternative periodicals catering to small subgroups, such as those interested in West Coast art, for example.)

The art magazine was thus one means of collaborating, reaching an audience, disseminating ideas or viewpoints, and building a community. *FILE,* published by General Idea, was one such forum for mail art submissions, especially from 1972 to 1974; it published an annual artists' directory with address listings for artists, groups, and organizations, and also

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[72] Lucy Lippard makes this observation, as does Benjamin Buchloh. Lippard, *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object, 1966–1972* (New York: Praeger, 1973); Buchloh, "Conceptual Art 1962–1969: From the Aesthetic of Administration to the Critique of Institutions," *October* 55 (Winter 1990): 105–143.

[73] The word 'zine derives from "fanzine," not-for-profit publications produced by individuals for readership by a generally small but interested subculture. The form originated with fans of science fiction but quickly spread to music, arts, and popular culture topics. Today the blog has assumed many of the functions the 'zine held.

[74] Gwen Allen interprets *Avalanche*'s contribution as the creation of a radical counterpublic, arguing for the interviews contained within its pages as a form of anti-criticism; Allen, "Against Criticism: The Artist Interview in Avalanche Magazine, 1970-1976," *Art Journal* (Fall 2005): 50–61. See also idem, "In on the Ground Floor: Avalanche and the Soho Art Scene," *Artforum* 44 (November 2005): 214–221, and "From Specific Medium to Mass Media."

[75] "Survey of Contemporary Art Magazines," *Studio International* 193 (September/October 1976): 183.

offered Image Bank's image request lists. *FILE* became one of the most well-known artists'
periodicals circulating throughout the network, with approximately 3,000 copies sent to
subscribers, newsstands, and libraries, and issues recycled from reader to reader. Even
publications with much smaller subscription numbers tapped into the circulation of the overall
network. The inclusion of one of Asco's "No Movies," *A la Mode,* in *VILE,* a 'zine with limited
circulation produced by Anna Banana, reveals the scope of the network, incorporating into the
fold even those not explicitly part of it (**figure 19**).[76] Among the 'zines published in the late
1960s and early 1970s were Richard Kostelanetz's *Assembling,* Ken Friedman's *New York
Correspondence School Weekly Breeder* (later produced by Stu Horn, and then Tim Mancusi and
Bill Gaglione)*,* Pat Tavenner and Lew Carson's *Mail Order Art,* Tom Hosier's *Modern
Correspondence,* Ed Varney and Henry Rappaport's *The Poem Company,* E. Deak, W. Robinson
and A. Canepa's *Art Rite,* Frank Guard's *Art Police,* Opal L. Nation's *Strange Faeces,* Anna
Banana and Bill Gaglione's *VILE,* Arthur Craven, Charles Chickadel, Bill Gaglione's *West Bay
Dadaist,* Image Bank's *International Image Exchange Directory,* and General Idea's *FILE.*[77] Of
course there were precedents for this sort of activity in Dada (the movement is playfully name-
checked in many of the linguistic puns that circulate in mail art), and, in the more recent past, in
the activities of Fluxus artists and the Nouveau Realistes in Europe, and more formally in Ray
Johnson's New York Correspondence School.

The 1970s also witnessed an increase in artist-run organizations. Julie Ault chronicled the
development of 29 in New York during the decade, while Nancy Drew lists 23 in Los Angeles.
Suzanne Foley mentions those that opened in the Bay Area in the 1970s: La Mamelle, Site, 80
Langston Street, American Can Collective Gallery (later Southern Exposure), Project Artaud, 63
Bluxome Street, The Farm, Woodworks, and Works. While the phenomenon has been
documented according to geography, an estimated 200 such spaces appear to have opened across

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[76] *VILE* 3, no. 2 (Summer 1977): 60. Anna Banana began publishing *VILE* in February 1974; although
VILE, as Banana explains, had far fewer subscribers than *FILE,* its inclusion of Asco's work suggests the
broad reaches the mail network had. Issues of *VILE* are collected in the John Held, Jr., Mail Art Periodicals
1970–2001 Archive.

[77] The mail art 'zines mentioned are those published in the early 1970s in North America. Mail art was
practiced across the globe, as evidenced by the range of international publications, such as Giorgio
Cavellini's self-titled example (Italy); Klaus Groh's *International Artists Cooperation* (Germany); Naoko
Masuda and J. Akoitashi Akitaken's *Abraxus* (Japan); G. Celant, M. Diacono, D. Palazzoli, and T. Trini's
B.T. (Italy); Bob Kerr and Terry Reid's *Canberra Telegraph* (Australia); Damaso Ogaz's *Cisorio Arte*
(Venezuela); Daniel Daligand's *Les Files de Mr. Hyde* (France); Edgardo-Antonio Vigo's *Hexa'gono*
(Argentina); Slavko Matkovic's *Kontaktor* (Yugoslavia); Nichael Gibbs' *Kontexts* (The Netherlands);
Géza Perneczky's *Numbered Books/Five Books* (Hungary); M. Rocha's *O Feto* (Brazil); Clemente Padin's
Ovum (Uruguay); Verlagsgalerie Leaman's *Reaktion* (Germany); Bartolomo Fernando's *Texto Poetico*
(Spain); Robin Crozier's *Views* (England); Group Marco's *Marco* (Mexico); and Pawel Petasz's
International Magazine of Rubberstamped Art (Poland). For an extensive list of mail art magazines
published from the 1960s through the 1990s, see *Eternal Network,* appendix 5.

the United States in the 1970s.[78] Recognizing the vagueness of the descriptor "alternative" for these spaces and programs, Drew defines them as "organizations that respond directly to the needs of artists and with a strong commitment to new expressions of art forms, paying artists fees and placing artists in key policy-making positions."[79] Many such institutions, if they could even be called that, provided alternative spaces for artists to exhibit their work, and offered artists agency in determining what was shown, where, and for how long. Some included studios in addition to public exhibition spaces; others focused on rotating shows, while some maintained collections of art work. Several of these organizations also strived for greater integration with the communities surrounding their venues, and hosted workshops and instruction for locals. Canada also made significant contributions in this area, because, as A.A Bronson (of General Idea) explained in a 1987 survey of "artist-initiated activity" in the country, "Twenty years ago as artists we had to construct not only our art but the fabric of an art scene. We had to start our own institutions, open our own galleries, publish our own magazines and develop our own networks."[80] Among the spaces that developed were, in Toronto, Art Metropole, which was founded by General Idea, A Space, YYZ, and Mercer Union; in Vancouver, Intermedia Society, Video Inn, Granville Grange, and the Western Front; in Montreal, Véhicule; in Winnipeg, Plug-In; in London, CAR; in Nova Scotia, the Centre for Art Tapes; and in Calgary, the Parachute Center for the Arts, Off Centre Centre, and EM Media.[81]

Bronson's remarks underscore the centrality of institutions to the vitality and visibility of minority artistic cultures, be they Canadian or Chicano. The emerging emphasis on community or artist-organized centers bolstered work by women and underrepresented minorities, in particular, with workshops and organizations launched to reach out to these populations. Community murals, print-making studios, and exhibition opportunities grew out of this movement, with Self-help Graphics and Womanhouse as two notable examples in California.

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[78] These artist-run spaces were part of a larger phenomenon of "alternative lifestyle groups and organizations," of which Richard Gardner documents 5000 in the United States as of 1976; Gardner, *Alternative America: A Directory of 5000 Alternative Lifestyle Groups and Organizations* (Cambridge, Mass.: s.n., 1976).

[79] Nancy Drew, "L.A.'s Space Age," in *LACE: 10 Years Documented,* exh. cat. (Los Angeles: Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions, 1988), 9. Taking a broader view than Drew in her annotated chronology, Julie Ault lists "alternative structures, spaces, artists' groups, and organizations" in New York City in the twenty years from 1965 to 1985; the 29 I refer to are those explicitly conceived of as alternative exhibition spaces or collections. Ault, ed., *Alternative Arts New York 1965-1985* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press; New York: the Drawing Center, 2002).

[80] A. A. Bronson, "From Sea to Shining Sea," in *From Sea to Shining Sea: Artist-Initiated Activity in Canada, 1939-1987,* exh. cat. (Toronto: Power Plant, 1987), 10.

[81] The growth of artist-run organizations as the creation and validation of a national art scene in Canada is discussed in chapter 4.

Although less publicized than the militant nationalist groups (such as the Young Lords and Brown Berets), these alternative initiatives played a strong role in shaping artistic subcultures.

The rise of these alternative art establishments indicates the ways in which artists were branching out from their roles as producers of artworks and were actively cultivating positions "previously assigned to other areas of the extant order."[82] James Pomeroy, writing in 1978, catalogued some of these roles: "critic, curator, historian, agent, translator, dealer, judge, advocate, performer, publisher, disseminator, advisor, editor, and promoter."[83] What Pomeroy's litany of roles suggests is a new vision for the artist in society—artists did not limit their options for what they could achieve or what roles they could adopt. In many ways they eschewed categorization altogether. This plurality of roles that artists engaged in also began to undermine the division between artists and the institutions that had traditionally supported them—galleries, museums, journals, patrons—a recognition that only galvanized support for artist-run initiatives. The expansion of the terms of artistic labor furthers the advancements of minimalist and conceptual artists, who, building on their predecessors, interrogated values of craft, hand-workmanship, and even the production of objects at all as constitutive properties of art.

The development of artist-run publications and centers contributed to the establishment of a viable alternative arts scene; these institutions supported artistic activity outside the mainstream, a loosely defined concept that referred to establishments run by individuals other than artists, or long-standing museums, galleries, and periodicals known for making (or breaking) artists' careers (the Museum of Modern Art, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and *Artforum* were popular targets of criticism.) The founding of new alternative spaces and events each year gathered momentum for the "alternative arts movement," as it has sometimes been called, and became a source of validation for the art produced within it.[84] The proliferation of alternative organizations lessened the cultural importance of the tastemakers in the mainstream and created new avenues for the circulation of ideas and artworks. If individuals in the 1960s rejected what they considered a flawed establishment ("Fuck the System," Abbie Hoffman yipped, pointing readers to free meals, booze, services, and items), in the 1970s, they changed approaches: instead

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[82] James Pomeroy, "Viewing the Museum: The Tail Wagging the Dog," in *The New Artsspace: A Summary of Alternative Visual Arts Organizations Prepared in Conjunction with a Conference April 26-29, 1978* (Los Angeles: Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Art, 1978), 13.
[83] Ibid.
[84] It has also been referred to as the "informal cooperation movement." See Alain-Martin Richard and Clive Robertson, *Performance au/in Canada, 1970–1990.* Québec: Éditions Intervention; Toronto: Coach House Press, 1991.

of fighting the system or manipulating it for your own benefit, as Hoffman suggested, why not create your own?[85]

"Kibbitzing around the Kitchen Table":
The Emergence of Communes, Collectives, and Collaborative Groups

As the reference to Hoffman suggests, these 1970s artist-initiated institutions grew out of the political aspirations of the preceding decade. "The impetus to create alternative and artist-run exhibition venues," curator Claudine Isé explains, "emerged out of a range of 1960s-era democratic movements, such as the Students for Democratic Society, whose ideas about self-determination, consensual decision making, participatory democracy, and separatism provided the founding principles on which these organizations were based."[86] In the early to mid-1960s the SNCC, SDS, and Berkeley protestors led civil rights and free speech movements to promote social reform and participatory democracy, while Timothy Leary, Ken Kesey, the Diggers, and the Grateful Dead sparked cultural and lifestyle choices, among them the oft touted sex, mysticism, and drugs, as avenues to consciousness raising.[87] The early, organized actions of political groups such as the SDS transformed, in 1968, into a groundswell of anti-establishment, anti-war, reform sensibilities among an increasingly politicized swath of the American population. Riots in Boston, Detroit, Harlem, and Washington ensued following the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr.[88] Revelations of the country's growing casualties and increasing stalemate in Vietnam further disillusioned the public; addressing his constituency, Walter Cronkite admitted, "I thought we were winning the war," confirming the gullibility of television viewers and the public at large lulled into believing in the nation's military invincibility. Student movements on various campuses initiated a questioning of the university structure as a whole, a move which lead to an increasingly radicalized youth culture that challenged American

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[85] Abbie Hoffman [pseud. George Metesky], *Fuck the System* (New York: s.n., 1967 or 1968).

[86] Claudine Isé, "Considering the Art World Alternatives: LACE and Community Formation in Los Angeles," in *The Sons and Daughters of Los: Culture and Community in L.A.,* ed. David E. James (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2003), 88.

[87] The generalized cultural dissent of the youth movement, dubbed by Theodore Roszak in 1969 as "counterculture," and the more organized political movements were often intertwined, although they also revealed separate trajectories and interests, a point sociologists Daniel A. Foss and Ralph W. Larkin make in their 1976 study, "From the 'Gates of Eden' to the 'Day of the Locust': An Analysis of the Dissident Youth Movement of the 1960s and its Heirs of the Early 1970s—the Post-Movement Groups," Theory *and Society* 3 (Spring 1976): 45–64. They periodize the 1960s into four phases of the youth movement that underscored this ebb and flow relationship between periods of "cultural intensification" and more overt political agitations.

[88] In contrast, Robert Kennedy's murder drew silence, Terry H. Anderson explains; many activists viewed Kennedy as the "last hope" (*Movement and the Sixties,* 207–208).

institutions more broadly, as historian David Chalmers has shown in his thorough overview of the "struggle for social change in the 1960s."[89] A "revolt against the establishment," as Terry H. Anderson described it, the political and social movements in the 1960s promoted alternative structures as a result of their dissent from the mainstream.[90] While artist-run organizations emerged from this 1960s desire to self-govern, the overall attitude in the 1970s had changed. The economic downturn, withdrawal from Vietnam, and election (and subsequent re-election) of Richard Nixon created an emotional exhaustion that prompted individuals to turn inward, a change of circumstances that moved Chalmers to quip that the "Age of Aquarius" had become the "Age of Narcissus."[91] Individuals in the youth movement expanded the scope of their dissidence to the politics of everyday life; many turned to activist enclaves near college campuses or established collectives with new goals to pursue individual freedoms communally.[92] The 1970s lead to a new era of single-issue politics with individuals re-grouping according to new interests and agendas: feminists, communalists, environmentalists, "embittered radicals," and proto-terrorist guerrilla groups, such as the Weathermen and, later, the Symbionese Liberation Army.

Communal living offered many individuals the opportunity to redefine their material, spiritual, intellectual, sexual, and work needs in relation to their own mores as opposed to those of the mainstream, consumerist society they rejected.[93] Asco, Ant Farm, and General Idea formed during the political and social crucible of 1969 to 1971, and some of their early practices underscore these origins. Both the members of Ant Farm and those of General Idea lived together; for Ant Farm this lasted roughly through 1972, when the group gave up their warehouse in Sausalito, holding an "Ant Farm demise party" there. The rotating cast of characters, with different priorities and views, and a preponderance "strangers dropping in to look at us" created some friction, which prompted the dissolution of the group's communal living efforts. This, however, ended only one phase of the group's productive collaboration, which corresponded to a shift in emphasis from creating environments for new "living patterns" (lifestyles) to questioning the media mechanisms that condition modern life. Like Ant Farm, General Idea began with a larger crew of members that eventually became the tight trio A.A. Bronson, Felix Partz, and Jorge

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[89] David Chalmers, *And the Crooked Places Made Straight: The Struggle for Social Change in the 1960s,* 2nd ed. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991, 1996), xvii.
[90] Anderson, *Movement and the Sixties*, preface, n.p.
[91] David Chalmers, *Crooked Places,* 78.
[92] Anderson provides a thorough and persuasive account of the "rip tides" of 1968, the reasons for a decline in the "movement" that started in Greensboro, South Carolina, in 1960, and the ensuring "crest" from 1968 to the early 1970s that gave shape to the counterculture (*Movement and the Sixties,* 183–291.) Foss and Larkin offer a slightly different account of events, depoliticizing the late 1960s actions (47–48), because they failed to adhere to a unified vision for the world that Foss and Larkin identify with the SDS-era of the movement.
[93] Foss and Larkin, "Dissident Youth Movement," 52.

Zontal, and the three mostly shared a residence until the latter two died from A.I.D.S.-related complications in 1994.[94] General Idea and Ant Farm both eventually solidified into core groupings with only a handful of members, developments that contributed to their success. For Asco, their 1970s projects revealed a more cohesive grouping of four central members than their later endeavors, which included a much larger roster in the 1980s, a move that ultimately led to the group's disbanding.

These three were among a host of artists' groups forming across North America in the 1960s and 1970s: Obasi, Afri-Cobra, Hairy Who, Non-plussed Some, Anonima, Guerrilla Art and Action Group (GAAG), Chicago Mural Group, Criss-Cross, Grand Union, MSIISM, Once Group, Pulsa, Rhino Horn, and Umbra are just some of those active in the decade. The energy radiated from these groups and the corresponding outgrowth of community exhibition spaces helped seed the collective ethos well into the 1980s, when several groups, such as Colab, Group Material, and PAD/D, rose to prominence. The availability of more affordable and portable video technology in the mid 1960s prompted the rise of media collectives, so-called "video freaks" who banded together to pool their money, resources, and growing knowledge of the new technology to offer new viewpoints and express previously unheard voices.[95] Groups like People's Video Theatre, founded by Ken Marsh and Elliot Glass, documented social protest actions and interviewed street-goers, and then invited those they taped to view these videos in their loft, enacting what they described as "video mediation." The Videofreex promoted a communalist ideal, living together and establishing a pirate television station in an upstate New York hamlet, Lanesville. The membership of these groups was often constantly evolving, as some worked together for several years and others came together for short bursts of collaboration. Videofreex member Parry Teasdale recalls the swarms of friends and strangers visiting the group at Maple Tree Farm, nestled into the Catskills; DeeDee Halleck, Ant Farm, Ben Levine and Ken Marsh

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[94] Jorge Zontal died 3 February 1994 and Felix Partz succumbed four months later on June 5. See obituaries in *The Globe and Mail* (5 February 1994, 7 June 1994) and the *Toronto Star* (5 February 1994) , as well as farewells to General Idea in the wake of Partz's and Zontal's passing in the *The Globe and Mail* (11 June 1994) and the *Montreal Gazette* (16 September 1995). The notices are telling in that abiding by the conventions of the obituary genre goes against the grain of the collective's practice, to single out someone's accomplishments. Writing the notice for *Now* magazine, Deirdre Hanna observes, "While GI don't reveal just how they divvy up their creative efforts, one suspects the trio has lost its biting edge with Zontal's passing." Hanna, "Art World Loses Jorge Zontal's Wit and Biting Irony," *Now* (Toronto), 10 February 1994.
[95] The structure of existing funding systems, particularly in New York, encouraged self-described video freaks to form groups; New York State Council of the Arts, for example, provided monies to support media training programs for members of the community, and groups were often better equipped to organize and maintain such programs. In Canada local initiatives programs were launched with the intent that they would support projects that would create jobs, which had the effect of encouraging groups like General Idea to apply.

from People's Video Theater, Lily Tomlin, Ricky Jay (a friend who still sucked his thumb), and Shirley Clarke were among the many who "contributed to the vitality of life at Maple Tree Farm. Their tapes or their work in other media, or just their kibitzing around the kitchen table, affected what we produced, supplying new ideas."[96] Teasdale's reminiscence underscores how much his group's operations were changing and spontaneous, shaped by different experiences and collaborators. Even groups with overarching or long-term projects (such as General Idea with its 1984 Pavillion) were responsive to the factors of their immediate situations, modifying, adapting, or including new elements as they went along.

Many of the video groups sought to counter what they perceived as the radical asymmetry of television—its one-way transmission from producers to receivers—and thus incorporated various forms of community involvement into their projects, whether it was the Videofreex's viewer call-in shows, Broadside TV's programming devoted to local issues, DCTV's emphasis on reporting on social injustices and their provisioning of training and equipment access for community members, and TVTV's (a sort of "super-collective") alternative coverage of major political and cultural events, such as the political nominating conventions, the Academy Awards, and the Superbowl. Such groups believed that opening up access to the tools of video production and distribution and thus offering people control of their own images would contribute to social and cultural change. Connectivity was central to this plan, and Gene Youngblood's concept of a Videosphere seemed capable of achieving it.[97] While Asco, Ant Farm, and General Idea shared this investment in connectivity, they diverged from the video groups in that they cultivated intermedial practices that incorporated video, but only as one tool of many to realize their projects.

The proliferation of artists' groups, such as Bernadette Corporation, Gelatin, Superflex, Ztohoven, hobbypopMUSEUM, and Art Club 2000, in the 1990s and this decade has compelled historians and critics to re-examine past practices, and in the past five years a number of exhibitions and conference panels have been devoted in different ways to the subject of collaboration.[98] Many recent studies focus on relational practices—art that is socially engaged,

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[96] See Parry D. Teasdale, *Videofreex: America's First Pirate TV Station and the Catskills Collective that Turned It On* (Hensonville, N.Y.: Black Dome, 1999), 115.

[97] Youngblood's concept of the "videosphere" in which media like video and television are an extension of the human senses reflects ideas popularized by thinkers such as McLuhan, Fuller, and Teilhard (*Expanded Cinema,* 260–264). For more on Pierre Teilhard de Chardin's noosphere, an interconnected global system of consciousness and information, see *The Phenomenon of Man* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1959), in particular book three, chapters 1 and 2.

[98] At the College Art Association's annual meeting in 2007 (in New York), several sessions tackled the topic of collaboration: Alexis Boylan and Elizabeth Lee chaired, "The Ties that Bind? Homosocial Collaboration in American Art," a panel that closed with a paper on General Idea's practice; the Design

participatory, or community-based. In his 2004 book *Conversation Pieces,* Grant Kester sets

relational art as a foil to present-day conditions where "we are reduced to an atomized

pseudocommunity of consumers, our sensibilities dulled by spectacle and repetition."[99] When

Alison Gingeras, in an *Artforum* article, accepts the new collectives' indifference to waging social

or political critiques as a sign of the times, Gregory Sholette responds by contrasting the groups

from the 1980s and '90s who were fervently dedicated to radical politics (a scene with which he

was admittedly involved as a founding member of PAD/D) with "the recent crop of gallery

sponsored art groupettes" which are the "product of enterprise culture."[100] The works of

hobbypopMUSEUM in particular drew Sholette's ire, especially their revision of the Baader-

Meinhof group's story, replayed as a happily-ever-after fairy tale; they seemed to him but

commercial hacks in comparison to the consciousness-raising and activist groups of the 1970s,

'80s, and '90s, like Group Material, Gran Fury, the Guerrilla Girls, Paper Tiger Television, and

the Yes Men. In *Collectivism after Modernism,* Sholette and his co-editor Blake Stimson attempt

to historicize and periodize collectivism, revealing its purchase during the high moment of

modernism as "the first real effort to develop a sustained alternative to commodified social life by

cultural means" and showing how its suppression in the Cold War as a political form only

strengthened its commitment to the "to-and-fro of cultural exchange."[101] Circulation and

exchange are central to the forms of collectivism that prevail after modernism, and part of

recognizing the limitations of the modernist project meant accepting the realities of the post-

modern present: the "collectives after modernism" all embraced the networks of mass

commodification, yet many did so in order to reroute their allure. The Dadacademy Awards

presented at the DeccaDance, for example, mimic the general format of the Oscars, a tactic which

both exposes the mechanisms by which individuals are accorded recognition in society and in the

art world, and benefits from them, in a night that validates the network as a vibrant and diverse

constellation of individuals with shared pursuits.

Studies Forum hosted "Collaboration and Participation in Design Practice and Education"; and Stephen E. Perkins organized a session, although not specifically addressing collaboration, on Artists' Periodicals 1945–1990. In addition to these topical sessions, Grant Kester presented a paper, "Collectivity and Its Discontents: Rethinking the Global and the Local in Current Art Practice."

[99] Grant H. Kester, *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 29.

[100] Gregory Sholette, "Calling Collectives [Letter to the Editor]," *Artforum* (Summer 2004): 16. Sholette writes in response to Alison M. Gingeras' article, "hobbypopMUSEUM," *Artforum* (March 2004): 174–175.

[101] Sholette and Blake Stimson, "Periodizing Collectivism," in *Collectivism After Modernism: The Art of Social Imagination after 1945* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 4, 10. Sholette and Stimson establish these periods of collectivism as a "prehistory" for understanding our current moment.

In 1997 George Lipsitz argued that although past social movements had sought out spaces free from the influence of commercial culture, this attitude was, to him, no longer feasible. He contends, drawing on David Harvey and Frederic Jameson, that "even artists from the most aggrieved communities seem inescapably drawn to the networks, circuits, and sites of cultural production generated by the new transnational economy."[102] Lispitz's understanding that contemporary artists could not and do not want to extricate themselves from the webs of post-industrial society is accurate, although this sentiment took hold much earlier than the mid-1990s period when he was writing. Indeed, it suffuses the work by collectives in the 1970s, and explains, at least in part, why they used their collaborations to establish systems for circulation and distribution. These systems and circuits they formed allowed them to participate in the changing social structure at a time when the relationships among people were readjusting as a result of new technologies and an expanding reach of shared ideas and dreams through "mass" media.

Others interested in collaboration are less invested in the product as exemplary of a "social imagination" or the result of an exchange between artist and community, as is the case of Kester, Sholette, and Stimson, but are interested in how collaboration reinforces the act of art-making as a process of discovery, something akin to a jam session. Janet Landay supports this view in *Collaborators: Artists Working Together in Houston,* and she draws on the metaphor of the rock band to explore the creative method.[103] A 1999 issue of *Afterimage* devoted to artistic collaboration explains that the various essays in it "shed light on what brings artists together to share their desires and ideas and to work to find common ground that is both accessible to each and aesthetically inspired."[104] This last qualification, the need to find "aesthetically inspired" common ground is becoming more important to critics of socially conscious collaboration, a move Claire Bishop argues for in her 2006 essay for *Artforum,* "The Social Turn: Collaboration and Its Discontents." She salutes the political efficacy of social interventions that "re-humanize" social relations from the numbing and alienating processes of late capitalism, but criticizes some of the effects this emphasis on social relations has in prompting critics to evaluate artists' success based on their working processes—what types of models of collaboration do they produce and do they ethically and equitably involve their subjects/participants?[105] Bishop calls for reconciling

[102] George Lispitz, "Facing Up to What's Killing Us: Artistic Practice and Grassroots Social Theory," in Elizabeth Long, ed. *From Sociology to Cultural Studies* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 1997), 236.
[103] Janet Landay, *Collaborators: Artists Working Together in Houston, 1969-1986,* exh. cat (Houston: The Glassell School of Art, the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, 1986).
[104] "Collaboration," *Afterimage* 27 (November/December 1999): 2.
[105] Claire Bishop, "The Social Turn: Collaboration and Its Discontents," *Artforum* (February 2006): 180. 178-183.

artists' social and collaborative investigations with their aesthetic products, and assessing them as such.

Whether focused on the artistic process or social product, many of these studies address the specific workings of collaborative practices—who contributed what, how different groups functioned, how they related to their audience/participants—more explicitly than the present one. My focus here is on the development in the 1970s of networks of artists engaged in experimental, intermedial practices that specifically engage with mass media systems, both basking in the latter's success and targeting them for criticism and scrutiny. The complex ways in which they negotiate identity, media, and consumer culture suggests a change in political climate from 1960s artistic practices, and as such their work merits attention for what it conveys about 1970s art and society more broadly.

"Contemporary avatars of kitsch"?
Re-Framing Consumption, Cultural Mechanisms, and Conceptualism

Tracing the allusions contained within these groups' projects recalls an array of interests, sources, and contexts that contributed to their overall approach. They came of age in the post-war consumerist boom, when the number of college students doubled and "white-collar" jobs were prevalent, with families driving into suburbs to settle in new homes. Technology was changing the way people lived, first with the widespread adoption of television (by 1960, 90% of American families owned a set) and also with the integration of new products such as stereo, birth control pills, antibiotics, and even nylon stockings. This new consumerism shaped the way life was experienced, and for the members of Ant Farm and Asco, informed their thoughts on American culture (even the Canadians of General Idea proved to be enamored with their Southern neighbor's trends). 1950s America, when these artists were children, was full of *things,* and the groups surrounded themselves with the glam and the guts of consumer culture—shiny new purchases and cast-off detritus. They drew on this shared cultural consciousness as a point of connection with others of their generation and older. In his book *Automerica* Chip Lord reminisced about landmark moments in his life by way of the car he was driving at the time, demonstrating how inextricable car culture was from his own personal memories; Gronk from Asco registered his appreciation for Hollywood B-movies, such as *Devil Girls from Mars,* and General Idea invoked the projections for the future represented at the World's Fairs, a fascination that also hooked Ant Farm. Indeed, all of the groups relished in staged rituals, such as beauty

pageants, world expositions, and awards shows.[106] The collective consciousness they tapped into was what General Idea called the "subliminal," an idea borrowed from the Beat writer William Burroughs.

Cultural observer Tom Wolfe captured this American land-of-plenty in his overflowing descriptions, choc-a-bloc with references, from "Paper-mates, Pentels, Scriptos, Eberhard Faber Mongol 482's, Dri-Marks, Bic PM-29's" and "revolvers, ice picks, fish knives, switchblades, hatchets, blackjacks, gravity knives, straight razors, hand grenades, blow guns, bazookas, Molotov cocktails, tank rippers" to

> hot dogs, tacos, Whammies, Frostees, Fudgsicles, french fries, Eskimo Pies, Awful-Awfuls, Sugar-Daddies, Sugar-Mommies, Sugar-Babies, chocolate-covered frozen bananas, malted milks, Yoo-Hoos, berry pies, bubble gums, cotton candy, Space Food sticks, Frescas, Baskin-Robbins boysenberry-cheesecake ice-cream cones, Milky Ways, M&Ms, Tootsie Pops, Slurpees, Drumsticks, jelly doughnuts, taffy apples, buttered Karamel Korn, root-beer floats, Hi-C punches, large Cokes, 7-Ups, Three Musketeer bars, frozen Kool-Aids.[107]

Wolfe's tongue-twisting lists remind of us of not only of the profusion of products that surrounded consumers in the post-war boom, but also the litany of brand names marketed. The presence of consumer branding recalls the naming practices of artists' groups and individuals, which was perhaps for them a way to assert their artistic or performed identities using a means proven in the consumer world.

As Lizabeth Cohen has shown in *A Consumer's Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America,* there were down sides to this cornucopia, among them a privatization of once public spaces, planned obsolescence of items to encourage new purchases, the segmentation of the population into target markets, overspending on newly acquired credit accounts, and the introduction of pesticides, preservatives, and questionable "miracle drugs."[108] New fenders bent, jewelry tarnished, ice cream melted, and even nylon pantyhose got runs. Of

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[106] General Idea's pageant is discussed in chapter 4. Gronk from Asco staged the "Miss Gallery Pageant" as a critique of conformity in the art world. He explains,

> I felt that the art scene was like a beauty pageant, since both were obsolete. I had people wearing banners representing different art galleries such as LAICA, ARCO, Otis, competing for the title of Miss Gallery 1978. One of the contestants competed in the nude after hammering his clothes into the wall. Another in the talent category sang "Going to the Chapel," wearing a plunging neckline wedding dress. *Melody Maker* loved the two shows but the mainstream gallery scene snubbed me with their pugged noses.

Gronk interviewed by Harry Gamboa, Jr., in "Gronk: Off-the-Wall Artist," *Neworld,* no. 4 (1980): 35.
[107] Tom Wolfe, *Radical Chic & Mau-Mauing the Flak Catchers* (New York: Bantam Books, 1971), 118, 131, 175.
[108] Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumer's Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (New York: Vintage Books, 2003).

course this overabundance of consumer items provided great fodder for Pop artists, and Wolfe's descriptions could even be inventories of those artists' works (Wayne Thiebaud's *Five Hot Dogs* [1961], Claes Oldenburg's *Soft Fur Good Humors* [1963], Roy Lichtenstein's *Pistol* [1964], and Robert Arneson's *Hydrox* [1966], to provide a sampling of the Pop artists' offerings).

Whereas Pop artists reproduced the commodities of American mass culture and the images of these in circulation in the traditional printed media—newspapers and magazines—and some even drew on the slick and impersonal style of advertising to do so (such as Warhol's *Before and After* from 1960), the artists' groups of the late 1960s and 1970s sought to reproduce the underlying means by which this culture was disseminated, in order to expose them and channel some of their allure for their own works. This represents a shift from Pop's emphasis on the *image* to conceptual artists' engagement in the 1970s with cultural *mechanisms*. One way General Idea did so was through the advertising-101 technique, branding, by labeling many of their various projects and products in some variation of "Miss 1984" or "General Idea": to wit, the Miss General Idea Gown, Bra, Wig, Trophy, and Shoe; The 1984 Spirit of Miss General Idea Vehicle; and the Hoarding of the 1984 Miss General Idea Pavillion. They realized that product branding generated desire, and that desire was at the center of consumption. Ant Farm, too realized this when they partially buried ten Cadillacs, fins up, in the Amarillo desert, demonstrating General Motors' philosophy of planned obsolescence, best expressed by the company's head stylist, Harvey Earl, in 1955: "In 1934 the average car ownership span was 5 years; now it is 2 years. When it is 1 year, we will have a perfect score."[109]

These groups' active involvement with commodity culture seems to distance them from their conceptualist contemporaries. Yet this distinction may be more in name than in kind. Rosalind Krauss describes conceptualism as "the contemporary avatar of kitsch," and maybe some of it is.[110] It mimics the forms and processes of mass cultural consumption as an end in itself, and thus what Krauss and Benjamin Buchloh elsewhere characterize as a tautology is really that the forms point back to themselves and back to the forms and processes of mass cultural consumption. In a pure conceptualist mode, this becomes a means for shutting down inquiry, as in Joseph Kosuth's analytic propositions. Yet the artists' groups accept this circular process as inevitable and harness it as a generative force, to go forth and multiply. They produce questions, beginnings, possibilities—they put their ideas into circulation, drawing other artists and groups

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[109] Harvey Earl from *Industrial Design* (October 1955), from the exhibition brochure, "Packaging the New: Design and the American Consumer, 1925–1975" Cooper-Hewitt national Museum of Design, 8 February—14 August 1994, quoted in Cohen, *Consumer's Republic,* 294. Earl's remarks betray his own self-interest: whether or not car buyers were cycling over their vehicle models that quickly, it was his job to make them want to do so.

[110] Krauss, "Two Moments from the Post-Medium Condition," 58.

into the mix, and using their model of connectivity to disrupt the insularity of more academic or philosophical conceptualism. In practice, they turned conceptualism into a material and social practice, while still retaining some of its underlying tenets: the questioning of the status of art in a process where the conception, not the execution, is primary.

For after all, in many ways, this dissertation is a story about conceptualism and its others. It is about "dirty" conceptualists who produced "stuff," lots of stuff. Some are quite beautiful, as in the drawings by Doug Michels that reveal the artist's eye and the architect's hand, others repurposed consumer items, such as the 1950s ceramic mermaid used as General Idea's pageant trophy, and others ragtag, as in the cut-and-pasted Xeroxed sheets that formed some of Asco's No Movies. And they produced stuff that had a life in circulation, not unlike a raucous version of Mad Libs, played with changing participants, across several years and locations. And they produced dreams, big dreams such as a viable Chicano cinema that would rival Hollywood glamour, or a dolphin embassy, a site for porpoises and humans to learn from one another. As post-modern as their methods of appropriation, pastiche, and parody were, their claims were big, messy, idealist, modernist claims.[111]

"The avant-garde is obsolete":
Reframing Paradigms in between Modern and Post-Modern

The Eternal Network offers a timely reconceptualization of the avant garde. For Filliou, the eternal network model replaces that of the historic avant garde, which was a position he thought untenable in 1960s society. Holding fast to the origins of "avant garde" as the forward branch of the military, seeking out information to report back to the ranks, the Fluxus elder explains,

> That is to say, I would propose that there is not one single artist nowadays who knows all the advanced research in art that goes on, and if this is true, I propose that the concept of the avant-garde is obsolete. That you cannot know who is in front, if you don't have all the knowledge of what goes on.[112]

The art scene of the 1950s and 1960s in Europe and America witnessed a revival of tactics similar to those deployed by the Futurists, Constructivists and Dadaists in the first decades of the twentieth century. The manifesto returned, performances were staged, anti-bourgeois sentiment

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[111] A dream Doug Michels gave his life for, as he plunged to his death scouting locations for the Dolphin Embassy—how modernist is that?

[112] Robert Filliou, "July 1973," in Peggy Gale, ed. *Artists Talk 1969–1977* (Halifax: Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 2004), 255.

abounded, and ironic play and hi-jinks resulted: in short, a re-birth of what the German literary historian Peter Bürger has termed the "historical avant gardes."[113] Art historian Benjamin Buchloh describes the emergence of the neo-avant garde as the result of artists starting the process of rediscovering the post-Cubist legacies of Dada and Constructivism in the 1950s and adopting several key avant garde paradigms: grid formation and monochrome painting, the readymade, and collage and assemblage.[114] Some critics, such as Bürger, have denounced the neo-avant garde as a repetitive, derivative reprise of the earlier, "authentic" vanguardist activity; others, like Hal Foster, have tried to grapple with the historical, artistic, and social reasons for the rise in avant garde activity in the 1950s and 1960s.[115] Whatever side one falls on in this debate, its legacy serves to overturn the Greenbergian orthodoxy that had established a teleology of modernism. Beginning with Alfred H. Barr's 1936 chart illustrating the development of the two strains of modern art, non-geometrical and geometrical abstract art, a theory of modernism that progressively tended towards abstraction was then cemented in Clement Greenberg's "Avant Garde and Kitsch" in 1939 and "Towards a Newer Laöcoon" the following year, where in each essay Greenberg stakes his claim for an avant garde production that is markedly separate from commercial culture and everyday life. By the 1970s, Cubism, Futurism, Dada, and Surrealism were becoming enveloped within the canon, and modernism had largely become part of the past, "the province of historians and curators engaged in the classification and preservation of artifacts" in shrines like the Museum of Modern Art.[116]

In "Modernism, Postmodernism, and Steam," eminent art historian T.J. Clark bristles at how modernism has been shallowly characterized in order to set a straw man precedent from which to break.   He asks, "The question to put to the art of the present, then, is what does that art appear to see as the beliefs in the culture of our own moment that are similarly structural, similarly the core of our present ideology; and how does art envisage putting those beliefs to the test?"[117] For Clark, these beliefs must take a specifically visual form, and he questions whether in much of the art considered "post-modern" this is legitimately the case. Clark's question, although revealing his career-long support of modernism, truly grapples with what distinguishes what others have set forth as two distinct categories of art—the modern and the post-modern—from

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[113] Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant Garde,* trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984). It was published in German in 1974.
[114] Benjamin Buchloh, *Neo-Avant Garde and Culture Industry: Essays on European and American Art from 1955 to 1975* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2000).
[115] Hal Foster, "Who's Afraid of the Neo Avant Garde," in *The Return of the Real: The Avant Garde at the End of the Century* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1996).
[116] Harold Rosenberg, "The Old Age of Modernism," *Art on the Edge* (New York: Macmillan, 1975), 287.
[117] T.J. Clark, "Modernism, Post-modernism, and Steam," *October* 100 (Spring 2002): 173.

one another, and in doing so, addresses concerns about medium in a way that Krauss in her affirmation of "technical support" as a productive category, evades.

To take up Clark's query with respect to these groups in the 1970s is to wonder, what were the structuring concerns about society that are expressed in their work? The intermedial practices of these groups reveal their beliefs in knowledge as a collection, as a networked field. Their participation in this networked collectivity anticipates more recent developments such as the World Wide Web, hyperlinks, and social networking sites. In this respect they seize on the processes that connect individuals to one another within a large and decentralized global society, and this they share with their partners in the Eternal Network. Clark still considers form to be an exploration of knowing, as the core belief, the structure—a means of making sense of or rebuilding the world; for the intermedial artists they match the in-betweenness of their era with a commensurate in-betweenness in form, placing different mediums in relation to one another and in relation to the mass media more broadly. Their "formal" preoccupation is dealing with, tapping into, and drawing attention to the profusion of information and connectivity of the era.

The difficulty in placing the heterogeneous art of the decade into established histories led critics and historians to the catch-all ism, "pluralism," a category that did nothing to come to terms with the hybridity of the art of the period. As a result the designator "1970s art" as a hermeneutic category that might call up for a reader certain shared concerns or practices is largely meaningless, a hollow descriptor that lacks the implication that "1960s art" carries. It seems almost as if the sprawling years often included in the "1960s" have, as a moment of cultural import, threatened to swallow the following decade, spitting out the final years, around 1977; this remainder is eventually tacked on as a prequel to the 1980s.[118] Some of the desire for periodization into decades is admittedly arbitrary, as Stanley Kutler astutely observed ("we calibrate our recent history by decades").[119] Yet the 1970s, in particular the period from 1973 to 1978, boasts an artistic identity separate from its momentous beginnings or its eventual endings. Indeed, the intermedial, networked practices of the 1970s speak to the position of the decade as in-between two significant cultural epochs, the social and cultural unrest of the 1960s and the

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[118] See, for example, Thomas Crow, *The Rise of the Sixties: American and European Art in the Era of Dissent* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1996); Lee, *Chronophobia*; Gerald Howard, ed., *The Sixties: Art, Politics, and Media of our Most Explosive Decade* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1982; rpt. New York: Paragon House, 1991); James Leggio and Susan Weiley, eds., *American Art of the Sixties,* exh. cat. (New York: Museum of Modern Art, distributed by Abrams, 1991); Chris Stephens and Katherine Stout, eds., *Art & the 60s: This Was Tomorrow,* exh. cat. (London: Tate, 2004); Christopher Grunenberg and Jonathan Harris, eds., *Summer of Love: Psychedelic Art, Social Crisis, and Counterculture in the 1960s* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2005); and Robert Hewison, *Too Much: Art and Society in the Sixties, 1960–1975* (London: Methuen, 1986).
[119] Stanley Kutler, "Editor's Foreword," in Chalmers, *And the Crooked Places Made Straight*, xi.

seeming retrogression of the 1980s. This very in-betweenness is dramatized in the works of the artists' groups in this study, in the ambivalence they cultivate and their lack of an overt political agenda even within their disruptions and interventions.

This position approximates what philosopher Jacques Ranciére's has described as the "the dream of an art that would transmit meanings in the form of a rupture with the very logic of meaningful situations."[120] Ranciére's vision of artistic politics illuminates the distinction between these artists' groups and their activist contemporaries, who often produced "meaningful spectacle[s] that would lead to an 'awareness' of the state of the world," or in simpler terms, consciousness-raising activities.[121] Asco, Ant Farm, and General Idea are in constant negotiation of unbalanced pairs, of material and conceptual forms, of the adoption and exposure of the mechanisms of consumer culture, of the play between art, non-art, and life, such that uncovering the precise meanings of their works, like some DaVinci decoder, is counterproductive. Instead, these groups' practices require a seismologist's approach of searching for resonances and reverberations to detect how they weave and suspend a matrix of ideas and provisional interpretations across their entire oeuvre, involving a network of people and institutions. Realizing that these multiple and provisional framings constitute the politics of these groups' practices, I offer the case studies that follow as the first steps towards such an undertaking.

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[120] Jacques Ranciére, "The Janus-face of Politicized-Art: Jacques Ranciére in Interview with Gabriel Rockhill," in *The Politics of Aesthetics,* trans. Gabriel Rockhill (London: Continuum, 2004), 63.
[121] Ibid.

Chapter 2
Asco's Cinearte

A decumbent figure, likely dead, lies crossways in the center of a city road (**figure 20**). Amber flares pierce the dusky evening sky, illuminating the body and blocking circulation along the street. The flares, barricading the street at regular intervals, serve as metonyms for police presence, for no officers are visible. A couple of bystanders pause in the distance, but even their appearance fails to shatter the eerie stillness that characterizes the scene. This photograph presents more questions than answers about who the figure is, why he is prone, where the police are, whether a crime has even been committed, why it is so *still*….

KHJ-TV, a Los Angeles television station, evidently accepted the photograph as a candid document of violence in the *barrios* of East Los Angeles, allegedly broadcasting the picture in 1975 in a news report on gang warfare.[1] Asco, the Chicano artists' group responsible for the picture, later contextualized the photo with an oral narrative, as recounted by member Harry Gamboa, Jr.: "I went on TV and I showed it as being a member of a gang that had been killed…," a plausible account, one credible enough to have been reportedly picked up by news media.

The exact circumstances of the broadcast are unknown; the only original accounts of the incident are those by Asco's members.[2] According to them, the scene and the accompanying story were actually faked, as the work's title, *Decoy Gang War Victim,* attests. The titular decoy was intended to be a stand-in for any nameless, faceless victim of gang violence—an apparent ruse to convince rival gangs that retribution had been meted for past injustices. Yet, if we are to believe the group, the decoy also duped the news media.

This story, that the photograph was distributed to various television stations and aired in a 1975 broadcast on KHJ-TV Los Angeles, was circulated by the members of Asco orally and in print, and has been repeated subsequently by art historians and journalists, among them C. Ondine Chavoya, S. Zaneta Kosiba-Vargas, and Chon A. Noriega. Because *Decoy Gang War*

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[1] For an account of the story's broadcast by one of the group's members, see Harry Gamboa, Jr., "In the City of Angels, Chameleons, and Phantoms: Asco, a Case Study of Chicano Art in Urban Tones (or Asco was a Four-Member Word)," in *Chicano Art: Resistance and Affirmation* (Los Angeles: Wight Art Gallery, University of California, 1991), 127.

[2] Gamboa is quoted in S. Zaneta Kosiba-Vargas, "Harry Gamboa and Asco: The Emergence and Development of a Chicano Art Group, 1971-1987" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Michigan, 1988), 171.

Victim is largely constituted through Asco's presentations of it—in photographs, in interviews, in writings by Asco member Harry Gamboa, Jr., and in statements on television and video—to the extent that these presentations or representations are now an integral part of the work. These accounts have the status that they do because it is assumed that they are, at least in part, credible and not pure fictions. That the story was repeated subsequently by scholars testifies to the discursive intermediality of the work, that it continued to be reframed in each re-telling of the story.

The photograph in question was one intervention into what Asco (Spanish for "nausea") perceived as an ongoing battle for the control of the representation of Mexican Americans in the mass media. The group's prank relied on the media's salacious taste for tales of brown-skinned youths duking it out in the *barrio*, which was played out in Channel 9's airing of the story. Asco's choice of mock-executing a gang member not only titillated the local news channel, but also revealed the group's belief that the Chicano "community," a term flaunted in Chicano movement rhetoric as a signifier of unity, was itself fractured and a site of continuous contestation. Faced with a battle on two fronts, within their own streets and the representations of them in the media, Asco marshaled their own arms, the No Movie.

Coined by group member Gronk, its title alone affirms that it is, quite literally, *not* a movie; it is, rather, the negation of a movie. No Movies were 35mm photographs taken of performances as if they were film stills from movies. Often stamped in red "Chicano cinema" and sometimes with the identifier "No Movie," these photographs suggested the presence of a viable Chicano film industry. No Movies offer their creators a viewpoint from which they had been traditionally excluded, as young, poorly educated, self-described Chicanos in East Los Angeles. Short on cash, resources, and connections, Asco invented the No Movie as an entrée into the cinematic realm without the overhead of producing an actual film. A clever move, it allowed them the purchase on society that film offered, and also enabled them to participate, albeit in trace form, in the nascent Chicano film industry. Indeed, Asco's No Movies provided a creative means of sidestepping the chicken-and-egg conundrum of Chicano cinema: with limited access to resources, training, and distribution, how would Chicano cinema get off the ground? Without a formally established Chicano cinema, how would aspiring filmmakers gain entry or place themselves within it? Bearing their "Chicano Cinema" stamp, the photographs circulated as No Movies immediately became text-producing phenomena that pointed to the existence of Chicano cinema that had yet to be codified as such. [3]

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[3] As Chon A. Noriega astutely observes, while this form of ethnic-based cinema was a productive and necessary form for establishing a critical discourse and set of practices, it also proved to be a limiting force,

The group's 1976 No Movie, *Chicano Cinema* (**figure 21**), presents just such a double-bind of a cinema predicated on ethnic identity.[4] In this photograph, Harry Gamboa slumps in the corner of a seedy hotel room with a gunshot wound to chest, one hand in his unbuttoned fly and the other grasping either the nozzle of a gas fixture or a weapon of some sort. Scrawled in blood on paper tacked to the wall above him are the words "Chicano Cimema," a trail of blood sinking from the final vowel. This revolutionary's gesture suggests different forms of social protest: nascent Chicano cinema and more prevalent Chicano expressions such as murals and graffiti. This No Movie, as Chon Noriega observes, brings these issues to the forefront: "Still, for the noncommercial and ethnic-identified filmmaker, the message worth dying for amounts to no more than the naming of a new genre: Chicano cinema."[5] The No Movie *Chicano Cinema* stages a scene of contrasting forces: violence paired with passivity, masculinity impaired by impotence, and fleeting traces commemorated by lasting photographs.

Chicano Cinema and *Decoy Gang War Victim* broach the question of access—what resources did aspiring Chicano artists have? What venues were there for training, production, and circulation?—and the archive, questions that also shaped the work of other groups in this study, but not to the same extent as they did for Asco. Coded into the No Movie itself was a reckoning with the lack of access for Chicano filmmakers and artists, and an acknowledgment with their very first No Movies, *Walking Mural* and *Instant Mural,* that the cultural politics that brought attention to Chicanos also put them in a codified box. "We were going to make art about what we were living at the time, about our dreams," Patssi Valdez asserted, resisting categorization. "We were not going to stay in a little box."[6] Asco's members reveal a similar self-consciousness about their work and its place in history as other groups in this study, and yet because of their chosen interventions, often ephemeral, sometimes oral and performative, fewer archival traces remain. In his history of Chicano film, Chon Noriega asserts that the "No Movie served as a pointed reminder that Chicano cinema had perhaps foregrounded the politics of access and revolution at

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keeping Chicanos within their predefined and separate category. The "catch-22 of such a project," Noriega argues, is that "it is necessary to posit subnational histories in order to locate texts and thereby incite discourse; but at the same time, any specific text will necessarily exceed the history within which it then circulates and is more or less contained." Noriega, *Shot in America: Television, the State, and the Rise of Chicano Cinema* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 20.

[4] According to Noriega, the scene was staged and photographed in 1976, and was published in 1983 as part of a conference and exhibition on the U.S.-Mexico border at the Center for Third World Economic and Social Studies in Mexico City; *Shot in America,* 198.

[5] Noriega, *Shot in America*, 198.

[6] Valdez in *Asco Is Spanish for Nausea*, a television program broadcast by K-RLN, San Antonio, Texas, in 1994 and included on the video compilation *Performance Documentation, Video Art (Agent Ex), and Television Interviews,* n.d.

the expense of the make-do aesthetics and local orientation of the Chicano movement."[7] No Movies seize on just such an improvisional and survivalist aesthetics—a *rasquache* sensibility—and fuse a sense of their own local, lived experience with broader concerns about media in an increasingly multi-cultural society.

Asco's No Movies took many forms. Some early performances, such as *Stations of the Cross, Instant Mural,* and *Walking Mural* can be retroactively considered No Movies, as the form, like General Idea's all-encompassing Pavillion, serves as an overall frame for the group's approach and practice. Others such as *A la Mode* (1977)*, Vogue* (1978)*, Waiting for Tickets* (1978)*, La Dolce* (1978)*,* and *Search, No Seizure* (1977) reinterpret Hollywood glamour from the perspective of stylish East Los Angeleno outsiders. Some works are captured on video or super-8 film, such as *Slasher #9* (1978)*, Instant Mural, Suffercation* (1974), *Sr. Tereshkova* (1974), and *First Supper* (*after a Riot*) (1974)*,* leaving traces of performances in different registers. The Young Boy in the '50s and Autologueseries emphasize the significant graphic components of No Movies—these were collages drawing on pen, paper, line drawings, photographs, type, and rubber stamps, some, as in *No Slapstick* (1977)*,* parody news reports, whereas others, such as *Artopsy* (1977), satirically adopt the rhetoric of an official report. *Día de los Muertos* (1974 and 1977), staged on All Saints Day and revisited in a fictional essay drafted by Harry Gamboa and in accompanying works on paper, bring together both the performative, textual, and the graphic in new Chicano ritual observations. In some cases more information exists than in others about how the works were made, where they were exhibited or published, what audience reactions to them were, and what the group themselves thought about them, and thus the availability of such documentation (or lack thereof) informs the art discussed here. Yet taken altogether, as a portrait of the group's No Movies from the 1970s, they collectively reveal the members of Asco to be collaborating with and across different media to draw attention to provisional and experimental Chicano lifestyle politics and artforms.

More than a gambit to initiate a discursive space of Chicano cinema, No Movies were a significant formal invention. They initiated a dialogue between conceptual art notions of the dematerialized art object and socially invested art forms, and they did so by drawing on cinema as a particularly fraught social and formal category. It is in this way that Asco distinguished their evocation of the film still from that of Cindy Sherman, who used the iconic nature of cinematic images and the way they assumed a certain form that had purchase in our collective memories,

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[7] Ibid.*,* 200. Noriega acknowledges that José Montoya of the Royal Chicano Air Force made these same points at the First Annual Chicano Film Series, Stanford University, held from 10–12 January 1979, and published in Montoya, "Thoughts on la Cultura: The Media, Con Safos, and Survival," *Caracol* 5, no. 9 (May 1979): 6–8, 19.

for her work's effect. In contrast, Asco relied not on the iconicity of images but on the pervasiveness of the *cinematic mode,* of cinema as our means of interpreting our experiences and the world around us. When Gamboa claimed that a No Movie "is perceiving life within a cinematographic context," he suggested that the form offers a means of seeing the world *as if* it were a movie. [8] Approximating what film critic Sheldon Renan means by "expanded cinema," a No Movie is a "spirit of inquiry" in the filmic mode.[9] At the time of his writing in 1966, cinema had become so expanded, says Renan, that it had reached "the point at which the effect of film may be produced without the use of film at all."[10] In stretching the boundaries of a particular medium, in this case cinema, Asco reconsiders medium as a *process* and *outlook* rather than as a material condition. In their No Movies, Asco assumes a cinematic frame without a camera, and renders questions about the material facts of medium as irrelevant to artistic practice as celluloid was to the production of their own movies. Their emphasis on process was in keeping with prevailing aesthetic trends of conceptual, mixed-media, performance, site-specific, installation, video, and mail art, yet Asco was deeply invested in the relationship between content and formal experimentation. Their practice went beyond interrogating the boundaries of a given medium to examining its social ramifications, an interest that coincided with Fluxus artist Dick Higgins' inquiry about the applications of what he called the new "intermedia" practices: "having discovered the intermedia…the central problem is now not only the new formal one of learning to use them, but the new and more social one of what to use them for?"[11]

        This question of the social effects of their actions mattered to Asco, milk-fed as they were on Chicano movement rhetoric and the promises of social change the 1960s heralded. This marks an important point of distinction between Asco and the conceptual artists active on the East coast, who were mostly taken with investigating art world systems and processes.[12] As American citizens of Mexican descent coming of age in 1950s and '60s Los Angeles, witness to and participants in the high school student boycotts, war protests, and increasing politicization of the

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[8] Gamboa in Gronk and Harry Gamboa, Jr., "Interview: Gronk and Gamboa," *Chisemarte* 1 (Fall 1976): 31. This was later published as "The No-Movie Interview," in *Jump Cut* 39 (1994): 91.

[9] Sheldon Renon, *An Introduction to the American Underground Film* (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1967), especially chapter 6; see also Gene Youngblood, *Expanded Cinema* (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1970). Examples of expanded cinema include cinema-combines, mixed media efforts involving varying components such as performance, video, dance, light shows, or painting.

[10] Renon, *American Underground Film*, 227.

[11] Dick Higgins, "Statement on Intermedia," in Wolf Vostell, ed. *Dé-coll/age (Décollage)* 6 (Frankfurt: Typos Verlag; New York: Something Else Press, 1967), n.p.

[12] Lucy Lippard acknowledges the limitations of the conceptualists: "However rebellious the escape attempts, most of the work remained art-referential, and neither economic nor esthetic ties to the art world were fully severed (though at times we liked to think they were hanging by a thread)"; Lippard, "Escape Attempts," in *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972* (New York: Praeger, 1973), xvi.

Chicano population, the members of Asco—Harry Gamboa, Jr., Gronk, Willie Hérron, and Patssi Valdez—turned increasingly to wielding their art as a weapon.[13] "The film industry and American television," in Gamboa's estimation, "have repeatedly made attempts to assassinate the image of Chicanos with cinematographic weapons."[14] Chicano activists had responded to this barrage in different ways, with media advocacy groups attempting to fight the system from within and artists claiming neighborhood spaces to offer their own counter-imagery. Asco, dissatisfied with such restricted options, envisioned a new model that would allow them to move across boundaries and to shift their frames of reference between the limited positions of insiders and outsiders. This model was the No Movie.

Taking their No Movies as their own retaliatory weapons against the cinematographic ones they decried raises a different form of political art than that of Ant Farm or General Idea. Asco staked out new means of cultural politics within the frame of the highly politicized Chicano movement and the art forms that had supported and publicized it. They tackled not just the politics of art, the politics of the object, and the politics of identity—challenges Ant Farm and General Idea also waged with varying degrees of commitment—but also the politics of everyday life. Gamboa explained how the group's approach centered on showing individuals that, even with limited resources, they could take control of their lives:

> The concepts we were trying to pass on to people dealt with political themes, however, using other non-blatant images, which essentially would capture peoples' ideas, in the sense of passing on ideas that would give people the idea that they could change things in their <u>own</u> <u>lives</u> and not have to be dependent on a lot of cash, or a lot of education, really, to do a lot of things with their own life. And that they weren't just helpless victims in their environment. And that in itself was political, in the sense that many people, where <u>we</u> come from, are essentially taught that they have no control over their own lives; that they should adopt a ready-made package for cultural death.[15]

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[13] These four were the founding members of the group, and were active primarily as a foursome, with the occasional participation of Humberto Sandoval, Marisela Norte, and Roberto Gil de Montes in the 1970s. In the 1980s, the group expanded to include other, often rotating, members, while some of the original principals, such as Hérron, pursued other projects more actively.

[14] Gamboa quoted in Fernando Martínez, "Artes Visuales," *La Republica* (Panama), 22 October 1978, article clipping from box 3, folder 6, M753 Harry Gamboa, Jr., Papers, Department of Special Collections, Stanford University, hereafter referred to as Gamboa papers [translation mine]. Original quotation is "La industria del cine y la televisión Estadounidense repetidamente ha hecho intentos de asesinar la imagen del Chicano con armas cinematográficas."

[15] Harry Gamboa in Philip and Amy Brookman, interview with Asco, in CALIFAS: Chicano Art and Culture in California, volume 3, uncorrected transcript from #82–85, taped 21 May 1983, Santa Cruz, transcription by Philip and Amy Brookman, pages 1–2, California Ethnic and Multicultural Archives (CEMA), University of California Santa Barbara.

Instead of falling victim to the "ready-made package for cultural death," young Chicanos, Los Angelenos, the urban poor, whoever felt a connection with their message, could reimagine their lives as different, by re-fashioning existing images, by creating new ones—even if only they only did so mentally or in trace forms.

In their attempts to reach beyond the limited purview of the art world, Asco seized and expanded movies as the productive category with which to intervene in the world around them, because movies "capture the *mentalité* of society," as architectural and film historian Nezar Alsayyad and others have suggested. For Asco, as for Renan and AlSayyad, film provides an epistemological system.[16] No Movies dramatize the way in which everyday life is always already mediated and provide a productive category to acknowledge this condition of mediation that had saturated American life by the 1970s, what they considered the "ready-made package for cultural death." The issue of the pervasiveness of the mass consumer attitudes and the way images shaped the public imagination also interested other collectives in the 1970s, as with Image Bank's image request lists, Ant Farm's reframing of iconic American memories, and General Idea's parrotting of both hetero- and homosexual fancies of glamour. Asco, like all of these groups, chose a format that would expose the often assumed and unuttered dreams, desires, and thoughts that inhere in images and in our ideas about the stories they unleash.

A No Movie, then, is a perspective, more so than a tangible object or work—a framing device. Movies had long held the privileged position of creating and reproducing the hopes, dreams, and experiences of an American public, yet in the 1970s media activists and fed-up citizens argued that they failed to reproduce accurately the Chicano experience. For that, muralism reigned as the most visible, and to many, the most important cultural example of the Chicano movement, touted for its ability to address the Chicano "community" in a way that mainstream movies and media did not. Murals were local, site-specific, and static; movies were national, widely circulating, and dynamic. Both media in practice, however, fell prey to the same problems of narrowcasting and typing. Both forms were seen to speak to (and in many cases, for) a larger community, and both, in Asco's eyes, were limited by this very interpolation. In response, Asco inserted their No Movies as a pointed counter model to the prevalence of murals and movies as the media of choice for the representation of the Chicano and American experiences, respectively.

Although critical reception of Asco's work has been limited to studies of Chicano and California art, their practice shares characteristics with other artists and groups across North

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[16] Nezar AlSayyad, *Cinematic Urbanism: A History of the Modern from Reel to Real* (New York and London: Routledge, 2006), 1. See also *Expanded Cinema,* wherein Gene Youngblood describes film as "a way of seeing."

America. Certainly the No Movies are a prime expression of intermediality in the way that they bridge street performance, video, graphic and mail art with poetry and wit. This chapter examines in depth two such aspects of Asco's practice: their experimentation and involvement with techniques specific to the media industry, which they wished to critique and ironize, even while they exploited and were fascinated by them, and their attempts to fashion an open, freely associated group that did not organize itself around some single 'ideal' notion of collective (in their case, Chicano) identity, but rather threw such mythic identities into question while also evoking and playing upon them.

Another Mud Painting!": Asco's Rejection of "Community" Murals

Asco's position relative to their understanding of Chicano community changed over the years, from a youthful investment in the late 1960s to a sense of alienation in the mid 1970s. They came of age during intense debates surrounding the adoption of the term "Chicano" in place of the older designator "Mexican American"; for many, the use of "Chicano" indicated a position of cultural nationalism, a pride in one's ethnic identity, and signaled a move away from assimilationist attitudes of years prior.[17] In their formative years they participated in the high school student walkouts (credited by the *Los Angeles Times* as the "birth of Brown power") and contributed to the periodical *Régeneracion,* whose editors espoused a decidedly cultural-nationalist policy (**figure 22**).[18]

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[17] Thus, adopting the name "Chicano" signified a new *political* identity for U.S. citizens of Mexican heritage, one that "reversed the policies and ideologies of assimilation and instead sought to recover, understand, and celebrate the cultural heritage that made them unique, while insisting on their economic and political rights as citizens of the United States." T.V. Reed, "Revolutionary Walls: Chicano/a Murals Chicano/a Movements," in *The Art of Protest: Culture and Activism from the Civil Rights Movement to the Streets of Seattle* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 105.

[18] The walkouts—when more than 15,000 students boycotted classes in the Los Angeles area—revealed the extent to which the burgeoning Chicano movement, which had begun in the countryside with César Chávez's United Farm Workers movement, had gained momentum in the growth of student organizations in colleges across California and the former Mexican territories, and had reached the city and a younger generation of potential Chicano activists. Gamboa, in particular, was active in local politics even in high school. He ran for vice president of the student government as a member of the "Freedom Party," met with Robert Kennedy during the senator's visit to Los Angeles (**figure 22**), belonged to several organizations, such as the East Los Angeles Improvement Council and the Educational Issues Coordinating Committee, and helped to organize the student walkouts at five Los Angeles high schools for six days in March 1968.

In her 1988 dissertation, "Harry Gamboa and Asco," Kosiba-Vargas offers a thorough account of Asco's early work and motivations, particularly in chapter 2.

For more on the Chicano movement see F. Arturo Rosales, *Chicano! The History of the Mexican American Civil Rights Movement* (Houston: Arte Público Press, University of Houston, 1996), especially chapters 10–13. and Ernesto Chávez, *¡Mi Raza Primero! Nationalism, Identity, and Insurgency in the Chicano Movement in Los Angeles, 1966-1978* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).

Asco members Harry Gamboa, Jr., Willie Hérron, Gronk, and Patssi Valdez met at Garfield High School in East Los Angeles, a crucible of the Chicano education movement. Gronk, who had already assumed the name Glugio Gronk Nicandro, had organized the performance *Caca-Roaches Have No Friends* in 1969, and recruited Patssi Valdez to be in it. Valdez, who was dating Hérron at the time, invited her best friend Sylvia Delgado along with her then boyfriend Harry Gamboa, Jr., to watch the production. After that initial contact, the four would meet in one of their garages to work on articles or illustrations for *Régeneracion,* and those almost daily collaborations opened up a sense of possibility for the group. Of their group's origins, Gronk quipped, "We went into the garage, but instead of coming out rock stars we became artists," implying the similarities between the methods of their formation and those of a garage band (a common theme that emerged during this period of heightened collaboration).[19] In 1972 the group exhibited work—their worst, according to Hérron—at Self-Help Graphics in a show titled "Asco," and Valdez recalled how visitors to the exhibition cried out, "Oh my god, this work gives me Asco." Gamboa added, "And everyone thought it was the name of the group, and we decided to adopt it, and empowered ourselves by taking the term…"[20] Their empowerment resulted from taking viewers' critical reactions and turning it into a statement about the group's aims—their desire to provoke visceral reactions in their audiences.

Yet Gronk emphasized another aspect of their group name, one tied into the valences of their particular situation as Chicanos in East Los Angeles in the early 1970s: "But the serious side of it was that a lot of our friends were coming back in body bags and were dying, and we were seeing a whole generation come back that weren't alive anymore. And in a sense that gave us nausea—or 'nauseous.' And that is ASCO, in a way. It was like, 'God, our generation is getting wiped out. This is a horrible situation.'"[21] The name assumed multiple valences, from their own reactions to their environment, those of their audience, and the nature of their work.

The group members responded to the growing Chicano movement and Vietnam War protest, at first through murals. Hérron and Gronk were both active in the street mural movement in its early years, revealing a representational sensibility that, even as early as 1970, drew on cinematic conventions. *Moratorium Mural* (also known as *Black-and-White Mural,* **figure 24 and figure 25**)*,* painted at Estrada Courts, the site of protests that year against the disproportionate number of Hispanics fighting in the Vietnam War, evokes a black-and-white

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[19] Gronk, "Artist's Talk," Cornell University, 28 October 1993, quoted in C. Ondine Chavoya, "The Performance Art of Asco," in *Corpus Delecti,* ed. Coco Fusco (London: Routledge, 2000), 242.
[20] Valdez and Gamboa reminisce in *Asco Is Spanish for Nausea* included in *Performance Documentation, Video Art (Agent Ex), and Television Interviews.*
[21] Gronk, interview with Jeffrey Rangel.

newsreel strip, with imagery culled from mainstream and Chicano newspapers, among other sources.[22] Presented as a horizontal succession of images, the rectangular panels depict the police's involvement in the moratorium riots (one young boy holds a sign decrying "brutality") and their improper treatment and confinement of Chicanos. Interspersed among these scenes are images of couples, mothers, and children, a contrast to the idealized renderings of Chicano families in other murals (demonstrated in a later mural by East Los Streetscapers, **figure 26**). Among these are a picture of Gronk as a stylized clown and a portrait of Patssi Valdez in mid scream that suggest their reactions to the absurdity and horror of these events. Gronk and Hérron use the film-strip style format to insert cinematic effects and thus enliven the static, two-dimensional medium of the mural; such a composition suggested a diegetic progression to the images, one that countered the timeless, symbolic imagery of many Chicano murals of the early to mid 1970s (see, for example, murals adorning walls of the Ramona Gardens Housing Project in Lincoln Heights, Los Angeles, **figure 27 and figure 28**). In addition, its monochrome palette diverged visually from local murals that boasted vivid, primary hues and monumental figures.

Following their painting of *The Moratorium*, two early performances by the foursome signal their frustration with muralism as an artistic model to express their experiences growing up in the predominantly Chicano area of East Los Angeles, and testify to their attempts to expand the medium to make it more relevant to their lives as artists and Chicanos. In *Instant Mural*, Gronk taped Valdez and sometime Asco collaborator Humberto Sandoval to a wall in East Los Angeles, trapping them into uncomfortable and contorted positions (**figure 29**). Gamboa, who had already assumed the role of the group's primary chronicler, snapped photographs of the event while passers-by called out for the two to be liberated. This instant mural literalized the way in which traditional murals locked their subjects into fixed identity positions, and dramatized these subjects' very struggles for escape.

In the appropriately named *Walking Mural* two years later, three Asco members promenaded down East Los Angeles' main thoroughfare on December 24, 1972, in a reformulated Christmas Eve procession (**figure 30, figure 31, and figure 32**). The black clad Valdez, resembling a modern-day *barrio* iteration of the Virgin of Guadalupe (a sight common in neighborhood murals, **figure 28**), was flanked by Gronk, outfitted in tiered green and red crinolines with hanging ornaments simulating a gaudy Christmas tree, and Hérron, whose head

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[22] Max Benavídez and Kate Vozoff liken Gronk and Hérron's mural to an alternative report on the protests, "[s]ince Chicanos had little, if any, access to news cameras or TV stations" (48–49). They contend that subsequently murals "were spontaneously produced to tell a side of the story that major media never covered" (49). Their essay, "The Wall: Image and Boundary Chicano Art in the 1970s," appears in Leonard Folgarait, ed., *Mexican Art of the 1970s: Images of Displacement* (Nashville: Center for Latin American and Iberian Studies, Vanderbilt University, 1984), 45–53.

protruded through a masonite board to join three crudely sculpted relief heads in a tetrad—a mural that seemingly "walked off the wall." As this motley crew proceeded down Whittier Boulevard, a contested site for Chicanos as C. Ondine Chavoya has persuasively argued, they drew perplexed and shocked reactions from street-goers, likely last-minute Christmas shoppers and revelers.[23] As Willie Hérron explained, the group preferred not to announce their performance plans in advance, but instead would "drop in on everything in its normal pattern," to gauge the reactions of the crowd.[24] Some "joined their silent walk through the crowds," while others had more violent reactions. Herron recalls in 1976: "They ripped my cape…They tore my tail off as they screamed 'putos' [a homophobic slur]."[25] Referring to the group as "*putos*" charges them with transgressing the boundaries of social custom, appropriate dress, and normative sex and gender roles. The removal of Hérron's tail approximates a symbolic act of castration, a neutralization of the threat the performance waged against the Chicano value system. Contemporary and subsequent critics of the Chicano movement censured the inherent machismo of the patriarchal structures, which often obscured the roles that women held within *movimiento* organizations or minimized the efforts of women in Chicano political life.[26] For Gronk and Hérron to don elaborate make-up and costumes, often with androgynous results, was to defy the cultural norms that dictated the behavior and dress of Chicano men. The slur "*putos*" reveals how some members of the community perceived Asco's performance as a defilement of Catholic customs and Mexican values. Moreover it highlights the way in which Asco attempted to discomfit its audiences and to bring attention to different lifestyle politics.

Valdez's incarnation as the Virgin offers us an in-depth look at how the group layered multiple allusions in their costumes; she transformed the icon of Mexican Catholicism into a

[23] For more on the valence of Whittier Boulevard as the site of their performance, see C. Ondine Chavoya, "Orphans of Modernism: The Performance Art of Asco," in *Corpus Delecti: Performance Art of the Americas*, ed. Coco Fusco (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 243, and also fns. 14–16.

[24] Hérron quoted in Julia Brown and Jacqueline Crist, "Interview with Willie Hérron," *Summer 1985* (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1985, n.p.

[25] Gamboa notes the positive reactions in his 1991 essay, "In the City of Angels, Chameleons, and Phantoms: Asco, A Case Study of Chicano Art in Urban Tones (or Asco was a Four-Member Word," in R. Griswold del Castillo, T. McKenna, and Y. Yarbro-Bejarano, eds., *Chicano Art: Resistance and Affirmation* (Los Angeles: Wight Art Gallery, University of California Los Angeles, 1991), 125. Hérron's comments appear in Gronk and Gamboa, Jr., "Interview: Gronk and Gamboa," *Chismearte* 1 (Fall 1976): 30.

A derogatory term, in the feminine iteration "*puta*," it most commonly designates a whore. The masculine form, "*puto*," is a pejorative reference to a gay man, yet it can also connote sexually promiscuous men. In such usage, the term can assume a joking, rather than negative, valence. In its masculine plural form, "*putos*" could refer to a mixed-sex group of both men and women.

[26] For more on feminist activism within the Chicano movement, see Sybil Vengas, "Conditions for Producing Chicana Art," *Chismearte* 1, no. 4 (Fall/Winter 1977/1978) and Gabriela F. Arredondo, *Chicana Feminisms: A Critical Reader*, *Post-Contemporary Interventions* (Durham [N.C.]: Duke University Press, 2003).

product of superstition. A syncretic symbol, the Virgin of Guadalupe embodied the mixed origins and beliefs of the Mexican people, and as a result, became known as the mother of the *mestizo* race (*la raza*).[27] Valdez's interpretation of this religious figure was unconventional: the Virgin's blue-green mantle was transformed into a diaphanous black robe, her mandorla became a zigzag cutout frame, and her pious face assumed a ghoulish appearance (**figure 32**). Yet when she caught the light just right, the sun glinted off the foil edges of the right side of her cardboard mandorla, and she appeared to glow, approximating a holy vision. As a dark inverse—the Virgin of Guadalupe's other—Valdez's incarnation evoked the symbol's syncretic past and Tonantzin, the Aztec moon goddess.[28] In assuming this loaded cultural figure, and re-interpreting her, Valdez effectively enters the debate about *indigenismo,* or the resurrection of a shared cultural past.

On the back of her head, Valdez bore "an aluminum *calavera,*" a skeleton that reinforces Valdez's active contribution to the syncretism of the icon of Mary. Yet the calavera has other valences. As Rafaela Castro explains, it is the "symbol of the downtrodden, who must laugh at life in order to survive it."[29] The calavera, then, epitomizes Valdez's and Asco's sensibility more broadly—the humor that they brought to their work and their willingness to make-do with what they have to in order to get by.

In drawing into a single frame Valdez's "Shadow of the Virgin," Hérron's literally ambulatory mural, and Gronk's Christmas tree, *Walking Mural* reveals a pastiche of various cultural symbols derived from Mexican, Chicano, Indian, and American traditions. The

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[27] A rich and complex cultural and religious sign, the Virgin of Guadalupe is what Eric Wolf describes as a "master symbol," an icon that "seems to enshrine the major hopes and aspirations of an entire society;" Wolf, "The Virgin of Guadalupe: A Mexican National Symbol," *Journal of American Folklore* 71 (1958): 34.

[28] A Catholic saint, the Virgin of Guadalupe exemplified "Indian Catholicism," the way in which the Aztecs accommodated Christian beliefs into their existing religious pantheon. The virgin was said to have appeared to Juan Diego, a Mexican Christian Indian, on December 9, 1531; she presented her name as Tlecuauhtlacupeuh, which the Spaniards interpreted as "Guadalupe." The Spanish, thus, connected the apparition with "Our Lady of Guadalupe" from Estemadura, Spain. However, because the Nahuatl word, "Tlecuauhtlacupeuh," means "*la que viende volando de la luz como el águila de fuego*" (she who comes flying from the region of light like an eagle of fire) and the virgin appeared at the former temple of Tonantzin on mount Tepeyac, the Aztecs recognized a continuity between the Christian virgin and their goddess Tonantzin, "Our Holy Mother." See Rafaela Castro, *Chicano Folklore: A Guide to the Folktales, Traditions, Rituals and Religious Practices of Mexican Americans* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 239–41; and Castro, *Dictionary of Chicano Folklore* (Santa Barbara, Calif.: ABC-CLIO, 2000).

Moreover, in assuming the Virgin on *la Noche Buena* (Christmas Eve)*,* she fuses two traditions of Mexican Catholic ritual, the Marian cult of Guadalupe and the observation of *Las Posadas*. The nature of her rendering of the Virgin, its evocations of a pre-Columbian past*,* in a *Las Posadas* celebration also adds another layer to the already syncretic icon.

[29] Castro, *Chicano Folklore*, 30–31. In "In the City of Angels," Gamboa notes that Valdez bore "an aluminum *calavera* on the back of her head" (*Urban Exile: The Collected Writings of Harry Gamboa, Jr.,* ed. Chon A. Noriega [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998], 79).

performance was a defiant act of self-definition—choosing symbols with relevance to the group's cultural heritage as American citizens of Mexican descent born and raised in Los Angeles—and also a challenge to muralism to become a more dynamic medium. This self-conscious aspiration was intimated by their choice of title, *Walking Mural,* which inscribes their performance within an aesthetic category that had been until then very much wall-bound and static. In performing their mural, Asco moves their art into another register of production, placing them within the ranks of Chicano performers such as El Teatro Campesino and also within the increasingly popular movement of performance art. This speaks to their desire to see themselves as part of an artistic vanguard; yet in literally breaking free from the medium but maintaining its iconography, Asco creates a tension between trying to avoid being pegged as "mud painters" and still wanting to maintain a connection to their identities as Chicanos.[30]

From the celebration of *los tres grandes*—David Alfaro Siqueiros, Diego Rivera, and José Clemente Orozco—as promoters of the popular front labor movement in the 1930s to the greeting "*Orale Raza*" ("Right on, my people!") exclaimed by Frank Fierro's 1974 mural at the Estrada Courts Housing Project (**figure 33**), muralism has been asserted as an art "for the people by the people." Eva Cockcroft and Holly Barnet-Sánchez reinforce this viewpoint in their book on California Chicano murals, in defining a "truly 'public' art" as one that "provides society with the symbolic representation of collective beliefs as well as a continuing re-affirmation of the collective sense of self."[31] Cockcroft and Barnet-Sanchez's statements affirm a sense of "identity" that is all-encompassing, and express a corresponding faith in murals to be able to present the "collective sense of self." Of course, identitarian movements predicate their existence on an overarching belief in the value of asserting collective identity; yet often their thrust is

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[30] In the 1970s, Asco is still working within this tension between the art world and the Chicano community and seeing productive areas to maneuver. In an interview with Gamboa, Gronk asks in frustration, "Why doesn't Peter Plagens or William Wilson know anything about the true avant-garde of Los Angeles?" "Gronk: Off the Wall Artist," *Neworld*, no. 4 (1980): 35. By 1987 Gamboa, at least, sees restrictions tightening in his essay, "The Chicano/a Artist Inside and Outside the Mainstream," *Journal: Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Art* (Winter 1987), when he enumerates five undesirable options for Chicano artists:

A. Work diligently toward a conveniently passive dead end?
B. Repudiate all psycho/socio/political content in his/her work?
C. Hop on the freight car of Western culture and onto the fast-track of critical success?
D. Close his/her eyes to the accelerating threat of acculturation, assimilation, and accommodation?
E. Derail the pre-conditions for institutional accreditation, public acceptance, and commercial adaptation (i.e. blowing up your bridges in front and behind you)? (21)

All of these positions involve compromise and rejecting different aspects of one's identity and desires.
[31] Eva Sperling Cockcroft and Holly Barnet-Sánchez, eds., *Signs from the Heart: California Chicano Murals* (Venice, Calif.: Social and Public Art Resource Center; Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1993), 5.

political and rhetorical (for example, at the grassroots levels, organizations related to the larger movement develop with specific issues or community needs in mind). However, in the celebration of muralism as a communal form that communicates to the public and conveys shared values, Cockcroft and Barnet-Sanchez overlook the ways in which murals on a building façade, billboard, or street side reach a wider variety of possible publics, each with its own priorities and frameworks.[32]

Asco's interventions in the name of muralism nuance the existing discussions on the medium and its central importance to the Chicano movement, or *el movimiento* as it was commonly called. Scholars such as Shifra Goldman, Tomás Ybarro-Frausto, Alan Barnett, T.V. Reed, Rupert Garcia, and Eva Cockcroft provide compelling accounts of how the medium encouraged community involvement, fostered pride in the *barrios*, provided Chicanos with visible symbols of their activism and commitment, and forged tangible connections to past cultural achievements, in particular to the great Mexican muralists of the interwar years. Indeed, period articles in mass-circulation papers boasted stories of how the democratic, collaborative project of muralism swept out gang violence in the *barrio* and gave Chicanos a command of their own representation.[33] Artist Amelia Mesa-Bains explains, "As a function of identity development, murals provided idealized portraits which celebrated family and cultural practices. Their themes often outlined political demands and spiritual beliefs significant to the larger Chicano community."[34] *Moratorium Mural* shows Hérron and Gronk to be tackling these subjects, but their means of executing them in the individuated scenes of the film-strip suggests the heterogeneity of the community and the factors dividing, rather than uniting, it.

The late 1960s and early 1970s period of the Chicano mural movement—its "birth" and subsequent explosion—represented the search for a common visual language to depict their

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[32] As Michael Warner has shown, the term "*the* public" often operates in the general consciousness based on a common-sense notion of citizenship as a being a member of a national, state, or local community, a participation that allows everyday people to see themselves as part of a social totality. Yet the many "publics" to which individuals belong at any given time are actually dynamic, self-organized social spaces generated discursively. According to Warner, the formation of a public is a fictional idea predicated on the notion of strangers attuned to a particular discourse that circulates reflexively. Warner explains, "Publics are essentially intertextual, frameworks for understanding texts against an organized background of the circulation of other texts, all interwoven not just by citational references but by the incorporation of a reflexively circulatory field in the mode of address and consumption." *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone Books, 2002), 16.

[33] For example, David Kahn, "Chicano Street Murals: People's Art in the East Los Angeles Barrio," *Aztlan* 6, no. 1 (Spring 1975); Frank Del Olmo, "Chicano Gang Turns to Art," *L.A. Times*, 11 September 1973; Martin Zucker, "Walls of Barrio Are Brought to Life by Street Gang Art," *Smithsonian* 9, no. 7 (October 1978); and *Signs from the Heart*, 68–83.

[34] Amalia Mesa-Bains, "Quest for Identity: Profile of Two Chicana Muralists," in *Signs from the Heart*, 70.

newly redefined culture.[35] Most murals drew on conventions from the Mexican muralists, borrowing the juxtapositions in scale favored by Rivera; the non-naturalistic brushwork, passages of chiaroscuro, and formal distortions of Orozco; and the intense foreshortening employed by Siqueiros. Conceived of as "social levers," murals addressed viewers directly, calling out to them with slogans or phrases or assuming a didactic mode emergent from the subject matter.[36] Common themes were Christian and pre-Columbian warriors and deities, indigenous symbols, portraits of movement leaders, representations of social issues and local youth and urban culture (as in **figure 27** and **figure 28**).[37] In their evocation of these symbols, Asco offers ways of re-thinking collective identity, as performative categories in constant flux, rather than concrete embodiments.

While some artists viewed muralism as opportunity to expand the definition of Chicano identity, such as Carlos Almaraz (a member of the prominent muralists group Los Four), for others the popularity and visibility of the medium engendered a double-bind chiasmus: in order to be a bona fide Chicano artist, one had to produce murals, and the production of murals claimed for one the status of a Chicano artist. [38] Gronk describes this ontological slippage and reification of Chicano identity: "We did regular murals at the very beginning because in order to be a Chicano artist, you had to do a mural to get recognition."[39] Because mural art was a crucial form in disseminating and expressing key issues of *el movimiento,* for young politically active Chicano artists to be effective and taken seriously, they had to take on board the medium to some extent. Willie Hérron makes this point clear when he literally assumes a board in *Walking Mural*. More than just a witty move, this sentiment was deeply felt by the members of Asco. *Walking Mural* operates within a discursive framework surrounding the practice and reception of muralism, to which Tomás Ybarra-Frausto's declaration of "*un nuevo arte del pueblo*" contributes.[40]

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[35] Benavídez and Vozoff, "The Wall," 45–46.

[36] Shifra M. Goldman, "How, Why, Where, and When It All Happened: Chicano Murals of California," in *Signs from the Heart,* 24. "We tried to make murals into cultural billboards," Judithe Hernandez explained. "We tried to make them informative like newspapers," quoted in Benavídez and Vozoff, "The Wall," 49.

[37] In "Chicano Murals of California," Goldman offers a listing of popular mural themes based on period (29–34).

[38] Almaraz explained this sense of possibility: "We were opening up the definition of what Chicano was and could be," quoted in Benavídez and Vozoff, "The Wall," 51.

[39] Gronk quoted in unidentified article clipping from *New West* magazine (1978), Gamboa papers, box 3, folder 6.

[40] Ybarra-Frausto suggests that particular expressive forms, drawn from folk practices, could encapsulate the Chicano experience:

Having codified the role of the artists as a visual educator, having structured an alternative art circuit for production and distribution, and steadily working to create an audience, the fundamental task was to elaborate *un nuevo arte del pueblo* (a new art of the people) created from shared experience and based on communal art traditions.

Once a viable alternative to the "Anglo" modes of art production and dissemination that allowed Chicano artists to exist outside the official systems, muralism became for some Chicano artists another restrictive medium. It kept them on the margins of the art world, working in an ages-old medium, borrowing from styles in the 1930s, and limited in their possibilities for exhibiting their work. For artists who sought to build their reputation in the art world, this medium, coded in East Los Angeles as by Chicanos for Chicanos, did not address the larger publics that Asco hoped to reach.

Asco member Patssi Valdez represents one of the alternate publics who did not identify with the collective interpolation of the murals: "I hated murals. I was sick of them. We'd be driving down the street and I'd say, 'Gronk! Another mud painting! The mud people!' I didn't care what they were trying to say politically. I just wanted to get rid of these terrible images."[41] Far from being the positive images of community touted in many of the articles in the English- and Spanish-language presses, for Gamboa, Hérron, Gronk, and Valdez, murals had become a sign of the backwardness of Chicano art: "mud painting" by "mud people." Valdez's condemnation indicts the quality of the paintings peering out from grocery store sides, billboards, and highway pylons; because muralism drew largely on community support and frequently on untrained artists, murals varied widely in terms of workmanship and composition. They also appealed largely to community audiences rather than to the mainstream art world, an address which Asco, desiring acclaim in both arenas, found limiting. Yet Asco's relationship to muralism was more complex and ambivalent than Valdez's outrage might suggest. They rejected its often falsely unitary and celebratory rhetoric while also drawing from the mural movement a sense of collective purpose and political motivation.[42]

The restrictions of the medium derived partly from the hopes in the late 1960s and early 1970s that it could represent a cohesive Chicano identity. Discussing one of the earliest murals of the Chicano movement, a 1968 wall by Antonio Bernal on the offices of United Farm Workers/El Teatro Campesino cultural center in Del Rey, California (**figure 34**), literary historian T.V. Reed claims, "No medium was better equipped to express this solidarity-in-difference than the wordless form of the mural where the complexities of verbal political positionings are muted in a

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His belief that murals (among other art forms, such as *pulquería* art, *almanaques*, *estampas,* and *altares*) represented "*un nuevo arte del pueblo*" glosses over the fractures and divisiveness in the Chicano movement and the cultural production associated with it; "Arte Chicano: Images of a Community," in *Signs from the Heart*, 64.

[41] Linda Frye Burnham, "Asco: Camus, Daffy Duck, and Devil Girls from East L.A.," *L.A. Style* 2, no. 9 (February 1987): 58.

[42] Benavídez and Vozoff quote an anonymous supporter of collaboration who declared it "counter-revolutionary to be a star"; "The Wall," 50.

visual language of pure juxtaposition—all the figures forming a single, united front of resistance."[43] Through Bernal's frieze-like ordering of the figures, the mural links Mexico's revolutionary past, signified by images of La Adelita (a reference to woman warriors who fought in the Mexican Revolution), Emiliano Zapata, Francisco "Pancho" Villa, and Joaquin Murieta, with present-day efforts headed by César Chávez of the United Farm Workers movement and Reies López Tijerina, who worked to restore New Mexican land grants to the descendants of their original owners. Marching along these figures in solidarity are a representative of the Black Panthers and Martin Luther King, Jr., inclusions that suggest a continuity of ideas and efforts between the civil rights movement earlier in the decade and those by Chicanos. For Reed, then, muralism—more so than verbal communication, which made apparent ideological contradictions—was effective in smoothing over the real differences in the struggle for social equality (the work's linear composition minimizes the political differences of the individuals pictured). He regards the visual juxtapositions inherent in the mural medium as techniques for *erasing* differences and discontinuities, rather than as potential strategies for exposing those same ambiguities and contradictions within Chicano culture.

Amid these various contradictions, muralism sought to clarify an identity for Chicanos. In the context of *el movimiento*, the phrases "*la raza*" or "the people" worked as an artificial means to create unity among people with different social concerns, varied connections to Mexican history, and divergent political approaches. [44] Translated literally as "race," the use of

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[43] Reed, "Revolutionary Walls: Chicano/a Murals Chicano/a Movements," 111.

[44] The first documented use of the term "*la raza*" was in the 19th century, a reference to Mexican Californians by Francisco P. Ramírez in *El Clamor Público*, his Los Angeles Spanish-language newspaper. Although at the time "la raza" was used interchangeably with "*la poblácion*," "*la poblácion California,*" and "*nuestra raza española*," the increase in such rhetoric testified to a new kind of ethnic consciousness; see F. Arturo Rosales, *Chicano! The History of the Mexican American Civil Rights Movement* (Houston: Arte Público Press, University of Houston, 1996), 18. In a meeting of young Mexican American activists in 1967, "la raza" was promoted as the best term to identify Mexican American people, because "Chicano" was not yet widespread and, especially for older generations, it carried an association of "low-class" status. For information on the use of "la raza," see Chávez, *¡Mi Raza Primero!* and David G. Gutiérrez, *Walls and Mirrors: Mexican Americans, Mexican Immigrants, and the Politics of Identity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).

For the generation of ethnic Mexicans coming of age in the 1960s, many youngsters maintained religious and cultural ties to their ancestral past—a mix of Spanish, Indian, and Mexican traditions—yet had never actually lived in Mexico and often had no memories of or allegiances to the country. This caused a problem for Chicano movement rhetoric that emphasized the illegal and imperialist seizure of lands and the subjugation of Mexican people as the motivating force behind *el movimiento*.

Due to different regional politics, such as the economic climate, the influx of Anglos into former Mexican territories, and the presence of Mexican Americans in government, the status and oppression of Mexican Americans have varied from region to region, resulting in uneven racialization.

Added to this ideological tension and concomitant sense of displacement by the newly emergent Chicano generation was the common perception by many "Anglos" that Mexican Americans were illegal aliens, not

"*la raza*" encouraged an association of "the people" with an ethnic Mexican identity, separating it from American populist ideals. As such, "*la raza*" was an effective slogan, appearing on movement posters and placards, forming parts of organization acronyms, newspaper titles, and gallery names, and, in many usages, it became a term synonymous with *el movimiento.*

The designation of the people with the Spanish term "*la raza*" also intimated a semantic slippage, a shifting from a general "*the* people" (which could refer to all U.S. citizens, all Californians, all Mexicans, etc.) to the implied "*my* people," limiting the scope of the public addressed to one of Spanish-speaking descent—a Mexican, Chicano, or even more general "Latino" self-identification. As a phrase to rally "the people," the semantic flexibility of "*la raza*" provided a level of inclusion not offered by the terms "Chicano," "Mexican American," or "ethnic Mexican." Despite the semantic fiction of a unified identity, *el movimiento*, like other quests for communal change, was never a cohesive movement. Rather, the Chicano movement was forged through the synchronous, and sometimes interconnected, efforts of various groups and organizations—publics of differing constituencies and discourses—which taken together became identified as a protonationalist and identitarian movement.[45]

Suffering from a "double consciousness" similar to what W.E.B. DuBois most poignantly characterized as the African-American condition, the status of Chicanos was such that they needed to negotiate competing, and often, conflicting cultures, expectations, and values. In his 1986 essay, "A New Artistic Continent," Guillermo Gómez-Peña identifies a productive space opened up by such a hybrid position (a site of possibility similar to the "third space" theorized by Homi Bhabha):

> It is often bicultural, bilingual and/or biconceptual…Artists are able to go back
> and forth between two different landscapes of symbols, values, structures and
> styles, and/or operate within a "third landscape" that encompasses both.[46]

Yet twenty years earlier, the possibilities of such a "third landscape"—a somewhat privileged artistic position "between" competing cultural and national traditions, historical periods, and critical methodologies, to borrow Bhabha's phrasing—were largely unrealized in the still-

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U.S. citizens, a sentiment that increased with the national rise of anti-immigrant rhetoric during the economic downturn of the early 1970s.

[45] Chávez considers the Chicano movement (and the reform ideals leading up to it) as "protonationalist," indicating the Chicano "consciousness of belonging to or having belonged to a lasting political entity," i.e. Mexico; he draws on Eric Hobsbawm's language in his discussion. See Chávez, *¡Mi Raza Primero!* 5, passim.

[46] Guillermo Gómez-Peña, "A New Artistic Continent," *High Performance* 35 (Fall 1986): 27.

developing Chicano movement.[47] The movement encouraged and celebrated cultural products embracing an ethnic Mexican culture over those exploring a hybrid or dual Mexican-American identity (with the undercurrents of subjugation, institutionalized racism, and unofficial segregation that such a double consciousness invoked). Thus, despite the potentially positive implications of the hybrid category "Chicano," the American aspects contributing to the understanding of Chicano identity were often wholly suppressed in the art and discourse of *el movimiento*.

In their presentation of complex, syncretic symbols in *Walking Mural* (and in other projects, such as their 1974 *Dia de Los Muertos* observation, **figure 35**), Asco reveals their engagement with the multiple publics approximated by the term "Chicano."[48] Despite the rhetorical urges toward a resurrection of indigenous and Mexican culture, Chicanos, by virtue of their living in the saturated media culture of 1960s Los Angeles, also implicitly participated through active consumption as well as passive attention (such as watching television or being inundated with advertisements) in mainstream American culture. For a cultural form to express "the experience of Chicanos," as has been claimed of muralism, it would therefore need to include the varied aspects of public life implied by the political entity "Chicano," and not simply celebrate elements of the "residual culture," to borrow Raymond Williams' term.[49]

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[47] Homi Bhabha and Jonathan Rutherford, "The Third Space: Interview with Homi Bhabha," in *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, ed. Jonathan Rutherford (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1990).

Chávez explains that the nature of the category "Mexican American" is an inherently liminal one, because the conquest of Mexico by the United States in the 19th century rendered the newly subjugated citizens an "in between people." Chávez borrows the idea of an "in between" people James R. Barret and David Roediger's unpublished study of Polish and Italian immigrants to the U.S. See *¡Mi Raza Primero!* 2 and footnote 3, page 121, for an explanation of this terminology.

[48] On two occasions Asco staged a performance during *Día de Los Muertos* festivities, revealing their interjection of their ritual performances into pre-existing (or newly created, as it were) Chicano customs, in an interrogation of the limits of belief and the sometimes willy-nilly adoption of new "traditions" for a political effect. In their 1974 performance at the Evergreen Cemetery in East Los Angeles, Herb Sandoval, Valdez, Gamboa, Gronk, and Hérron armed themselves with various elements relating to war, which they built from cardboard: a tank, an airplane, and a camera.

Arising out of the Catholic tradition of All Saints' Day (and All Souls' Day on November 2), *Día de Los Muertos* (Day of the Dead) celebrations on November 1 had gained new ritual significance during *el movimiento*. Traditionally this day marked an observance of those who had passed away; family and friends would visit the gravesites of the deceased, perhaps say a prayer, and leave flowers or offerings at the site. Yet with the increasing importance placed on indigenous customs, several community centers adopted this occasion as an apt time to develop new communal traditions. The renewed interest in All Saints' Day and All Souls' Day derived from their similarity to Aztec rituals celebrating the memory of the dead; Castro, *Chicano Folklore*, 79–80.

[49] See Raymond Williams, "Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory," in *Problems in Materialism and Culture* (London: NLB, 1980), 40.

Marcos Sánchez-Tranquilino's assessment of Chicano identity captures the goals inherent in *chicanismo*, and thus highlights the frustration of those who longed for a cultural expression that could approximate this newly stated identity position: "…the Chicano experience represents a model for all Americans to acknowledge their current identity as an outcome of two (or more) living histories coming together; that

Gronk elaborates on this idea of drawing on a multiplicity of cultural referents, both American and Latin, for inspiration:

> A lot of Latino artists went back in history for imagery. We wanted to stay in the present and find our imagery as urban artists and produce a body of work out of our sense of displacement. Latin imagery had a strong input, but we also had Albert Camus, Daffy Duck and movies like *Devil Girls from Mars.*[50]

Living in Los Angeles during the television era and the growth in Hollywood, teenagers and adults were inundated by moving images and American popular culture—as a Chicano, these influences were as strong as Catholic rituals and Mexican culture. Gronk's emphasis on generating "a body of work out of our sense of displacement" speaks to the "in between" position of the Chicano artist, and hints at the possibilities inhered in the "third space" promoted by Bhabha and Gómez-Peña.

Asco's *Instant Mural* and *Walking Mural* prefigured the disillusion that accompanied muralism's acceptance and eventual institutionalization, dramatized by several mural exhibitions and conferences in the mid-late 1970s.[51] Although many artists persisted in seeking a Chicano visual language, murals from the mid-1970s through the 1980s also sought to show solidarity with oppressed peoples internationally, and particularly in Central America.[52] As the cultural-nationalist appeal of murals waned (partly due to increasing federal and local government funding for such projects and a widening range of public "canvases"), many artists sought to move beyond the "identity question" to consider broader themes.[53]

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there is a multiplicity of ways to be American; that the word 'Chicano' is an American word (not only an English, or only a Spanish word) because it signifies the unique amalgamation of the old and new identities without the denial of one in favor of the other" ("Murales del Movimiento: Chicano Murals and the Discourses of Art and Americanization," in *Signs from the Heart*, 101).

[50] Harry Gamboa, Jr., "Gronk and Herron: Muralists," *Neworld* 2, no. 3 (Spring 1976). See also Burnham, "Asco," 58, for similar remarks by Gronk and other group members.

[51] One of the earliest was Los Four's show at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in 1974; a group exhibition, organized by the Comite Chicanarte with the cooperation of the Los Angeles Municipal Art Gallery, Barnsdale Park, was held from 14 September to 12 October 1975. More than 150 muralists gathered in Chicago in 1976 for the first National Murals Conference; a second event was held two years later, which resulted in the periodical *Community Murals,* published until 1988. Several books appeared on the topic, including *The Mural Manual: How to Paint Murals for the Classroom, Community Center, and Street Corner* (1975) and *Toward a People's Art: The Contemporary Mural Movement* (1977).

[52] The PLACA Project in San Francisco (1984), comprised of more than twenty-five murals, is the most extensive and well-known example of this trend.

[53] The 1970s and '80s witnessed a renewed interest in mural art across the United States, and artists of all ethnic and racial backgrounds took to the "oldest art form," painting on walls. Among the many were William Walker and John Pitman Weber (of Chicago Public Art Group) in Chicago; LeRoy Foster in Detroit; John Wehrle in California; Kent Twitchell in Los Angeles; Terry Schoonhoven and Vic Henderson (later of the Los Angeles Fine Arts Squad) in Venice, California; and Josie Grant and the Haight Ashbury Muralists, both in the Bay Area.

During this time, Asco turned to No Movies as a means of envisioning identity as a phenomenon engendered by the connections one forges with others, based on the participation within and the circulation of different discourses. What I am describing as a type of "networked" identity as practiced by Asco offers a forceful reconsideration of singular notions of identity based on naming practices—as in Jésus-Salvador Treviño's most famous affirmation "Yo Soy Chicano"—in favor of a more fluid model in which identities sharpen and fade from focus by shifting one's frame of reference.[54] Such a model was very real for a group that was "disliked by some for being too Mexican and disliked by others for not being Mexican enough."[55] As a formal innovation, No Movies allowed Asco to negotiate positions in between Mexican, Chicano, and American cultures, largely because their adoption of the expanded medium was flexible enough to enter and support various discourses about Chicano film, culture, and identity.

"As Hollywood continues to shoot Chicanos, Chicanos will have to shoot right back":
The No Movie as a Weapon

For Asco, both muralism and the mass media fixed Chicano identity as static and one-dimensional. As with their desire to enliven muralism by producing a processional mural, they too sought to counter the deadening effects of film and television on Chicanos. While they conceived of their interventions very much in the nexus formed by the mainstream media and Chicano interests, they did not in practice limit the ways in which the Chicano community could be defined, as Hollywood and muralism alike had done. Instead, Asco's No Movies armed them with a multi-pronged attack on various mass media forms.

As their walking mural vivified muralism, Asco's No Movies countered the passivity they believed to be integral to television, by disrupting and rerouting information flow and creating feedback patterns. In *Decoy Gang War Victim* (**figure 20**) Asco infiltrated the television news in order to send a message to the Chicano "community" to stop the cycle of violence, and to expose the ways in which the media were complicit in perpetuating it. The work offers a lesson on access: to tools and technology, to the institutions that disseminate information, and to local and national publics. Through its unorthodox circulation, *Decoy Gang War Victim* calls attention to the barriers Chicanos faced in attaining balanced coverage and equal access to the media, yet in the unveiling of its own duplicity (by means of its title and by explanations readily offered by

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[54] Treviño's 1972 documentary *Yo Soy Chicano* traces Mexican-American history and oppression and features interviews with movement leaders José Angel Gutiérrez, Rodolfo "Corky" Gonzales, Dolores Huerta, and Reies López Tijerina.
[55] "Ismania," in *Urban Exile*, 258.

Asco members), it offers a way to circumvent those very barriers. The work intervenes in these institutional channels, forcing slight fault lines, cracking open room for maneuver. That room for maneuver is epitomized by the No Movie.

The television report, and Asco's subsequent unveiling of their media stunt, highlighted the gulf between the destructive collective actions of *barrio* factions and the productive efforts of the artists' group, and how easily such a chasm could be erased by an anchorman presenting the daily news. The only "gang war" captured in the photograph was the group's attack on the media and their so-called attempts to end the cycle of violence plaguing their neighborhoods (they staged the event on a residential block in the Li'l Valley area of East Los Angeles). Gamboa explained,

> I went on TV and I showed it as being a member of a gang that had been killed, as if once they found someone had died there would no longer be any need for battle to continue because retribution had been completed. Someone got a copy of that and played it on Channel 9 News, as if it had been a real victim….[56]

The "real victims" were the Chicanos watching the evening news only to see reports on gang members, riots, and criminals, and failing to see any of the positive contributions to American society by citizens of Mexican or Spanish descent.[57] Contrary to Gamboa's statement that he hoped the photograph would end the cycle of violence, that cycle was instead perpetuated by the media's airing of the story, which confirmed the stereotypical view of Chicanos as gang members. This circular effect could not have been entirely unanticipated by Asco, and thus their tale of gang retribution reads as a cover story for their knowing media manipulation.[58]

Decoy Gang War Victim dramatizes the problems of access by showing how, in 1975, the only way for Chicanos to appear on the nightly news was through the coverage of gangs. Debates had been raging within the Chicano community about how to oppose effectively these pervasive

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[56] Gamboa is quoted in Kosiba-Vargas, "Harry Gamboa and Asco," 171.

[57] In a 1977 examination of the treatment of women and minorities in television (both in front of and behind the camera), the United States Commission on Civil Rights concluded, "Men of Spanish origin appeared in the sample news programs only as criminals." Of the 85 correspondents who reported the news during the sampled newscasts, none were Latino (and only five were nonwhite), and among the 230 news stories broadcast, only 9 covered events pertaining to minorities, with none reporting on Chicanos or Latin Americans. The report refers to "Spanish surnamed" individuals and "of Spanish origin" when indicating Latin American populations; United States Commission on Civil Rights, *Window Dressing on the Set: Women and Minorities in Television* (Washington, D.C., August 1977), 50–51, 54, and table 3.1.

[58] The staging of *Decoy Gang War Victim* invites comparisons to Chris Burden's *Dead Man* performance from 1972, where the artist covered himself with a tarp and lay in the middle of La Cienega Boulevard, illuminated by two flares that would eventually dim (thus making it more likely cars would be unable to see him). Burden's audience for this performance becomes witness to a potential crime; Asco's audience for *Decoy Gang War Victim* is the television viewers, those watching its initial presentation on the news or the later explanations by Gamboa.

negative portrayals, with the formation of media advocacy groups a key strategy. These advocacy groups had been calling for reforms in the film and television industries since the late 1960s.[59] Early tactics they adopted had involved lobbying for positive imagery to replace negative stereotypes, organizing boycotts of products, and developing a pool of skilled workers. During this period, the launch of media trainee programs and film schools encouraged the development of minority cinemas and media professionals.[60] By 1971, media groups like the National Mexican-American Anti-Defamation Committee (NMAADC) shifted their emphasis from reforming prejudicial imagery to calling for systemic changes, ones that would guarantee greater access and equal opportunity for Chicanos in the film industry in particular.[61] Despite appeals for policy changes and greater access by these media groups, in the 1970s Latinos had only minimally penetrated television and film's hermetic ranks.[62] Asco's No Movies offered a counter-method to the efforts of advocacy groups in the late 1960s and 1970s, a call to arms for individuals to take a stance, however fleeting or minimal.

Asco also drew motivation from the position of prominence occupied by TV and movies in their lives, and sought to challenge the hegemony of these media. For many, as for Gronk, the television set served as "babysitter," as surrogate parent.[63] Imbued with such a responsibility,

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[59] Mindy Beck describes how media critics recognized "TV's ability to do real damage to people's dignity," and sought tactics to counter what they perceived as the medium's pernicious effects; Beck, ""Minority Images on T.V.: Up from Amos 'n' Andy?" *Access* 19 (6 October 1975), 7.

[60] Many of these aims were reiterated by the National Latino Media Coalition in 1975, announcing their goals to "advocate a more positive image for Latinos in the mass media; to promote accurate reflection of the lifestyles and historical contributions, language and culture, needs and aspirations of Latinos; to encourage equal employment opportunity and civil rights for Latinos in all media; to develop a national staff with skills necessary to support local Latino media groups; to promote studies and disseminate information on the Coalition's concerns." The call for equal employment and a national staff with support skills indicated the group's awareness of the systemic issues Latinos faced, but lacked a clear plan of action for how this would be achieved. See Marjorie Miller, "Spotlight on Media Reformers: National Latino Media Coalition Reorganizes," *Access* 19 (6 October 1975), 17.

[61] Noriega provides a thorough and compelling account of the relationship between Chicano media groups and broadcast practices, and discusses how Chicano media groups were divided between promoting activism and industry professionalism (*Shot in America*, chapter 7).

[62] It was not simply ignorant or racist hiring practices that resulted in the dearth of Chicano representation in television and film, but it was also the established, complex, multi-faceted machinery that ran these industries which impeded Chicano's access to the media: a need for specialized knowledge and training; actors, crews, and sets; equipment; producers and distributors; screening venues; critics and publicists; and audiences. By the mid-1970s, Mexican Americans from mass media activist groups had become what Noriega calls "realistic radicals," in that they became part of the system they were trying to change (*Shot in America,* 134).

[63] Gronk described himself as a child of the television: "I grew up with a single parent, so, you know, you have the TV set that is constantly there and it's feeding you a lot of information about the bigger picture of the world, perhaps. You have current events that are taking place, and especially in the sixties where the world is transforming and changing right before our very eyes, so many things are falling apart, going to the wayside." Gronk, interview by Jennifer Sternad-Flores and Rita Gonzalez, Los Angeles, 31 August 2004, transcript, Gronk Collection, Chicano Studies Research Center, University of California Los

television held tremendous power "to do real damage to people's dignity," as media critics warned.[64] The pernicious effects derived partially from the way in which television was an invited visitor in one's home, becoming part of one's domestic life. With the news, Asco's target in *Decoy Gang War Victim,* harm ensued as a result of the perceived objectivity of the format, which, like photographs, operates based on viewers' assumptions that "real" events are covered.[65] Not only does the television news presuppose a world "out there" that exists to report on, but it also presupposes an audience to be watching the broadcasts. Indeed, as sociologists Harvey Molotch and Marilyn Lester declare, "those who make the news are crucial actors in making publics what they are."[66] The publics interpolated by the TV news programs were predominantly white, if the demographics of the newscasters and of the subjects of their reports is any indication. Yet the actual viewing audiences were not all white—a 1980 study revealed that the percentages of Hispanics watching the local and national news was similar to those of Anglos, with two-thirds of those surveyed reporting they watched the televised evening news.[67] Although Los Angeles claimed one Spanish-language television station, KMEX, viewers charged that, because the majority of its programming came straight from Mexico (some 70,000 to 80,000 feet of prepared film and video weekly), the programming did not reflect Mexican-American concerns and,

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Angeles, 6. Harry Gamboa had an even closer relationship to television, explaining, "…my forehead was connected to a television screen similarly as one would expect from a set of harmonious Siamese twins." The image here, of Gamboa as the television's twin, reinforces the alienation he must have felt given the lack of content that referenced the Chicano experience when he was growing up in the 1950s. Marisela Norte, "Harry Gamboa, Jr.: No Movie Maker," *Revista Literaria de El Tecolote* 4, no. 2 (July 1983): 12.

[64] Muralist and professor José Montoya, writing in 1979, warned: "the man can still cut us down in a minute. Not because he has the tanks and sophisticated riot control squads, but because he controls the media! And he uses that media to tell the rest of the world that everything from drugs and crime, to unemployment and engorged welfare rolls, is the fault of us euphemisms, i.e., Hispanos, Latins, Mexican hyphenated Americans, etc." Montoya, "Thoughts on La Cultura," 6.

[65] That audiences valued television as a source of objective reporting is confirmed by the United States Commission on Civil Rights in their study, where they cite a 1970 study that indicated just more than half of Americans surveyed believed television brought the news quickly, whereas a third felt it offered the "fairest and least biased news coverage" (in comparison to newspapers and radio). *Window Dressing on the Set*, 1.

[66] Harvey Molotch and Marilyn Lester, ""Accidents, Scandals and Routines: Sources for Insurgent Methodology," in *The TV Establishment,* ed. Gaye Tuchman (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1974), 53.

[67] Another study, conducted in 1980 of 4,039 respondents, revealed that the percentages of Hispanics watching the local and national news was similar to those of Anglos: 65% of Hispanics responded that they watched the national news the day before, compared to 70% of Anglos; 64% of Hispanics tuned in to the local news, where 68% of Anglos replied they did. See Bradley Greenberg et al, *Mexican Americans and the Mass Media* (Norwood, N.J.: Ablex Publishing Corporation, 1983), 93, table 4.6.

In 1960, Mexican Americans constituted 11.8 of the total population. Helen Rowan, *The Mexican American,* a Paper Prepared for the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights (Syracuse, N.Y. and Stockton, Calif.: Gaylord Pamphlet Binder, 1968), 1. A special census of East Los Angeles revealed the population to be about 75.6 percent Mexican American, page 3.

instead of building a community, it contributed to a feeling of "isolationism."[68] Patssi Valdez summed up this feeling of alienation, noting how it fed into the formation of the group: "We were all having dialogues about the different things that bothered us….You'd look at television and you didn't see yourself there, and if you did you were a cholo or a chola…like where am I in this picture? I don't exist anywhere."[69]

For Gronk, Gamboa, Hérron, and Valdez, watching television and movies engendered a forced identification with American domestic life, stereotypical Chicano villains or buffoons (such as the corn chip shill Frito Bandito), or narrow portraits of "Hispanic" life (as in *Chico and the Man*); few possibilities existed to break open these fixed categories, to picture the "lifestyles and historical contributions, language and culture, needs and aspirations of Latinos, a central aim of the Latin American Media Coalition."[70] Influential filmmaker Jesus-Salvador Treviño pled for reform in the imagery presented on television, demanding that the "broadcast media must actively participate in presenting a positive and realistic image of the Mexican American to the Anglo-American viewing and listening audience."[71] Yet Treviño questioned the effectiveness of doing so through television. In the "Media Is the Mistake," he mused, "Perhaps we must begin 'exposing' television to the public, denouncing its shortcomings, perhaps we can provide people with the tools to discern between the 'true' facts and the 'truer' facts, between the stereotype and the real person in front of them. But the question is how to communicate this information…through television?"[72]

Treviño's statements exposed two different issues: the first, correcting stereotypes with positive imagery, ran the risk of smoothing over the complexity of Chicano identity (and thus returning to the situation that Asco found problematic with murals). His second concern, a worry about the medium of television itself, was well founded, particularly because television obscures the line between fact and fiction. Television's two primary aims—entertaining and informing—

[68] Francisco J. Lewels, Jr., *The Uses of the Media by the Chicano Movement: A Study in Minority Access* (New York: Praeger, 1974), 48. Los Angeles radio station KWKW-AM had been broadcasting entirely in Spanish since 1956. By 1969, four television stations, all part of the Spanish International Network (SIN), were broadcasting in Spanish: New York's WXTV, Los Angeles' KMEX, San Antonio's KWEX, and Phoenix's KPAZ. See "Spanish Market: Undersold, Undervalued," *Broadcasting,* 19 September 1966, 67. Francisco Lewels confirms that SIN's programming came from Telesistema Mexicano, the largest producer of Spanish-language television shows in the world (47–48).
[69] Valdez speaking on the television documentary *Asco: Is Spanish for Nausea* included in *Performance Documentation, Performance Documentation, Video Art (Agent Ex), and Television Interviews*.
[70] Miller, "Spotlight on Media Reformers," 17. In the same issue of *Access,* Mindy Beck also noted objections to *Chico and the Man*, and explained that the show's producer, the Komack Company, made some adjustments in response to complaints. One such change? Chico was no longer referred to as a Chicano; Beck, "Minority Images on T.V.," 5.
[71] Treviño, "Mexican American and Mass Media," 3, box 13, folder 1, M624 Treviño papers, Department of Special Collections, Stanford University, hereafter referred to as Treviño papers.
[72] Treviño, "The Media is the Mistake," [n.d.], 5, box 13, folder 4, Treviño papers.

intermingle, producing distortions in the truthfulness of the events covered.[73] Using the medium against itself, so to speak, would be a difficult proposition, as Treviño surmised, because its apparent truthfulness was often accepted as a matter of course. Hispanic survey respondents affirmed this faith in the truth value of television, claiming it a competent medium to be trusted.[74] No Movies, "designed to create an impression of factuality," draw attention to the confusion of fact and stereotype, of mythic images and the complexities of the real world, rather than trying to distinguish between "true" and "truer" facts as demanded by Treviño.[75]

Asco's provisional solution sidestepped Treviño's conundrum by proffering a medium that used television for its effect but was most definitely not television at the same time (similar in function to Asco's adoption of "movie" as a productive descriptive category within which they could assume the ambitions of movies as culturally resonant documents, without buying into their limitations). As not-television, *Decoy Gang War Victim* nonetheless appropriates the ease of dissemination of information via TV for its effectiveness as a No Movie. The group's intervention in television—that the story was picked up by broadcasters at all—appears almost accidental, but this lack of intentionality perhaps boosted its effectiveness. Burgeoning media radicals, or "insurgent sociologists," according to Molotch and Lester, should seize the opportunity to "upset routine news-making, simultaneously contributing to social reconstruction and gathering data on the impediments to such reconstruction."[76] In this case, with the publicization of *Decoy Gang War Victim* as an actual event, Asco identified a fissure in TV news reporting and exposed it.[77] Their subsequent revelations of the fictitious story, intimated by the work's title, incite viewers to re-examine their acceptance of the news—if this hoax was picked up by the news, what else is being erroneously reported?

Asco also used its No Movies to call attention to the sensationalism of print media, the way in which the newspapers, like television, lured readers by appealing to their taste for violence. In *ASCO Celebrates the 9th Victim of the L.A. Slasher* (1975; **figure 36**), Valdez,

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[73] Dale Minor, "Contamination: Propaganda and the News," in *Mass Media: The Invisible Environment Revisited,* ed. Robert Glessing and William P. White (Chicago: Science Research Associates, 1976), 209.
[74] Bradley Greenberg et al, *Mexican Americans and Mass Media* (Norwood, N.J.: Ablex Publishing Corporation, 1983), 109, table 4.26. Responding to a question which asked interviewees to rate television and newspaper images on a scale of 5 to 1 (with 5 as best and 1 as worst), Hispanics surveyed in 1980 deemed television images competent (averaging 4.07 out of 5) and trusted (averaging 3.68 out of 5).
[75] Gamboa in Norte, "No Movie Maker," 12.
[76] What Molotch and Lester characterize as "routine events," Boorstin would deem a "pseudo-event"—both are "planned as events by those who have both a use for them and the ability to promote them as public"; Molotch and Lester, "Sources for Insurgent Methodology," 58–59, 65.
[77] The goal of interrupting status quo reporting dovetails with the aims of the video collective TVTV, in which the group offered alternative coverage of key political and social events, such as the Democratic and Republican nominating conventions, the Super Bowl, and the Academy Awards.

Hérron, Sandoval, Gronk, and Gamboa pose on a shallow set behind oversized simulated yellow roses, against a backdrop of a celestial sky (white orbs create the appearance of glimmering stars). The February 1, 1975, issue of the *Los Angeles Times* is raised aloft on the left-hand side, its sensational headline blaring, "Slasher: No. 9 Victim Found Dead in Hollywood." The front-page story announces a new victim of the serial killer then terrorizing Los Angeles' streets. The so-called "Skid Row Slasher" drew the most concentrated police effort in the city since the Manson killings and the assassination of Robert Kennedy, and received an attendant amount of press coverage.[78] The inclusion of the newspaper in their group self-portrait calls attention to the mechanisms by which newsmakers use fear and curiosity to sell issues. Striking through "Dead" in the headline is the stamp "Asco," changing the title's meaning: "Victim Found Asco in Hollywood." The demise of innocent civilians at the hands of a mass murderer corresponded to the rise of Asco—a dramatization of the way in which the industry benefits from the misfortunes of others. The title substitution also evokes the gut reaction one has at seeing the gruesome scene described in the news article. As is characteristic of their work, irony operates at several levels in this self-portrait, in that they are drawing on the very resources that they target to promote themselves.

Their awareness of media bias had increased after their participation in the 1970 Chicano moratorium protest. Recalling his experience at the moratorium and subsequent reports in the press, Gamboa, in particular, reacted to what he considered one-sided news coverage, claiming the media was "manipulating these images." At the protest, he recounted, "I saw cops beating up women, cops beating up little kids, and saw them shooting at people…I saw cops acting like dogs, but the next day in the newspapers the cops were represented as victims: all the photographs were images of the cops getting hit." A photograph in the *New York Times* (**figure 37**) confirms this sense, with the caption revealing "[s]heriff's deputies moving into group of youths at rally after rock and bottle throwing broke out in East Los Angeles, Calif."[79] Gamboa's distrust of the print media recalls Gronk and Hérron's 1970 black-and-white mural *Moratorium Mural* (**figure 24 and figure 25**)*,* which they offered as a counter to what they perceived as pro-police media coverage. The mural went part way to presenting their destructive view of the event and the press it elicited, yet Asco needed to go even further, actually taking photographs rather than simply drawing on a photographic or media language to make their point. Following the

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[78] The "Skid Row Slasher" dominated area-newspaper headlines, generating sensational buzz akin to the "Slasher: No. 9" heading. On Wednesday, December 29, 1976, Vaughn Orinn Greenwood was convicted for the majority of the murders.

[79] "48 Hurt in Riot at Peace Rally on Coast," *New York Times,* 30 August 1970, 64 (story from the AP wire).

moratorium riots Gamboa decided then he had only had one recourse: he needed to pick up a camera and began shooting. If he did not "capture these images and document the things I see, they're going to get lost and ultimately people will define them for me."[80] At stake in his adoption of the camera, then, was a desire for self-definition.

This moment also confirmed for Asco that covert protest, by re-routing or subverting routine news-making, proved a more desirable strategy for them to expose the operations of the media than by participating in organized demonstrations. Public protests called attention to issues that would most likely otherwise be ignored by mainstream media and were instrumental to the Chicano movement. Yet such staged group events, like the Chicano moratorium, had the unwanted effect of drawing attention away from the reason for the protest by highlighting the event itself (and opening itself up to lop-sided media coverage). This results from a double bind affecting groups lacking in media clout and social and political power; Molotch and Lester astutely observe that such groups "must typically assemble themselves in an inappropriate place at an inappropriate time in order to be deemed 'newsworthy.' The fact that they are forced to resort to spectacular displays, e.g., sit-ins, allows those with easy access to the media to respond to the 'inappropriate' display rather than to the questions which underlie it," a reality dramatized in the *New York Times* coverage of the moratorium protest.[81] The terms are thus dictated by the media, and the event becomes the topic of conversation rather than a vehicle for conveying a group's messages. Asco sought, with their No Movies and various performances, to provide their own frame for these events—a move at self-definition that had, in some ways, greater stakes than it did in the work of Ant Farm or General Idea.

Just as Asco operated within an expanded idea of cinema, using performance and still imagery as evidence of their cinematic practice, they also expand the medium of photography to include the circumstances of its display and discussions circulating around it. The broadcasting of the photograph, *Decoy Gang War Victim,* by the news media was central to the work's effect; in disseminating it, Asco expanded its frame of reference, from a shot of a staged outdoor performance to a document, however false, of one aspect of Chicano lived experience. It provided the impetus to set the photograph in motion.

Thus *Decoy Gang War Victim* pulls several frames of reference within its single image: a scene of a street crime, the crimes of the media in perpetuating non-corroborated stories of Chicano violence, and the art world actions of a group of vanguard pranksters. All artworks do

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[80] Gamboa quoted in C. Ondine Chavoya, "Social Unwest: An Interview with Harry Gamboa, Jr.," *Wide Angle* 20, vol. 3 (1998): 69.
[81] Quoted in *Window Dressing on the Set,* 55. Molotch and Lester, "Sources for Insurgent Methodology," 57.

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this to some extent, yet generally the additional valences result from interpretation, and are supplemental to the work itself. In the case of Asco's No Movies, these multiple frames of reference are a central and important aspect of the group's development of an embedded practice, creating works that cross-reference one another and generate spirals of associations and allusions. The story, and the hoax it perpetuated, thus became bound up in the work as a whole, rendering it impossible to discuss the photograph without the accompanying story (an interdependence encouraged by the group's frequent repetition of the tale of its TV broadcast). It is this retrospective presentation that fully realizes the work's intermedia potential.

This act of envisioning the framing device within the work's very ambit is a defining aspect of Asco's intermedial practice. They mix various media to produce their No Movies, choosing formats that were contextualizing agents in themselves—captions and photographs. and yet it is their dissemination and contextualization by the group that create the works as a whole, a circumstance Gamboa recognizes in a 1983 interview with Philip and Amy Brookman:

> [I]n combining visuals and performance and putting it back into still photography
> or creating scenes fro [sic] the camera, creating captions to go with the camera,
> sending them out and having them published as fact in journals and magazines
> and museums across, well across the world actually, and many people believing
> in our version of history.[82]

Art historian C. Ondine Chavoya characterizes this deception as "pseudographic" cinema, and in choosing this phrase, she aptly invokes both the sense of the works' pen-and-paper formats as well as their status as "false documents"—they appear to show scenes from movies or from life, as in *A la Mode* and *Decoy Gang War Victim,* for example, yet in reality are graphic counterfeits.[83] Yet I would like to suggest a different emphasis in Asco's No Movies. Works such as *Decoy Gang War Victim* are not simply falsifications of evidence and circumstance. What is most salient is that they *circulate* as something other than what they purport to be. Their framing by the group and reception by audiences constitute the No Movies' intermedia webs.

As seeming fragments, Asco's No Movies prompt questions about the whole, causing viewers to seek additional information, to fill in the blanks, to draw their own conclusions. Many of the works become dependent on the supplemental information the group provides about them—from interviews, from other works, from published statements and essays. The No Movies, as a way of seeing, are themselves framing devices that fold incidental data into their view, and thus they successfully incorporate ostensibly extraneous information under their

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[82] Harry Gamboa in Philip and Amy Brookman, interview with Asco, CALIFAS volume 3, transcript, 7.
[83] C. Ondine Chavoya, "Pseudographic Cinema: Asco's No Movies," *Performance Research* 3, no. 1 (Spring 1998): 1–23.

auspices, rendering integral to the form what is often merely supplemental.[84] The group seemed to understand that to make interventions one needed to tackle the *mechanisms* by which images were produced, circulated, and received. Moreover, any images they produce must evoke some potentially disturbing reality if they are to have any effect at all.

"Commit[ting] acts of perceptual sabotage":
The No Movie as a Feedback Loop and Signifying Cluster

In *Decoy Gang War Victim,* Asco inserted feedback into the traditional one-way transmission process of television news—the airing of a story on television to its reception by a viewer. They did so not by diverting the broadcast signal or developing their own television programming (tactics adopted by media groups such as the Videofreex and TVTV). Instead they interjected their own agenda into existing programming.

They also enveloped into their practice viewers' responses to their work, operating on a model that was itself based on a feedback loop.[85] Their group name testified to this receptivity. Originally an unnamed collaboration between the four principals, Asco derived their collective appellation from the disgusted remarks of viewers of their work, many of whom complained that the work "*me da asco*," or made them nauseated.[86] Viewers' responses guided the group's perspective on what it sought to accomplish with its impromptu street performances and circulating photographs, and Asco endeavored to discomfort its audiences, rather than lull them into a false sense of identification (a criticism they leveraged against muralism, film, and television). Espousing this sentiment, Willie Hérron proclaimed, "We wanted to reach inside and pull people's guts out," while Harry Gamboa softened the violence of their aims, noting that they "wanted to give people a certain kind of almost gastrointestinal response."[87] The visceral nature

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[84] In this respect the group differs from other conceptual artists, in which supplemental information is central to comprehending a work but not necessarily folded back into its form; see Alexander Alberro, *Conceptual Art and the Politics of Publicity* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2003).

[85] David Joselit makes a convincing argument for feedback practices as integral to 1960s and 1970s art forms and politics in *Feedback: Television Against Democracy* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2007).

[86] Patssi Valdez recalled that "we had an exhibit and I remember looking around the room and we were saying "Oh my god, this work gives me Asco" and recounted the moment on the television program *Asco: Is Spanish for Nausea*, produced by Beverley Jones Rupp and directed by Sean Peters and Beverley Jones Rupp, which is included on *Asco Video: Performance, Documentation, Video Art (Agent Ex), and Television Interviews* (1990), videocassette (90 min.) at Stanford University Libraries.

[87] Max Benavidez, "Interview with Willie Hérron," radio broadcast, KPFK-FM Los Angeles, 31 August 1981, audiocassette, Gamboa papers, quoted in C. Ondine Chavoya, "No Movies: The Art of False Documents," in *Only Skin Deep,* ed. Coco Fusco and Brian Wallis (New York: Abrams and the International Center for Photography, 2003), 199. Gamboa in Alicia Sandoval, *Let's Rap with Alicia*

of the reactions Asco sought contrasted with the intellectual objects of much conceptual art. Although Asco's interventions provoked thought, they went beyond arm-chair musings—they hoped to shock audiences into some sort of politically charged response. Hérron and Gamboa's statements recall the group's appropriation of the *Los Angeles Times* slasher story title, revealing how the group's approach differed less than they thought from the media's appeal to emotion rather than intellect.

Their stated goals also countered the aims of community organizers and social rights organizations. Asco hoped to enliven viewers, yes, but they did not channel their audience's responses into particular sanctioned actions. Their intentions were diffuse, and the effects of them sometimes intangible. In prompting a gut response from their viewers, Asco hoped to engender an engaged sense of seeing, where the eye was very much connected to a sentient body. Their works like *Decoy Gang War Victim* were efforts to "provoke the viewer to commit acts of perceptual sabotage."[88] Such perceptual sabotage involves recognizing and destroying entrenched ideologies to adopt a politicized approach, one that connoted a guerrilla sensibility that distinguished it somewhat from then-prevalent calls for "consciousness-raising." With their works, Asco hoped to "instigate people to take an active role in their own lives, changing it, controlling it."[89] This goal represented a different side to Chicanos' calls for imagery reform in the media—the questions did not solely revolve around correcting misrepresentations, but also involved empowering individuals as viewers to take control of their identities and how they were represented publicly, whether by muralists or in movies and on television. Gamboa explains his desire for people "to take an active role in the arts also. And to create cultures, not to become simply consumers of the residue."[90] Thus Asco's tactic of "perceptual sabotage" also encouraged a transformation from viewer-consumers to producer-saboteurs of an authentic experience.

Asco's model of viewer engagement differed from the ways murals addressed their publics. Instead it follows from a tradition not unlike the crumbling of the theater's fourth wall; it involves adjusting one's frame of reference to acknowledge the very performance itself and the viewer. *Decoy Gang War Victim* achieves this by letting some viewers in on the joke—those in the know, privy to the work's title and the explanations offered, realize the group's ruse. Harry Gamboa appeared on television programs, including one directed by Sean Peters and produced by Beverly Jones Rupp at Falcon Cable TV, and situated *Decoy Gang War Victim* relative to the

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Sandoval, television broadcast interview with Harry Gamboa, KTLA Channel 5, Los Angeles, April 1978, audiorecording, box 14, audiotape 2, program c, Gamboa papers.

[88] Harry Gamboa, Jr., "Light at the End of Tunnel Vision," in *Urban Exile,* 102.

[89] Harry Gamboa in Philip and Amy Brookman, interview with Asco, CALIFAS transcript, volume 3, 2.

[90] Ibid.

group's oeuvre.[91] In this televised segment, Gamboa laments how Los Angeles transforms its Chicano citizens into "consumers of unvaluable goods." In their No Movies, Asco dramatizes this principle—what is there to consume other than empty promises, stereotypical images, and trace actions? No Movies pretend to offer a scene from a filmed movie, suggesting a complete version exists for one's consumption, only to disappoint viewers when they realize that the "still" in question is merely a titillation, a document of a scene long since performed and never to be realized again. As non-material films, No Movies circulate discursively as cinema, yet offer scant consumable goods. In step with conceptual artists who sought the democratic promise of the "dematerialized art object," Asco offers the No Movie as a "rebuff to celluloidic capitalism of contemporary cinema," as Gronk announced in 1976.[92]

Borne of having literally two nickels to rub together, the No Movie presents a radical economy of means.[93] It rejects costly celluloid in favor of cheaper media—paper, photographs, performance. In this respect, the No Movie is accessible, democratic: anyone can make one. Few tools or supplies needed. Yet where film produces an enduring record of a particular moment, No Movies are transient. Although sometimes scripted, they impart an air of impromptu performance, which furthers the sense of their impermanence.[94] The group's inventiveness and resourcefulness when faced with few actual resources is emblematic of the Chicano sensibility of *rasquachismo,* an attitude of stylishly making do with what one what has. More than just making do, *rasquachismo* implies an "outsider viewpoint," one that originates from "a funky, irreverent stance that debunks convention and spoofs protocol."[95] Forging a pedigree that connects him with street-side vendors hawking their wares, Gronk consciously positions Asco within a *rasquache* sensibility: "I started peddling the concept of the No Movie on 87th and Broadway in 1974 trying to create an atmosphere where the No Movie could flourish amongst the masses. I was competing against the low budget street peddlers who had successfully pawned off their own concepts—jelly beans/white rice and their anti-animated versions of the end of the world."[96]

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[91] This program appears as part of the compilation *Asco Video*.

[92] For the dematerialized art object, see Lucy Lippard, "Escape Attempts" in *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972* (New York: Praeger, 1973). Gronk in "Interview: Gronk and Gamboa," 31.

[93] Gamboa relates the origins of the No Movie: "It started with 5 cents in my pocket and 5 cents in Gronk's pocket. With a dime between the two of us, we used it to call a mutual friend but he wasn't home. Gronk and I were broke but we still wanted to make a movie so we made one about two artists who only had a nickel each and who spend it foolishly but then get the idea of how they can make a movie" ("Interview: Gronk and Gamboa," 31).

[94] The group's early performances, such as *Walking Mural, Instant Mural,* and *Day of the Dead* were unscripted, whereas the No Movies from the 1980s often had a story that guided the group's posing.

[95] Tomas Ybarra-Frausto, "Rasquachismo: A Chicano Sensibility," in *Chicano Art: Resistance and Affirmation*, 155.

[96] "Gronk: Off the Wall Artist," 42.

Gronk twists a traditional beans-and-rice meal to "jelly beans and rice" as a nod to the way in which wit and style can be paired with a struggle for daily subsistence. This marriage of resourcefulness and humor is characteristic of the "underdog perspective—a view from los de abajo" that distinguishes *rasquachismo*.[97] It also suggests a post-modern position, which, contrary to the sense of postmodernism as an engagement in the world of appearances, Asco shares with the street peddlers very material concerns: the sense of operating on the basest level of society— on the street—with the basest means possible—themselves, their ideas—as survival tactics.

Rasquachismo encouraged pushing the limits of medium and good taste, and in this regard, Ant Farm and General Idea could also be seen to embody a *rasquache* attitude. Yet Asco had much more of a need for their rasquache stance, as they had access to fewer resources than the other two groups. Adopting this "witty, irreverent and impertinent posture that recodes and moves outside established boundaries," as Tomás Ybarro-Frausto has described, allowed Asco to expand the formal category of cinema to include their performances, photographs, and text-and-image graphic work.[98] In high school, the group members (before they came to collaborate as Asco) were known as stylish and fast-talking "Jetters," a lifestyle Gamboa characterized "as a means to deny/defy the harsh realities which confronted them. All you needed was a quick wit, a sharp tongue, a cool dance step, attitude, the latest clothes, and enough cologne so that you'd smell good from a block away."[99] This shared attitude bonded them to one another early. Looking back on the group's formation, Gronk recalled thinking, "We've got a lot of things in common. We're sort of, all four of us, sort of outcasts in a way. We look slightly different than a lot of people out there." He continued,

> Our look is part of who we are, in a way. And it is something about us that Harry would document a lot of our activity, and we would look at the slides and say, "Gee, that looks like a movie." Or, "We sort of look like characters. I mean, like very young . . . that we can make a lot of different imagery, just ourselves, utilizing just us."[100]

Documenting their own working process was part of the group's means of self-identification and was built into the No Movie concept from the very beginning. They literally gave themselves a new viewpoint through which to understand their place in society at the time, as stylish outsiders drawing on their Chicano and American influences. Their lifestyle politics were intricately related to the works they created, and the way looked shaped their thoughts on cinema as an available mechanism to frame conceptually what they were doing and what they hoped to accomplish.

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[97] Ybarra-Frausto, "Rasquachismo," 156.
[98] Ibid., 155.
[99] "Ismania," in *Urban Exile*, 258.
[100] Gronk, interview with Jeffrey Rangel, 20 and 23 January 1997, Los Angeles, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

The jetter stance reprises the flair and attitude of the 1930s and '40s *pachuco,* a self-styled outsider in zoot suit and pompadour. The *pachuco* represented a subculture that actively resisted assimilation in their behavior, dress, and speech, and did so in flamboyant fashion.[101] Likewise, Asco's attitude distinguished themselves from other Chicano artists, just as their undeniable glamour, a sensibility that could only come from living within view of the Hollywood sign, distanced them from East coast conceptualists, whose art tended towards the cool and austere. Their fondness for linguistic play, itself a province of conceptualism, was also more along the lines of merry prankster than academic investigator, reveling more in the spiraling of associative connections than in the unraveling of linguistic systems.

Thus Asco's particular dialect forms an integral aspect of the No Movie's intervention. Their No Movies exhibit alliteration, puns, and rhyme in heavy measure. The pun, as conceptualized by Deborah Fried, "transforms and unshapes"—it disorders meaning, and generates new connections and contexts. Puns in Asco's practice become a means of engendering an active audience, of shifting the perceptual burdens on viewers to create meaning, to make new connections. Their punning sensibility is central to the group's forging of a networked identity, in which their efforts are but single nodes within a dense connective web.

In Asco's lexicon No Movies involve "projecting the real by rejecting the reel." The certainty of both categories—reel and real—is destabilized by the pun, as the homonyms produce confusion when heard and signal this sentence as a site of meaning production when written. The substitution of a single vowel suggests a transformation from a realm of reproduction (the reel) to ostensibly what is reproduced (the real). If we consider the pun, as Gregory Ulmer suggests, as a "research strategy," as "a signifying cluster … to bring together material for thought and to suggest structural relationships, curious turns," Asco's clever wordplay becomes an intervention in the instrumentalized language they choked on in school, and a means of reasserting the textual within the filmic.[102] Puns and double entendres, as George Lipsitz observes, "undermine the

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[101] Benavídez and Vozoff, "The Wall," 46. They explain, "In a very real way, Anglos had no frame of reference for the *pachuco*'s deviant mannerisms." In addition to their dress and behavior, Pachucos spoke *Caló,* a dialect combining Spanish Gypsy Caló, Mexican Spanish, New Mexican Spanish, and American English.

[102] Jonathan Culler, "The Call of the Phoneme: Introduction," in *On Puns: The Foundations of Letters,* ed. Jonathan Culler (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988), 15. Solely a Spanish speaker when he began school, Gamboa explains he was stigmatized by having to duff the dunce's cap, labeled "Spanish," in school, suffering an indignation that likely inspired him to repurpose English as a weapon. In an interview with Linda Frye Burnham, Gamboa announced his resolve: "I made it a point that I was going to speak English better than they did. I was going to turn it against them," and later he asserted, "My weapon became language." Burnham, "Asco," 58, and Chavoya, "Social Unwest," 68.

instability of words."[103] Their linguistic turns also function to open up interpretive possibilities, to create additional sites of meaning production by foregrounding the viewer's central role in "getting it," in realizing the pun and forming his/her own connections. This has the effect of creating a linguistic subculture, a grouping that one may enter voluntarily by adopting the discourse conventions and a means of keeping others at bay; these publics based on language customs recall the *pachucos'* development of their own slang as well as the word play in the Eternal Network.

In *Action Project Pie in Deface* (also known as *Spray Paint LACMA*), the performance's title offers a spin on slapstick "pie in the face" humor and graffiti as "defacement" of the museum's walls (**figure 38**). In 1972 Gamboa, Hérron, and Gronk tagged the Los Angeles County Museum of Art's walls in protest of a comment allegedly made by one of the museum's curators, who, when asked about exhibiting Chicano art there, responded, "Oh Chicanos don't do art; they're in gangs."[104] As a countermeasure to the curator's ignorance, the "gang" of four asserted the turf-claiming medium graffiti as an artistic reclamation; Asco's act of vandalism effectively became the first Chicano work displayed at the museum, an inversion cleverly intimated by the work's title. The spray-painted autographs also act as a self-conscious riff on tagging and muralism, media adopted by Chicanos to reclaim public spaces that were subsequently widely publicized as evidence of a new Chicano aesthetic. "Urban calligraphy," as graffiti was deemed by scholars such as Marcos Sánchez-Tranquilino and Jerry and Sally Romotsky, held positive valences as *barrio* art production, evidence of the "making do" mentality.[105] However, the space claimed by Asco in their tags was not the *barrio*, but the museum, as the group sought to oppose the effacement of Chicano art as a result of the institution's curatorial practices with their own very literal defacement of museum property. Asco's signatures thus became pies in the faces of the curators who refused to see what Gamboa described as Chicano's "phantom culture." The traces of the performance, promptly whitewashed, circulated by means of the photograph—of a pensive Patssi Valdez standing behind the graffitied façade—and by the subsequent mentions of the action by the group members and others. Eventually even defiant gestures like these are validated and institutionalized, a process

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[103] George Lipsitz, "Facing Up to What's Killing Us: Artistic Practice and Grassroots Social Theory," in Elizabeth Long, ed., *From Sociology to Cultural Studies: New Perspectives* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 1997), 240.

[104] Gamboa recounts this tale in the television program "Asco: Is Spanish for Nausea," an interview included in the compilation *Asco Video.*

[105] See Sánchez-Tranquilino, "Murales del Movimiento" and Jerry Romotsky and Sally R. Romotsky, *Los Angeles Barrio Calligraphy* (Los Angeles: Dawson's Book Shop, 1976) for more on "urban calligraphy" and how it differs from vandalism. See also Willie Hérron, interview Jeffrey Rangel, City Terrace, East Los Angeles, 5 February 2000, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

of which we are reminded in the LACMA's use of the work as a key image for its recent exhibition of Chicano art.[106]

The work's title frames the group's action and places it within a context, "a signifying cluster," and prompts the viewer to look for outside information, to consult additional sources to uncover added layers. As with the photograph in *Decoy Gang War Victim,* without the additional elements, the photograph is essentially unreadable and formally unremarkable: it becomes simply a picture of an unidentified woman standing on a walkway behind three unknown names tagged on a building. Yet within the "signifying cluster" initiated by the questions the title word play prompts (Why is this a pie in the face? What is being defaced?), the ramifications of the group's intervention become clearer.

The titles of Asco's works function within a different discursive register than the performances themselves. They provide clues after the fact, hinting at the possible meanings suggested by the performances and by the discussions of them subsequently. The witty titles offer fodder for those writing about the group's work, for the artists, critics, and historians looking at the photographic representations and trying to place Asco's art within aesthetic categories. In evoking the "signifying clusters" initiated by puns, Asco maintains the circulation of their work through these discursive circles. This signaled their desire to be both inside and outside the mainstream, attempting to approximate the in-between position for which Gómez-Peña later advocated.

The group's unstinting use of puns also counters the transience of orality at the heart of performance. The odd juxtapositions of words, the way that the rhymes resound in one's head or remain trapped on the tongue, serve as reminders of Asco's work. The vivid word play keeps the ideas in circulation, motivating the "signifying clusters" to expand and move throughout the network. In this respect the group's practice resembles that of General Idea, the Canadian trio discussed in chapter 4.

"Thinking within an 8 ½" x 10" format…Postal distribution":
Circulating No Movies by Mail

Unlike Ant Farm and General Idea, whose sense of collaboration was encouraged by a McLuhanesque techno-utopianism, Asco's communal sensibility grew out of a growing Chicano

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[106] The Los Angeles County Museum of Art mounted the exhibition, *Phantom Sightings: Art after the Chicano Movement*, from 6 April to 1 September 2008 and published an illustrated catalogue of the same title.

culture formed around issues of community and collaboration. The emergence of community workshops, murals, rallies and political organizations created an environment where collaboration was encouraged and viewed as a necessary condition of political change. Artists in particular formed *colectivas* (collectives) or founded *centros culturales* (cultural centers) in order to forge a "network to enhance the development of a practical body of knowledge that could be used as a reference for all Chicanos."[107]

An important precedent for socially conscious Chicano site-specific installation and performance art was El Teatro Campesino, founded in 1965 by playwright Luis Valdez to capture the plight of Chicanos. Valdez believed that Chicanos "wouldn't really register politically until we had the artists who could express what the people are feeling and saying."[108] El Teatro Campesino uncovered indigenous imagery and Pre-Columbian models to express the Chicano experience, a practice of cultural retrospection from which Asco ultimately diverged—they sought to produce an art that looked forward, that incorporated elements from contemporary Chicano life in urban America. Nonetheless El Teatro Campesino was instructive for politicizing Chicano performance practices as central to a reform ideology.

In addition to El Teatro Campesino, the prevalence of muralism as an artistic model encouraged collaboration and a corresponding sense of community awareness as a means of self-determination, which as we have seen Asco eventually rejected, and several Chicano artists' groups emerged in the 1970s who were involved in mural production.[109] Such prominent groups included Los Four, a collective of primarily muralists founded in 1973, and Royal Chicano Air Force (RCAF), Sacramento-based artists and community organizers.[110] Both Los Four and RCAF were active in producing new institutional spaces for Chicano involvement, with the former publishing the journal *Chismearte* (in which some of Asco's work appeared) and the latter establishing the Centro de Artistas Chicanos, an environment of artistic exchange, support, and collaboration accessible to the public. The RCAF's *centro* was among many Chicano community centers and artist-run organizations forming in California in the 1970s, such as Mechicano Art Center, Self-Help Graphics, and Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions in Los Angeles and Galeria de la Raza in San Francisco. This growth in alternative exhibition spaces was fueled by

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[107] José Montoya, "Thoughts on la Cultura," 7.

[108] William Murray, "'Zoot Suit': The Triumph of El Pachuco," *New West* 3 (11 September 1978): 47, quoted in S. Zaneta Kosiba-Vargas, 30.

[109] Robert Rosenblum, *Mexican Resistance in the Southwest: 'The Sacred Right of Self-Preservation'* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 53–67.

[110] RCAF began in 1969 as the Rebel Chicano Art Front, but changed their name in a joking response to a common misconception that their acronym stood for "Royal Canadian Air Force." The origins of the group name recall the way in which Asco also relied on audience feedback to arrive at their collective designation.

the rise of performance and installation practices, which Claudine Isé argues, "shifted the locus of creative activity from the lone artist to a shared creative and interpretive process between artist and audience."[111] Los Angeles in particular offered few established museums for contemporary artists to display their work—Nancy Drew lamented that, with the take-over of the Pasadena Art Museum by Norton Simon in 1974, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art became "the only game in town"—yet new spaces emerged in the 1970s that encouraged spontaneity and experimentation and offered possibilities for developing artists.[112]

Although by the mid-1970s Asco had soured on community murals as a viable expression of their experiences, they continued to believe in the possibilities of collective action. Gronk envisioned this as the imperative of "the true avant-garde," which "works within the community to change the environment, to change a real situation, not a manufactured one. Working to change a real situation is a lot more avant-garde than someone wrapping a building or doing a performance in an art gallery for an art audience."[113] Gronk's expresses the group's occasional frustration at its lack of renown compared to more celebrated artists such as Christo and Chris Burden, a sentiment shared by several scholars in their attempts to situate Asco's practice within an avant-garde tradition.[114] The vanguard nature of Asco's work is not in question here, nor does it offer a particularly fruitful line of inquiry. Examining the way in which the group "worked to change a real situation" by actively intervening in their environment is much more significant, especially in what it reveals about the art scene in the 1970s. Yet how in practice did the group's interventions differ from those artists "doing a performance in an art gallery for an art audience?"

Although the group's work was predominantly framed by critics as Chicano art and discussed in these terms almost exclusively, Asco themselves sought a wide audience, not necessarily just Chicano viewers or art-world regulars. In practice, however, they addressed these publics most often. That their early works drew disgusted audience reactions indicates a certain lack of art-world savvy on the part of their early viewers, who were likely not familiar with the performance tactics Gronk alludes to in the above statement. Indeed some of the effectiveness of their early works derives from their shock value, particularly in their street performances in East Los Angeles such as *Instant Mural* and *Walking Mural*. These were not the actions expected of

[111] Claudine Isé, "Considering the Art World Alternatives: LACE and Community Formation in Los Angeles," in *The Sons and Daughters of Los: Culture and Community in L.A.,* ed. David E. James (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2003), 86–87.
[112] Drew documents 23 such organizations that opened from 1968 to 1980 in Los Angeles in "L.A.'s Space Age," in *LACE: 10 Years Documented,* exh. cat. (Los Angeles: Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions, 1988).
[113] Max Benavidez, "The World According to Gronk," *L.A. Weekly* 4, no. 37 (13–19 August 1982), 30.
[114] See, in particular, C. Ondine Chavoya and S. Zaneta Kosiba-Vargas.

politically active, up-and-coming Chicano artists, yet this youthful posturing and self-positioning was central to the group's early work, when they were still shaping their aesthetics and setting the scene for their later interventions.

Part of seeking a wider audience was adopting appropriate media, and they selected a decidedly low-tech high distribution means: mailed photographs, stamped "Chicano cinema," provided maximum impact for a minimum outlay of resources. Claiming the No Movie as a means of "[t]hinking within an 8 ½" x 10" format…Postal distribution," Asco adopted a postal campaign supplemented by word of mouth to circulate the group's work throughout Los Angeles, Chicano, and art world circles.[115] In 1983 Harry Gamboa reflected on the origins of the group's approach:

> Well it started off using spraypaint in the schoolroom, but a lot of it has been to get a lot of these different images out to a lot of people, and to give a lot of younger people a lot of new ideas. And ideas in the sense that…are within <u>reach</u> of anyone. And I guess that's one of the main reasons that we've always sort of worked with mediums that are affordable and available is that you know, using paper, using ourselves, using simple cameras, slides, you know. And the whole thing is to make the best use of ourselves and our words, our concepts, because you can reach a lot of people with that, and a lot of our people have that."[116]

In this passage, Gamboa raises the issue of access to resources, not just for the members of Asco but also for other East Los Angelenos. Yet Gamboa also inverts the negative aspects that stem from a lack of access—to expensive art materials, to art-world institutions—into a positive, by noting how this afforded them the possibility of turning on young audience to the power of ideas and creativity.

Moreover, they used themselves as malleable forms—or as General Idea would term it, "available formats to inhabit." They dressed up as different characters with different cultural valences—the Virgin of Guadalupe, a movie star, a band of psychotic criminals in 1974's the *Gore Family*. Doing so enabled them to complicate and re-situate various identities without having to monmentalize a single one. Thus built into their make-do approach was a lifestyle politics that addressed the political realities of being Chicanos born and raised in the United States without allowing themselves to be circumscribed by those very categories. Whether they reached broad publics or not, their rhetoric addresses and includes them. No Movies offered a vehicle that was affordable, available, and suitable means of conveying their ideas.

The mail art scene offered an appropriate forum to distribute their No Movies, as it boasted the same low-budget, low-tech, high-concept, high-circulation ethos as Asco. The group

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[115] "Interview: Gronk and Gamboa," 31.

[116] Harry Gamboa in Philip and Amy Brookman, interview with Asco, CALIFAS volume 3, transcript, 10–11.

adopted the No Movie format when they realized "that a multimillion dollar project could be accomplished for less than ten dollars and have more than 300 copies circulating around the world."[117] One such work, *FADEIN/FADEOUT* (**figure 45**)*,* is annotated with its print run (130), a move which signals the reproducibility of this kind of "No Movie," its ease of distribution.[118] Handwritten instructions on handling a revolver accompany a labeled line drawing of fingers loading a bullet into said gun (this drawing also appears in another of the group's mail art projects, *Pistol Whippersnapper*). The line break of the final instruction emphasizes the action— to shoot—making a slick approximation between shooting a gun and shooting a camera. Likewise, in light of the threat of a gunshot, the "FADEIN" and "FADEOUT" tags take on added significance, as if the final moments before death.   The confluence of elements make an obvious play on the conflation of cinematic violence and actual violence, which then becomes aestheticized through dramatic performance or artistic conventions. That device recalls Gamboa's contention, "As Hollywood continues to shoot Chicanos, Chicanos will have to shoot right back," and confirms the No Movie as a means of assuming a counter stance.[119]

Particularly active in the correspondence scene was Gronk, who carried on an intra-mails relationship with Jerry Dreva, a member of Les Petites Bonbons. The Bonbons contributed to the Canadian group General Idea's *FILE* network, revealing the extensive webs made possible by circulation via the mails. In one letter, Dreva announces his departure from Toronto and borrows General Idea's quirky terminology, referencing the "Hand of the Spirit," a prop the group used in photo shoots that became a sort of fetish object circulating in General Idea's network, and the "borderline," a condition the Canadian trio expressed as a fault line between nature and culture. [120] In his correspondence with Gronk, Dreva dresses himself in the argot common to the artists of the *FILE* mail network, reproducing the creative spellings ("tore" for "tour," for example), witty substitutions ("U$" to signal the country's commercialism), and string of allusions used to indicate one's membership in the Eternal Network.

Asco shared an artistic sensibility with Dreva's Les Petites Bonbons, who from 1972 to 1974 performed the role of a glam rock band without actually playing any music; instead, they

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[117] Ibid., 32.

[118] The marking of the edition number also reinscribes the No Movie within a fine arts tradition of printmaking, conforming to the system that dictates small editions and print numbers as indicators of value. A certain irony is generated by all the different aesthetic traditions alluded to in this example of the group's mail art.

[119] Gamboa, "Silver Screening the Barrio," *Equal Opportunity Forum* 6, no. 1 (Nov. 1978): 7.

[120] Dreva writes, "En route to New York. After telephone farewells and brunch on Yonge Street the tour reluctantly departs from Toronto… Les Bons Bons on the Borderline, dozen pigs with dog ransack Vega & tear thru luggage. The Hand of the Spirit is abused by U$ Border Patrol." Dreva, letter to Gronk, 17 May 1974, quoted in Max Benavidez, *Gronk*, 55. For more on the Hand of the Spirit and the Eternal Network, see chapter 1, 21–22; on the "borderline case," see chapter 4.

marketed their activities as if they were a bonafide band, and photographs of the Bonbons circulated in the press. The Bonbons were, according to Dreva, a "conceptual rock 'n roll group":

> We've never performed anywhere, but we're in to all these magazines and publications. We were in People magazine and they photographed us in front of Rodney's Disco, and we've announced that we're going to be in all these different cities, but we've never picked up a guitar or played a musical note ever.[121]

The Bonbons' "rock 'n roll swindle," as Jeffrey Rangel dubs it, resembles Asco's duplicity with their No Movies. In the case of both groups, they sought the fame and recognition that came with being musicians, for the glitter rock group, and moviemakers, for the Chicano collective, yet both eschewed the traditional creation of products associated with those industries. Instead they reproduced the mechanisms by which stars created desire in the public, namely, by having their photographs taken and published in magazines and newspapers, and by having rumors and stories circulate about them. (Henry Luce's *Life* exemplified this phenomenon, which General Idea also advanced through their periodical *FILE*.)

Self-publicity was a defining aspect of the celebrity lifestyle, and both Asco and the Bonbons actively promoted their own activities. Dreva's fascination "with the power of the media to create and define" led him to accept a position at a Wisconsin newspaper where he anonymously chronicled his own goings-on.[122] He later circulated copies of these press stories through the mail art network, which broadened the audience for his work beyond his local Wisconsin circle and which served as a validation of his efforts. Likewise Asco manufactured

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[121] Dreva quoted by Gronk in his interview with Jeffrey Rangel, 20 and 23 January 1997, Los Angeles, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, accessible at http://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/oralhistories/transcripts/gronk97.htm.
  Dreva considered the Bonbons "an overtly gay band of cultural revolutionary guerrillas." He explained that "conventional radical politics was of its very nature an anti-gay medium—or at least *un*-gay, if not *anti*-gay." Thus he formed the Bonbons with Bob Lambert, Chuckie Betz, and others in the attempt of "integrating art and life and cultivating androgyny." Being "gay" for Dreva meant "liberated and liberating lifestyles, the unification of fantasy and reality, art and life" and this expanded idea of identity as a practice informed his work with the Bonbons and his later performances. "Have You Heard from Dreva?" *High Performance* (Spring 1980): 27.

[122] In *High Performance,* Dreva describes his stint at the Wisconsin newspaper: "Eventually I began to document my own life/art performances (many of them illegal) anonymously on the pages of the newspaper I worked for." See "Have You Heard from Dreva?" 24. See also Alex P. Dobish, "Aha! South Side's Kilroy Unmasks Himself," *The Milwaukee Journal,* 8 June 1980, 1, 15. For more on Dreva, see Jennie Orvino, "The Art of Jerry Dreva," *Cityside,* 5 June 1978, 7, 10, and Stewart Home, *The Assault on Culture* (Stirling: A.K. Press, 1991), 69–73, also available at http://www.stewarthomesociety.org/ass/ma.htm. The Jerry Dreva folder in the Alternative Traditions in the Contemporary Arts: Artists' Works and Correspondence Files at the University of Iowa Special Collections contains mail art, articles, and correspondence from Dreva. The Lucy R. Lippard papers at the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, also includes mailers and correspondence from Dreva and Les Petites Bonbons.

their own publicity, through interviews, photographs, exhibitions, and news articles. Gamboa, the most prolific writer of the group, would often interview the other members of Asco, such as in the article, "Gronk: No Movie Maker" or "Hérron and Gronk: Muralists." These tactics enabled Asco to control the information circulating about them.

Rasquachismo was central to performing the lifestyle Asco wanted. Their stylish comportment represented their improvised version of Hollywood glamour, just as their No Movies were their iterations of film and television's offerings. Asco, like General Idea, was both hyper-aware of the superficiality of the celebrity machine and completely enraptured by it. General Idea famously asserted (with only partial irony), "We wanted to be famous, glamourous [*sic*] and rich. That is to say we wanted to be artists and we knew that if we were famous and glamourous we could say we were artists and we would be. We never felt we had to produce great art to be great artists."[123] For Asco, as for the Bonbons and General Idea, the circulation of stories about them was enough to prove their existence and their importance. By being seen out at hip venues, wearing appropriately outlandish and stylish clothes, and garnering press coverage, Asco and the other art groups explored the superficiality of celebrity, the way in which fame resulted not from an individual's display of great character or achievement but instead from the greatness of his press coverage. A "human pseudo-event," the celebrity is known simply for being known, a circumstance historian Daniel J. Boorstin lamented arose from "the democracy of pseudo-events," where "anyone can become a celebrity, if only he can get into the news and stay there."[124] In performing the lifestyle and personae of musicians and moviemakers, both Asco and the Bonbons capitalize on the media's need to manipulate the public's attention, their desire to be fashionable and in touch with what is new and cool. Like General Idea, they latched onto the media's function as a tastemaker, just as galleries, museums, and periodicals are tastemakers in the art world. As a result, both groups' practices form implicit critiques of the superficiality of a system that substitutes publicity for substance, yet they also benefit tremendously from the very mechanisms their works criticize. Like Andy Warhol and Gilbert and George, they also make it integral to the very substance of their art, ironizing it performatively.

If General Idea's "Glamour" manifesto asserted the Canadian group's attitude, then Asco's No Movie *A la Mode* is their ode to living a witty, stylish life. In the most frequently reproduced photograph from the series, Patssi Valdez seductively and haughtily eyes the camera, blouse unbuttoned, gloved hand possessively grasping Gronk's shoulder as if to claim him and push him into the background (**figure 39**). Served up on a restaurant table, framed by familiar

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[123] General Idea, "Glamour," *FILE* 3, no. 1 (Autumn 1975): 21.
[124] Boorstin, *Image,* 60.

diner fixtures, sugar container, salt shaker, and napkin dispenser, Valdez embodies a dish in both its literal sense and its slang association. She also represents a glamorous and fashionable sensibility: she is á la mode. Further details about the performance, provided by Gronk, reveal that she symbolizes a scoop of ice cream atop a slice of pie, that quintessential diner fare, which was hidden beneath the table (and the camera's view).[125] "A la Mode," Gamboa added, "was based on the relationship between scoop and slice, a matter of the subliminal violence in submission."[126] Gamboa's quip introduces the possibility of "subliminal violence," in submitting to having one's photograph taken, in submitting to fashion. The violence of gang warfare, of the media's biased coverage of Chicanos, and of sensational headlines has become fully aestheticized and hyperbolized in *A la Mode.*

Staged at the well-known Los Angeles eatery Philippe's, *A la Mode* occurs in a site where members of different communities drop in for a bargain-priced cup of coffee or famous French dip sandwich, snagging a seat at any table available. In a commercial part of the city close to Union Station, Chinatown, and the barrio, Phillipe's is, as David James observes, "a liminal space where geographic and social boundaries intersect." [127] Philippe's represents a site where different social identities are negotiated. Yet the argument James does not make and which is perhaps most instructive here, is that Asco used the culturally fraught category of film to explore these negotiations in their No Movies. As in their choice of site for *Walking Mural*, in *A la Mode* (and other No Movies) they make productive use of the frisson of the site and their intermedia presentation to envision new images and narratives that seek to rival the purchase of Hollywood in society. James codes their choice of symbolic sites as their entry into a politics of exclusion: "For Asco, the premise of the entire *No Movies* project was able to link an infatuation with Hollywood, their pained awareness that it excluded them, and also a refusal of that exclusion."[128] He rightly characterizes the push-and-pull of Asco's relationship to Hollywood— the lure of the glamour and the rejection of falling outside its purview—yet he places too much weight on their exclusion. Partly this is because he sees only limited options for how subaltern groups can participate in Hollywood: at the systemic level, he claims, they can fight for positions

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[125] Gronk, interview with Jeffrey Rangel.

[126] Gamboa, "The No Movie Interview," 31.

[127] David E. James, "Hollywood Extras: One Tradition of 'Avant Garde' Film in Los Angeles," *October* 90 (Autumn 1999): 20. Macdonald Harris, writing in the *New York Times* in 1990*,* goes as far as to assert that Philippe's "typifies the democratic spirit of Los Angeles." He supports his claim by noting how "you share your table with anybody who happens to sit down next to you. There is an air of camaraderie among the customers, a kind of unspoken friendliness and consideration that's rare in a big city… The customers are people of all kinds: shoppers, residents of nearby Chinatown, businessmen, Amtrak workers from the station, people who have been coming here for years and are now bringing their children." Harris, "Real Food in L.A.," *New York Times,* 4 March 1990, section 6, 35.

[128] James, "Hollywood Extras," 23.

in the industry or form their own alternatives to it; at the film level, they can produce images and stories that represent accurately their identities or they can appropriate those of the industry to expose them as one-dimensional and stereotypical. For as much as Hollywood had captured Asco's collective imagination, their No Movies reveal a sense of possibilities not allowed for by James' (or Treviño's, for that matter) binaries. Asco's No Movies are not just about exposing questions of access and exclusion, although they do that too: *A la Mode*, for example, shows Asco to be using the form to capture a public imagination and to channel stardom within a culturally complex site, and in doing so, address publics much wider than Hollywood's narrowcasting.[129]

     A la Mode illustrates a collapse between Asco's way of living—*rasquachismo*, their stylish Jetter attitude—and their way of seeing the world. It encapsulates the No Movie as a framing device to elevate the everyday. Gamboa explained how the palpable desire emanating from Hollywood changed the way the city's inhabitants see the world (and their place in it):

> If the smog is not too severe when you stand atop nearly any rooftop in Los Angeles, you can see the Hollywood sign as it beckons to the world with its multibillion-dollar myth. When you climb back down into your own backyard and walk along the streets, everything can be considered a façade, everyone can be acknowledged as an "extra," and you can be the brightest-burning star.[130]

No Movies provide a mechanism to achieve, document, and disseminate this transformation. Thus Patssi Valdez becomes a *barrio* version of Sophia Loren, a comparison Gronk later noted.[131] The No Movies attest to the way in which Asco sought to refract the allure and glamour of Hollywood to their own work (demonstrated in *Vogue* from 1978, figure **40**). Several No Movies Asco made in 1977 and 1978 recall famous film classics revisited by Asco: *La Dolce* (also known as *Fountain of Aloof*), in which Patssi Valdez and sometime Asco collaborator Billy Estrada evokes the Trevi Fountain scene with Marcello Mastroianni and Anita Ekberg from *La Dolce Vita,* and *Waiting for Tickets* (**figure 41**), a send-off of Battleship Potemkin's "Odessa Steps"

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[129] Asco's *First Supper (After a Riot),* performed on Christmas Eve, 1974, also makes use of the significance of its site for its effect. In this performance, Pattsi Valdez, Humberto Sandoval, Willie Hérron, and Gronk stage an impromptu meal on a traffic island at the intersection of Arizona Street and Whittier Boulevard. The island had been constructed on the site of a police mass shooting which had taken place in 1973 during a public demonstration. The damage sustained during the shooting was significant, and subsequently many of the surrounding buildings, sidewalks, and street were repaired or rebuilt, a sort of whitewashing over the physical reminders of what had happened there. The group surrounded themselves with elements from Día de los Muertos celebrations, an act that signaled their memory of what had occurred and yet also promoted their desire for peace in their neighborhood. The group performed *Instant Mural* just after *First Supper.*

[130] Gamboa, "Light at the End of Tunnel Vision," 99. General Idea also conceives of various publics as "extras," particularly in their series of audience rehearsals.

[131] Gronk, interview by Sternad-Flores and Gonzalez, 54.

montage, in which Valdez and Estrada play lovers in a suicide pact, tumbling to their demise after they had waited for tickets at the city's Music Center, a symbol of "legitimate" high culture. Gronk explained, "I didn't want to accept Hollywood as something that I was rejecting entirely, no. I'm going to utilize it and incorporate that into the body of work that I'm creating."[132] The way in which they incorporated Hollywood—and by Hollywood, Asco generally meant both film and television—into their work was by harnessing its appeal and the means by which it minted stars.

To this end, Asco organized their own awards presentation in 1978. The No Movie awards recognized standard cinema categories in acting, directing, costume design and art direction, editing, special effect, sound, writing, and best "No Movie Similar to the Decca Dance's Sphinx d'Or awards or General Idea's 1984 Miss General Idea Pageant, the No Movie awards were a parody of the industry's means of patting itself on the back. There was, predictably, great overlap in the nominees, as well as some ironies and surprises (sound editing for almost entirely silent scenes?). In a reversal of standard award-show protocol, Teddy Sandoval, a male performance and mail artist, was nominated for best actress in *The Frida Kahlo Story*/*La historia de Frida Kahlo*, because he played the titular character to Gronk's Diego Rivera; as with Gronk's Miss Gallery Pageant or General Idea's own pageant, Asco overturned gender expectations and celebrated camp in their spoof. Each of the parody ceremonies represents a certain desire to be included in the official cultural mechanisms, and yet they also mock the exclusivity, formulaic staging, and silliness of the proceedings.

Yet for Asco, even more was at stake in their iteration of the time-tested bestowal of industry honors. The No Movie awards recognized that there was an industry to celebrate, however fledgling. They also tapped into the battles for cultural nationalism that had come to prominence during the Chicano Movement when they also named them the Aztlán awards, in reference to the symbolic place for Chicano movement activists advocating for a return of ancestral lands inappropriately annexed by the United States. For Asco, Aztlán seemed as mythical a place as Hollywood, as both represented people's dreams and desires. Thus the No Movie awards embodied the cinematic mode, as described by Sheldon Renan and Nezar AlSayyad, in representing both filmmakers' desires for a public and also the public's own desires that movies bred and reinforced. In Asco's case, it provided a concrete representation and acknowledgment of their work as well, even if they were fabricated awards for non-existent films. A photograph of Patssi Valdez receiving one such honor in the form of a spraypainted gold plaster cobra trophy highlights her "star" quality as it declares a newly minted star, as she

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[132] Ibid.

sparkles in a low-cut dress (**figure 42**).The No Movies awards dramatized the limited access Chicano artists and filmmakers faced (as well as Hollywood's restrictive gender norms) and yet also revealed their ingenuity and humor. Moreover, the No Movie awards served as both recognition ceremony and as a No Movie in its own right, exemplifying the No Movie's role as a framing device for their overall practice.

In evoking the voices that commented on it so effortlessly, such as the statements by Gamboa and Gronk about the work, *A la Mode* mimics the publicity drummed up for films both pre- and post-release by fan forums, press coverage, and actor appearances. Interlaced within the photographic is the supplemental commentary produced around the "movie." The work itself assumed various forms—as single photographs, as part of a flyer advertising a performance at UCLA in 1977 (where the familiar "No Movie" stamp brands Valdez's chest), and as part of a spread in the periodical *Chismearte*, in which the title photo crowns twenty-eight smaller black-and-white shots in a compositional move that resembles a frenetic series of jump cuts (**figure 43 and figure 44**). Flanking these central images on the right is a picture of a film strip and the lettering "Cinearte 76," a portmanteau linking cinema with arts and an apt descriptor for Asco's practice. Stamped "Chicano Cinema/Asco," the composition implies that the small photographs are stills from Asco's movies, bolstering the sense of a vibrant, productive film industry by Chicano artists. This page appeared alongside an interview with Gronk and Gamboa about their No Movies. Although the questions posed to the two Asco members are attributed to a *Chismearte* editor, they were, in fact, written by Gronk and Gamboa, evidence of their need to create information to complement their No Movies.[133] The categorical flexibility of the No Movie allows for this additional commentary to be folded into the work itself—rather than extraneous material, the interviews, flyers, and magazine articles become alternative nodes of the No Movie process. In this respect Asco has assumed not just the iconic images that stand in metonymically for whole films, but also the process by which those films enter the public imagination, the systems of publicity and distribution.

Asco did not, however, simply employ these tactics as supplementary materials to the No Movies. In many instances, these supporting documents became the No Movies themselves. Their No Movies took form in different graphic media—single image "stills," multi-image collages, posters and postcards, and text-and-image graphic presentations. These often included remnants of the oral and the performative, transferred and transformed on the page. In one such work, from the *Autologue* series, the lettering "FADEIN" and "FADEOUT" frames the edges of the 8 ½ x 11-inch paper, presenting the dialogue as a contained, theatrical scene (**figure 45**). The

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[133] Kosiba-Vargas, "Harry Gamboa and Asco," 163.

dramatic conventions of the monologue and the cinematic staple, dialogue, have merged into an autologue, an existential conversation with one's self. The autologue projects a splintered self, evoking the double consciousness of being an American citizen of Mexican descent. At the start of the conversation, "Me" reminds "I" that "you have been repeating yourself unceasingly for the ppast [*sic*] three years." (This statement echoes Gronk's complaint that "Chicano film makers were making the same movie over and over again," a circumstance that prompted the group to begin making their own "movies.")[134] Asco exposes the circularity in obsessing over these issues, a circularity it mimics in *FADEIN/FADEOUT,* where the dialogue concludes with "I" pressing "Me" about what an autologue is, ending on the same lines it opened with, the character "Me" asserting "A conversation with oneself" and "I" responding, "Almost." The use of deictic pronouns forces the reader to assume the characters' positions, a move not dissimilar from the forced identification Chicanos were subjected to when watching television and movies. Moreover, the autologue also reveals the ways in which voices are thrown, made to seem as if they stem from one source yet are shaped by another. The repetition of the lines suggests that even when given a voice, perhaps the end result is just as futile as chasing one's tail.

FADEIN/FADEOUT eschews the seriousness of the monologue form and purist conceptual art and uses irony to poke fun at themselves and at the search for identity. In doing so, it also reveals the need for an outlet for the multiplicity of Chicano voices and for a means to avoid the co-option that comes with television and movies. Despite the laments over the failures of the Chicano media activists to effect real change, one of the important effects of this period of debate in the early-mid 1970s was the discursive culture it generated; topics such as media organizing and appropriate imagery were discussed among filmmakers, artists, and scholars who circulated both polished and informal articles, many simply mimeographed sheets, throughout the growing networks of the Chicano media reform movement. This introduced an organic, grass-roots means of organizing, creating a discursive system that required little institutional support or structure.[135] Thus even as they seem to be just joking around, they were also pointing to new ways of circulating images and ideas that run counter to those that rule in the mainstream media.

The correspondence networks thrived on the loose affiliations and rhizome-like structure generated by individuals, and Asco responded well to that organizational model. When the free-form, allusive, and meandering trajectory of a correspondence relationship was fixed by attempting to represent and chronicle it, as in the exhibition *Dreva/Gronk, 1968—1978/Ten Years of Art and Life* (**figure 46**), the results were chaos. Held at Los Angeles Contemporary

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[134] "Interview: Gronk and Gamboa," 32.
[135] Noriega, *Shot in America*, 131–138.

Exhibitions in March 1978, and boasting a stocked bar, performances by punk bands such as The Bags, and packed to capacity, "the gallery underwent complete devastation with the help of 20 cases of beer, 20 gallons of wine, and a fresh supply of energetic punks from Frankenstein's laboratory."[136] After the resulting mayhem, which included mannequins being chucked from gallery windows, the police were summoned to the event, which drew some publicity the following day. "Perhaps nothing captured the spirit of that time better than the now-legendary Dreva-Gronk art exhibition opening at LACE," artist Sean Carillo proclaimed.[137] At issue here is the limits of what society could allow in even a more informal, alternative, public institutional setting—an individual anarchic gesture is one thing, but actions that result in destruction of public property are another. Hélio Oiticica faced this reality when he invited samba dancers from the local *favelas* into his 1965 exhibition at the Museu de Arte Moderna in Rio de Janeiro (they were consequently expelled from the gallery), and Gordon Matta Clark did as well when he was ejected from the 1976 architecture show at the Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies for shooting out some of the building's window panes (an attempt to reinforce the realities expressed in the photographs of vandalized housing projects in the Bronx that he included in the exhibition). These actions reveal the consequences of when "perceptual sabotage" meets actual destruction.

The show also signaled the end of Dreva and Gronk's collaboration in recognition of the fine line between exhibition and petrification. Asco learned this lesson through their involvement in the founding of the Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions gallery. The Dreva/Gronk show revealed it to be a venue pressed from a different mold than the sedate art galleries of years past. An artist-run space for the display of experimental works in a variety of media, LACE presented exhibitions and events which represented a range of community interests, "such as the Chicano working-class community; punk rock performance artists, poets, and musicians; homeless artists; students and other youth; AIDS activists; and free-speech advocates."[138] The diversity of the audiences at LACE confirmed the group's commitment to attracting viewers from outside the Chicano and visual art communities. Started with funds from the Comprehensive Employment Training Act, a program similar to that which supported General Idea's *FILE* in Canada, the gallery began as a way to employ artists and to create an environment supportive of the new art forms of performance and video. Yet disagreements about how best to run the organization, what types of work should be displayed, and how to raise money to support its operations led Gamboa

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[136] Harry Gamboa, Jr., postcard to S. Zaneta Kosiba-Vargas, 13 March 1978, quoted in "Harry Gamboa and Asco," 163. *Gronk/Dreva 1968–78 Ten Years of Art/*Life was held at Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitons from 9–29 March 1978.

[137] Sean Carrillo, "East to Eden," *Forming: The Early Days of L.A. Punk,* exh. cat. (Santa Monica, Calif.: Smart Art Press, 1999), 41.

[138] Claudine Isé, "Considering the Art World Alternatives," 86.

and Gronk to withdraw from active involvement in the gallery in 1979. The realities of the hierarchy of running a gallery conflicted with the group's own style of operations, something which signaled rifts in the group's collaborative style.

"Work which I don't have to take the blame for alone": Asco as an Aesthetic Coalition

Asco's collaboration was always a blend of the individual and the communal. Members were free to work on their individual projects while they participated in group efforts. Projects such as *FADEIN/FADEOUT* (1977) are primarily Gamboa's creations, yet they are branded as collaborations with the characteristic Asco stamp.   The group would develop ideas for new projects like an improvisation troupe, using one member's suggestion as a jumping off point for generating new ideas and scenarios; they adopted an improvisatory attitude, where they "just did it and defined it afterward."[139] Yet Asco also revealed a division of labor, with each participant fulfilling roles suitable to his or her talents and goals. Harry Gamboa was the group's chief chronicler; through text and photographs he maintained an archive of the group's activities. He also published articles about Asco and Chicano art and wrote most of the scripted performances. His volume of textual production has led some scholars, such as S. Zaneta Kosiba-Vargas, to posit him as the intellectual center of the group. Yet Gronk was equally active in shaping the group's conceptual projects, and was also a principal actor in the group's No Movies, videos, and performances. Patssi Valdez was the group's main performer and costume and set designer, and Willie Hérron contributed his talents as a painter and draughtsman and his penchant for rock-and-roll performance.[140]

Collaboration allowed the group to capitalize on one another's strengths and minimize weaknesses. Gronk admits that Gamboa would often get tripped up by his own tongue-twisting dialogue; his texts consisted of intricate puns, rhymes, and linguistic inversions that he was adept at penning, yet less skilled at performing.[141] By pooling their talents and resources, Asco could tackle larger projects, such as the No Movies, which required performers and a photographer, as well as the behind-the-scenes support to circulate the representative photographs. Art historian C.

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[139] Hérron quoted in Benavídez and Vozoff, "The Wall," 51.
[140] In the late 1970s and in the 1980s, Hérron became increasingly involved with his band, Los Illegals.
[141] Gronk explained, "One of the things that, you know, Harry was never good in front of an audience as a reader or doing a live performance…And his stuff is very difficult to do. It's like all the puns, all the little jokes, all the rhyming of words and stuff that are strung together. I mean, it looks great on print when you see all the rhyming and stuff, but when you have to do it, they're like tongue twisters, so your tongue is like doing acrobatics inside of your mouth"; Gronk, interview by Sternad-Flores and Gonzalez, 36–37.

Ondine Chavoya characterized the group as "an aesthetic coalition of politics and production, performance and action," a description that rightly suggests the diversity of individual interests represented, their alliance based on shared goals, and the group's provisional and changing nature.[142] Gronk once described the No Movie as "[w]ork which I don't have to take the blame for alone," a playful stance which indicated his perspective on Asco as a band of fellow conspirators engaging in mischievous or even transgressive activity.[143] Gronk's quip places the group in an almost adversarial role, as individuals banding together to promote their own agenda and to combat the perception of a singular "Chicano art" or "Chicano culture."

Describing Asco as a coalition captures the provisional, networked nature of identity that the group sought. Throughout the 1970s they moved from a static "community" ethos best represented by the murals in their East Los Angeles neighborhood to a coalition aesthetics that intimates the fluid, dynamic sense of identity in which they were invested. Working as a coalition allowed them to move between media and industries, an organizational structure that mirrored the formal flexibility of the No Movie and the semantic fluidity of their brand of language.

Rather than joining forces to produce counter-stereotypes or wage policy demands, Asco's coming together as a coalition and the lifestyle they promoted in doing so was itself a political act. Their provisional union was an acknowledgment of the contingent nature of identity, and an assertion of their rights not to be forced into identification with a singular culture. Yet their fascination with glamour and intersection with mass media forms was also a recognition of their desires to dream big, to turn their underground performances into a movement that drew its own supporters and discourse. The No Movie made living this life possible, by presenting the idea that life is always framed: not just by the media, but by our past experiences and our desires.

Asco's work in the 1980s moved away from the experimental networked practice that characterized their 1970s oeuvre, and they adopted a performance mode more closely aligned with theater than with their impromptu street processions and mail projects that mark their early years. By 1987 the "coalition" had become fractured. A disappointed Gamboa sent the then-active Asco members a missive declaring the end of the group. In closing, he quoted from a No

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[142] Chavoya, "Pseudographic Cinema," 11.
[143] "Gronk: Off the Wall Artist," 35.

Movie performance he had penned: "Collectivism is dead."[144] A few years later, writing an account of the history and practices of Asco, Gamboa's view of a collective experience had not improved:

> The cohesiveness of the art group as collective was never fully realized by the individual members of Asco. Their individual and group appearances often shifted according to their indefinable moods, family problems, love interests, instant boredom, availability of materials, lack of sleep, and desire to maintain their personal identities. Although the Asco members worked closely with each other, there was generally enough ego friction to maintain a sharp level of intragroup competitiveness.[145]

Their own group sense mirrored a problematic generally faced by radical experimental collectives that sought to fashion themselves as groups that did not obliterate the individuality (and individual preoccupations) of those forming the group. This model worked for relatively short-lived collaborations, such as in the case of TVTV, formed from members of Raindance Corporation, the Videofreex, and Ant Farm, but it was much more difficult to sustain for long periods, as Asco came to realize, because individual members' interests eventually were pitted against the collective's, and slowly the sense of a group identity began to fade. This in turn relates to a larger tension between individual and group dynamics in social justice movements (such as the awkward positions African American women faced in the feminist and black power movements) and in modern society. In the 1970s, Asco's coalition had worked because they shared aims, a similar free-wheeling working style, and a fairly small group size, often consisting solely of the four original members. By the next decade, the group's membership changed, expanding to include a cast of rotating characters with only a superficial understanding of Asco's early motivations.

The control the group had exercised over the publication and circulation of their works also weakened, as images and stories circulated throughout the network and as the group received more publicity. The aesthetic of the signifying cluster, which allowed their works to accrue meanings as they circulated, resulted from transferring the onus of the work's signification to its viewers. The free-form signification that ensued rendered Asco unable to control the context in which their No Movies were received. Gamboa is confronted with this double-bind as he looks back on Asco's career, and is

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[144] Harry Gamboa, Jr., memorandum to Barbara Carrasco, Diane Gamboa, Juan Garza, Daniel J. Martinez, Glugio Gronk Nicandro, Humberto Sandoval, and John Valadez, 31 March 1987, box 4, folder 2, Gamboa papers. See also "Ismania," 252–267.
[145] Gamboa, "In the City of Angels, Chameleons, and Phantoms," 121–130.

reminded that certain photographs continue to circulate in unwanted circles. Names and faces are attached (oftentimes intermixed), so as to create an indelible persistent fantasy of an alternative Chicano art group of the seventies and eighties. Guilt by association is compounded when relationships that have been dead for nearly a decade are suddenly brought to life before a mass audience. The viewer must beware that several zombies do not constitute a living or relevant art group.[146]

The very pictures that had "proven" the existence of a viable Chicano art group (and "cinema") in the 1970s had by 1991 become false documents suggesting the continuing vitality and collaboration of that same group. Once again Gamboa felt he was working against the people holding the pictures, and yet this time, the pictures were of his own creation.

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[146] Gamboa, "Light at the End of Tunnel Vision," 101.

Chapter 3
Ant Farm's Mediated Politics

In May 1974, a trio of three artist-architects calling themselves Ant Farm traveled to Texas to collaborate on a site-specific installation that would become *Cadillac Ranch* (**figure 47**).[1] They did so at the invitation of Stanley Marsh 3, a local businessman and art patron whom the group had met through the mail art networks; the year before he had invited them to submit a proposal to do a project on his land.[2] Ant Farm's installation consisted of a line of ten Cadillac sedans from progressive model years plunged head first at a 52-degree angle into cement "graves" on a stretch of Marsh's ranch alongside Route 66 in Amarillo.[3] *Cadillac Ranch* was received by journalists at the time as the "apotheosis of … car-lust," "a frozen Detroit culture mystery," and a mocking of "the dream of total mobility, with its attendent [*sic*] pollution, energy crises and express mutilation of the landscape."[4] As these commentators noted, the installation was appreciated for its evocation of mobility—the promise of exploring the country via the open road—and puzzling nonetheless because of its "frozen" quality; that very idea of free circulation

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In quoting from archival documents in this chapter, I have been faithful to the originals in spelling, punctuation, and mechanics. Only where confusion might result have I placed a designator [*sic*] to indicate that I am quoting the source verbatim.

[1] Chip Lord and Doug Michels, two Ant Farm principles, and sometime collaborator Hudson Marquez produced *Cadillac Ranch.*

[2] Marsh preferred for his name to be designated with the number "3" rather than roman numerals. Marsh had commissioned other projects on his land, most notably Robert Smithson's *Amarillo Ramp.* Designed by Smithson in 1973, the project was realized posthumously by Nancy Holt and Richard Serra to Smithson's specifications, after the artist died in a plane crash while he was surveying the Amarillo site.

[3] Doug Michels, in describing the process of installing the Cadillacs, described the holes in which the cars would be buried as "graves": "also, i would say that it would be easier to dig a larger hole than to cut all them caddy's in half. sid feck could dig all ten of the graves in a couple of days. once the cars have been obtained, the installation should take less than a week." Gas War Transformational Access, Letter to Stanley [Marsh 3] from Doug [Michels], 15 February 1974, Ant Farm archive, Berkeley Art Museum/Pacific Film Archive, purchase made possible through a bequest of Thérèse Bonney by exchange, a partial gift of Chip Lord and Curtis Schreier and gifts from an anonymous donor and Harrison Fraker, 2005.14.111 (hereafter referred to as Ant Farm archive). The accession number provides the exact location of the item within the archive.

The reference to graves persisted, as, according to Ant Farm member Chip Lord, "a lady whose father had owned the local Cadillac dealership brought a bouquet of plastic flowers [to the Cadillac Ranch opening party in Amarillo] and we placed them next to the buried cars." Ant Farm, *Automerica* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1976), 127.

For more on the mail art networks and Ant Farm's participation in them, see chapters 1 and 4.

[4] "Rocket News and UFO Report," *Motor Trend* (February 1975): 9; "Cadillac Ranch nel Texas," *Domus* 539 (October 1974): 48; Michael Nicholson, "Playing with Ants," *The Bulletin* [Australia]*,* 15 May 1976: 55.

is thwarted by the permanent rootedness of the buried Cadillacs. The only circulation they now embody is virtual, through the circulation of images. These observations evoke the defining ambivalence of *Cadillac Ranch*: its celebration and critique of American car culture, and its suggestion of the installation's central paradox, dead-end motion.

Both of these themes—ambivalence and circulation—are central to *Cadillac Ranch,* and indeed to Ant Farm's practice more generally. The group's preoccupation with mobility took form in their early works as inflatable structures, portable and cheap, for the "nomads" of the late 1960s and early '70s—those abiding Kerouac's dictum to go on the road. With *Cadillac Ranch,* Ant Farm evinces an abiding interest in not constructing *structures* to move but in considering networks to move *in* and *around*. Like Asco and General Idea, Ant Farm conceived of networks as both physical circuits of communication and as virtual paths for the relay of information. Describing themselves as "war babies, television children, Rod & Custom subscribers, university-trained media freaks and hippies," Ant Farm announced in 1970 that they were "interested in balancing the environment by total transformation of existing social and economic systems."[5] In many ways the grandiose claims for "total transformation" they dreamed up early in their career were very much products of late 1960s culture, when artists and individuals had a faith that through cooperative action they could effect societal change, a position still imbued with modernist ideas about collectivism, what Blake Stimson and Gregory Sholette have characterized as the desire to "develop a sustained alternative to commodified social life by cultural means."[6] Certainly the group's adoption of the motif of the industrious ant as democratic worker recalls an underlying modernist belief in the strength of the proletariat as greater than the individual. Yet the green plastic toy marketed by Uncle Milton Industries, an entertainment product, hints at the ambivalence of Ant Farm's practice, the way it spans modernist and post-modernist sensibilities. The group embraces both the positions of the proletariat worker and of the commercial manufacturer; they advocate a "total transformation of existing social and economic systems" and yet they also make ample use of the existing systems to realize their projects.

The very intermediality of their practice—one shared by Asco and General Idea—signals a key opportunity presented by collectives, namely, to undertake a range of different artistic projects because of the varied talents and interests of the group members involved. According to Italian art critic Germano Celant, the group participated actively "in carrying out various social

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[5] Ant Farm's contribution to *Design Quarterly* 78/79 (1970): 10, a special double issue on conceptual architecture.

[6] Blake Stimson and Gregory Sholette, "Introduction: Periodizing Collectivism," *Collectivism After Modernism: The Art of Social Imagination After 1945* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 4.

activities which may take the concrete form of videotape recordings of real or imaginary events, articles of design for an alternative and specifically musical culture, buildings, political manifestations."[7] This intermedial practice requires that the artists assume different roles, depending on the project, that could include being critics, historians, souvenir producers, museum gift-shop operators, patrons, and media operatives. The group itself recognized the various roles its members played, closing their statement, "What is Ant Farm?" by enumerating the following "ant occupations": "architect, graphic designer, author, artist, inventor, builder, teacher, video producer" (**figure 48**).[8] Observing the different guises of "artists, designers, craftsmen, architects, toymakers, tellers of kitch [sic] truth and dirty beauty" that the group adopted, Thomas Garver, the curator of the M.H. de Young Memorial Museum in San Francisco, touched on Ant Farm's deep investment within their own cultural milieu, how they produced "proposals that are serious, funny, and frequently contradictory, yet mirror the configuration of our culture, the product equally of triumph and debasement."[9] *Cadillac Ranch* provides a fruitful point of entry to examine in more depth how group the group interrogated medium, the media, and public memory—and the intersection and circulation of the ideas surrounding those issues— through their experimental, intermedial, and ambivalent practice.

"Cadillac Ranch will take you away": Circulation and Stasis of the Roadside Attraction

Conceived of by the group as a "roadside attraction" just off the famed old Route 66, *Cadillac Ranch* represents a waypoint, one node in the vast network of American roads that offered a temporary stop for motorists, tourists, or simply the curious before they moved on to other destinations.[10] As a "roadside attraction," *Cadillac Ranch* takes its place categorically

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[7] Germano Celant, "Ant Farm," *Casabella* (April 1973): 27.

[8] "What is Ant Farm?" from *4*2 Maro* book proposal, Ant Farm archive, 2005.14.243.3. "What is Ant Farm" is also reproduced in "The Ant Farm Timeline" published in Felicity D. Scott, *Living Archive 7: Ant Farm: Allegorical Time Warp: The Media Fallout of July 21, 1969* (Barcelona: Actar, 2008), 203. The timeline was printed in abbreviated form in Constance Lewallen and Steve Seid*,* eds. *Ant Farm 1968–1978,* exh. cat. (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, in association with the Berkeley Art Museum and the Pacific Film Archive, 2004). Hereafter the timeline will be referred to as "Ant Farm Timeline" and any associated page references will refer to Scott.

Ant Farm began the timeline in 1976 for a book project that ended up being *Automerica*. The timeline that appears in *Ant Farm 1968–1978* was substantially revised in 2004 to coincide with the Berkeley Art Museum's retrospective exhibition.

[9] Thomas, H. Garver, "Can Man Control Technology's Domination of Nature," reproduced in "Ant Farm Timeline," 251.

[10] In 1997 the installation was moved two miles west. Anne Dingus reports Marsh as saying, "The girls [the cars] didn't like the smell of the city. They like the fragrance of cow manure and wheat and new-broken

alongside other well-known interstate landmarks as "South of the Border," the well-advertised motel just past the North Carolina-South Carolina state line, and the Wigwam motel in Holbrook, Arizona, both testaments to the variety of local culture across the United States.[11] Although it became a road less traveled in 1956 with the establishment of the federal highway system, Route 66 nonetheless still represented to many Americans the "road to opportunity."[12] Created in 1926, it was, as historian Quinta Scott declares, "the road out of the mines, off the farm, away from troubled Main Street…. And after Americans had overcome the depression and won the war and good times boomed, Route 66 was the ultimate road trip."[13] *Cadillac Ranch*, stretched out in the vast Texas plains, draws on the allure of its famous siting to achieve its balance of opposites (the composition recalls a Cadillac advertisement from 1968 in which that year's offerings, lined up like chorus girls, gleam against a barren terrain, **figure 49**). The work presents a tension between circulation and stasis: the automobile's function as a vehicle for movement fossilized in a monument along one of the U.S.'s most famous cross-country routes. In its inclusion of distinctive Cadillac models from the years 1948 to 1964, the installation invokes the visionary General Motors stylist Harvey Earl, who first popularized the tailfin, an idea he allegedly gleaned from the P-38 bomber and transferred to the 1948 Cadillac.[14] In this monument to Earl and to car culture more broadly, Ant Farm dramatized the difference of attitude between the mid-1970s concern with a scarcity economy and the consumerism of only ten years prior. With American society mired in the recession and the oil embargo, Ant Farm member Chip Lord explained that perhaps the solution to the growing problem of the automobile—its increasing centrality to an American consumer lifestyle and yet the drains it placed on the environment and economy—may be to "remove cars from the realm of function and fix on them a sole future role of

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sod." Furthering the grave analogy, Marsh apparently left a sign at the old site that read, "Unmarked graves for sale or rent." Dingus, "Car Talk," *Texas Monthly* 25 (October 1997): 26.

[11] Lord discusses both of these attractions in the book he wrote and published under the corporate name Ant Farm on American car culture, *Automerica*. For the transformation of the highway landscape, see Catherine Gudis, *Buyways: Billboards, Automobiles, and the American Landscape* (New York: Routledge 2004).

Ant Farm also marketed their "documentation series," "The Roadside Environment," a collection of 44 slides that examined the "a uniquely American style of design" in the pre-highway system era; see *Environmental Communications* 74/75 (October 1974): 38.

[12] Quinta Scott, *Along Route 66* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2000), 3.

[13] Ibid.

[14] Lord tells this story in "Autorama," *On Site* 5/6 (1974): 59, and he describes the rise and fall of the car tail fin in "A Backward Look at the Forward Look," *Rolling Stone,* 29 August 1974, 68. For more on the styling changes in the American car industry and Earl's role in the them, see Alfred P. Sloan, *My Years with General Motors* (New York: Doubleday, 1964); Henry B. Lent, *The Look of Cars: Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow* (New York: Dutton, 1966); and for a more recent appraisal, Thomas E. Bonsall, *The Cadillac Story: The Postwar Years* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2004).

entertainment."[15] The sentiment echoes Marshall McLuhan's well-known analogy between the future of the car and the horse, an allusion that underscores the influence the Canadian media theorist had on the shaping of Ant Farm's philosophy about communications and mobility within a new television culture.[16] Reinforcing the car's move away from utility toward entertainment, Lord offers examples of "auto artworks [that] exist in the twilight zone between art, function and craft." They signal a future where "cars *are* entertainment."[17] *Cadillac Ranch* and Ant Farm's other work negotiate these boundaries between art and entertainment, or to rephrase slightly, between the circulation of aesthetic objects within the art world and the circulation of commodities and images in the public realm. This tension and affinity between the two spheres is a central concern that guides the appraisal of Ant Farm's work that follows in this chapter.

While the installation itself is grounded—a point reinforced by the cement "graves" anchoring the cars—the circulation of images of the work points to a model of mobility that the installation represents: the circulation of the sign. With Harvey Earl's redesign, the cars themselves had become "pure image."[18] The ever lengthening tailfin had little functional use, but it served to visually distinguish one model from another, reinforcing the obsolescence of the older models. Seeing a picture of the isolated tailfins from various models arranged side-by-side in a book the group found at a flea market reinforced this sense (**figure 50**).[19] Ant Farm even developed rubber stamps bearing just the Cadillac tailfins, which they used on letters and collages they sent (**figure 51**). Due to its stylistic changes, the car became in the 1950s both moving vehicle and circulating image.

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[15] *Automerica*, 13. The activist Mitchell Goodman perhaps best described the growing skepticism about American consumerism (and the role of the car in it) in the introduction to *The Movement Toward a New America*: "The American Way of Life. What ever happened to *that*? It became a machine, a car, a skyscraper, a helicopter, napalm. It took us for a ride; and disappeared into the cesspools of Vietnam and Chicago. End of the ballgame." See Goodman, *The Movement Toward a New America: The Beginnings of a Long Revolution* (Philadelphia: Pilgrim Press, 1970), viii.

[16] In *Understanding Media* (New York: Routledge, 2001)*,* McLuhan remarked, "It is true that going-to and coming-from work are almost certain to lose all of their present character. The car as vehicle, in that sense, is sure to go the way of the horse. The horse has lost its role in transportation but has made a strong comeback in entertainment. So with the motorcar" (238).

[17] *Automerica*, 113.

[18] "A 'fish tailfin,' with the taillight built in—that was the first Cadillac tailfin. It was pure image. The image was in our consciousness—my family never owned a Cadillac, but there sure were a lot of them on fashionable Snell Island where I lived in Florida." Ibid., 124.

[19] Chip Lord recounts how the group

discovered a flea market book called *The Look of Cars.* An illustration from a Cadillac ad showed seven years of Cadillac tailfins, culminating in the 1959 model year—the year of the tailfin. We Xeroxed, collaged, and reproduced the image. We photographed real Cadillac fins until we had a slide show that sequentially pictured the development of the Cadillac tailfin. We considered the fins a 'pure image,' symbolic of their decade and removed from their functional context as parts of late-model sedans.

"Automerica excerpts," in *Ant Farm 1968-1978*, 156.

Ant Farm also explored the literal conflation of circulation and sign in what they termed "car as billboard." In a script for a slide lecture (ostensibly one of the many they gave during the early-mid 1970s at college campuses), they note, "image coming and going, both ways out on the free way, fast images, billboard as information."[20] The image of something seen and recognized traveling from both directions—coming and going—clearly mattered to Ant Farm, as seen in drawings Lord made of *Cadillac Ranch* as one approaches, close-up, and as one leaves (**figure 52**).[21] One panorama postcard of the attraction bears a photograph taken by Wyatt McSpadden that manages to encompass all ten vehicles in its frame; the view it provides is expansive, with the angle of the cars greater on the left side creating an impression of movement, as if the viewer were actually in a car driving by the scene (**figure 53**).[22] Traveling on highways, one pessimist observed, was akin to watching television, with images seen through the windshield as if on a screen; although "at least, with TV, you can turn it off."[23] The vehicle, like television, was changing the way people viewed their surroundings and the ways in which they interacted with them, as even the vast expanses of undeveloped terrain were being punctuated by compulsory advertisements in the form of billboards, not unlike the parceling out of television time into commercials.[24]

Even without a billboard literally attached to its roof, the car was still a sign, both of American consumer growth, and in the case of the Cadillacs, luxury.[25] General Motors was betting on the eliteness of the brand, lauding the "joy of possession" it conferred to its owners (**figure 54**), billing it the "world's most eloquent possession" in advertisements and touting its beauty, grace, performance and handling. These qualities Ant Farm stripped of the vehicles when they put them out to pasture.

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[20] Past Lectures (Script…U.S. is an image nation), Ant Farm archive, 2005.14.305.

[21] These drawings appear at the bottom of a letter from Chip Lord to Stanley [Marsh III], re: nice time at Trader Vic's, 1974, Ant Farm archive, 2005.14.109. Uncle Buddie, a recurring character Ant Farm referenced and their designated "media contact" for their performance *Media Burn,* explained the group's attitude toward the car as entertainment: "Our consciousness is in the post automobile era and as the functional value of cars decreases the entertainment value increases. So we can look at cars now as a lot of stuff just laying around to do art with," quoted in Carla Liss, "AntFarm's Media Burn," *Berkeley Barb,* 11–17 July 1975, 11.

[22] That this postcard can be found in the Artist Box (Ant Farm), Art Metropole Collection, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, box 318, is evidence of its wide circulation. Dexter Press in West Nyack, New York, printed the card.

[23] *Difficult but Possible Supplement to the Whole Earth Catalog* (September 1969): 17.

[24] David Antin describes how advertising standards (the 15-, 30-, and 60-second spots) condition the time structures of television programs in "Television: Video's Frightful Parent," *Artforum* (December 1975): 36–45. He distinguishes television's time format from that of video art.

[25] Advertisements for the brand, such as one the group reproduced in *Automerica,* describe the 1958 model as "motordom's masterpiece in luxury" (125).

In addition to the idea of the car as billboard, a theme that clearly resonated with the group, Ant Farm saw potential for the image of the installation to circulate in the commercial sphere. The group claims the postcard of *Cadillac Ranch,* distributed by Fotofolio since 1975, as "the world's best-selling art postcard"; the image has also been reproduced in advertisements for Volvo, Compaq Computer, Chrysler, Nissan, Motel 6, and in the liner notes for Bruce Springsteen's 1980 album *The River.*[26] In addition to Springsteen's hit song of the same name, Warren Zevon also paid homage to *Cadillac Ranch*, and the Hard Rock Café invited a lawsuit when they chose an angled and partially buried 1959 chartreuse Cadillac to crown their "popular culture palace."[27] Charles Kuralt profiled the roadside attraction on CBS news, both national and local press covered it (such as *People, The National Observer, San Francisco* magazine, *Motor Trend, Texas Highways,* and *Car and Driver*), and the Amarillo Chamber of Commerce listed the work in its tourist guidebook. The co-existence of the physical mobility of the automobile on the open road (best represented by Ant Farm's *Truckstop Network*, a project which will be discussed later) with the virtual circulation of images and ideas is embodied in *Cadillac Ranch* in a way that signals a change in the group's thinking about networking and mobility. In petrifying the nation's most prolific and accessible means of transportation, *Cadillac Ranch* makes us attend to the relationship between circulation and stasis and consider how introducing a new means of (virtual) mobility might be a productive way of intervening within existing communication and transportation systems. This confluence of physical stasis and virtual circulation is reinforced by Marsh's singing, "The Cadillac Ranch will take you away, will take you away" (to the tune of the Beatles' *Magical Mystery Tour*) in the accompanying video, *The Cadillac Ranch Show;* as the camera pans across the installation, the cars' very rootedness is contrasted with the potential for the imagination (aided by drugs, certainly) to spin off into new territories. Through these postcards and appropriations, Ant Farm added to the mystique already circulating around the cultural symbol of the automobile, and created a new monument, in some ways nostalgic for the

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[26] Volvo of Australia, print advertisement (1977); Bruce Springsteen album, *The River*, liner photo (1980); Compaq Computer, print advertisement and poster (1993); Chrysler automobiles, advertisement in *USA Today* (1993); Motel 6, promotional brochure (1994); Nissan truck, television commercial (1996). See http://www.libertysoftware.be/cml/cadillacranch/ranch/cadcom.htm, last accessed 22 October 2008.
[27]Sharon Boorstin, "Morton's Hard Rock Café: A Pop-culture Palace," *Los Angeles Herald Examiner*, 19 November 1982. Ant Farm filed suit against Peter Morton and Hard Rock Café, charging him with "unfair competition, unlawful copying, and unjust enrichment." The suit was adjudicated before a judge and resulted in Hard Rock Café's commission of *STP (Save the Planets)* for a new Hard Rock Café in Houston. *STP* was completed in 1987 after the group had officially disbanded; the work consisted of a 1963 Ford Thunderbird atop a gold trilon containing consumer oil products.

past of fast cars, big tailfins, and American luxury, and in others critical of those same values for the waste and desire they created.[28]

"Sometimes misty, sometimes piercing":
Adopting Ambivalence as a Position of Celebration and Critique

Chip Lord explained that when he was a student at the College of Architecture at Tulane University he first met Doug Michels when he delivered a guest lecture there.[29] After pursuing various projects post-graduation, Lord and Michels reconnected in San Francisco in 1968. There they became acquainted with Curtis Schreier, an artist trained at Rhode Island School of Design who was working for Lawrence Halprin's architecture studio.[30] Lord, Michels, and Schreier would form the core of Ant Farm in 1968, although, especially in its early years, the group invited miscellaneous collaborators for various projects. In 1970 they incorporated in the State of California as the non-profit company Ant Farm.[31] Their collective name derived from the response of a friend to Michels' remark that the most interesting architectural ideas were occurring not in the mainstream, but underground: Sharon Skolnick allegedly replied, "Oh, you mean like an ant farm." The group adopted the formicid title as evoking the name a rock band might have, in marked contrast to the staid pairing of surnames common to architectural firms. As Lord later observed, "The founding of the name was indicative of how Ant Farm worked: the right idea comes, everybody acknowledges it is the right idea and instantly adopts it."[32] Of course, as trained architects, Lord and Michels were comfortable with the process of

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[28] In *The Waste Makers,* Vance Packard chronicles the process of "planned obsolescence," in other words, the way in which automakers used stylistic changes to make cars seem outdated and obsolete even though they were still functional. Packard also looks at the "obsolescence of desirability" vis a vis women's and men's apparel and cosmetics. John Keats calls this same process "dynamic obsolescence"; see Packard, *The Waste Makers* (New York: David McKay Co., 1960) and Keats, *The Insolent Chariots* (Philadelphia and New York: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1958), 52.

[29] Lord recounts their first meeting in an interview with Glenn Phillips on 11 February 2007 at T.R. Uthco member Doug Hall's home in San Francisco published in *California Video: Artists and Histories,* ed. Glenn Phillips (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute and J. Paul Getty Museum, 2008), 234.

[30] Michels had been working in Washington, D.C., for an architectural firm prior to moving west, and Lord attended Anna and Lawrence Halprin's workshop for dancers and architects, a program he credited as formative for Ant Farm. (See Lewallen, Lord, Michels, and Schreier, "Interview with Ant Farm," in *Ant Farm, 1968–1978*, 40.)

[31] See Early Manifestos , Ant Farm archive, 2005.14.248.1.

[32] The story of Ant Farm's name was repeated in many articles on the group, among them the piece by Thomas Albright ("Ant Farm," *Rolling Stone,* 13 December 1969, 36) and given in more detail in "Interview with Ant Farm," 41.

collaboration, as it was common in architectural training and practice.[33] Yet architects in a firm generally abide by hierarchies that govern how projects are assigned and developed; Ant Farm's system of collaboration was far more open-ended. The group members adopted few set roles within the collective, as Lord's comment above acknowledges. Their lack of an overt hierarchy was reinforced by their name. Ant Farm used the graphic from Uncle Milton's popular children's "live ant habitat" for their early stationery, and played off the insects' reputation for industry and building in sometimes assuming the name "Ant Corps."[34] More than just a hip moniker, the name Ant Farm reinforces several key values important to the group from its incipience: equal collaboration, acceptance of the commercial sphere, and a desire to operate outside mainstream channels or "underground."

The young Ant Farmers had come of age in the 1950s and '60s and the media culture of the post-war boom—the glossy picture magazines, the souped-up or stripped-down cars, the greatly hyped space race, and the shiny promise the future bore for prognosticators at the World's Fairs in 1939 and 1964—held particular sway with them.[35] They were both fascinated by these elements and recognized the dangerous allure of them, and they reproduced this ambivalence in their artworks. In fact, this ambivalence is exemplary of a post-1960s reality. Following the violent suppression of demonstrators at the 1968 Democratic Convention in Chicago and the later shootings at Kent State, the optimism in protest movements waned, and increasingly an ethic of compromise settled in among former agitators (although a minority turned to increasingly extreme and violent forms of protest). In contrast to the bifurcating idealism of the late 1960s—pro-war versus antiwar, communist versus capitalist—Ant Farm, like Asco and General Idea, favored a "both-and" sensibility.[36] The group members recognized that their approach to the past and present was *both* celebratory *and* critical and made no apologies for such a stance. Rather than feeling compelled to choose between two seemingly opposing positions, Ant Farm opted to

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[33] Lord explains how the group's collaboration stemmed naturally from their experiences: "There was a logic in working collectively. There were the countercultural notions of the late 1960s, but also because we were trained as architects, there was a precedent of working in teams." Lord in Marita Sturken, "Cultural Icons and Technological Change: An Interview with Chip Lord," *Afterimage* (October 1988): 8.

[34] See Ant Farm Stationery, Ant Farm archive, 2005.14.238.1 and 2005.14.238.4. Uncle Milton Industries sells their ant farms to this day; their website boasts over 20 million sold (ostensibly since the product's inception in 1956.) See http://www.unclemilton.com/products/AntFarm/ last accessed 22 October 2008.

[35] They acknowledge in their book proposal *4*2 Maro* that "LIFE [magazine] in particular added basic building blocks to our image vocabulary," explaining that "Ant Farm was born out of image language." Ant Farm archive, 2005.14.246.8.

[36] The term is drawn from Robert Venturi, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, in association with the Graham Foundation for Advanced Studies in the Fine Arts, Chicago, 1966), 23–32. In the unpublished document, "History of Ant Farm," Chip Lord notes that Robert Venturi was one of Doug Michels' professors at Yale School of Architecture (Ant Farm archive, 2005.14.260.10). Michels graduated in 1967, and Venturi held the William B. and Charlotte Shepherd Davenport Visiting Professorship of Architectural Design from 1966–1970.

resolve any such binary with a "both-and," or ambivalent, approach. Chip Lord, writing in *Automerica,* the book he published under the Ant Farm brand in 1976, describes it as "a book that courts ambiguity" and recognizes that the perspectives represented are viewed through "sometimes misty, sometimes piercing eyes" (**figure 55**).[37] A review of the book in the *Artsmagazine* insert issue *Rude* accurately characterizes it as "AN AUTO EROTICA OF AMERICA'S LOVE & HATE RELATIONSHIP WITH THE CAR."[38] In a later interview, Lord elaborates on this ambivalence in *Cadillac Ranch:* "There's an ambiguity as to whether it's a critical piece or a tribute. And it's both."[39] The hard-line stance of the late 1960s—either you are "with us" or "against us"—gave way to a compromise aesthetic, what literary historian Marianne DeKoven describes as a "utopia limited."[40] Ant Farm negotiated within this space carved out by the "both-and" model, seeing productive contradictions and tensions they could mine for their artistic effects, if not for a laugh or a buck.

The "both-and" philosophy Ant Farm expressed was symptomatic of their ambivalence towards artistic institutions and traditions. In *Cadillac Ranch* they worked within a traditional artist–patron format, where the installation was commissioned and owned by Stanley Marsh 3, and the artists received an operating budget and an "art coefficient" (fees) for generating the idea and the work.[41] Mitigating this traditional artist–patron model was the interactive component of the work.[42] The group did not sign *Cadillac Ranch* or place an identifying placard to attribute or explain it, and instead allowed the work to become an "interactive monument," where the public could add to it with graffiti (and they did, **figure 56**).[43] Ant Farm did, however, weld the car doors shut and the hubcaps on, the former ostensibly done as a safety precaution and the latter to

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[37] *Automerica,* 13, 12.

[38] M. Bidner, "Automerica by Ant Farm," *Rude* ("artsmagazine insert issue") [1977], from the Art Metropole Collection, special edition periodicals, #12183. In *Insolent Chariots,* John Keats deems cars "love-objects from the start, venerated, called friends, lovingly polished and assigned the virtues of ponies, veterans and dogs" (35).

[39] "Interview with Ant Farm," 72.

[40] Marianne DeKoven, *Utopia Limited: The Sixties and the Emergence of the Postmodern* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).

In *Architecture or Techno-Utopia* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2007)*,* Felicity Scott describes a similar "survivalist rhetoric" and mentality pervading the counterculture (and particularly the architectural counterculture) after 1968.

[41] Undated letter from Doug and Chip to Huds [Hudson Marquez] on Cadillac Ranch stationery, Cadillac Ranch/Correspondence, Ant Farm archive, 2005.14.269.4.

[42] *Media Burn* offers another interactive component, a feedback card inside the program, for attendees of the event to rate it, and to comment on what they think Ant Farm should tackle next. Ant Farm, Media Burn Souvenir Booklet, 1975, Artist box (Ant Farm), Art Metropole Collection, box 316.

[43] Marsh also played an active role in promoting *Cadillac Ranch,* so much so that the work was often referred to as Stanley Marsh's *Cadillac Ranch.* Their lack of preservation of the vehicles allowed the work to succumb to the forces of entropy, something the installation shares with another work sponsored by Marsh, Robert Smithson's *Amarillo Ramp* (1973).

prevent theft.[44] They also circulated news of the "attraction" in the commercial sphere, selling postcards and t-shirts. A letter, likely dating from 1974, reveals Ant Farm's tongue-in-cheek excitement about the possibilities of expanding *Cadillac Ranch* marketing into other consumer arenas: "We look forward to the Ford/Rockefeller buttons; the Cadillax Ranch postcards, bumperstickers, t-shirts; decals, pennants, salt and pepper shakers, glassess, toy drums, clocks, watches, blazers, wallets, belts, and piggy banks."[45] This letter was signed, "Yours in the ephemeral, Chip Lord RIP OFF ARTIST," a flippant play on the tension between making money and "selling out," the common '60s fear that erstwhile idealists would abandon their principles and cave in to the demands of the market. Lord's acceptance of this accusation, and even his ironic adoption of it via rubber-stamped appositive, indicates the group's willingly ambivalent attitude circa 1974. Some four years earlier they had referred to a "life of tenuously making do without sacrificing the ideals of the new vision," a lifestyle which risks "'borderline radical' labeling."[46] In the intervening years, the group seemingly became more comfortable with an ideologically compromised aesthetic, one that was becoming more overtly ambivalent and less of a negotiated sacrifice. Lord's closing line, "Yours in the ephemeral," in addition to signaling his participation in an aesthetics of ephemerality widespread at this time, raises questions about these marketing items as both physical objects and as commodities within an economic system and their function as ephemeral objects supporting an artistic project. Are these buttons, decals, and postcards part of the work *Cadillac Ranch,* elements as much a part of the work's enduring success and iconicity as the sculptural installation itself? Are these ephemeral consumer items complements to the terrestrial installation, circulating where it is immobile, for sale where it is not, fleeting where it is permanent, cheap and flimsy where it is hardy?

"All we need is … a souvenir stand to keep in the tourists":
Negotiating Art, the Commercial Sphere, and Politics

Much has been made of the "dematerialization of art," an idea popularized by Lucy Lippard and John Chandler in their 1968 essay of the same name. For artists reared in post-war American culture, the proliferation of images and systems, of information, was replacing material

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[44] Terry Boyce mentions the securing of the doors and wheel covers in his article, "Oil, Cows—and Now A Cadillac Ranch?" *Old Cars* [Iola, Wisc.], 16-30 September 1974, 1.

[45] Letter from Chip Lord to Stanley [Marsh III], n.d. [annotated in pen at top c-9-74] on "Atomic Museum" letterhead, Correspondence to Stanley Marsh, Ant Farm archive, 2005.14.268.5. Spelling and punctuation reproduce that of the original letter.

[46] Ant Farm, "Advertisements for a Counter Culture," 86.

production for something more sinister, more abstract, and largely de-materialized. Lippard and Chandler link this situation to artists' adoption of more de-materialized forms for presenting their work in order to resist co-optation by art market forces. They note how populist ideas about harnessing the systems of communication and distribution to wage critiques, rather than add to capitalist production, circulated in the art world, and contributed to a de-emphasis on the material aspects of the art object. Conceptual art was at the forefront of this turning away from a material focus on the object; it was art in which "the idea is paramount and the material form is secondary, lightweight, ephemeral, cheap, unpretentious, or 'dematerialized,'" as Lippard explained in her 1973 sourcebook.[47] Art critic Douglas Davis, writing in a December 1973 column in *Newsweek,* chose another label to describe the recent artistic trends: "post-object art." Like Lippard and Chandler, Davis recognizes the sentiment of anti-commodification that surrounded conceptual ventures; he quotes gallerist Jack Wendler, "Conceptual art is being bought mostly by people who know the artists and who have a deep interest in their work. It was made not to be a product. The prices—usually around $1,500—are regarded as a contribution to enable the artist to keep working."[48] While these pretensions to exist outside the financial constraints of the art world were recognized as unrealistic—even Lippard acknowledged in 1973 the naïveté of her viewpoint, lamenting that "art was recaptured and sent back to its white cell"— ideas of circumventing the art market circulated discursively and were inextricably bound up with the idea of the "dematerialized art object."[49] Moreover, the dematerialized practices of conceptual art could themselves at some level be seen to echo the very mechanisms of a more dematerialized economy. Despite this concern and the rapid acceptance by galleries and museums of conceptual art, it was nonetheless instrumental in restructuring the relationship between art and the information systems in which it was often disseminated and displayed. Ant Farm shares with conceptual artists an interest in the movement of information through systems (social, ecological, technological, mass-media), but instead of targeting the art world as the location for their interventions, as in the work of Hans Haacke, Michael Asher, and Dan Graham, they choose the commercial sphere, and in particular the mass media.

There has long been discussion about the effectiveness of social and cultural movements in provoking material change in political and economic structures, with some critics finding that

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[47] Lucy Lippard, "Escape Attempts," in *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972* (New York: Praeger, 1973), vii. For an earlier incarnation of this idea, see Lucy Lippard and John Chandler, "The Dematerialization of Art," *Art International* 12, no. 2 (February 1968): 31–36.
[48] Douglas Davis, "Art Without Limits," *Newsweek,* 24 December 1973, 73. In another *Newsweek* article*,* Davis deems that collecting "in the recessionary '70s … demands a commitment bordering on fanaticism." Davis, "The Supercollectors," *Newsweek,* 11 August 1975, 68.
[49] Lippard, "Escape Attempts," xxii.

such movements offered merely a "distraction from the 'real' political and economic struggles."[50] Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, while acknowledging this position, asserted that the social movements of the 1960s were not simply distracting attention from genuinely political radicalism when they "valued … a more flexible dynamic of creativity and what might be considered more *immaterial* forms of production." Rather, Hardt and Negri maintained, what had been considered by some critics as "*'merely cultural' experimentation had very profound political and economic effects.*"[51] According to Hardt and Negri, seemingly immaterial cultural forms—such as raising consciousness, producing alternate lifestyles, and establishing new networks of information—could have real material effects.

The 1970s experienced these debates about the role of art in culture, fresh from the arguments surrounding artists' roles in protesting the Vietnam War; artists' actions in the 1970s signaled the emergence of two lines of thought, the first which advocated that artists' goals should be to ward off commodification (as seen with the Conceptual artists) while the other side countered that artists were naïve to think that their gestures could have revolutionary significance.[52] Ant Farm believed in the political efficacy of art, although this belief was mediated by a recognition in the limitations of all forms of political resistance. They routinely referenced their practice as "art politics," stamping documents accordingly and discussing the topic in interviews. Yet their approach was more mediated and their aims less clear than that of

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[50] Quote from Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000), 274. They reference Judith Butler, who succinctly articulated this position in her rebuttal of it in a 1998 issue of the *New Left Review*; she writes:

> These are some of the forms that this kind of argument has taken in the last year: that the cultural focus of left politics has abandoned the materialist project of Marxism, that it fails to address questions of economic equity and redistribution, that it fails as well to situate culture in terms of a systematic understanding of social and economic modes of production; that the cultural focus of left politics has splintered the Left into identitarian sects, that we have lost a set of common ideals and goals, a sense of a common history, a common set of values, a common language and even an objective and universal mode of rationality; that the cultural focus of left politics substitutes a self-centred and trivial form of politics that focuses on transient events, practices, and objects rather than offering a more robust, serious and comprehensive vision of the systematic interrelatedness of social and economic conditions.

Butler negotiates the complex positions about the relationship between culture and politics set out by thinkers such as Adorno. The anti-aesthetic attitude was prominently articulated by Guy Debord, who argued that art was caught up in a regime of spectacle. See Butler, "Merely Cultural," *New Left Review,* no. 227 (January-February 1998): 33-44. It was previously published in *Social Text*, nos. 52-3 (Fall/Winter 1997): 265–277.

[51] Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, 274 (emphasis theirs).

[52] For different artists' thoughts on the role of politics in art generally and, more specifically, in relation to their art, see "The Artist and Politics: A Symposium," *Artforum* (September 1970): 35-39.

video activists such as Broadside TV and University Community Video or even than conceptual artists involved in institutional critique, such as Haacke, Asher, and Marcel Broodthaers.[53]

Although often referred to as conceptualist artists, Ant Farm countered the prevailing conceptual art stance of disparaging the commercial ties of art and accepted the economic realities that all work envisioned as "art" is eventually recuperated by the system. Their response to this predicament was to situate their work within both the art world and the commodity sphere, contesting the mainstream avant-garde position that art had to preserve itself by keeping cultural commodities at bay.[54] Ant Farm claimed no lofty status for art as anything other than another form of cultural commodity. Thus they acknowledged the centrality of the commodity system to the art world and anticipated the inevitable commodification by the industry by hastening the process and commodifying their own work (a stance conceded with the "RIP OFF ARTIST" slogan).[55] Rather than sell "multiples," as General Idea did, they produced tourist-themed ephemera related to their works. They recognized the hypocrisy of complaining about the art market while nonetheless seeking remuneration for their works, just as they acknowledged their love of the car culture of their youth even as they condemned the waste generated by the planned obsolescence of car models solely to generate revenue for car manufacturers. Framing *Cadillac Ranch* as a "roadside attraction" removed it from the art world and centered it within a tradition of commercial ventures for cross-country travelers: motels, restaurants, themed attractions. Conceiving of their installation as a "roadside attraction" places their work within a vernacular, commercial tradition venerated by architects such as Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown, and reveals an "[e]mbrace of the American way of life," as architectural historian Felicity Scott acknowledges. Circa 1973, Ant Farm member Doug Michels wrote to patron Marsh asking, "Stanley, will there be postcards and t-shirts for sale at the Cadillac Ranch roadside attraction? all we need is a fence to keep out the yahoo vandals and a souvenir stand to keep in the tourists." The letter, hand-written on Cadillac Ranch letterhead, was punctuated by the red rubber-stamped graphic, "Cadillac Ranch Roadside Attraction by Ant Farm ROUTE 66 Amarillo, Texas" (**figure**

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[53]For account of video activists see Deirdre Boyle's well-researched *Subject to Change: Guerrilla Television Revisited* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997). Two absorbing surveys of political art during this period are Peter Selz, *Art of Engagement: Visual Politics in California and Beyond* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006) and Francis Frascina, *Art, Politics, and Dissent: Aspects of the Art Left in Sixties America* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999).

[54] See Brian O'Doherty's critique of museum culture, originally published as a series of essays in *Artforum* in 1976 and later collected into the volume *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space* (Santa Monica, Calif.: Lapis Press, 1986).

[55] In an interview Uncle Buddie, a character frequently played by Chip Lord, explained, "museums and art galleries are just a reflection of the capitalist system making everything a product. And television is at the heart of that," quoted in Carla Liss, "AntFarm's Media Burn," 11.

57).[56] This letter underscores how the group actively conceived of their installation within the commercial sphere, here as a tourist site replete with logo, stationery, and rubber stamp. Although *Cadillac Ranch* itself was not for sale, they could sell its allure through producing postcards and t-shirts, items for visitors to take home to remember and publicize their experience. In this way, perhaps Ant Farm made good on some of conceptual art's promises for democratic access. The reality, of course, of much conceptual art was that it was esoteric and elitist; as Lippard laments, "[a]lthough the forms pointed toward democratic outreach, the content did not."[57] In *Cadillac Ranch* Ant Farm had taken content accessible to many—the American automobile—and paired it with a form—the postcard, the t-shirt—equally accessible. They just happened to use a mass-cultural form (brand merchandising) to do so. That the installation is both non-purchasable art— the terrestrial permanence of *Cadillac Ranch* and its ownership by their patron, not by them—and a souvenir item circulating in the commercial sphere points to where two central themes— ambivalence and circulation—coincide. *Cadillac Ranch* circulated by virtue of its representation as tourist memorabilia, converting the former physical motion the work symbolized into virtual movement through a commodity system. Ant Farm's ambivalent attitude relative to commodity culture, distanced as it is from rigorous anti-commodity stance of high-minded conceptualists, is similar to that of some present-day groups, such as the Bernadette Corporation, a subject broached in the conclusion of this study.

       Cadillac Ranch is very much a material object—rooted into the ground—and yet it also circulated in less material form by images and word of mouth. One journalist even referred to the installation as Brigadoon, elaborating "It is there, but it does not really exist."[58] For this journalist, the installation recalls the mysterious Scottish village of the eponymous Lerner and Loewe musical, because just as quickly as it appears, it is gone. Yet it circulates in myth. As drivers passed it they told their friends, and newspapers and magazines published stories about it. In *Old Cars* magazine, Terry Boyce repeats a story that describes the accidental way in which *Cadillac Ranch* was initially received and experienced. He tells of car enthusiast and Vice-President of the Fifties Ford Club of America Tom Howard's chance encounter with the installation, and the ensuing pursuit of information about the meaning of the work and who created it:

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[56] Letter from Dug [Doug Michels] to Stanley [Marsh 3], [1973], on "Cadillac Ranch" letterhead, Correspondence to Stanley Marsh, 2005.14.268.10. Although the letter is undated, the Berkeley Art Museum dates it to 1973.

[57] Lippard, "Escape Attempts," xvi.

[58] Frank Deford, "A Site for Tired Eyes," *Sports Illustrated,* 18 April 1977, http://vault.sportsillustrated.cnn.com/vault/article/magazine/MAG1092308/2/index.htm.

The Old Cars staff spent most of a morning mulling over the pictures [Tom Howard had sent], trying to [figure out why the] Cadillacs were there. Were they put out to pasture in their leaning posture by a rancher who couldn't bring himself to turn them in when he bought a newer model? Or are they the work of a grizzled Texas recluse thumbing his nose at the wealthy? Could it have something to do with nearby U.S. Route 66, that great artery of American dreams which takes off from Amarillo across the desert to Southern California, where, at least in the tailfin era, everyone was reputed to live in houses with swimming pools and at least a new Cadillac in every garage?[59]

Boyce's possible explanations for *Cadillac Ranch* register its nostalgia for the past (the rancher), its critique of American luxury (the recluse), and the ambivalence of its attitude toward the "bigger-better-faster-more" mentality of the post-war boom. Boyce recognizes the installation for what it is, a roadside attraction, and takes pleasure in it as such. Although rooted in Amarillo, the circulation of photographs taken by Californian Howard to the staff at *Old Cars* in Iola, Wisconsin, allowed the work a virtual mobility and added to the circulatory life of the automobile as a vehicle somehow representative of American culture, just as it served in the promotional exhibits at the 1939 World's Fair. None of Boyce's possible explanations treat the installation as "art." However, as Ant Farm member Doug Michels noted in 2004, "at some point it turned into art." With this reversal, from roadside attraction to art object, *Cadillac Ranch* inverts the process of commodification by the art world. Instead of having an art object rendered as a commodity by gallery or museum, *Cadillac Ranch* is transformed from commodity to aesthetic object, and as curator Connie Lewallen laughingly acknowledges, back to commodity object again.[60]

This shifting back and forth from the art world to the commercial sphere relies partly on the way in which the work is framed, and as with Asco and General Idea, the idea of the frame becomes an increasingly central theme in Ant Farm's oeuvre. Like the other collectives mentioned in this study, Ant Farm lacks a ready-made frame for their art to be appreciated *qua* art; the conventional "frames" that artists generally rely on to provide a context for their interventions—the canvas, pedestal, wall, studio, site, gallery or museum—are largely absent from Ant Farm's oeuvre. Instead they must provide their own parameters, establishing boundaries even as they seek to transgress them.[61] Providing a framework for one's art was central to much conceptual art, which relied heavily for its effect on the format of an exhibition, the specific context of the artwork's display (on the wall, in a catalogue), and the existence of supplemental

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[59] Boyce, "Oil, Cows—and Now A Cadillac Ranch?" 1, 8.
[60] "Interview with Ant Farm," 69.
[61] In "Escape Attempts," Lippard quotes Robert Smithson's tenet that "all legitimate art deals with limits. Fraudulent art feels that is has no limits" (xx).

documents such as reviews, articles, and public discussions by the artists, what the art historian Alexander Alberro refers to as "outside information."[62]

Video quite frequently served as this frame, as in *The Cadillac Ranch Show,* a video pendant to the installation. Curator Steve Seid deems it a "kind of spin control," and it was, although perhaps a carefully controlled spin off, introducing the characters Leo Wyoming (played by Marsh) and Uncle Buddie, the used-car salesman portrayed by Chip Lord. Together these characters forge a connection between horse and car, between renegade cowboy, evinced by Leo Wyoming's perforating a Cadillac door with targeted bullets that spelled out "Ant Farm," and the slick salesman, ready to turn the aging automobile into profit maker via commercial licensing and souvenir products. The character of Uncle Buddie became a regular in the Ant Farm cast, recurring as the "project director" for the First Artists' Soap Box Derby Awards, held on May 28, 1975, and also reappearing as a press contact for the group's 1975 event, *Media Burn.* Rather than offering an interpretive lens through which to view the work, *The Cadillac Ranch Show* accrued to the existing installation, adding layers of meaning, and weaving connections, as in the character of Uncle Buddie, to other Ant Farm projects.

Perhaps the most important "character" in circulating news of *Cadillac Ranch* was its patron Stanley Marsh. The work was produced and created by Ant Farm, yet it is commonly referred to as Marsh's *Cadillac Ranch,* and the media-friendly patron did little to disabuse people of this notion. Doug Michels even admitted, "half the draw was *Cadillac Ranch* and half was Stanley's own personality."[63] Thus, although it initially seemed to conform to a standard artistic commission, *Cadillac Ranch* blurred boundaries between artist and patron. Journalists such as *Sports Illustrated* columnist Frank Deford asked in 1977, "why *did* Stanley Marsh 3 bury 10 tail-fin Cadillacs in cement at the same angle as the sides of the Great Pyramid of Egypt out there in a Texas field running alongside Route 66?"[64] Deford continues, "Wouldn't it be more sensible for him to buy a Wyeth for the den or put some venture capital into the World Hockey Association?" Indeed those were more standard models of artistic patronage, ones Marsh eschewed for opportunities that allowed greater interactivity on his part. Acting almost as ringmaster (an analogy furthered by a large Barnum & Bailey poster in his office reception), Marsh hosted the various anniversary parties feting the sculpture, encouraging continuing media coverage of the "Texas panhandle's most famous icon." As ranch-side promoter, conceptual artist in his own

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[62] Alexander Alberro, *Conceptual Art and the Politics of Publicity* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2003), 57.
[63] "Interview with Ant Farm," 69.
[64] Deford, "A Site for Tired Eyes."

right (he did, after all, produce *The World's Largest Phantom Soft Pool Table*), and visionary patron, Marsh expanded the press exposure of the installation and helped it to circulate widely.

**"Art Is Dangerous If It's Not Contexted Within a … Cage":
The Frame as a Container for a Collateral Practice**

The frame becomes a central feature of Ant Farm's work, providing a containment of the very diffuseness that characterized the group's practice. This differentiated their aims from some of the conceptualists, who sought categorically to break out of the constraints of the "frame," conceived in its traditional relationship to painting on the wall. "For years people have been concerned with what goes on *inside* the frame," the artist Robert Barry mused in 1968. He continued, "Maybe there's something going on *outside* the frame that could be considered an artistic idea."[65] Of course conceptual artists could adopt such a stance because the gallery (or art journal) in which they presented their work acted as a frame, even if it was not always recognized as such. In contrast to this idea that "the frame was there to broken out of," Uncle Buddie, analogizing museums to zoos, cautioned against art without a contextual frame: "Art is dangerous and if it's not contexted within a … cage. It's wild."[66] The "ranch" provides the arena for the Cadillacs, the uninterrupted prairies of the Texas landscape providing a blank canvas not entirely different from the white cube of the modern gallery (an outdoor setting, as you might recall, in which General Motors saw fit to parade their 1968 models, **figure 49**). Ant Farm worked in no single medium or genre, and each work often entailed multiple related elements. As with the range of objects (often read as ephemera) produced in relation to *Cadillac Ranch,* such as the installation, the postcards, t-shirts, images, characters (Leo Wyoming and Uncle Buddie), video, and book *Automerica,* the group launched a constellation of different objects, characters, and ideas tied to one or more projects. Concepts or forms from one work might inform another, just as the group drew from both the aesthetic and commercial spheres for the framing and circulation of their works. This multi-media, multi-object artistic production—what I term the group's "collateral practice"—required different framing devices or conventions to make the work comprehensible as a whole.[67] Each mode in which the work was presented came with its own

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[65] Lippard quotes Barry in "Escape Attempts," xii; since she does not cite the origin of the quote, it remains unclear whether the emphasis is Lippard's or Barry's.

[66] Ibid., xiv; Uncle Buddie quoted in Carla Liss, "AntFarm's Media Burn," 11. The ellipsis mark is from the original.

[67] I must credit Alex Potts with suggesting the term "collateral" to me. In the catalogue for the 2007 exhibition, *Collateral: When Art Looks at Cinema,* Adelina von Fürstenberg credits Michael Mann's film

frames. So in fact the work generated is seen through multiple, proliferating framings that possibly come together in a provisional frame provided by the viewer/consumer who assembles a mental view of the various works, never entirely graspable as a single entity, dispersed across multiple modalities.

Such framing devices ranged from the title of a work—a way to draw in the various constitutive elements under a single conceptual category—to videos that helped to provide a context and documentation of an event, to accompanying statements, interviews, pamphlets, and books where the group stated their goals and ideas, and to their *20/20 Vision* exhibition, where they had the opportunity to present their works relative to one another. They also used other contextual frames, seeking variously to place their work within the context of artistic developments (as in their contributions to *Design Quarterly, Progressive Architecture,* and *Radical Software*), within the commercial sphere (such as through marketing images of their works by postcard or in *Playboy* magazine), through the lens of humor (as in the sponsorship of *The Eternal Frame* by *National Lampoon* magazine), as a pendant to the increasingly popular alternative lifestyle movements (publicized most notably in the *Whole Earth Catalog*), and in relation to spectacular displays of American progress and technological advancement, such as in the World's Fairs.

The *diffuseness* of Ant Farm's multi-media art production, how they worked within both aesthetic and consumer spheres, for example, was activated through their practice of *diffusion*. Their works were in continuous circulation, among the sometimes rotating cast of Ant Farm group members, on the lecture circuit of North American colleges, through the mail art networks, on television, in the gallery and museum world, by word of mouth, in the alternative, arts, and popular presses, and through postcards, books, posters, and decals (the example of the circulation of news of *Cadillac Ranch* testifies to this). Indeed, Ant Farm's career oeuvre can be said to embody a broader tension between the circulation of images and their stasis. We can read their practice as a negotiation of networks and nodes, terminology borrowed from the language of system and network theory becoming popular in the 1960s.[68]

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of the same name as an inspiration for the show's title. She also invokes collateral as "the non-precise collocation of the works presented, always in a lateral position between cinema and art." Although von Fürstenberg alluded to the space between art and cinema, this idea of expansive in-betweenness perfectly characterizes Ant Farm's practice, operating as they were in the interstices between art and life, art and entertainment, and art and commerce. See *Collateral: Quando l'Arte guard ail Cinema/When Art Looks at Cinema,* exh. cat. (Milan: Charta, 2007), 9.

[68] Patricia Mellencamp discusses systems theory in relation to Ant Farm in "Ant Farm Redux: Pyrotechnics and Emergence," *Journal of Film and Video* 57, nos. 1-2 (Spring 2005): 40–56.

The group's adoption of a networked means of working allowed Ant Farm to negotiate, and even integrate, various opposing positions that had long been both maintained and attacked in the art world: insider and outsider, for profit and not for profit, art world and mass culture, art and entertainment, art and politics, static and circulating, and network and node. Relative to one such set of positions, the group acknowledged its desire to adopt a "both-and" stance: "But art and politics, if you can just synthesize that so that you're not in either one but you're in both of them and the things you're saying have to do with both areas it makes it harder to deal with. You have to think about it."[69] What follows will trace how the group integrated these *seeming* binaries in four very ambitious, highly ambivalent works: *Truckstop Network*, *20/20 Vision*, *Media Burn*, and the *Eternal Frame*, a project they collaborated on with another collective, T.R. Uthco.

"Put Energy into a System You Can Believe In": Real (C)ity and Truckstop Network

As with a live ant habitat, in its early days the members of Ant Farm lived and worked together. Calling themselves an "expanded family," they explained their model for communal living as follows: "The expanded family concept is at the core of an expanding ecological consciousness: by sharing food, resources, entertainment, clothes, the joy of children, we maximize the amount of resources used."[70] Their living-working model testified to the group's early engagement with alternative lifestyles and to their growing ecological awareness, and revealed their investment in Buckminster Fuller's "comfortable standard of living for everyone."[71] The group envisioned several different living alternatives which they contrasted with

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[69] Uncle Buddie quoted in Carla Liss, "AntFarm's Media Burn," 11.

[70] Truckstop Network Proposals (Request for Funds, "Ant Farm Family"), Ant Farm archive, 2005.14.253.22b.

[71] In *Operating Manual for Spaceship Earth* (1969)*,* Fuller calls for people to cooperate world-wide to share in developing and using sustainable resources, in order to preserve them for future generations (he likens earth to a spacecraft with a finite supply of resources). His ideas circulated widely among the *Whole Earth Catalogue*-set and in *Radical Software*, and his dome design was applied in various communes, with the most noteworthy being Drop City. See Fuller, pirated transcription of interview videotaped by Raindance Corporation, *Radical Software* (Spring 1970): 5, for his appeal to readers to steer the planet towards self-sufficiency using the resources and technologies (he defines technologies broadly, including our mental faculties) they have at hand.

   Chip Lord and Doug Michels met Fuller in 1969, when they were teaching at the University of Houston. Fuller had been invited to give a lecture in the engineering school, and, after engaging in some minor deception, Lord and Michels collected him at the airport. After informing him of that they were not, in fact, representatives from the engineering school, they took Fuller, with his permission, to see his Dymaxion car on display at *The Machine at the End of the Mechanical Age* exhibition at Rice University. According to Michels, Fuller initially was resistant to seeing his concept vehicle thirty years later, because he worried that time had not treated it too kindly. For the account of the Fuller "kidnapping," as they fancifully call it, see "Interview with Ant Farm," 43–44.

their ideal living situation, Real (C)ity, where "[t]he difference between man building (the process) and natural growth is not immediately apparent" and where individuals waste little of their energy budget: Fat City, where "one sided consumption of stuff and single minded (lineal) categories for everything" abound; Rock City, where stockpiling new tools and technologies dominates their actual use and where inhabitants feed off the surplus of Fat City; and Edge City, where many depart for fringe communities and where the ones who remain depend on "part time collaboration with the old order powers (risking 'borderline radical' labeling)" (**figure 58**).[72] Edge City offered a compromise between the mooching, living "one jump ahead of ones [sic] credit" attitude embodied by Rock City and Real (C)ity, where "time can be shaped at will" nullifying temporal and spatial boundaries and obviating concerns of environmental scarcity because needs are provided for using the minimum possible resources.[73] As increasingly disenchanted folks sought refuge in areas peripheral to the American suburbs, Ant Farm realized that these "media nomads" would require tools for living an Edge City life.

From 1968 to 1971, the group was actively involved in creating portable inflatable structures that travelers could bring with them and set up anywhere—perfect for those following their dreams to start their own communities from the ground up. These "technologies of communication and travel presented vistas of individual and national progress," an ethos supported by the new alternative lifestyle politics.[74] The Drop City commune in Colorado was one such well-publicized experiment, where "droppers" from across the U.S. congregated as early as 1965.[75] Felicity Scott explains the significance of inflatable structures, and in particular the geodesic dome, to a survivalist politics of resistance: "What was regarded by the mainstream as a 'deviant' use of technology in the service of 'dropping out' was to those seeking alternative lifestyles not only a negative expression against corporate and commercial culture but also a positive technique, or perhaps itself a medium, of social liberation through 'experimentation with

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[72] Ant Farm, "Advertisements for a Counter Culture," 86. The conceptualization of these different cities recalls the British architecture group Archigram's proposals for an *Instant City, Underwater City, Computer City*, and *Walking City.* Archigram's practice was architecture "as an escape hatch from environmental conditions, not an internment within them." For more on Archigram, see Simon Sadler, *Archigram: Architecture without Architecture* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2005), 38 ff.

[73] Ant Farm, "Advertisements for a Counter Culture," 86.

[74] Fred Turner, *From Counterculture to Cyberculture: Stewart Brand, the Whole Earth Network, and the Rise of Digital Utopianism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 41.

[75] For an account of Drop City by one of its participants, see Peter L. Douthit, "Drop City: A Report from the Energy Center," *Arts Magazine* 41 (1967): 49–50, and also Douthit's contribution under the name Peter Rabbit, "Drop City Revisited," *Shelter and Society*, ed. Paul Oliver (New York; Praeger, 1969). Felicity Scott provides an insightful account of Drop City, particularly as it intersected with contemporary architectural thought, in *Architecture or Techno-Utopia*, especially chapter 6.

new forms of productivity.'"[76] In its rejection of the "work equals money equals success"
mentality represented by Fat City, Drop City approximated Ant Farm's concept of Edge City.[77]

Stewart Brand's *Whole Earth Catalog* was the guide of sorts for those interested in
developing alternative communities such as Drop City. A compendium of information and
resources on communication, ecology, building, and community, *The Whole Earth Catalog*
published "tools" (information tools, in the form of books, maps, classes, and utilitarian objects)
for "New Communalists," as historian Fred Turner aptly describes them, to form their own self-
sustaining networks. The impetus to get "off the grid" of the American military-industrial
complex and to build new communities stemmed from the New Communalists waning faith in
existing political models for revolutionizing society; instead, Turner contends, these groups
viewed transformations in technology and in lifestyles as the primary means for realizing social
change in a newly interconnected, global world.[78] Reflecting on the era, Brand noted the
importance of the model he introduced: "At a time when the New Left was calling for grass-roots
political power, *Whole Earth* eschewed politics and pushed grass-roots *direct* power—tools and
skills."[79] As a model community, one that was "a function of network representation," the *Whole
Earth Catalog* was thus a central agent in effecting this transformation, because it "synthesize[d]
a vision of technology as a countercultural force."[80] In a 1969 supplement to the *Whole Earth
Catalog*, they issued the following statement on the motivations behind the new nomadic
lifestyles (**figure 59**):

THE FRONTIER DAYS WERE
LAND OWNING, PUTTING DOWN ROOTS, SELF SUFFICIENT
FARMER STABILITY. THE COWBOY WAS LIVING IN ANOTHER
LIFE STYLE, SACRIFICING COMFORT FOR FREEDOM AND MOBILITY.

THE COWBOY NOMAD CARRIED ALL HIS LIFE SUPPORT SYSTEMS
WITH HIM BEING RESTRICTED BY WHAT HIS VEHICLE (HORSE)
COULD CARRY.

COWBOY NOMAD EQUIPMENT: SAFETY MATCHES/KWIK START ENERGY
                    BANDANA/ CLIMATE PROTECTION TOOL
                    BED ROLL/ THROWN DOWN SLEEP
               ANYWHERE
                    SADDLE BAGS/ HAND CARRY STORAGE PAK
                    SIDE IRON/ TAKE YOUR OWN JUDICIAL

[76] Scott, *Architecture or Techno-Utopia*, 157.
[77] Ant Farm, "Advertisements for a Counter Culture," 86.
[78] In *From Counterculture to Cyberculture*, Turner describes the process by which Stewart Brand appealed
to these New Communalists with the *Whole Earth Catalog* to create "network forums," in which people
could interact and form new communities through meetings, publications, and digital networks.
[79] *Whole Earth Catalog* (Winter 1998): 3.
[80] Turner, *From Counterculture to Cyberculture*, 89, 6.

SOCIETY TODAY IS AMBIGUOUS, LAWS ENFORCE STATIC LIVING
PATTERNS WITH VOTER RESIDENCY LAW, DRIVERS LICENSE STATE
JURISDICTION, STATES RIGHTS KEEP YOU [sic] IN YOUR PLACE, IN A
CIVILIZATION DESIGNED FOR MOBILITY. UNLIKE THE COWBOY,
WE CAN GET QUICK FOOD, NEWS, SUPPLIES, ANYWHERE ON THE ROAD
IN THE UNIVERSAL COMMERCIAL SERVICES MATRIX (YOU CAN GET
COCA COLA ANYWHERE IN THE WORLD) THE HOWARD JOHNSONS ARE ALL
THE SAME AS THE SEVEN ELEVEN, O-TOT-UM, PAK-A-SAK, LITTLE
GENERAL, BABY GIANT, PIK-A-PAK, TOM THUMB MARKET.
 IF WE PUT YOU IN AN AMERICAN SUPERMARKET DISORIENTED TIME
CLIP, HOW LONG WOULD IT TAKE YOU TO GUESS THE CITY YOU ARE
IN?

YET THERE ARE COWBOY NOMADS TODAY, LIVING IN ANOTHER LIFE
STYLE, AND WAITING FOR ELECTRONIC MEDIA, THAT EVERYONE KNOWS
IS DOING IT, TO BLOW THE MINDS OF THE MIDDLE CLASS AMERICAN
SUBURBANITE. WHILE THEY WAIT THE COWBOY NOMADS (OUTLAWS)
SMOKE LOCO WEED AROUND ELECTRIC CAMPFIRES.

"WILL YOU BE STAYING HERE IN DODGE CITY, MR MAVERICK?"
"WELL MAM, I RECKON I'D GET AWFUL ITCHY BOOTS SITTING
AROUND IN ONE PLACE VERY LONG."[81]

The figure of the cowboy nomad recurs throughout the *Whole Earth Catalog* and Ant Farm's early oeuvre. "Mobile, flexible, masculine," Turner writes, "he is to consume knowledge and information and carry it with him on his migrations."[82] Thus the cowboy nomad was not only an itinerant renegade, but also a roving information source, carrying new developments and knowledge along with him. He was, in short, a moving node in a vast information network. That the members of Ant Farm pictured themselves as this outlaw figure is apparent from collages Lord and Michels submitted with their resumes for their *Electronic Oasis* proposal to Experiments in Art and Technology for the 1969 Paris Biennale (**figure 60 and figure 61**).[83]

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[81] *Difficult but Possible Supplement to the Whole Earth Catalog* (July 1969): 17. The "cowboy" motif also appeared in an activity score for *Time Slice* (1969), which included a picture of a galloping horse and rider, and the collaged text, "COWBOY," and occurs in their performance *Plastic Businessman Meets Space Cowboys* at Houston's Alley Theater in 1969. The Alley hosted an annual gala event, where different rooms were decorated according to a theme (such as "African Safari" and "French Cabaret"). At the invitation of Marilyn Lubetkin, the group created one such environment, a "performative room with slide show." Ant Farm members encouraged visitors into the darkened room, dressed in white jumpsuits and goggles and adorned with headlights and flags, they assumed the role of rock musicians playing live and structured the performance around eight multi-media slide and music shows; as an anthem of sorts for the group, Steve Miller's "Space Cowboy" featured prominently. They explained, "We were intrigued by the Texas myth and the fact that Houston's plastic modernism backed up against the cowboy tradition. A slide show came out of this as well as the cowboy nomad theory." The members of Ant Farm recount this "kind of happening" in two pages from the 4 2 Maro Binder, untitled book page, 2005.14.246. 10 and Autorama, 2005.14.246.7, both in the Ant Farm archive. See also "Interview with Ant Farm," 46.
[82] Turner, *From Counterculture to Cyberculture*, 88.
[83] These photocollages were submitted along with Lord and Michels' resumes and are now held in the Experiments in Art and Technology records, Research Library, Getty Research Institute, accession number 940003.

In these collages, the lads literalize the "cowboy nomad" figure. Both sport kerchiefs, cowboy hats, and jeans while posing against the backdrop of a smiling moon and starry night sky. Lord poses as if preparing to draw both his weapons from their holsters, while Michels appears to casually discharge his weapon, firing what is labeled on the collage as a "space capsule." Accompanying Lord's submission are commemorative space stamps from the United States and Romania (the latter's country indicated in the orthography, Posta Romina, adopted by the communist government), and presiding over Michels' collage is an allegorical figure brandishing torch and wreath between two oil rigs (a sight reminiscent of the iconography of certificates issued by prominent oil companies; **figure 62** shows Ant Farm's alteration of a Houston Oil Company of Texas stock voting trust certificate to make them the beneficiary). The certificate and Michels' appropriation of its iconography underscore Ant Farm's mockery of the trappings of official, corporate culture, even though they appropriate it when beneficial (such as when they incorporated Ant Farm in the State of California), tactics similar to Asco's No Movie awards and General Idea's various corporate alter egos. As "advertisements" of sorts for their actions—these collages, after all, accompanied the men's "official" biographical data and project submission-- these renderings picture Ant Farm as renegade explorers, even as they are framed by a somewhat traditional proposal and submission process for acceptance into an exhibition. In fashioning themselves as cowboy nomads/space cowboys, Ant Farm adopted this role in an update of what then seemed like a quaint notion of the avant garde artist.

The virility of the cowboy nomad—as gun-slinging, traveling outlaw bringing only as many possessions as he could carry—contrasted with the sanctioned forms of masculinity implied by the cars used in *Cadillac Ranch.* Car culture provided men with a means for becoming consumers, particularly in the 1950s when men were slotted into roles as breadwinners and women as bread-makers and consumers. Buying cars initiated a distinctly gendered mode of consumption that encouraged the marketing of gadgets and electronics to men subsequently. The figure of the cowboy nomad required a shift in male consumption, from product to process. It also signaled a contrast from the "urbane playboy," an image that, as Bill Ogersby argues, had emerged from the middle-class "'ethic of fun' [that] was largely geared to masculine desires."[84]

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[84] Ogersby explains: "During the 1950s and early 1960s this faction [of middle class culture intent on doing its own thing] had steadily coalesced as a distinct entity, drawing together notions of youth, affluence, and hedonistic consumerism in a cultural configuration that challenged and gradually displaced the more traditional bourgeois mores of conservatism and puritanical reserve. This emergent cultural formation was, however, hardly radical. Finding its fullest expression in the concept of the playboy, the new middle-class 'ethic of fun' was largely geared to masculine desires, while the 'good life' of hedonistic consumption remained almost exclusively a white preserve until the late 1960s." (page 181). See also Mark Jancovich, "The Politics of *Playboy*: Lifestyle, Sexuality and Non-Conformity in American Cold War Culture," in

Cadillac Ranch allows for the deconstruction of those very ideas of masculinity embedded within car culture, conveying an impotence and powerlessness through the dead-end state of those very cars that had once served as evidence of virility.

To support the cowboy nomad lifestyle on a scale larger than a handful of individuals required an infrastructure—resources and supplies for nomads. Ant Farm proposed *Truckstop Network* as one such model, which as they conceived it, would provide a community for nomads.[85] Their proposed network would supply food, shelter, and communications access for people on the road (see **figure 63** for a collage revealing the potential contributions of the *Truckstop Network*).[86] Yet just constructing structures themselves was not enough, the group realized. They had previously asked, "Why should we stick around with cinder blocks and concrete and dig holes for a foundation," and although the inflatables they promoted lacked the fixity of concrete and foundations, they nonetheless only solved one problem—that of temporary shelter.[87] To truly forge alternate communities required a commitment to a greater infrastructure. Michael Shamberg, collaborator with Ant Farm in the video "supercollective" TVTV and author of the book *Guerrilla Television,* for which Ant Farm provided the graphic design, argues that "No alternate cultural vision is going to succeed in Media-America unless it has its own alternate information structures, not just alternate content pumped across the existing ones."[88] Shamberg's philosophy is an essential rephrasing of McLuhan's dictum, "the medium is the message," but it

Historicizing Lifestyle: Mediating Taste, Consumption and Identity from the 1900s to 1970s (Aldershot, Hants, England: Ashgate, 2006), 70–87.

[85] In "Interview with Ant Farm," Lord describes how *Truckstop Network* tied into "a larger theme in the counterculture of nomadics, constantly moving around but somehow making community out of that process" (55).

[86] The Portola Institute, publisher of the Whole Earth Catalog, operated the Menlo Park Whole Earth Truck Store, which contained many of the items advertised in the publication. They explain the role of the store: "We see who's buying what. We hear complaints and suggestions. We try out items that might be in the next CATALOG. We have a place where friends can come and see what's happening." Ant Farm's *Truckstop Network* could be indebted to the Portola Institute's concept. *Difficult but Possible Supplement to the Whole Earth Catalog* (September 1969): 30.

[87] In 1970 Ant Farm published the *Inflatocookbook,* a collection of "recipes" for building one's own inflatable structures. They borrowed this alternate distribution model from Lloyd Kahn, publisher of *Domebooks* (also begun in 1970). Felicity Scott catalogues the rise and fall of dome building as, at first, a seeming panacea for hippies drawn to the do-it-yourself form as a new means of building a participatory democracy and as a "metaphor of the space age," and then later as an example of design form that became quickly commodified and replicated as "an end in itself." (*Architecture or Techno-Utopia,* 170 ff).

For a comparative account of the relationship between inflatables and the European protest movements of 1968, see the richly illustrated exhibition catalogue edited by Marc Dessauce, *The Inflatable Moment: Pneumatics and Protest in '68* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press and the Architectural League of New York, 1999).

[88] Michael Shamberg and Raindance Corporation, *Guerrilla Television* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1976), 27.

is instructive for pointing to alternative systems as the means for making real change.[89] *Truckstop Network* is an investment in this possibility. The vestiges of a radical utopianism living on in their proposed *Network* distinguish Ant Farm's practice from that of present-day lifestyle artists, such as Andrea Zittel, whose "designs for living" lack a political impulse. Although Ant Farm initially produced inflatables as self-sufficient living pods for a peripatetic lifestyle, they quickly became more engaged with considering the systems which kept people in contact than with producing goods for those same travelers.[90]

Thus with *Truckstop Network* the group revealed a change in emphasis from creating portable living structures to thinking about the demands of developing a cross-country infrastructure to build a community of nomadic individuals. Forging communication technologies became a central priority for the network, because"[e]nlarging on personal mobility means accommodating … communication."[91] A report to the United States Office of Education, to which Ant Farm contributed early *Truckstop* designs, explained that putting people in contact with one another allowed them to make the most of the knowledge and tools they had: "Information temples need to be taken as places where interface between people (present) and experiences (past) meet to interact."[92] Communication structures also supported the alternate economic model of the *Truckstop Network.* The network proposed a system of exchange, where work performed in one location (node) would receive credit for services or goods provided at another. Such an economy was based on individuals' identities as both producers and consumers, and it differed from the recycling aesthetic promoted by Drop City, in that it operated based on a system of work, exchange, and credit. Bill Voyd, writing about Drop City, explained how "[t]rapped inside a waste-economy man finds an identity as a consumer"; within the Drop City commune, individuals repurposed discarded or waste materials to generate their objects: "Once outside the trap he finds enormous resources at his disposal—free."[93] By removing themselves to an outpost and living off the remnants of overconsumption, Drop City fused elements of Ant Farm's Rock City and Edge City concepts; however what distinguished the Colorado commune from Real (C)ity was the latter's creation of its own economy, independent from Fat City. The

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[89] Ant Farm provided the illustrations for Shamberg's book, *Guerrilla Television,* and must have been familiar with its contents.

[90] "The catalyst for interaction is often inflatable structures, but the basic information exchange is at the essence of our commitment to alternate lifestyles." Truckstop Network Proposals (Ant Farm Data), Ant Farm archive, 2005.14.253.11.

[91] *Concepts of Educational Mobility: A Report to the United States Office of Education* (Houston: New Learning Technologies Program, [1971]), introduction. Because of previously published material included in the report, the archivist at the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, dates this work to 1971, not 1970 as the WorldCat listing indicates.

[92] *Concepts of Educational Mobility*, introduction. Ant Farm contributed to this report.

[93] Voyd, "Funk Architecture," 156–157.

credits that one banked in the *Truckstop Network* were "energy credits," an acknowledgement that it was the people who fueled the network and who kept it operating, rather than commodities. Ant Farm envisioned the network as "AN ABANDONMENT OF PERSONAL PROPERTY." [94] Central to the network was a transferability of credits earned by sharing in the system through work: "WHEN YOU HAVE A SHARE IN THE TRUCKSTOP YOU OWN PART OF THE PHYSICAL REALITY, YOU DON'T NEED ANYMORE, THE ENERGY SYTEM INSURES THAT ENERGY YOU PUT INTO THE SYSTEM IN SAUSALITO CAN BE TAKEN OUT IN HOUSTON." [95] What generated exchange value in the network was "information/tool access." Thus information and resources function as currency in Ant Farm's newly envisioned economy, reinforcing the process-based systems they sought to create. They acknowledge the naiveté of these aspirations: "this is corny and probably old fashion [*sic*], but I think people need a system to believe in." [96] With Americans' faith in the government at a low because of ongoing debates about the U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War, Ant Farm proposed *Truckstop Network* as a means for connecting people, physically and virtually.

This connection between physical and virtual connectivity was solidified in a plan for the proposed network, which asked, "how many ways do you communicate/enter Truckstop?" Entering Truckstop thus became a form of bridging national and global communities, via bus, car, motorcycle, bicycle, truck, airplane, helicopter, and blimp but also via radio, telegraph, TV, telephone, teletype, computer, film/tape/slides, xerox, U.S. mail, and "Daily Gazette." The suggestion of a shift from physical movement along highways to virtual movement later instantiated in *Cadillac Ranch* was addressed earlier (and more explicitly) in a proposal from *Truckstop Network:* "EVENTUALLY WE WILL ABANDON PHYSICAL MOVEMENT FOR TELEPATHIC/CYBERNETIC MOVEMENT (TELEVISION) AND OUR NETWORK WILL ADAPT TO THE CHANGE" [97] These ideas of physical mobility giving way to cybernetic communication follow McLuhan's thinking, particularly in his identification of the television as the primary instrument of change.

The concept of the Truckstop Network spawned a host of related proposals that became associated with the project in some form or another. In fact, whether they preceded the *Truckstop* idea and helped develop it or whether they arose from it is immaterial, because they all became enveloped as collateral elements in the larger project. One such early proposal, *Vacancy M,* presages Ant Farm's interest in American roadside culture demonstrated by *Cadillac Ranch*.

Truckstop Network Proposals (Truck Stop Fantasy One), Ant Farm archive, 2005.14.253.5.
[95] Ibid.
[96] Truckstop Network Proposals (If truckstop is to become a reality), Ant Farm archive, 2005.14.253.25.
[97] Truckstop Network Proposals (Truck Stop Fantasy One), Ant Farm archive, 2005.14.253.5.

Envisioned as "[d]ocumentation of mobile American lifestyles as a 'living art,'" *Vacancy M* involved a crew of artists traveling in a "media van" representing the experiences "encountered by the side of the road" through "videotape, film audio recording, selection of ststionary [sic], placemats, postcards, commercial slides, interviews, and reality collages."[98] This proposal for *Vacancy M* suggests the group's acceptance of a wide array of media for documenting their experiences, not limited to video, film, and photographic records, but also including commercial ephemera such as placemats, stationery, and postcards. Several placemats for *Truckstop Network* exist, which demonstrates the group's engagement with producing utilitarian souvenir objects— hybrid forms that provide information, perform an everyday domestic function, and commemorate the work and disseminate information about it (**figure 64**). That these consumer items would serve as indices of their "process of incidental education" reinforces how Ant Farm's practice was very much multi-media and richly allusive, even in its nascence. These collateral elements allowed the group to work in the spaces between art and entertainment. They did not create a tension between the two spheres so much as temporarily bracket any such binary so that they could move across it; art, for them, seemed in no material way to differ from the entertainment or consumer spheres, and as such, the group held no hang-ups about combining all the resources and media available to them to create new educational, artistic, and consumer experiences.

Another such mobile, interactive educational model that Ant Farm proposed is *Antioch Greyhound*, a precursor to the full-fledged *Truckstop Network*. Through redesigned vehicles equipped with video and audio technology, Ant Farm envisioned Greyhound buses as mobile classrooms, replacing colleges with a self-sustaining roving educational environment based on exchange and interactivity. To this end, Ant Farm advertised that it was "CONCENTRATING ENERGIES TOWARD SUPPORT SYSTEMS FOR MOBILE ENVIRO-MINTS: TAKING LIFE/ART+ECO/TECH-LEARNINg."[99] Ant Farm's *Antioch Greyhound* answers Michael Shamberg's call for a change in the educational system to respond to the demands of an increasingly technological "Media America."[100] Part of properly equipping "Media America" was establishing both "mobile hardware" in the form of vehicles outfitted with communications tools and portable living structures and "loose openended information software" (with software here

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[98] Truckstop Network Proposals (Vacancy M), Ant Farm archive, 2005.14.253.9.
[99] Truckstop Network Proposals (Intents and Purposes), Ant Farm archive, 2005.14.253.12.
[100] "Slowly, cumulatively, I came to realize that the school environment was wildly out of sync with an electronic environment it refused to acknowledge," Shamberg writes in *Guerrilla Television,* 1.

referring to the systems through which information is relayed).[101] In a letter seeking funding for another, similar, project, Ant Farm describes

> a mobile teaching environment consisting of two trucks, a converted school bus, several inflatable environments, two geodesic domes, slides and movies, videotape equipment, materials to build on the spot inflatables, and several Ant Farmers moving from school to school to community to conference and sharing ideas, information, and resources.[102]

These various projects related to *Truckstop Network* represent a faith in collaboration as a viable learning model and in the necessity of networks to engender that collaboration and communication.

In fact, *Truckstop Network* as a whole mirrored the group's own collaborative processes. In one drawing, "3D Truckstop," Curtis Schreier envisions a model "minicommunity" or Truckstop, with meeting and living spaces, cooking and sleeping spaces, working areas for film and video production as well as for building inflatable structures (**figure 65**).[103] Modeled after a missile silo in Wendato, Utah, most of the cylindrical structure lies underground, with only a small aperture breaking through the surface.[104] Solar energy feeds the core of the community, which fuels the "electro/video/communication maximum efficiency power." Channeled along with this solar power is "free association application of learning" and "hanging out & picking up what it's about." This form of taking in one's surrounding—through antennae as Pamela Lee described—captures Ant Farm's casual working mode. In fact, the drawing is annotated, "whatever you can think up (Doug-fill in some fantasies here)," pointing to a vacant area within the Truckstop cylinder city. That free association and fantasies are transformed into power in the *Truckstop Network* is a strong endorsement of the transformative power of art and culture in society—a true instantiation of media politics.

They literally took their ideas for the *Truckstop Network* on the road, supported by a grant their friend and patron Marilyn Lubetkin provided to the Corcoran Gallery. In a "media van" retrofitted with videotape equipment that could capture the sights along the road as they

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[101] Truckstop Network Proposals (Antioch Greyhound), Ant Farm archive, 2005.14.253.8a. Punctuation as is in original.
  Ant Farm's approach was shaped by what they read in *Guerrilla Television* and Raindance Corporation's periodical *Radical Software* as well as ideas that circulated based on the works of Teilhard de Chardin, Marshall McLuhan, Gregory Bateson, Norbert Wiener, R. Buckminster Fuller and others.
[102] Ant Farm Prospectus, Ant Farm archive, 2005.14.245.22.
[103] Truckstop Network Proposals (3D Truckstop), Ant Farm archive, 2005.14.253.40.
[104] In an interview in 1972 with Linda Groat (at Cal Arts), Doug Michels explained that "we were goin' around looking at obsolete missile silos 'cause we were thinking about starting one of the truck stops in an abandoned missile silo, using war tech for peaceful purposes and all." "A ~~Conversation~~ Play with Ant Farm," *Networks* 1 (1972): 70, Ant Farm archive, 2005.14.327.

drove, Ant Farm embarked on a series of lectures and demonstrations of their inflatable prototypes, cheap, portable shelters that were easily erected, perfect for the cowboy nomad.[105] Their meandering road trip revealed the redundancy of the *Truckstop Network* they were seeking to illustrate; as Lord lamented, "the life-support system turned out to be unnecessary in roadside America where all your services are easy access. The lectures paid for the trip, but it was difficult to remain fresh enough to relate to new students on each campus. Somewhere along the line, the Corcoran backed out."[106] The museum's withdrawal from the project highlighted the tension between the need for financial support for their projects and their desires for "off-the-grid" freedom. Although the group remained convinced of the need to develop alternative information structures (in fact, a boon of their *Truckstop Demonstration* tour was they met Michael Shamberg and the Raindance Collective, with whom they would collaborate on TVTV and *Guerrilla Television*), their cross-country trip helped to convince them that a services and support network based on the automobile was neither necessary nor particularly visionary by 1973. While the *conceptual* basis of *Truckstop* relates to theories of computer networking that originated in the 1950s and were further developed in limited systems in the 1960s, such as the ARPANET link that was established in November 1969 between the University of California, Los Angeles, and The Stanford Research Institute, the *rhetorical* address of *Truckstop* places the cutting-edge technological framework within a slightly retrogressive model of the highway system, itself a product of the Eisenhower era. As such, Ant Farm's hybrid *Truckstop*—part enactment of Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*, part precursor to the internet—marks a change occurring within American society, now looking to a future less based on the transportation of physical bodies and more constructed around virtual transmission links. Nonetheless, Ant Farm situates these new ideas of communication in relation to past decades-old dreams of mobility, a theme that dominates their 1974 exhibition *20/20 Vision*.

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[105] After modifying their truck and trailer to provide a kitchen, shower, solar collector, and inflatable dwelling (ICE-9), Doug Michels, Hudson Marquez, Doug Hurr and Ben Holmes took to the road, their schedule largely dictated by a series of university lectures. Some members of the road crew dropped off at different points, and others, such as Chip Lord, joined in. See the description of their *Truckstop Network* travels in 4 2 Maro (untitled page), Ant Farm archive, 2005.14.246.25.
[106] Ibid.

"The future in the past": *20/20 Vision* **and** *4*2 Maro*

The 1973 oil crisis and steeply rising prices at the pumps completely quelled the *Truckstop Network* dream and made it all too quickly an artifact of a past time.[107] A network based on the automobile, with services and support systems mapped onto a highway grid, seemed out of touch with contemporary trends, given the oil embargo and resulting backlash against car culture.[108] *20/20 Vision,* an exhibition organized by Ant Farm which opened at the Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston, in December 1974, readily recognized this already dated aspect of their proposal in presenting, among other things, gas pumps from the major petrol companies as sculptural relics rather than as utilitarian objects (**figure 66** provides an installation view of *20/20 Vision*). Above these hung an astronaut's suit, suspended upside down in an eerie effigy. Other elements in the exhibition referenced the space race, with the most exciting being a live video feed from the Manned Spacecraft center control room for Sky Lab IV, which was in orbit at the time. The Sky Lab presentation was billed as a "freeway of tomorrow," terminology that maintained the themes of mobility the group explored elsewhere in the exhibition. The evidence of NASA's products for living in space (and, some might say, their imperial expansion into space) coincided with the symbols of terrestrial mobility, cars, in the main gallery space. The exhibit thus extends the "space cowboy" theme that Ant Farm had been invested in since they arrived in Houston (or Space City, as they sometimes dubbed it).

Looking backwards to see the future provided a central framing device for Ant Farm's oeuvre as a whole.[109] In the exhibition installation and the accompanying catalogue, designed as a functional 1974 calendar that they aptly termed a "CalendarLOG," they chose a unifying theme to link their brand of future speculation to those of past visionaries (see **figure 67 and figure 68** for the cover and part of the January spread, respectively). Presenting the "Future in the Past," a subset of what they term "The National Media Archives," they displayed via wall-mounted panels and slides their personal collection of advertisements, postcards, photographs, and drawings they curated from a variety of sources, among them General Motors, Ford Motor Company, and the Canadian group Image Bank (**figure 69**).[110] Their vision of the "Future in the Past" is marked by

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[107] Journalist Ann Holmes acknowledges this situation in her review of the group's exhibition *20/20 Vision,* "The Ant Farm: A Prophecy from the Workers," *Houston Chronicle,* 6 January 1974, 10.

[108] An advertisement in the group's proposal *4*2 Maro* reinforces how dated looking to the highway system seemed in 1974; it called for "A salute to the builders of the world's greatest Highway network…It's time to cheer America's growing new interstate highway system!" 4 2 Maro binder (A salute to the builders), Ant Farm archive, 2005.14.246.47.

[109] The theme recalls Chip Lord's article "A Backwards Look at the Forward Look."

[110] Ant Farm also maintained their own personal image archives, such as their *Men with Models* binder (labeled Man and his Models on the binder edge), which included newspaper photographs, clippings from

repeated references to five specific, carefully chosen years. Ant Farm envisioned the installation as an "avenue of progress"[111] ranging from 1939, which witnessed the transformation of F. Scott Fitzgerald's "valley of ashes" into the "World of Tomorrow," the site of television's launch and incubator for the technological hopes of a world poised on the brink of war; to 1955, which marked the apex of America's fascination with the automobile and inaugurated the "dream car," instilling the seeds of desire and marketing hype in a public primed to consume after leaner war years; to 1974, where Ant Farm's exhibition served as the lynchpin in the group's future-oriented aesthetic, a moment when the disparate aspects of their practice coalesced in a single moment; to 1984, the year made famous by George Orwell's portentous book, which suggests a tomorrow yet to come, a future that, like Orwell's novel, often resembles and critiques its *present* society more than imagines an entirely new, different one; and finally, to 2020, the far-off future where the visions dreamt in the present would betray their origins in the 20th century. Grouped into one corner of the gallery space, a car acts as a metonymic place-holder for four of these time periods: a Cord stood in for 1939; Harley Earl's Firebird 3, the turbine-powered X-car, represented the dream cars of the 1950s; "*Media Van,* with its gray bubbles, the George Orwellian 1984; and the Lunar Rover foretold the year 2020—because it was the most futuristic vehicle you could get,"[112] as Chip Lord explained (**figure 70** shows the vehicles and **figure 71** offers an installation view of three of them).

These references to the historical events evoked by the five dates advance a distinct narrative about America's relationship to technology and progress, a story that is frequently

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magazines, advertisements, and postcards that showed men with different types of design models (of cars, of buildings, at the drafting table, currency, inter alia.) They likely used these pictures for inspiration and for various graphic displays (such as in the *20:20 Vision* wall panels and in the calendar pages). Their process was similar to General Idea's, who also collected images pertaining to key themes, such as "three men imagery." For the *Men with Models* binder, see Ant Farm archive, 2005.14.244.

   Chip Lord describes when he and Doug traveled through Canada and met up with Image Bank, with whom they had been exchanging images through the mail art network:

> [W]e weren't prepared for the overload that Marcel Idea and Mr. Peanut had in their image bank. They had scrapbooks on specific image subjects such as: Mr. Peat, Cows (Marcel had done a museum piece which consisted of a live cow in the gallery), all of Ant Farm's correspondence and other stuff, as well as hundreds of post…cards, magazines etc.

They realized from this visit that a viable network existed through the postal system, coordinated by Image Bank's monthly mailings, their Image Exchange Directory, and *FILE magazine.* 4*2 Maro binder (untitled page), Ant Farm archive, 2005.14.246.26.

[111] This drawing that maps out the installation of *20/20 Vision* is included in the Ant Farm Timeline, 248.

[112] "Interview with Ant Farm," 65. Lord remembers 1959 as one of the key years presented in the exhibition, although the publicity materials and exhibition catalogue clearly indicate that 1955, not 1959, was the year singled out to stand in for the decade. Contributing to this dating confusion is the display of the Firebird III in the exhibition (according to press accounts), a vehicle released in 1958 and which was featured at General Motors' Motorama of 1959. These chronological aberrations suggest that the symbolism of the mid-to-late part of the decade—of dream cars, outlandish styling, and planned obsolescence—was more important to the group than singling out one year.

interrupted (and most certainly complicated) by Ant Farm's insertions of their own work into a much larger historical frame. "Utopia or Myopia?" critic Peter Papademetriou asked in the headline of his review of the exhibition for *Architectural Forum* but this cleverly worded question misses the mark in pinpointing the real force of Ant Farm's retrospection and prospection.[113] The inclusion of predictions of the future as told by the past did not render Ant Farm's sight necessarily myopic; instead, these selected artifacts provided a context for understanding the limits to imagination—the Ant Farmers' dreams for technological progress, as visionary as some of them were (a dolphin embassy!), were necessarily conditioned by the images and ideas that they were raised on: concept cars, the space race, the need for systems to reach across the vast United States.[114] Thus *20/20 Vision* became a device that brought Ant Farm's work into relief, by *contextualizing* it relative to the group's other projects and to their received ideas about what visions for the future look like, what forms they take. In this way the group also assumed the role of curators and historians of their own work, placing them within their cultural context and in relationship to their other projects, a richly allusive form of practice that they cultivated throughout their career as an art collective.

As its title suggests, *20/20 Vision* promises "normal" unaided visual acuity—the ability to discern text clearly when standing at a distance of 20 feet. Yet "20/20 Vision" also suggests unusual perspicacity, as in the familiar lament, "hindsight is always 20/20." The "20/20" split implies looking twenty years past or hence, a span in decades. The exhibition tackled the question of what the future held by proposing plans for cities and centers without automobiles (connecting citizens virtually through cable television and rapid transit) and by representing how visionaries of the past had imagined life decades ahead. In this way it was, as with Filliou, a knowing acknowledgment of the expiration date of even their own proposals, and a recognition of how ideas about progress can change from optimistic plans to compromised realities to historical curiosities. This registered Ant Farm's ambivalence in a new way, tying it both to nostalgia for the way things were and to an ironic understanding of the difficulties in using history as a guide for the future. This message becomes all the more apparent in the present day, when in 2008 gas prices tipping $4 a gallon had consumers reeling and the auto industry scrambling to reconfigure its product lines to acknowledge alternative energy sources.

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[113] Peter C. Papademetriou, "Utopia or Myopia?" *Architectural Forum* (March 1974): 86.

[114] Doug Michels acknowledged this context for *20/20 Vision:* "Maybe it comes from growing up with dream cars, Sputnik and the promise of technological wonders from science." Quoted in Nancy Frizelle, "Persona: What About Tomorrow: 2020 Vision," *Pacific Sun,* 13 December 1973, 27, Ant Farm archive, 2005.14.260.2.

This gloomy realization that not much had changed in thirty-five years aside, *20/20 Vision* recognized the value in having dreams for the future, however outlandish or naïve they might register later. "It is our hope," Ant Farm announces in the accompanying exhibition catalogue, "that the visitor to 20-20 Vision will be inspired by the entertainment value of these 'visions of tomorrow' at the same time realizing that new visions can make the world a better place to live."[115] In declaring this goal, Ant Farm establishes itself as the protagonist who will effect positive changes with re-envisioned models of the future. The promise of making "the world a better place to live" reveals the collective's belief that even as past ideas are redeployed as entertainment and lose their critical purchase on the future, looking forward can nonetheless be productive in the present for stimulating the imagination. In this introductory statement, Ant Farm combines nostalgia—once a medical condition discovered in the 17th century to describe a severe physical homesickness, which subsequently became used to indicate a psychological sense of longing for an idealized, imagined past—with utopianism, both responses that reject the present in favor of looking forward or backward.[116]

Ant Farm's presentation of Futurama, the most visited attraction of the 1939/40 World's Fair, effectively reveals the group's nostalgia for the not-too-distant past when the automobile reigned as the primary conduit for individual mobility and also points to how the group drew on these past conceptions of the future to frame their own accomplishments (the utopian impulse that derives from their nostalgia). They invoked Futurama through their display panels of photographs and in the pages of their CalendarLOG (see, for example, the January and February pages, **figure 72** and **figure 73**). General Motors' look at the future, designed by Norman Bel Geddes, drew an estimated 25 million visitors in the two-year span of the fair. In motorized armchairs, fairgoers toured a vast miniaturized cross-section of the U.S. as it might appear in 1960, glimpsing "great towering cities," "thousands of miles of multi-lane highways," and regulated, orderly intersections. The accompanying souvenir guide hypes the Futurama experience (**figure 74**):

> the FUTURAMA … is designed, not as a projection of any particular highway
> plan or program, but rather to demonstrate in dramatic fashion that the world, far
> from being finished, is hardly yet begun; that the job of building the future is one

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[115] Ant Farm, *20/20 Vision CalendarLOG* (Houston: Contemporary Art Museum, Houston, 1973).
[116] Linda Hutcheon, "Irony, Nostalgia, and the Postmodern," *Methods for the Study of Literature as Cultural Memory, Studies in Comparative Literature* 30 (2000): 193.

which will demand our best energies, our most fruitful imagination; and that with it will come greater opportunities for all.[117]

The decade of economic depression and period of national retrospection—what has been referred to as the "search for a usable past"—culminated, at the end of the 1930s, in a new plan for a "usable future."[118] This plan for revivifying the economy and injecting new capital derived from technocrats, who, as historian Francis V. O'Connor has argued, "promised a future of material plenty for the masses—one which would permit a richer, less onerous, more streamlined life for every citizen."[119] According to O'Connor, the fair exemplified the advertising techniques, spectacular designs, and hopeful air by which "the nations 'usable future' could be projected upon the American imagination."[120] Thus, looking back on 1939 in 1974, Ant Farm's presentation affirmed their belief that visitors to the World's Fair (and, in particular, the General Motors pavilion) seemed to buy the fantasies projected therein, and trusted that the fair's plans for tomorrow would make the world a better place. Moreover, by including representations of Futurama in *20/20 Vision,* the group placed their own visions for the future as heirs of these past traditions; particularly as the country faced an economic recession and the public expressed a waning faith in American government, Ant Farm's plans for an entertainment-shopping center complex, self-sufficient convention city, or cetacean-human communication station seemed to rekindle the desire to make "a less onerous, more streamlined life for every citizen." Thus their sometimes romantic, sometimes critical look to past ideas about the future spurred their own desires to effect change.

The catalogue accompanying *20/20 Vision*, rather than clarifying the role of the exhibition within its context in the art world as such publications often do, provided an experience that was a corollary to visiting the show and yet one that also presented new questions about the artists' approach to history—both their own and a national history invoked through representation. Flipping through the pages of the calendarLOG recreated an experience similar to visiting the space, in that pages devoted to the visions of the future by technological luminaries in the 20th century were interlaced with page spreads documenting the group's own projects, such as *Truckstop Network* (May, **figure 75**), their various inflatables (June, **figure 76**), proposals for the commercial and recreational environments *Convention City* and *Freedomland* (July and August, **figure 77** and **figure 78**, respectively), the award-winning *House of the Century* (September,

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[117] Cited in *Dawn of a New Day: The New York World's Fair 1939/40* (New York: New York University Press; Flushing, N.Y.: The Queens Museum, 1980), 101.
[118] Francis V. O'Connor, "The Usable Future: The Role of Fantasy in the Promotion of a Consumer Society for Art," in *Dawn of a New Day*, 57–71.
[119] O'Connor, "The Usable Future," 57.
[120] Ibid.

figure 79), and the *Ant Farm Time Capsule* (December, **figure 80**).[121] In placing these works in relation to one another, the catalogue urges viewers to flip through the pages and to make connections among the works and to trace common threads. A 1973 drawing for one of the site-specific installations, *20:20 Living Room of the Future*, reveals one way in which Ant Farm subtly weaved in allusions to upcoming projects without explicitly acknowledging this (**figure 81**). In the drawing, a projector casts an image of a flaming pyre at the end of a stretch of asphalt, a scene that portends Ant Farm's *Media Burn,* an image event they would create some two years later (**figure 94**).[122] This allusion to another of their works—one yet unrealized as anything other than an image—indicated how deeply interconnected Ant Farm's practice was. Moreover, the links between circulation, communication, and entertainment presented by *Cadillac Ranch* the following year are prefigured in the rendering of the living room console as a car fender with television monitors standing in for wheels. The way the group embedded references from one project into another also turns the historian into a detective, hunting for clues amid the various archives the group maintained; as the detective sifts through the evidence, he or she must continuously switch his or her frame of reference.

While the calendar form, in its equal allotment of space in regular intervals, serves to aggrandize Ant Farm's retrospective presentation of its own work, elevating the group's art to a level of cultural import akin to the 1939 World's Fair, this particular format imbues the exhibition catalogue with a time-based narrativity, allowing Ant Farm to intertwine several stories within a print medium that expresses the past, present, and future. The act of turning the pages places the previous month resolutely in the past (and out of view) and lands the viewer firmly in the present. Yet the black plastic spiral binding also allows for cycling through the pages and turning back and forth, which invites the generation of narratives that differ from the chronological account Ant Farm offers. In its physical construction, the catalogue mirrors the temporal ambiguities of its content: the presentation of a linear, chronological narrative, yet one that is frequently

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[121] *Playboy* featured the House of the Century, selling it as the ultimate bachelor pad, a move consistent with the magazine's espousal of carefree consumption and pleasure. Ant Farm received considerable mail in response to the *Playboy* story, particularly letters inquiring about the cost of building it (including one from Honey Novick, Miss General Idea 1970, and another from a high school student who found the $2000 price of blueprints the group quoted him too steep for his budget.)
   Convention City, explored in the bottom half of July's spread, is a giant domed city, wherein 20,000 people could partake in democratic government and could live, work, and play in a community without cars as their connection to one another. To increase participation, two-way cable television linked the events occurring in Convention City to American homes, similar to our current-day C-SPAN station, but with a built-in feedback loop. *Freedomland* represents a dome-enclosed mall with telecommunications services and live television piped in—an entertainment complex.
[122] Also shown in the drawing is a single tipped and inverted car, an anticipation of *Cadillac Ranch,* which was installed the following year.

punctuated by insertions that disrupt normative diegetic progression. The calendar form condenses a wide historical swath of events into regularized monthly increments, regardless of their actual occurrence in time. Thus in the logic of the calendar's time-keeping, 1955 falls directly after 1939, yet the pages from May to December span only a 4-year period. In its structure the calendar creates a very literal narrative of the group's work, intersecting with the timeline that they made to document their own projects (the work of a historian) and also the limits of such a project—the calendar's usefulness as a timekeeper expires in December 1974. The ability of calendar format to flip forward and backward in time parallels one of the qualities of nostalgia: it represents an effort to "evade teleology," as Hutcheon describes it. Acknowledging the inevitable march of time in an obvious way through the expected progression of months, Ant Farm's calendar also disrupts that same inevitability by mixing in personal histories with national ones, by applying a standardized time frame (the year divided into months and days) into a different periodization—1939, 1955, 1974, 1984, 2020. In these ways, the CalendarLOG both drew on and ironized historical narratives.

The CalendarLOG also evokes a hand-made quality, a throwback to a craft-based aesthetic in an exhibition devoted to technology, progress, and the future, yet completely in keeping with the very hands-on practice Ant Farm, trained as architects and artists, relished. The composition of elements on the pages retains a distinct collage aesthetic—photographs, textual citations in varying fonts and sizes, the uneven ink traces of a rubber stamp, and drawings are culled from a vast array of sources (**figure 76** and **figure 80** are particularly representative of this aesthetic). These material bits and pieces suggest the vast accumulation of objects that might have been on display in the exhibition, among them site-specific installations of Ant Farm's work, wall-mounted photo and text panels documenting their projects, and a video, *4*2 Maro,* which offered off-air interviews with the artists. The collage aesthetic also points to the calendar as an archive of the group's own practice, a counterpoint to the National Media Archives (that the group members themselves had constructed). Following its use as an inspiration for future developments, the calendarLOG becomes an object valued for its entertainment and informational value, in a similar way to the projections for the future by General Motors, Ford, and the Westinghouse Company that Ant Farm references in the exhibition, which had by 1973 become historical curiosities. One aspect of Ant Farm's playful ambivalence registers in the polyvalence of the catalogue; it shifts among various categories: utilitarian tool, aesthetic object, museum shop souvenir, and an archival record of the group's practice.

With all its sanguine representations of what the future might bring—cars that fly! Planes that swim!—Ant Farm also signals the potential dark side of a technology-based future society.

A photograph on the January page (**figure 68**) reveals a half-nude man and woman staring stoically into space, as electrode wires and nodes tap into their brains—a display of man's space-age control over technology, or, conversely, technology's control over man (a question that was raised in the promotional materials for *20/20 Vision,* which asked, "Can Man Control Technologies [*sic*] Domination of Nature?" [**figure 82**]). The scene constructs a prototype virtual reality machine, staged for the camera in a photo shoot in a University of Houston science lab, part of the group's 1969 time capsule *Electronic Oasis* included in a Parisian exhibition. In another reproduction of the scene (**figure 83**), the photograph bears a title and caption: *Enviroman*—a play on words suggesting "environment" and man's suitability in it—is "the man of the future, plugged into an Alpha computer environments [*sic*] of the Howdy Doodey [*sic*] future. Image technology is born."[123] In this iteration of *Enviroman,* Ant Farm links image creation with the popular 1950s children's show, a reflection of the wonder, technical fascination, and business realities associated with early television. The Howdy Doody Show was a boon to the TV industry, prompting parents to purchase television sets and demonstrating the potential of the medium to advertisers through commercial advertising spots, brand placement, and marketing of licensed products, such as toys, comic books, beanies, and t-shirts. The reference to the Howdy Doody Show reinforced Ant Farm's own desires to create a slew of licensed products associated with their artworks, such as programs, pins, and postcards, or the calendar-catalogue that accompanied the *20/20 Vision* exhibition.[124] Yet the *Enviroman* photograph also projected a more disturbing view of the future, where the brainwave and carotid monitors connect via wires to a computer, which transmits a vision of the future straight from the Ford Company design studios, of land-, sea-, and air-faring craft as tomorrow's vehicles for all means of transport. The "image technology" imported from the human subject's brains merely outputs *recycled* visions from the media—a striking visualization of the end effects of an image-mediated society. *Enviroman* epitomizes Ant Farm's early ambivalence about the past and the future, their nostalgia for a time when technology signaled progress and television a medium of communication, and yet also their growing concerns about what society would actually look like and function like when these technologies were eventually adopted.

In another projection-cum-cautionary tale Ant Farm presents *Kohoutek* (**figure 84, figure 85, figure 86,** and **figure 87**), the group's response to the Monsanto House of the Future

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[123] Ant Farm Timeline, 209.
[124] The popular children's character referenced in Ant Farm's *Enviroman* recalls the sense of deconstructed masculinity suggested by their "cowboy nomad" figure and by *Cadillac Ranch*: as a wooden marionette, Howdy Doody projected androgyny, although he was dressed in a cowboy outfit. For this assessment of Howdy Doody, see Mark Burns and Louis DiBonis, *Fifties Homestyle: Popular Ornament of the U.S.A.* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), 11.

displayed at Disneyland for a decade beginning in 1957.[125] Here the metaphor introduced in

Enviroman (which is alluded to in the calendar page for *Kohoutek,* **figure 84**) is the dangers of

virtual circulation borne out through the uneasy fusion of biology and technology in "the

dollhouse of the future." *Kohoutek* anticipates the logical end point of the preponderance of

modernist architecture, in which the free-form, organic shapes that had inspired the group's

building designs (as in the *House of the Century* and the models for *Freedomland*) are re-

established as physical attributes of living bodies (**figure 85**).[126] The fiberglass model represents

an "urban environment that has no permanent context." Rather it is "free to teleport at random,"

introducing a new means of connectivity—whereas in the *Truckstop Network* physical sites were

nodes connected by highways, in *Kohoutek* this arterial model is supplanted by a centralized

bionic brain, "a biotech synthesis of living brain tissue laced with electronic amplifiers.[127] The old

Truckstop model relied on physical apparatuses to connect individuals to one another; the

Kohoutek proposal promised an internalized connectivity where bodies become their own

communications devices. *Kohoutek's* eradication of time and space follows Marshall McLuhan's

sense of "a brand-new world of allatonceness."[128] Within *Kohoutek* a colony of female Barbie

dolls propagate via artificial insemination and the aforementioned "Brain bank" controls local

intelligence and activity (the social organization of *Kohoutek* extends many of the principles of

ant colony). In a "post-privacy" era, a surveillance gland "monitors the evolutionary process for

the good of all mankind" —in Ant Farm's vision of the year 2020 our own cyborgian bodies

betray us, victims of an uncritical faith in technological progress (**figure 86** reveals a detail of

Kohoutek).[129] The Big Brother watching? Ants, as the "true evolutionary winners" in a witty

reversal of Darwinism.[130] In its elevation of ants, *Kohoutek* channels the sci-fi horror genre,

particularly in drive-in flicks from the 1950s like *Them!* The name of the attraction itself signals

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[125] In another parallel with present-day trends, in July 2008 Disneyland opened the Innoventions Dream Home in Tomorrowland, a 'high-tech' version of the House of the Future sponsored by Microsoft, HP computers, Life|ware and home builder Taylor Morrison. In their press release for the attraction they included a photograph of the Monsanto model, available at http://www.disneylandevent.com/tsm/28-dreamhome.html, last accessed 10 January 2009.

[126] Michael Shamberg asserts that video marked an evolutionary stage in human development, which allowed for "increased control over our psychological environment." ("Official Manual,*" Guerrilla Television,* 31). His biological sense of the technological development of Media-America drew heavily on the theories of Norbert Wiener, author of *The Human Use of Human Beings: Cybernetics and Society* (New York: Avon Books, 1967).

[127] In another proposal related to *Truckstop Network* from circa 1969*,* NODE describes a city "organized by distributing life functions to several nodes located on the periphery for freedom of access," Ant Farm Prospectus (NODE), Ant Farm archive, 2005.14.245.12.

[128] Marshall McLuhan and Quentin Fiore, *The Medium is the Massage* (New York: Random House, 1967), 63.

[129] 2020 Vision/Dollhouse of the Future (Kohoutek), Ant Farm archive, 2005.14.266.17.

[130] Ibid.

a letdown of its technological promise as it evokes a comet discovered in 1973 that had failed to live up to its hype as "comet of the century." As such, *Kouhoutek* spoofs techno-evolutionary paradigms and reprises the question implied by the *Enviroman* staging: Can man control technology's domination of nature?

Italian critic Germano Celant captured the group's desire to balance technology and nature: "the idea is to possess more antennas, but naturally to remain more antlike."[131] The more antennae, the greater the ability to stay connected to others and to stay tuned in to new developments; the more ant-like, the greater the propensity to collaborate as equals and to accomplish huge tasks together. Ant Farm re-imagined the role of the artist as a worker-builder, explaining that the group "accepts only worker ants, and by regulation, no queen ant or leader ant is admitted."[132] Their model of collaboration was premised on a non-hierarchal structure, where every member had an equal stake (albeit possibly different role) in every project.

These cautionary predictions temper Ant Farm's nostalgia with irony, which nuances their ambivalence. Nostalgia and irony are "elements of response," according to literary historian Linda Hutcheon; they are not qualities that inhere in objects but are produced by them in the reactions of a viewer/reader. As Hutcheon explains, one *experiences* nostalgia when two different moments collide in one's mind and one "make[s] irony 'happen'" when the unsaid and said rub up against one another generating critical *frisson*.[133] Ant Farm's reliance on framing devices successfully draws their nostalgic, utopian, and ironic stances into relation with one another in the minds of their viewers who become charged with a certain agency to imagine new futures. (This stance recalls Asco's desire to provoke viewers "to commit acts of perceptual sabotage"—reflection becomes a valid political act in these groups' philosophies.)

Ant Farm's interest in representing the past reveals itself as a pervasive interest in all of their work. Some projects, such as *20/20 Vision* and their various time capsules, take up this concern with greater insistence. Their first time capsule, the *Electronic Oasis,* was a 22 x 30" cardboard box mounted on plywood that the group contributed to the Paris Biennale in 1969 (**figure 88** and **figure 89**).[134] They selected items that related to the moon landing, a national and international event that had captivated Ant Farm, especially given their residence in Space City (Houston). Among the ephemera they included were postcards, pictures of cowboys, American and Texan flags, and souvenirs. Yet instead of sending a sealed canister the contents of which

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[131] Germano Celant, Ant Farm archive, 2005.14.265.1f.
[132] Celant, "Ant Farm," 27. Patricia Mellencamp also points out that Ant Farm's *Truckstop Network* suggested an affinity with working-class travel—this certainly maintains the group's worker ethic.
[133] Hutcheon, "Irony, Nostalgia, and the Postmodern," 199.
[134] The time capsule portion of *Electronic Oasis* was related to the group's "environment" *Space Cowboy Meets Plastic Businessman* at the Alley Theater in Houston.

would be revealed at a future date, this version of time capsule presented distinct artifacts of Americana for a largely international audience, and thus the group chose to have the work displayed open. Visitors to the Biennale seized on the souvenir items, and at the end of the exhibition period, only the cardboard container remained.

In a work closely related to *20/20 Vision* (and displayed as part of the exhibition), Ant Farm created another time capsule, one modeled after Westinghouse Corporation's examples on view at the 1939 and 1964 World's Fairs, to launch the opening of the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston's new building in 1972 (**figure 90** and **figure 91**).[135] In this impermanent cultural souvenir, Ant Farm included videotapes of Houston's elite schmoozing at the museum's opening and also incorporated images from everyday urban life. They packed consumer goods, largely edibles and perishables, into a refrigerator—the "open door to the American dream," to be sealed and re-opened twenty or so years hence in a ceremonial unveiling.[136] Unlike Westinghouse's time capsule, which included millions of pages of microfilm, the souvenir items Ant Farm enclosed for perpetuity were perishable, indicating that, for the group, the most telling evidence of the 1970s for future generations was the foul brown remnants of a consumerist society.[137] Relying on humor, references to popular culture, and a good measure of entropy, Ant Farm's time capsule encapsulated the group's variegated practice: both critical and affirmative, sometimes ordered and often messy, consumption-oriented yet largely unconsumed, and a medium meant to last yet guaranteed to perish. As such, Ant Farm's time capsule intersected with the aims of *20/20 Vision* the following year, particularly in its emphasis on time-based

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[135] Ant Farm also compiled the *Citizen's Time Capsule* in 1975, where they asked residents of Lewiston, New York, to fill 30 suitcases with objects and images, loaded the luggage into a "weatherproofed" 1968 Oldsmobile Vistacruiser, and buried it on the grounds of Artpark, a cultural center under the auspices of the New York State park system.

[136] In *4*2 Maro*, the group acknowledges the contribution of mail artist Flakey Rose Hips to the first issue of General Idea's FILE "megazine": "Essentially the fridge is frigid, an open door to the American dream. Well insulated and gleaming clean, the closed door promises the garden of yum-yum delights. Fridge Art is Maintenance Art, the ultimate Museum. Everything kept up to the minute for weeks on end. Another race against time." The idea of the refrigerator as the "open door to the American dream" is repeated in *Time Capsule 1972-1984*, a video by Ant Farm containing footage from the 1972 party at the Contemporary Arts Museum and then from a 2000 unveiling of the capsule's contents.

[137] According to Ant Farm, the time capsule contained "all the magazines on the rack for a week in 1972; a sampling of grocery store products, particularly Unnatural foods; rain water; marijuana; videotape of Houston; articles of clothing; and other items unique to the early seventies," Ant Farm archive, 2005.14.246.39 (see also 2005.14.246.40). An article in the *Texas Observer* explained how Ant Farm's time capsule would contrast the pomp of an art world opening celebration with the humdrum of the quotidian city life by showing "video tapes of dignitaries and over dressed guests, plus 'real images' of supermarkets, freeways and Laundromats, the 'real life' of Houston during opening week, will be edited, compiled, and sealed in a refrigerated container." *Texas Observer,* 28 April 1972, 23, Ant Farm archive, 2005.14.239.

media, consumer society, objects contextualized by performance, and futures based on past examples.

Publications often serve as a repository or "time capsule" for an event that occurred, offering readers a chance either to relive their experience or to visit a site they never experienced. (An advertisement for the 1939 World's Fair Souvenir Guidebook reminds us of these uses of a souvenir publication, **figure 92**). For Ant Farm, closing their catalogue with juxtaposition of Westinghouse's time capsule with their own invites a comparison of the CalendarLOG to a time capsule, which preserves and shapes the collective's artwork alongside other examples of American cultural history. Their video *Time Capsule 1972–1984* serves as a different kind of record, documenting news footage of their capsule, the 1972 dedication party at the Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston, and the work's subsequent unveiling in 2000. Thus the video offers a meta-frame, contextualizing the time capsule within the process of its making, just as the time capsule itself frames Houston culture circa 1972. The presence of these frames-within-frames (and indeed, the time capsule is one such overarching framing device) reinforces the circularity and self-citation at the heart of Ant Farm's practice.

20/20 Vision (and many of the works included within its frame, such as the 1972 *Time Capsule*) exposes Ant Farm's preoccupation with their own history, a concern for self-framing they shared with General Idea. In addition to collecting an archive of documents and designs related to their practice (some of which was destroyed by water after a fire at their workshop/storage warehouse in 1978), they also compiled a book project, *4*2 Maro*, which recounted their history and chronicled their projects. Although it looks to Ant Farm's past, its title suggests a future-oriented outlook.[138] The attention to tomorrow ("2 Maro") was warranted because they were often hyper-aware of the dated nature of some of their projects, such as the *Truckstop Network*. However, their "ironized nostalgia" allowed them to spin these projects such that they became signs of a past cultural fascination, historical remnants that as archaeologists-

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[138] According to Chip Lord, Links Books initially gave Ant Farm a contract and an advance to publish "Image Technology by Ant Farm," a personal history of the group. When Links Books backed out in late 1973, Ant Farm approached MIT Press in 1974; the representative, Howard Webber, explained to the group that "the self-conscious chattiness" of the book would likely not appeal to a large audience but he noted his appreciation for the chapters "From Bubbles to Stone" and "Image Technology" because they described the group's design work (MIT declined the project anyway). Ant Farm revised their proposal, now called *4*2 Maro,* which they sent to E.P. Dutton. The editor there saw no market for a history of the relatively unknown group, but instead suggested they adapt two chapters that discussed American car culture ("Autorama" and "The Future in the Past"), into a book-length study, which became *Automerica.* See Chip Lord, "The Timeline of the Timeline," in Scott, *Living Archive 7,* 193.
4 2 Maro was also the license plate on the group's *Media Van.*

futurologists the group would riff on.[139] Their Canadian counterparts General Idea would fully embrace this role as archaeologists/futurologists in generating new myths based on cultural products prized in past eras, such as the beauty pageant.

Thus, more than a prophetic look into the year 2020, as its title might suggest, *20/20 Vision* articulates and narrativizes a critical shift, offering a new paradigm that reassesses history in terms of entertainment value and that advocates communications systems as the site for future economies. In *20/20 Vision*, the group explores a new form of situating themselves in history and in the art world. Through the exhibition and its accompanying calendarLOG, Ant Farm stages a scene in which the group's entire practice could be considered, and where their past projects and proposals for future works are brought into conversation with one another in the mind of the viewers/readers.[140] Ant Farm's projects and training as architects reveal an attentiveness to local contexts and site; yet *20/20 Vision* prompts a rethinking of the idea of site, to consider it not only as a physical space, but also as a set of historical and cultural conditions within which to position their interventions. The resulting effect is an artistic practice that is playful, citational, ambivalent, and sometimes even contradictory. In presenting a highly selective and condensed narrative of the history of America's relationship to technology, Ant Farm deems the ideas of progress surrounding past visions of mobility as outdated for the changing society of the 1970s. However, in using the terms and discourses from that past to promote their own vision of the future, the collective undercuts any lasting critical force that might register with the retelling of those past stories. This doubling-back (both in the telling of their story and in the process of reading the catalogue) underlines the variety of rhetorical tones the group adopts throughout the catalogue: critical, naïve, utopian, self-aware. It encapsulates the very ambivalence of their practice, inextricably of their own time yet caught between the pull of their received ideas about the future and their desire to break from those past models to launch truly new transformations "of existing social and economic systems."[141]

In a period when artists were moving outside the gallery into particular local contexts to undertake their projects and when performance art was on the rise, Ant Farm established their site not so much as a *physical* location but instead as a *historical* terrain. In charting a teleology that

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[139] Hutcheon contends that the "ironizing of nostalgia, in the very act of its invoking, may be one way the postmodern has of taking responsibility for such responses by creating a small part of the distance necessary for reflective thought about the present as well as the past." Hutcheon, "Irony, Nostalgia, and Postmodernism," 207.

[140] *Kohoutek* was one of the main exhibits advertised as part of *20/20 Vision*, and was even promoted within the exhibition itself—the *Kouhoutek* poster papers the side of a display vitrine—revealing Ant Farm's layered approach to self-citation.

[141] *Design Quarterly* 78/79 (1970): 10.

led to their present moment and that generated the necessity for the advancements they put forth, Ant Farm responded to the demands of contemporary discussions about technology's place in the future, the role of media in American life, and the need for structures that adapt to changing lifestyles. As architect and historian Michael Sorkin recently argued, Ant Farm "were genuine researchers, and their contribution … set the agenda for contemporary research in environmentalism, advanced building technologies, electronic globalization, public art and space, and postindustrial flows."[142] Certainly they were not alone in their investigations, as other single artists and art collectives—some with whom Ant Farm collaborated, such as Southcoast, T.R. Uthco, TVTV, and the Art Guys—were also very much invested in reconsidering their local contexts relative to the larger discourses surrounding them.

In *One Place After Another* art historian Miwon Kwon explains the genesis of site-specific projects as a means to resist complicity with market forces that reduce objects to commodities in the museum spaces.[143] In Kwon's account, such institutionally critical practices give way to "discursive site specificity" where the "site" of inquiry is a "field of knowledge, intellectual exchange, or cultural debate." Unlike the previous models of site-specific work, this site need not be a *pre*condition, but is generated by the work, often as 'content', and then "verified by its convergence with an existing discursive formation."[144] In her explanation of the development of new site-specific practices, particularly in the 1980s and 1990s, Kwan articulates a move away from literal interpretation of the site to a more flexible, virtual understanding. A site-specific practice evolves through a contingent movement through textual references and conditioning discourses, generating tangled networks. Although Kwan identifies this period of site specificity as the last point in her genealogy, she allows for the fluidity and cross-penetration of her categories and of the rough chronological boundaries she posits. In Ant Farm's work, the American media environment, environmental sustainability, portable architecture, communications networks, and consumerism emerge as critical "sites" of artistic investigation, among others. Moreover, in opening up these disparate discourses, Ant Farm asks that we

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[142] Michael Sorkin, "Sex, Drugs, Rock and Roll, Cars, Dolphins, and Architecture," in *Ant Farm 1968–1978*, 9.

[143] T.J. Demos, "Rethinking Site Specificity" [review of *One Place After Another*] *Art Journal* 62, no. 2 (Summer 2003): 98. Demos pointed out that in Kwon's construction of site specificity, "the artwork begins to appear completely uprooted from material practice, as well as from its historicity."

[144] Miwon Kwon, *One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2002), 26. Kwon explains, "The site is now structured (inter)textually rather than spatially, and its model is not a map but an itinerary, a fragmentary sequence of events and actions *through* spaces, that is, a nomadic narrative whose path is articulated by the passage of the artist. Corresponding to the model of movement in electronic spaces of the Internet and cyberspace, which are likewise structured as transitive experiences, one thing after another, and not in synchronic simultaneity, this transformation of the site textualizes spaces and spatializes discourses" (29).

consider them in tandem with one another—cars and television, space exploration and the American mediascape contribute jointly to generate potential equilibrium or disharmony in the future, depending on the choices made in the present based on the knowledge passed on from the past.

For artist-architects assuming the task of re-conceiving life in a new technological era, Ant Farm recognized the need to reconsider physical sites and the connections among them in different ways. Moving from a *physical* node-network model towards a virtual one allowed them to distinguish their projections for the future from those they were reared on from the 1940s, '50s and '60s. The *Truckstop Network,* as progressive as it seemed to Ant Farm in the first year or two of the 1970s, appears in *20/20 Vision* to be inextricably bound to General Motors' inflated belief in the highway system; the group nonetheless needed to work through those sites of their own history and knowledge in order to understand circulation and stasis as paths of inquiry that allow people access to history and the present as well as to one another. After *20/20 Vision,* the group's focus shifted toward images as embodiments of circulation and stasis—capable of being reproduced infinitely and preserved throughout time and yet instantiated in a picture and read in specific moments. Images, for Ant Farm, heralded a new era of artistic practice, one based not on the creation of a single work or site, but a truly *collateral* model grounded in an understanding of their works as protean and circulating in time, discourse, space, and imagination, continually re-investigated and re-constituted in the frame of the viewer's mind.

"The fruits of our addiction to the image": Image Technology by Ant Farm

Ant Farm recognized the reality of 1970s life: it was almost continuously mediated by images. They acknowledged the proliferation of images during their teen years, from print advertisements to billboards to television; this wide availability of the past reproduced in images likely contributed to their nostalgia for that very past.[145] The single most important moment, though, for their appreciation of life as always mediated by the image was the Apollo 11 moon

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[145] Nostalgia is fueled by being able to readily procure and review images from the past, an aspect that Hutcheon identifies with the postmodern era and the great availability and reproducibility of images; "Irony, Nostalgia, and the Postmodern," 196.

  Ant Farm elaborated on how much the media profusion in the postwar period shaped the group members' sensibilities: "The fascination with the image! Before we went to school we were drawing—airplanes in dogfights, cars, houses, baseball players. Then television and Howdy Doodey [sic] bombarded our growing image vocabulary with tousands [sic] of moving pictures daily. When we went to school in the fall the automakers were introducing the new models with pure image language. We watched intently and went down to the showrooms on the Big Day. After school we soaked p magazines, for the pictures. LIFE in particular added basic building blocks to our image vocabulary." 4 2 Maro Binder (Enviroman), 2005.14.246.8.

landing.[146] The media coverage and hype surrounding the event was tremendous and produced a souvenir industry surrounding it—the image-experience was almost immediately packaged and sold to capitalize on the feel-good national mission (and Cold War victory). The author of *Guerrilla Television,* Michael Shamberg, even opens his book with the emphatic declaration that the "moon landing killed technology." Although it required technological developments for man to get to the moon, it was not, he asserts, the rockets (which, according to him, have been around for centuries) that made the feat possible, but the software, our ability to build on and communicate information through new systems. He continues, "The death of hardware is the ultimate transformation of America to Media-America. It embodies our total shift from a product- to a process-based culture."[147] Thus for Shamberg, the switch to a process-based culture arrives with a change in emphasis from what he described as "hardware" to "software." Ant Farm upholds this belief when they detect the ironic disjunction between the technologies that landed man on the moon and those disseminating news of the event (**figure 93**):

> GLOBAL-CONSCIOUS TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY MAN
> OPENED A TIN CAN YESTERDAY WITH A MACHINE DESIGNED IN
> THE 19TH CENTURY
> SAT DOWN AND WATCHED A LIVE BROADCAST FROM THE MOON.
>
> AMERICA, IN AN ALLEGORICAL TIME WARP
> USING PRE ELECTRONIC, PRINT AGE TECHNIQUES
> WELCOMES RETURNING SPACE HEROES
> TICKER TAPE PARADE DOWN FIFTH AVENUE.[148]

Images of the "moon shot" released by NASA were printed in newspapers and magazines, formats which struck the group as quaintly traditional in comparison to the scientific progress demonstrated by the Apollo mission. Likewise what heralded the potential to bring countries together in a global society became quickly appropriated as a national triumph of the Space Race. Ant Farm's design for a $100 bill (**figure 58**) that appeared in the July 1970 issue of *Progressive Architecture* implied the antinomy between the unified picture of the earth as seen

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[146] "One national event that held significance for us was the Apollo 11 moon landing, and we got into that in a big way," Lord reminisced. The group celebrated the event with a moon party, held with their friends from Southcoast builders in Galveston, Texas. They watched the scenes from the moon on a television installed inside an inflatable. The next morning Chip Lord and his collaborator Charley Tilford staged a "Space Monument" at the Manned Spacecraft Center in Clear Lake, Texas, inflating one of their pneumatic structures with electricity stolen from a gas station, covering it with a Dreamcloud parachute, and marking the installation with an American flag to commemorate the national event. Lord remembers, "The press corps never came but the Clear Lake police did and told us to get off that private property." 4 2 Maro Binder (untitled book page), Ant Farm archive, 2005.14.246.10.

[147] Shamberg, *Guerrilla Television,* 3.

[148] Ant Farm Prospectus (Ant Farm no. 853), Ant Farm archive 2005.14.245.6. This is the same document as Truckstop Network Proposals (No. 853), Ant Farm archive, 2005.14.253.33.

from the moon—as demonstrated by a page in the same issue which reproduced a photograph of the earth with the caption, "We can't put it together. It is together"—and the way the moon landing was claimed as an American territory (and commodity).[149] The hundred "MOON DUBLUNARS" were tender of the "Unified Space over America" and a caveat added: "THIS NOTE SIGNIFIES THAT NASA'S SAGA OF SUCCESS HAS A SPACE ERA EFFECT OF UNIFYING ALL MANKIND." Yet the "MOONDUST CERTIFICATE" is as useless as moondust itself, a signal that any pretensions of international harmony generated by the lunar landing were illusory.

The hype surrounding the space race and Apollo 11's success dramatized for Ant Farm the important role the image played in determining contemporary reality. The group explained the evolution of their orientation toward the image, rather than the object, in an interesting reversal of the architectural process: "We were anxious to build, but before you can build anything, we realized, you must make an image of it. You make many images, draw it again and again, and sometimes the idea needn't go beyond image to be realized."[150] They provided several examples of situations in which the creation of the image was paramount, rather than an image formed as an index of a lived experience:

> For instance: How many ads are nothing more than actors in well lit settings, for a moment, for the sake of the image, the photo, rather than the photo documents of real events? How many Americans trek to national parks and monuments only to take a snap-shot? How often do architects present slick renderings of buildings before floor plans and structural systems have been selected?[151]

The moon landing illustrated this concept because it garnered such intense media coverage and public response (and initiated subsequent scrutiny and conspiracy theories), yet it was experienced by the American public solely through images (another such culturally fraught media moment was the assassination of president Kennedy, an event the group re-examines in their video *The Eternal Frame,* which will be discussed later).[152] Indeed its reception as "pure image"

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[149] Ant Farm, "Advertisements for a Counter Culture," 87. Other artists in the period adopted currency as an artistic subject; Andy Warhol silkscreened 18 dollar bills on a single canvas (1962), Phillip Hefferton redesigned Washington's portrait in a painting enlarging the currency (1963), Öyvind Fahlström produced a satirical $108 note, and Robert Arneson replaced a presidential portrait with his own on a coin (1965). Asco also reworked a fifty-dollar bill that they published in *Regeneración* 2, no. 4 (1975): 27.

[150] Even in events that were realized, they focused on the images that resulted from them (which were often the only surviving elements from those early performance-events). Ant Farm acknowledges this in their prospectus (which they had intended to publish as a book): "TIME SLICE produced some good images." 4 2 Maro Binder (Joe Hall Care of The Alamo), Ant Farm archive, 2005.14.246.12.

[151] 4 2 Maro Binder (Enviroman), Ant Farm archive, 2005.14.246.8.

[152] An impetus for *Cadillac Ranch* was the way in which the vehicle had been transformed from functional object to "pure image."

fueled the conspiracies surrounding the moon landing, many of which claimed the images were created on a sound stage at the highly secret desert military base Area 51.[153]

The group's recognition of the defining role of the image in postwar society matched the perspective of post-modern theorists such as Jean Baudrillard and Frederic Jameson. More critical than Baudrillard, Jameson theorized the transformation of reality into images as a defining condition of late capitalism, or what he terms postmodernism. Ant Farm's realization, while undoubtedly post-modern, was tempered by their very modernist belief in their abilities to intervene and effect change, albeit on a small scale and with an aim to support new life styles, rather than the complete destruction of the old order. Ant Farm shares with Jameson a profound nostalgia for the past, although the aims and force of their nostalgia differ greatly. In "Postmodernism and Consumer Culture," Jameson intimates that he believes in a time—the modern period—when original meaning could be identified, when the simulacral could be held up against a fixed original.[154] In particular, his discussion of the breakdown of the relationship between the signifier and signified reveals his certainty in the modernist concepts of authenticity and originality—concepts, which Walter Benajmin has shown, are already called into question by modernist works of art, such as those by the Dadaists. In some ways, Jameson unwittingly draws attention to the continuity of modernist practice in the late capitalist era—the self-reflexivity apparent in James Joyce's work resurfaces in that of Thomas Pynchon, the play of signifiers in Samuel Beckett repeat in Ron Silliman's poetry, and the episodic repetition of the present continues from William Faulkner to Tim O'Brien. For Jameson, however, these recurring strategies are stylistic only; as pastiche they lack the critical purchase of parody, according to Jameson. He prophesies the end of innovation, because nothing new can be produced at the end of history—artists, architects, writers, and musicians are doomed to recycle and repeat past innovations, without generating any genuinely new forms. This results because, according to him, one's memory of the historical past is limited to stereotypical images of that past, thus the

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[153] In 1974 Bill Kaysing, a technical writer for Rocketdyne, the company that supplied the main propulsion units for NASA's Saturn-V rockets, self published *We Never Went to the Moon: America's Thirty Billion Dollar Swindle,* which was released by both Health Research Books and Eden Press in 1976 and again by Health Research Books in 2002. At the beginning of the book, Kaysing claims, "It has been estimated that thirty percent of the adult population of the United States does not believe that this country has landed astronauts on the moon," citing no evidence for this figure. More recently Gerhard Wisnewski wrote *One Small Step? The Great Moon Hoax and the Race to Dominate Earth from Space* (Forest Row, Eng.: Clairview Books, 2008).

[154] Jameson, "Postmodernism and Consumer Society," in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern* Culture, ed. Hal Foster (Port Townsend: Bay Press, 1983), 127–144. See also Jameson, "The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," in *Postmodernism, Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2003), 1–54, and in particular Jameson's comparison of Van Gogh's painting of peasant shoes to Warhol's *Diamond Dust Shoes.*

individual has no access to the past that is not mediated through images. Even aspects of the built environment have been turned into imaging surfaces, a transformation Ant Farm acknowledges in their observation that the "House of Tomorrow has become an appliance with a 2-dimensional screen, like the plastic ant farm, exposing a narrow slice of reality between its electric green frames." The symbol of their own practice—the toy ant farm—is but a primitive form of television, the group explains, and the "car of the future has become the rushing flood of images traversing this environment."[155] Cars' windshields become viewfinders for the images of American life that flash by along the side of the road, feeding into the public's expectation for the moving image stimuli they have come to expect. *Cadillac Ranch* transforms the vehicle from this type of conveyer of images to image itself, a full-circle realization of the circularity of images in post-war American society.

While Ant Farm came to embrace an understanding of reality as continuously mediated, they did so without being pessimistic as to the total pervasiveness of such mediation (a stance Jameson's essay betrays) and also without uncritically celebrating the new media technology (an orientation often ascribed to Marshall McLuhan). In this they approximated Baudrillard's more neutral vision of an image and simulacram-based society. Central to their successful navigation of these two poles was their very ambivalence; they realized the way in which the allure of 1950s car culture, for example, was largely a myth sold by the Detroit carmakers through images, but they did not let this prevent them from owning and taking pleasure in those vehicles and their memories of that era, however contrived those "memories" might actually be. As with their approach to *20/20 Vision,* they understood that their projections for future innovations would likely say more about their present than they would about the future, but that did not limit Ant Farm's proposals. Instead, they sought a means to work *within* a society dominated by the circulation of images, recognizing that images provided means of accessing the world. Thus they conceived of their practice as "image technology"; in their credo, images were a form of software, tools that could be used to alter consciousness and promote reflection and action. They also recognized that images had an impact on material reality rather than constituting a purely self-referential or self-defining universe.

They called their staging in the University of Houston computer lab, *Enviroman*, the birth of "image technology," and referred to it as "some of our software, the fruits of our addiction to the image" and "an example of the image ethic."[156] Their multi-media and slide lectures were conceived in those veins, with the script for one such performance labeled "Image Technology by

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[155] Early Manifestos (Ant Farm 3-10 by Curtis Schreier), Ant Farm archive, 2005.14.248.7. Handwritten annotation at top of first page indicates this was written by Curtis Schreier.
[156] 4 2 Maro Binder (Enviroman), Ant Farm archive, 2005.14.246.8.

Ant Farm." Of course video also provided a new tool for the group to use, when one member of Ant Farm purchased a portable video camera in 1970. Curtis Schreier explained,

> VIDEO BECAME ANT FARM'S EQUIVALENT OF THE
> ARCHITECTURAL MODEL, TO RECORD THE GROUP'S LIVE-IN
> DESIGN PROCESS (THE WAREHOUSE TAPES); TO EXPLORE THE
> MULTI-BARRELED IMPACT OF ELECTRONICS ON AUTOMERICA
> (CADILLAC RANCH, MEDIA BURN) AND TO EXPLOIT THE
> STRUCTURE OF PURE ELECTRONIC CULTURE (ETERNAL FRAME,
> OFF-AIR AUSTRALIA).[157]

This latter quest, "to exploit the structure of pure electronic culture" became increasingly central to the group's work in the mid-1970s. Schreier's statement reflects Ant Farm's ongoing interest in producing actions (ones that elicit reactions) rather than making objects; this impulse bears out in their oeuvre, although it is countered by the hand-made quality of so much of their work—the careful attention paid to drawings and plans, the hours spent customizing the Phantom Dream Car, constructing the display panels or exhibits for *20/20 Vision,* editing videotape, and designing the logos for various commercial ephemera inter alia. "The fruits" of the group's "addiction to the image" were realized in these very material forms, showcasing Ant Farm's productive commingling of both a conceptual and a material practice.

In her recent and impressive book on Ant Farm's early work, Felicity Scott argues that the group registers a distinct move from what she terms a "politics of ecology" to a politics of media; similarly, in an essay for a catalogue on Ant Farm's art Pamela Lee characterizes their practice as an investment in "media ecology," a systemic exploration of communications systems.[158] Both scholars attend to the fusion of nature and technology in the group's work, with the idea of media as encompassing both physical and virtual environments. Whereas Lee focuses on "communication" as a central motivator of Ant Farm's art, I see connectivity—with its attendant concerns of circulation, networking, commerce, and media—as a more apt lens through which to understand their practice. Lee's characterization is instructive for introducing a set of terms that then allow us to re-examine how the physical and virtual mobility suggested in Ant Farm's work forms a new art politics, but rather than dividing Ant Farm's diverse oeuvre into projects that thematize "the rhetoric of mobility" and those that embody "a virtual freezing of movement," as Lee does, I view all of the group's works as taking up both concerns. Moreover, understanding these concerns as suffused through their career oeuvre draws attention to how the art object becomes diffused into a practice straddling the art and commercial spheres and

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[157] Early Manifestos (Ant Farm 3-10 by Curtis Schreier), Ant Farm archive, 2005.14.248.7.
[158] Scott, *Living Archive 7*; Pamela Lee, "Antennae: On Ant Farm's Media Ecology," *Ant Farm,* exh. cat. (Orleans: Éditions HYX, FRAC Centre; Berkeley: Berkeley Art Museum, 2007), 19–31.

circulating as image and discourse, which informs a newly ambivalent "media politics"
dependent on the same forms and processes it criticizes. *Media Burn* instantiates this practice in
messy, bombastic, tacky, and intriguing ways.

"You can't disarm images with words": Media Burn

On July 4, 1975, on an admittedly "slow news day," Ant Farm crashed a 1959 Cadillac
Biarritz-turned-"Phantom Dream Car" into a pyramid of forty-two flaming television sets in the
parking lot of the Cow Palace in Daly City, California (**figure 94**).[159] This Independence Day
spectacle, which they titled *Media Burn,* was covered by five television networks and was also
reported by several local and national newspapers, among them the *San Francisco Chronicle, San
Francisco Examiner,* and the *New York Times.*[160] At the event, an "artist-president" channeling
the late John F. Kennedy (with the requisite patrician bearing and New England accent) gave a
speech from a television pulpit on militarism and the mass media, as volunteers sold t-shirts,
postcards, decals, and souvenir booklets from the cab of a Volkswagen coupe (**figure 95** and
figure 96). Even the Phantom Dream Car could be purchased after the event, the emcee
announced.[161] Following this spectacle, in 1976 Ant Farm produced a 23-minute video that
documented the pre-event festivities, captured the crash itself from different angles, in different
time signatures and in still photographs, included drawings of the interior of the Phantom Dream
Car, and incorporated news footage from various Bay Area television networks (**figure 97** and
figure 98).[162] The group even revisited themes from earlier projects, such as the space cowboy,
transformed here into the "media matador" kitted out in spacesuit and helmet for their two-minute
countdown to blast off (**figure 99**).[163]

If pressed to describe *Media Burn,* what would one claim as the central, original
"artwork"? Is it the performance held on July Fourth, is it the subsequent video, or is it the

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[159] The exhibition catalogue for the show *Ant Farm 1968–1978* (page 169) credits these people for their
work on *Media Burn*: Chip Lord, Doug Michels, Curtis Schreier, Tom Weinberg, Doug Hall, John Hilding,
Homer Flynn, Hardy Fox, Graham Whifler, Dan Calderwood, Starr Sutherland, Ceil Gruessing, Judith
Williams, Burt Aronowitz, David Cort, Phil Makanna, T.L. Morey, Edmund Shea, Uncle Buddie, and Optic
Nerve (Lynn Adler, Jules Backus, Jim Mayer, Sherrie Rabinowitz, John Rogers, Mya Shone).
[160] Bay Area television stations that covered the event were KGO-TV channel 7, KRON-TV channel 4,
KPIX-TV channel 5, and KTVU-TV channel 2. See Media Burn (press coverage), Ant Farm archive,
2005.14.285.51.
[161] Driving into the television sets damaged the vehicle, amputating its top fin. After advertising it in
classified ads, the car was eventually was purchased by a gallery.
[162] They screened a 19:20 minute *Media Burn: Edited for T.V.* on ¾" tape as part of the "Wheels to Reels"
program, one of twelve screenings of videos held at Optic Nerve, date unknown.
[163] Moreover the video literalizes the astronaut connection—as if anyone could miss it—when the artist-
president declares Ant Farm "pioneers as surely as Armstrong and Aldrin when they set foot on the moon."

circulation of postcards of the space-age Caddy crashing into television sets? Pinpointing the actual artwork and choosing which aspects of it to relegate to the position of "ephemera" becomes exceedingly difficult with *Media Burn.* Unlike *Cadillac Ranch,* which offers ten car rumps as its core object and acknowledges the other elements of the work—the video, the souvenir items, the postcards—as somewhat secondary materials, *Media Burn* creates a tension between establishing a single image as its central core and creating multiple elements that revolve around that core image to form the whole diffuse work. This shift is one in degree, not in kind; both works offer an anchor around which the various satellite elements can orbit. *Media Burn* replaces an object (the sculptural installation in *Cadillac* Ranch) with an image and event. Yet the reception of *Cadillac Ranch* as a "sculpture extraordinaire" highlights this shift: *Media Burn* as an image/event by its very nature draws in performers, souvenirs, audience reactions, and journalistic commentary in a way that a sculpture, as an autonomous art object, does not necessarily. In this way *Media Burn* exemplifies the group's "collateral practice," a mode of artistic operation that opens up the single object of art to the various ephemeral elements that form a collateral web in which the "object" is accessed, experienced, and interpreted.

For Ant Farm, at the center of this tension was the imaginary divide between art and entertainment, a line the group played with for great effect. Indeed much of the salience of *Media Burn,* the way it is appreciated by some scholars and artists (and lambasted by some journalists) is its send-up of the art world and the media in an eight-second ride hosted for the members of the press and television networks.[164] Indeed, the pre-event activities, with the performance of Doug Hall as the "artist-president," and the anticipation generated by the behind-the-scenes footage revealed on the video, are actually more engaging than the car crash itself, which seems slower, smaller, and less emphatic than the image built up in our minds.[165] A journalist in attendance, Lucinda Hawkins, remarked on this letdown: "The crash was disappointingly unspectacular and the dream car emerged unscathed. But as the TV tubes imploded from the heat with sharp retorts, reporters hit the ground and one battlefield veteran groaned, 'Man, this is worse than Vietnam.'"[166] In Hawkins' estimation, then, it was the aftermath of the event—its symbolic skewering of the media—that proved its lasting bite.

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[164] The public was not invited to the event; *Media Burn* was billed as press only, and arriving individuals were required to show a press pass, an item designed by Ant Farm and mailed with the event's press release. On the DVD commentary, Lord notes the feelings of pride and laughter that arose when he first saw members of the press arriving wearing the passes Ant Farm had designed.

[165] Amy Sloper explains that the Doug Hall and Jody Procter of T.R.Uthco had developed the idea of the "artist president" in the early 1970s, and began performing it on a tour of colleges they conducted in 1973 and 1974; *California Video*, 234.

[166] Lucinda Hawkins, "California," *Studio International* (October 1975): 157.

Like *Cadillac Ranch, Media Burn* was caught between the art world and the commercial sphere from its incipience, a position Ant Farm negotiated with ease. Initially the group was in search of a sponsor, commercial or artistic; Lord claims they unsuccessfully had pitched the idea to both the Walker Art Center and Leavitt's Furniture Store in Houston "as the basis for a tv ad."[167] After receiving an invitation by the Houston Chamber of Commerce in 1974 to participate in a commercial street festival, Main Street '74, benefiting the city's downtown businesses, they proposed "Autorama," where they would "drive a car thru a wall of burning t.v. sets." Attempting to secure a project manager to sponsor their contribution, Ant Farm framed the event within aesthetic categories, referring to the primary image as a "moving sculpture."[168] For their targeted audience, prominent Houston vendors involved in the Main Street fair, Ant Farm's selling of their wacky demolition idea as an example of high art ("moving sculpture") might gain more traction than framing it as a one-off fun event by a bunch of puckish lads.

Notwithstanding their desire to frame their proposal in the best way possible to receive support for the project, the description of "Autorama" as "moving sculpture" touched on a central concern of Ant Farm's: the way in which a concept of circulation was built into the project from the beginning. When they contacted an acquaintance, Bobby Gerry, to gauge his interest in becoming the project's manager for "Main Street '74," they described their event as *Coming and Going: Transformational Access*.[169] The concepts of "transformational access" and "coming and going" had risen in relation to *Cadillac Ranch* and earlier projects. Describing a reduction in the number of cars included in the installation to ten, Michels explains to Stanley Marsh 3, *Cadillac Ranch*'s patron: "if we span the years between 1948 and 1965 the transformational access will remain clear."[170] Referring to the changes over those model years in vehicle styling (the "rise and fall of the tailfin"), Michels also plays on the term of "transformational access," hinting at the ways in which the automobile, and in particular the Cadillac, was more than a vehicle for carrying people but also a means of conveying status.[171]

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[167] *Automerica*, 130. Documented ideas for *Media Burn* had been circulating since 1972, and possibly even earlier; *Art and Artists* in August 1972 reported that Ant Farm was working on a new project, *TV Crash,* "in which a steel-late '49 Ford runs into a flaming wall of TV sets on astro turf." See "In View," *Art and Artists* (August 1972): 9.

[168] Main Street 74, letter from Doug Michels to Alan Finger, Vice President, Finger Furniture, 11 July 1974, Ant Farm archive, 2005.14.283.4, page 1 of 2.

[169] In a slide lecture the Ant Farm members gave at colleges across North America, they describe a "car as billboard—image coming and going, both ways, out on the freeway, fast images, billboard as information." 2005.14.305. A letter from Chip Lord to Stanley Marsh 3 stamped "received Aug 1 1974," bears a stamp, "coming AND going" as well as drawn sketches of three views of *Cadillac Ranch,* one labeled "coming," one, "close up," and one, "going," Ant Farm archive, 2005.14.109.

[170] Gas War Transformational Access, letter from Doug [Michels] to Stanley [Marsh 3], 15 February 1974, Ant Farm archive, 2005.14.111.

[171] Lord describes *Cadillac Ranch* as "a monument to the rise and fall of the tailfin" in *Automerica,* 124.

"Transformational access" intimates the expansion of the physical mobility offered by cars into the virtual travel promised by television, and the corresponding attack by the automobile against the onslaught of TV (most memorable are the advertisements recasting the car as a living room on wheels). Before the adoption of "planned obsolescence," the introduction of new car models required a real material transformation—the auto companies made improvements to the ways the cars functioned. With Harvey Earl's innovative styling, the material transformations of subsequent model years were often minor and merely cosmetic, yet these distinctions were sold up in the representations of the vehicles. Ant Farm recalled this shift from material transformation to a representational one: "When we went to school in the fall the automakers were introducing the new models with pure image language."[172] The transition then from car to print advertisement of the car to television—in which all material items have been transmuted into images—would become visually apparent in *Transformational Access*. The group was eager to pursue this "idea [that] has been around for a long time and yet it still generates excitement as an image."[173] Plans for a Main Street '74 contribution fell through, and the group refocused their energies on realizing their idea in December 1974 in San Francisco. In the change of locations and contexts, the circulatory aspect of the event that emphasized this type of transformation—the title—also changed. In a September 1974 letter to the San Francisco Museum of Art in which they asked for funding, Ant Farm conceived of the event in terms of an iconic "primary image" of a "car crashing thru a pyramid of burning tv sets," a project they now labeled *Easy Money*.[174]

The change in title, from *Transformational Access: Coming and Going* to *Easy Money* signals an important moment in the project's development. The transformation of physical to virtual mobility in *Coming and Going* had changed to a transformation in cashflow—the idea of circulation was transferred to the movement within an abstract economic system. The change from physical to economic mobility recalls the group's "energy credit" plan for the *Truckstop Network,* in which work performed for the network garnered credits for services or items. The energy credit system allowed participants to move about the network, as work performed in one location could be transferred into credits used in another. *Transformational Access* suggested a

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[172] 4 2 Maro Binder (Enviroman), Ant Farm archive, 2005.14.246.8.
[173] Main Street 74, letter from Doug [Michels] to Bobby Gerry, 29 July 1974, Ant Farm archive, 2005.14.283.5. In this letter the group was looking for a project manager, because Alan Finger (see 2005.14.283.4) had declined to participate. In an account of *Media Burn* Ant Farm published in *Video Art: An Anthology,* they credited the idea's source from the "subliminal," a nod to General Idea and Image Bank's mail art networks. See "Media Burn," *Video Art: An Anthology,* ed. Ira Schneider and Beryl Korot (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976), 10.
[174] Easy Money, 1974, Ant Farm archive, 2005.14.123.

flow between image world and consumer world, a continuum that *Easy Money* rather gauchely pinpoints.

The title *Easy Money* acknowledged the consumer elements that would circulate around and in response to the media event itself: a souvenir stand, booklet, t-shirts, postcards, and assorted ephemera for sale. These collateral items became part of the artwork itself, conceived of as inextricably bound with the actual event. In an October 1, 1974, letter to Tom Weinberg, who provided seed money for the event, Doug "Swami Sez" Michels asks, "are you still into the 'pay-tron' of 'easy money'??????????????????" The aim, as Michels explained to Weinberg (whom he addressed as "$core"), was "to inject artificial event HYPO into the media. ads with carol doda in easy money t-shirt, posters, and consumption christmas images."[175] At this point in the planning of what would become *Media Burn*, Ant Farm was gearing up toward an event held on Christmas day 1974. The "consumption christmas images" would have been a way to draw the hype of the Christian celebration into the event—a fitting nod to the commercialization of the December holiday in the United States. Making efforts to contract a local gallery or museum to act as the "conduit of buks," Michels explains how "some people dont think it is art." Realizing that there was a potential to draw in the cultural support and frame the art world provides while still generating the desired media hype and commercial sale items, Michels adjusts the project's frame: "We might think of event as profit-makin ART with real hype. considering both alternatives now. you got any feelings one way or the other????"[176]

This letter marks an important moment for Ant Farm in re-framing what would become the Media Burn event. Conceived of as a primary image to circulate commercially on t-shirts, postcards, and souvenir booklets and as a vehicle for generating media attention, the group realized the need for a device that would effectively re-launch them and the event into an artistic context. Their use of extensive preparatory drawings and designs of the event locates their practice within a traditional model, common to both architects and as artists; these sketches also offer a conventional means of representing the performance, a notion reinforced by their inclusion in the 2004 traveling retrospective of the group's work organized by the Berkeley Art Museum. In this way the drawings serve a supporting role, standing in for the event itself which could not be recreated. Such documents were widely used in exhibitions of performance or other ephemeral art. These types of preparatory materials could also function to garner support for a nascent project. Often before a project had been developed conceptually or practically, the group devised

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[175] Carol Doda was a popular topless dancer in San Francisco in the mid-1960s, and later in the decade and into the 1970s, a spokesmodel for San Jose's KGSC-TV.

[176] Main Street 74 (Easy Money), letter from Doug Michels to $core [Tom Weinberg], 1 October 1974, Ant Farm archive, 2005.14.283.6. All punctuation and spelling are from the original.

corresponding stationery and a logo; these marketing tools provided an early frame for a concept, sometimes making it appear more developed than it was. The letterhead and logo became marketing tools used in the group's proposals to potential sponsors. In this regard Ant Farm consciously placed themselves within the art world by appealing to art institutions—museums, galleries, foundations—for financial support. Although they received only limited funding from these sources for *Media Burn*, by circulating their proposal in such circles, their appeals garnered attention for their work, and they also recast their inability to command full institutional support for their event as evidence of their status as art "outsiders."[177]

Throughout their career, Ant Farm welcomed their involvement as both artist-insiders and cultural-outsiders, presenting themselves as an innovative art and architecture group for their lecture series at North American college campuses, for example, and as cultural renegades— "space cowboys" and hippie nomads—in outlets such as *The Whole Earth Catalog*. In the souvenir program for *Media Burn*, the group differentiated themselves from "traditional artists" by emphasizing "We're not like traditional artists who have a product to sell."[178] This statement would indicate that their products were their ideas rendered so as to create a defining image that would correlate with what they believed had been in the public memory all along. They described themselves as an "art agency that promotes ideas that have no commercial potential but which we think are important vehicles of cultural introspection."[179] Yet, as the early title *Easy Money* makes apparent, the artists' products were also very real commodities—t-shirts, posters, stickers, postcards—a turn that countered the group's marketing of themselves as an "art agency" producing works with no "commercial potential." Their pretension to distinguish themselves

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[177] Ant Farm received $1000 from Electronic Arts Intermix from a National Endowment of the Arts grant from the Visual Arts Division in support of *Media Burn*; see the letter from Howard Wise to Chip Lord, 12 June 1975, Ant Farm archive, 2005.14.285.38.

An undated revised budget for the project calculated the cost of the event and post-production video at $8,484. This figure includes salary for the artists ($700/each) and rent, postage, phone ($500 a month for two months). Other costs relate to the set up (purchase of the "dream" car and modification, $1,300; collection and purchase of television sets, $300), production costs (Cow Palace rental, $500; P.A. system rental, $50; set-up of the television set pyramid and truck rental, $100; postcard invitations and postage, $125; graphics, press pass, and program notes, $100; logo t-shirts, $300; color poster $425; and production consultants/workers $389) and rental equipment to document the event (Action Master high speed film camera rental, $115; 12 hours of tape $264; rental of two Sony color portapaks $431; 800' color film and processing, $175; two cameramen, $100; miscellaneous filming costs, such as a tripod, $100), and post production costs such as film to tape transfer ($35), studio editing time ($300), and roundtrip airfare from San Francisco to New York ($275). Media Burn budget, n.d., Ant Farm archive, 2005.14.287.8.

[178] Media Burn Souvenir Booklet. Artist box (Ant Farm) Art Metropole Collection, box 316. Also quoted in Paul Krassner, "The Naked Emperor: Fiddling while the Media Burns, or: Nero, my God, to Thee," *Crawdaddy* (October 1975): 14.

[179] Main Street 74, letter from Doug Michels to Alan Finger, Ant Farm archive, 2005.14.283.4, page 1 of 2.

from traditional artists was simply posturing to claim an outsider status in order to fuel attention and sales for their hijinks.

The framing of the group as art-world outsiders was a clever marketing ploy to heighten the value of their Ant Farm brand. Although the *Media Burn* event itself was not a profitable venture, the collateral elements associated with the event sought to be. The group assumed the function of museum gift-shop, by incorporating the commercial aspects often associated with the institutional frame (the gallery, the museum) into the artwork itself. This commercial aspect was bound up with the work from the start, not just in the event's early tie-ins to the Houston Chamber of Commerce or to its working titles, but also in the way in which the artists envisioned *Media Burn* as a singular image circulating in the commercial sphere. Describing the group's thought process, Lord later acknowledged that they first latched on to the work's commercial success—"It'll be a great postcard"—and then realized, "everybody will love it too."[180] Lord's recollections single out the postcard of *Media Burn* as the lasting image of the event, more so than the video or the Phantom Dream Car itself.[181] That these spin offs were not commercially successful renders the exercise a kind of virtual commercial production, just as it was something of a virtual artwork. It highlighted their playful, performative approach—they played with virtual reality, with virtual promotion, with virtual art, and yet all of this was anchored in reality and in the real labor the group members expended on the project (customizing the car, for example).

The emphasis on *Media Burn* as a single image immortalized in a postcard contrasts with the rather prosaic reality of the event itself. It is true that even after the release of the *Media Burn* video (and its re-release on DVD), the iconic image of the Phantom Dream Car making contact with the stacked televisions remains as the primary representation of the event. In *Automerica* Lord had noted the prevalence and function of postcards to preserve the memory of what he perceived as a quickly vanishing era:

> Many motels long since torn down in the name of progress still exist on postcards which can be found in flea markets and junk stores and at auctions. These five-cent and ten-cent ads were a cheap, ingenious promotion device which now may be the only existing records of thousands of roadside businesses. They serve as an archives of a nation on wheels.[182]

The promotional device has become archival record; once used to entice consumption, it now functions as a souvenir for contemplation and reminiscence. Yet Ant Farm, bolstered by the circulation of these types of postcards in the mail art networks, adopts the postcard as both

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[180] Chip Lord and Pierre Huyghe, "Conversation," *Ant Farm*, 47.
[181] Ibid.
[182] *Automerica*, 58.

primary artwork and as ephemera associated with it. It becomes a stand-in for their artwork (the concept), a promotion of it, and a record that it happened.

This play with opposites, commercial and not-for-profit, art and entertainment, primary artwork and related ephemera, befits the central irony of *Media Burn*: the event enacted a ritual destruction of television but relied on that very medium for its own circulation. Ant Farm conceived of *Media Burn* as a means to tackle mass media systems with their own means. They claimed, "We're still interested in dealing with the systems which control over lives. Media is the most dangerous of these because its [sic] the least understood. You're not even aware of what it does to you. You can't talk back. That kind of rage was what led to Media Burn."[183] In channeling their frustration into the *Media Burn* crash, the group did not open up a line of feedback or provide consumers with a means of talking back, as the Videofreex did by launching Lanesville TV.[184] Instead, they viewed the event and its circulation as a means to "'fight fire with fire,' to sock home a message about the media."[185] Ant Farm literalized this message. In the Phantom Dream Car, an in-car closed-circuit video system mounted in the vertical fin provided a view of the road, supplanting the windshield as viewfinder. Thus, the crash that Media Burn enacted was not just automobile to television, but, as Carla Liss observed in her article on Media Burn for the *Berkeley Barb*, "TV to TV."[186] This image of television-smashing-television is reinforced by a January 1973 drawing, *Media Vision* (**figure 100**), which depicts a "late model sedan" fitted with video camera and a detail of one of the television sets in the pyre, with the caption, "image of vehicle driving toward firewall on all television receivers."[187] In short, the drawing represents a vehicle as weapon colliding with an image of itself. Two media, facing off against one another, literally and figuratively, in front of the media corps—*Media Burn*'s many layers invoke the hall of mirrors, or as one journalist observed of the video version, "a kind of infinite regress—a tape of a tape of an event that was staged in order to be taped and re-taped."[188] Uncle Buddie continued, "it's not just destruction of television. It's [the] whole system: it's capitalism."[189] The work both fed into the capitalist system, sending out reporters, generating

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[183] Media Burn Document, n.d. [c. 7/7/75], Ant Farm archive, 2005.14.285.21, page 3. Text for article by Jon Carroll, "Watching the Media Burn," *Village Voice,* 14 July 1975, 78.

[184] Pioneering media groups attempted to combat what they perceived as the monolith of network television, either by broadcasting their own station as the Videofreex did or by providing alternative coverage of important political events, as TVTV did.

[185] Media Burn Statement, n.d. Ant Farm archive, 2005.14.285.20, page 1.

[186] Liss, "AntFarm's Media Burn," 11.

[187] Media Vision (part 2 of 3), January 1973, Ant Farm archive, 2005.14.41. In the actual *Media Burn* crash, the television sets did not show the image of the approaching car on their screens—*Media Vision* exaggerated the circularity of the event presented as image.

[188] Sheldon Frank, "Smashing Your TV and Needing It Too," *Chicago Reader,* 17 October 1975, 16.

[189] Uncle Buddie quoted in Liss, "AntFarm's Media Burn," 11.

news, circulating on television, and jammed that same system by advocating the destruction of television and having that power image take hold in the minds of consumers. After all, Uncle Buddie concludes, "You can't disarm images with words."[190] Indeed, the skeptical news coverage of the event did little to erase the iconic image from view, particularly as the photograph of the car plowing into the pyre of televisions circulated so widely.

Through their practice of diffusion, the group's efforts reached into "politics, environmental whole systems," Uncle Buddie noted, and these had begun to "bleed over" into their work.[191] One observer commented on this aspect of *Media Burn,* when he complained, "What is all this political garbage, I thought you all came here to put a car through a tv!'" (as if that, in itself, is not a political act.)[192] The "political garbage" to which he ostensibly referred was the presence of the artist-president and his speech against "militarism, monopoly, and the mass media." Thus not only is the material nature of Ant Farm's practice becoming increasingly diffuse, drawing more multi-media elements into its collateral network, but the circles the network spans have widened to include more arenas for intervention.

With the general public not invited, the press formed a sizable chunk of the audience at the Cow Palace, with representatives from the art world—gallerists, fellow artists, friends— filling out the ranks. The artists strategically chose the Fourth of July so that the event would receive press coverage on what is commonly a "slow news day." (The added resonance of liberating "media junkies" from their addiction on Independence Day must have been a bonus.) Ant Farm offered *Media Burn* "for the entertainment of an invited audience and representatives of the press who will unknowingly take our message to the living rooms of America."[193] Kevin Wallace, the correspondent for the *San Francisco Chronicle,* quipped "Fat chance" in response to the idea that the "media was supposed to feel burned up about the whole thing."[194] In fact, even the media were attracted to watch the event, but rather than seeing it as an indictment of their own roles (which was reinforced by Wallace's rejoinder), they presented Ant Farm and *Media Burn* as

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[190] Ibid.

[191] Ibid. Uncle Buddie, about hosting Media Burn at the Cow Palace, laughed: "they didn't know it was going to be art politics, they thought it was going to be conceptual art."
   Germano Celant, writing in 1973, characterizes Ant Farm's desire "to provoke with collages a visual panic in the correspondence together with false information causing a behavioralistic panic like that produce [in] the case of Bob Venturi." In the margins next to this paragraph someone has written "GREAT." Celant continues, "The information procedure also assumed the verbal and television characteristic. At the ecological conferences the ant farm unites and collaborates between television services, in the political sphere, and videotapes on their creative activity." Celant, text for exhibition at Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston, Ant Farm archive, 2005.14.265.1b.

[192] Lucinda Hawkins relates this story in "California," 157.

[193] Media Burn Statement, n.d. [stamped July 4, 1975], Ant Farm archive, 2005.14.285.20, page 1.

[194] Kevin Wallace, "A Fiery Happening in Name of Art," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 5 July 1975, 3.

an avant garde oddity, removing the group from the hybrid consumer-aesthetic space in which they operated and placing them at a safe remove in the "art world."

In its image-guided navigation (the drivers looked to a video monitor inside the car to see their way) the Phantom Dream Car itself reinforced a double-bind that *Media Burn* enacted: television viewers were encouraged to "put their foot through their television screen" and yet they needed that set as their access point to the rest of the world and to receive that very message. Rather than encouraging similar acts by frustrated couch potatoes, Ant Farm offered images of the event as catharsis; the "image alone may relieve deep seated frustrations [in] the television consumer," by simulating an act of destruction so the viewers need not perform the same one.[195] Like past visions of the future *20/20 Vision* that informed society's ideas about technological progress and the present, *Media Burn* fed a fantasy about destroying an instrument that had become so central to an American way of life.[196] In the dollar event program, they claimed *Media Burn* as "auto absolution," obviously relishing in the play on "auto" as an absolution from the car addiction and also as a self-absolution from television addiction (**figure 101**). The "transformational access" suggested by the work's early title becomes clearer: the physical power of the act of destruction transfers to the power of the image to resonate in the collective consciousness.

Several journalists acknowledged this double-bind, but none as saliently as Sheldon Frank, columnist for Chicago's free weekly *Reader,* who questions whether Ant Farm can truly "have their cake and eat it too*."* [197] Frank castigates the group for "smashing your TV and needing it too," yet also applauds them because "It's cheaper to get off watching someone else destroy a television." *Media Burn* puzzled him, Frank admits, because it is "the work of people who are prisoners of media domination."[198] Responding to Frank's article, video consultant and

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[195] Media Burn Statement, n.d. [stamped July 4, 1975], Ant Farm archive, 2005.14.285.20, page 2. Curtis Schreier reports that "after the crash people started throwing TVs around and kicking them in. It was great—totally spontaneous." Apparently the "fire department freaked out. This big pile of TV sets was on fire and the crowd kept making things worse." Quoted in Ellin Stein, "Ant Farm: The Last Interview," *Boulevards*, Ant Farm archive, 2005.14.239c. If Schreier's story is true, then some audience members got the opportunity to experience the catharsis in destruction.

[196] A newspaper clipping in the Ant Farm archive reports the kidnapping of three individuals (and eventual murder of one of them) and subsequent ransom request for the return of a television set ostensibly stolen by the three hostages. A portion of the article explaining the motive for killing one of the hostages was highlighted: "'You can't take a man's TV set,' one deputy explained. 'Sitting in front of the TV drinking a beer, isn't that what America's all about?'" from "Six 'TV Vigilantes' Arrested," unidentified article clipping, Ant Farm archive, 2005.14.286.12. This story was retold in the "Facts" section of *National Lampoon* (February 1976): 23.

[197] Frank, "Smashing Your TV," 16.

[198] Ibid.

Ant Farm sympathizer Susan Levy explodes, "You CAN have your cake and eat it too!"[199]
Levy's emphatic statement expresses the defining mantra of the American dream—"you too can
have it all!" Ant Farm's means of having it both ways was by smashing TV and using it to
publicize its own event. Levy explains: "Ant Farm not only acknowledges the existence of these
burns (golden arches, tail fins, Evil Knievel, network TV, etc.) but creates more burns in an
attempt to make us aware of their existence, their absurdity, and/or their all-too-often undetected
damage to the environment." Levy's rejoinder to Frank's criticism misses the mark, although she
rightly acknowledges the group's desire to have its cake and eat it too. Rephrasing it a bit, the
group's "both-and" or ambivalent attitude allows them to refuse such a dichotomy that means that
they either accept or reject television as a viable communication system. Instead, they, like Asco
and General Idea, sought to work in between these different perspectives, shifting between
exploiting and reconfiguring media forces and accepting at the same being trapped within
them.[200]

  Media Burn epitomizes what was commonly referred to as a "publicity stunt" or a "media
event."[201] Equally apt is Daniel J. Boorstin's term "pseudo-event," a planned or planted occasion,
done primarily to be covered by the media or reproduced. The "pseudo" prefix, Boorstin
explains, indicates the event's uncertain relationship to reality, a situation which suggests a
broader problem in American society, in which the country has become weakened by its illusions:
"We are haunted, not by reality, but by those images we have put in place of reality."[202] Well-
known advocates of media events were the Yippies, a group of activist pranksters famous for
their theatrical actions. In staging press conferences and taking advantage of the media coverage
already afforded certain events, such as the Democratic National Convention and Woodstock,
they devised savvy strategies to gain press coverage.[203] Some sneered that their interventions

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[199] Susan L. Levy to Sheldon Frank, The Reader, Chicago, letter, October 20, 1975, in which Levy defends
Ant Farm's actions against the negative portrayal of the group in Frank's article. Ant Farm archive,
2005.14.285.44.

[200] Paul Krassner, one of the founders of the Yippies, summed up the event by noting an unanticipated
irony: "It takes a Media Burn to provide work for media people. Much better than collecting
Unemployment." If *Media Burn* initiated an infinite regress, at least it would continue to fuel itself.
Krassner, "Fiddling while the Media Burns, or: Nero, my God, to Thee," 2.

[201] In the footage that opens the *Media Burn* video, one of the network news anchors deems it a "media
event," noting that it used to be called a "publicity stunt," but not anymore.

[202] Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Image* (New York: Atheneum, 1962), 6. In his book, Boorstin chronicles the rise
of the pseudo-event, tracing its origins from 17th-century American newspapers' reliance on reporters to
find or make the news.

[203] For more information about the Yippies, see books authored by its members: The Yippie Book
Collective, *Blacklisted News, Secret History: From Chicago '68 to 1984* (New York: Bleecker, [1983]);
Paul Krassner, *How A Satirical Editor Became a Yippie Conspirator in Ten Easy Years* (New York:
Putnam, 1971); Abbie Hoffman [pseudonym, Free], *Revolution for the Hell of It* (New York: Dial Press,

were merely "symbolic politics," a term suggesting that they operated within a representational realm rather than a material one. The same could be said of Ant Farm's practice, a characterization which would frame the group within the art world, the most conventional domain of symbolic politics. And indeed, this was how the group was characterized by some of the media—as conceptual media whores—a practice which reframed the group's art not as the experience of the event itself, but rather in terms of the images of it that circulated. The television critic for the *New York Times,* Cyclops, leveraged that criticism against the group:

> The purpose of a happening is to attract attention, and the business of television is to pay attention, and the conceptual artists would have been distinctly disappointed if they hadn't been able to watch themselves attacking television on the evening news. We have reached a pretty existential pass indeed when we don't really believe we have done anything until we see ourselves do it on TV.[204]

For Cyclops, Ant Farm's invitation to the media to report on the event results from their own desires for validation, the equivalent of seeking their five minutes of fame.[205] This contention reinforces Boorstin's dictum that the "power to make a reportable event is thus the power to make experience."[206] The transfer in power that he characterizes, from the power to report to the power to create, was reinforced by *Media Burn,* although this particular view constitutes only one of its frames—it does not define the work.

It is one of the potential hermeneutical frames the work offers, one that artist Pierre Huyghe observed: it was "the TV coverage that was creating the reality of the project."[207] In this framing, what was construed as an act of destruction, of negation, of "killing" the television, was

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1968); Abbie Hoffman, *Steal This Book* (New York: Pirate Editions, distributed by Grove Press, 1971); and Jerry Rubin, *Do It: Scenarios of the Revolution* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1970).

   Ant Farm included a copy of *Revolution for the Hell of It* in their submission to the Paris Biennale, *Electronic Oasis 1.*

[204] Cyclops, "The West Coast—Is It Live or on Tape?" *New York Times,* 20 July 1975, D21. Esteemed literary and culture critic John Leonard was possibly the author of this column, as he published television reviews under this pseudonym for the *New York Times* and for *Life* magazine. For more on Leonard's television reviews, see his 1973 collection of criticism, *This Pen for Hire* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday) and also *Smoke and Mirrors: Violence, Television and Other American Cultures* (New York: New Press, 1997).

[205] This resembles Michael Shamberg's dismissal of Yippie Abbie Hoffman's media politics: "Abbie Hoffman thinks he's getting his message across by going on the Dick Cavett show, but as somebody…once said; 'The revolution ended when Abbie Hoffman shut up for the first commercial.'" (*Guerrilla Television,* 27.) In "Requiem for the Media," Baudrillard reinforces this critique when he cautions, "But transgression and subversion never got 'on the air' without being subtly negated as they are: transformed into models, neutralized into signs, they are eviscerated of their meaning." In *Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign,* trans. Charles Levin (New York: Telos Press, 1981), 173.

[206] Boorstin, *Image,* 7–8, 10.

[207] Chip Lord and Pierre Huyghe, "Conversation," *Ant Farm,* 46.

instead the birth of an image. Huyghe recognized this as a complex negotiation of various positions in his conversation with Chip Lord in 2007,

> When you produce an event, you always incorporate its image, its representation through the given media, you call that a media event. Before any artists were dealing with these live events, you integrated the fact that there's no way to escape from the image and, rather than negate it, with you it becomes part of the dynamics of the work.[208]

Thus the reporting on *Media Burn* transformed the event into an image, bringing the work full circle, since it began as an image.[209] In the eponymous video the group incorporates footage from the television broadcasts that aired stories on *Media Burn,* folding the dissemination and reception of the event into the work itself (and also proving its existence, important for the group's own history, as was demonstrated by the lack of documentation for Asco's *Decoy Gang War Victim*). Ant Farm's integration of the press coverage they received into the *Media Burn* video exemplifies the group's collateral practice and the different ways in which they framed their production.

Although the television reporters framed *Media Burn* as the work of conceptual artists, Ant Farm's reliance on the media to *realize* the "media event"—it is not a media event if the media does not show!—casts the event's position as art into doubt, contributing to the work's intermedial or indeterminate status (a status the *Eternal Frame* broaches when Doug Hall as the artist-president decides their re-enactment is "not not art"). John Lion, founder of San Francisco's Magic Theater, perhaps irritated at being asked to leave the demarcated press area at *Media Burn*, confirmed the tendency of the event to veer into non-art territory by acknowledging, "I think it's real important that people get real close. Otherwise it's like watching a football game...If you're not there, then it's not art." Lion's remark suggests that there is an appropriate viewing distance for appreciating art, and that physical proximity—by being part of the action, in a sense—renders the work into an artistic context that being removed from the performance—as a bystander, as a distant spectator—negates. Being close up one *experiences* the event; relegated to a cordoned off section of the parking lot renders the event closer to an image than an experience. In effect, the close viewing distance envelops the spectator *into* the work, makes him or her part of the collateral practice, as is the case with Lion's remark being recorded as part of the *Media*

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[208] Ibid.
[209] Curtis Schreier offered another perspective on the commercial television coverage of the event: "They reproduced the image but didn't mention it was a protest against trash television….The media watered the event down and presented it as nothing more than an arty Evel Knievel at the Cow Palace." Quoted in Stein, "Ant Farm: The Last Interview," Ant Farm archive, 2005.14.239c.

Burn video. The spectators, as with the commercial ephemera, become bound up in the work of *Media Burn* as a whole.

Ant Farm's need to construct a frame to control their image extended to media reports about the performance. During the live event, the group did not produce a spokesperson to offer interpretations or answer questions about what was happening; their platform consisted of the souvenir program, the artist-president's speech, and the news stories that were aired and published following the event. In reporting on *Media Burn,* journalists and newscasters registered a range of opinions from those who appreciated Media Burn's wake-up call about media control ("a smashing way to turn off TV addicts"), to those bemused and confused by the event (Don Mapp KTVU asking, "Get it?" and Kevin Small responding, "I don't think I want to get it"), to those critics who condemned the group's event as "horseplay" or, perhaps even worse, as "cute."[210] Despite the appearance of ceding the representation of the event to the media, Ant Farm actually exerted some control over how the story was reported by limiting attendance to those bearing badges created by the group.

In other instances, Ant Farm played an even larger role in manipulating the media. The group seemingly provided Jon Carroll with text that served as the basis of an article Carroll wrote for the *Village Voice* (handwritten notes atop the four-page document indicate the copy was "read over phone to NYC 7/7/75 omitted paragraph begins on page 3."[211] The published article repeats the typescript document almost word for word. Is providing news stories—in more ways than one—to journalists, just an extension of media burn? Carla Liss lamented how "[m]edia burns the public continually—(re)writing, suppressing, omitting, 'the news,' not to mention the daily

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[210] Supporters of the event in the press were Carla Liss, Paul Krassner, Terry McDonell, Jon Carroll. Neutral accounts were offered by Lucinda Hawkins and *Domus*. Critics included Kevin Wallace, Cyclops, and Sheldon Frank. J.C. Garrett drew inspiration from the event and incorporated it into his story "Pieces Left at the Scene of the Accident: An Illustrated Apology to J.G. Ballard," *Tofu Magazine,* no. 3 (Fall/Winter 2000): 20–27, Ant Farm archive, 2005.14.325.

Ant Farm also received feedback on *Media Burn* from those who attended and those who caught it later on video. John from Folk Art Landmarks returned the feedback card from the event program, completing the prompt--"I thought the event on the whole"—with "was even better than its publicity." Ant Farm archive, 2005.14.285.3**.**

Rick Powne of the Tucson Media Coalition shared the reactions the video garnered when he screened it a media workshop: "Upon the showing of 'Media Burn' one broadcaster—a station manager representing the Tucson Broadcasting Association, said that the tape was akin to showing Nazi's [sic] burning books. Well, he didn't stand up for the Star Spangled Banner like some of us did. The television station management present for the showing were a trifle nervous when applause broke out in the auditorium and the restrained giggles as the T.V. sets were smashed made them look around more than once. Workshop participants came away with a fresh reminder of the power of image and symbol inside that little box." Ant Farm archive, 2005.14.287.12.

[211] Media Burn Document, n.d. [c. 7/7/75], Ant Farm archive, 2005.14.285.21, page 1 of 4. Text for article by Jon Carroll, "Watching the Media Burn," *Village Voice,* 14 July 1975, 78.

barrage of advertisement."[212] In performing an event that literalizes the frustration with the control television has over consumers' lives, yet in controlling the way in which television and the print media report the event, does Ant Farm retain the upper hand or do they fall prey to the same media domination they accuse the mainstream of perpetuating? Not only did Ant Farm offer textual support for journalists, but they also responded to their critics. One such letter was sent to Cyclops (author of the scathing review mentioned earlier), penned by Uncle Buddy (the character from the *Cadillac Ranch Show*).[213] He criticizes Cyclops for reproducing inaccurate information about the event, information he believes the television critic received from reading other news stories about it, rather than from attending it. He concludes his letter: "MEDIA BURN is about real people being frustrated and pissed off at the supression [sic], omission, and distortion of facts by the news media."[214] How does this compare with the story that Ant Farm hand fed to Jon Carroll? Is this really that different from Sheldon Frank's characterization of Ant Farm's "infinite regress"?

Ant Farm's play with the press may just be a tactic of "media inversion." "'Media inversion' is a term people in the Ant Farm kept using for the process by which one finds oneself on the opposite side of the media," according to garilbaldi [*sic*], the author of a 1971 article on Ant Farm. garilbaldi invokes the term because the group upended his expectations—that he would be the one conducting the interview and maintaining control—when they set him in a truck to watch video, some taped and some broadcast live by the Ant Farmers from another space, and then instructed him to communicate with them via walkie-talkie. They had seized control of the interview process, a media inversion that the very compliant garilbaldi acknowledges, "Being interviewed by people one is watching on television, and had come to interview can be described in those terms."[215] *Media Burn* acts out such an inversion by representing the television news coverage of the event in its own video documentation, appropriating and recasting the footage through their parodic lens.

What is the end point of such a parody? Skip Blumberg, a participant in TVTV and member of the Videofreex who taped *Media Burn* along with a crew from Optic Nerve, registers the political agency of the event, asking in a letter to Chip Lord, "where will this all end? Is the next gig to drive a tank into the CBS studios? Or fly a plane through a burning drive-in movie screen?"[216] He continues to muse about the ramifications of this "media burn": "Or constructing a

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[212] Carla Liss, "AntFarm's Media Burn," 1.
[213] The group refers to this character sometimes as Uncle Buddie and others as Uncle Buddy.
[214] Media Burn, letter from "Uncle Buddie" to Cyclops, 20 July 1975. Ant Farm archive, 2005.14.287.5.
[215] "Captain Video's Kids," *Good Times* 4, no. 23 (9 July 1971): 24, Ant Farm archive, 2005.14.313.
[216] Skip [Blumberg] to Chip Lord, letter, April 14, 1975. Ant Farm archive, 2005.14.306.

giant frog who's [*sic*] tongue will lash out to grab and swallow a communications satellite? And who'll drive the frog? Well, keep up the good work and you might end up with your own series."[217] Blumberg questions the logical end point of what *Media Burn* set in motion, noting, with a sense of irony, that the only possible conclusion is incorporation into the media sphere, by becoming a television series.

   Media Burn operates with the same sense of irony that Blumberg expresses, acknowledging both the potential to raise political awareness in "fighting fire with fire" and also the unavoidable double-bind of doing so. Part of *Media Burn*'s "transformational access" derives from its capacity to integrate established opposites, such as art and commercial entertainment, a double position they, unlike their activist predecessors of a just a few years prior, maintained precisely because it could embrace contradictions. Despite the imminent destruction of the televisions, Doug Michels proclaims, "we're signing on, we're not signing off." Indeed, their ambivalence towards the media, their love-hate relationship with American postwar consumer culture, and their development of a truly collateral practice would be realized in an even more ambitious and complex project, *The Eternal Frame.*

"THE BEST ART WALKS THE THINNEST LINE BETWEEN LIFE": Re-mediating *The Eternal Frame*

   If Blumberg questioned the ramifications of *Media Burn*, Terry Boyce, the journalist from *Old Cars* who investigated the origins of *Cadillac Ranch*, anticipated a logical conclusion for work so heavily invested in the 1950s: "This era is popularly known as 'the fifties.' It began in the excited post-war 1940's and ended abruptly in the rear seat of the Presidential Continental one terrible afternoon in November, 1963."[218] In noting that the assassination of Kennedy marked the end of the "car" era, Boyce, writing in September 1974, foresees the group's climactic project, *The Eternal Frame.* For this work, a re-enactment of John F. Kennedy's assassination in

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   Optic Nerve was a San Francisco-based video collective that formed in 1972. One of their most well known works is *Fifty Wonderful Years,* a portrait of the contestants of the 1973 Miss California Beauty Pageant.

   Founded in 1969 by David Cort, Curtis Ratcliff and Parry Teasdale, the Videofreex were one of the first video collectives. They moved to Maple Tree Farm in the Catskills hamlet of Lanesville, New York, in 1971, where they launched a pirate television station, Lanesville TV. For more on the history of the Videofreex, see member Parry Teasdale's entertaining account, *Videofreex: America's First Pirate TV Station and the Catskills Collective That Turned It On* (Hensonville, New York: Black Dome Press, 1999).
[217] Skip [Blumberg] to Chip Lord, letter, 14 April 1975. Ant Farm archive, 2005.14.306.
[218] Boyce, "Oil, Cows—and Now A Cadillac Ranch?" 8.

Dealey Plaza, Dallas, Ant Farm collaborated with another artists' group, T.R. Uthco, which consisted of Doug Hall and Jody Procter (sometimes Diane Andrews Hall is also credited as a member).[219] Hall had played the role of the artist-president at *Media Burn* just the month before the groups undertook their staging of the *Eternal Frame,* and he resumed his character, playing John F. Kennedy while Doug Michels assumed the role of Jacqueline Kennedy (**figure 102** and **figure 103**).[220]

The Eternal Frame tackles the topic of history and historical memory, by re-mediating the images the public accepts as substitutes for personal memories. In the years following Kennedy's death, debates surrounding the assassination questioned who had the power to decide history: the state, represented by the Warren Commission's official investigation, the public dissenters, or the media?[221] In *The Eternal Frame,* Ant Farm and T.R. Uthco skewer all of these sources—the Warren Commission and the conspiracy theorists alike for their faith in the image as evidence, and the media, for rendering a national tragedy into an endless replay of public spectacle. This interest in the politics of media is an outgrowth of Ant Farm's engagement with the circulation of images—the dissemination of imagery and ideas from the mass media into the collective consciousness of a nation's public is perhaps the most enduring and pervasive form of the spread of imagery, and Ant Farm and T.R. Uthco contribute *The Eternal Frame* as their meditation on the process by which images acquire their allure.

Performed in Dallas in August 1975, the taped footage was subsequently edited to include pre-performance interviews, photographs, and Abraham Zapruder's film from the actual assassination (the groups had obtained an unauthorized 16mm reproduction of the film). They debuted the resulting video at showings in New York, at Anthology Film Archives, and in San Francisco, at the Unitarian Church, on November 22, 1975, the twelfth anniversary of Kennedy's

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[219] Doug Hall recounts the story of the formation of T.R. Uthco: "Jody Procter, who had been my roommate at Harvard, was living in San Francisco and was married to my younger sister at the time. We had collaborated in college doing some odd performances and actions, mainly relating to language and gesture. We were also very politicized, and were involved in SDS [Students for a Democratic Society] and other political situations. The other member of our group, Diane Andrews, and I met later Skowhegan [School of Painting and Design in Maine]. When Diane and I moved to San Francisco after graduate school in Baltimore, we decided that we would form some kind of collaboration between the three of us." Doug Hall, interview, *California Video,* 234.

[220] Jody Procter from T.R.Uthco and Tom Morey played Secret Service agents. Others credited on *The Eternal Frame* are Doug Kinney, Jim Newman, Skip Blumberg, Bart Friedman, Alan Schulman, Pepper Mouser, Bill Harlan, Sandra Woodall, Leslie Sherman, Dan Calderwood, Optic Nerve, Stanley Marsh 3 and Sophie Procter. In *Ant Farm 1968–1978,* Curtis Schreier reveals that The Residents, the famously secretive avant garde rock group, were Secret Service agents in *The Eternal Frame.* Although the identities of the band members have not been positively confirmed, many speculate that Hardy Fox and Homer Flynn were members; they are named in the credits for contributing to *Media Burn.*

[221] Art Simon makes this point in *Dangerous Knowledge: The JFK Assassination in Art and Film* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996), 2.

death.[222] The press release advertised the screenings as a "mass-media memorial"; the double meaning of the latter phrase—that this commemorated the death of the mass-media as the public knew it before Kennedy's assassination and that it provided a memorial via "mass-media" form (video)—underscores the playful ambiguity the groups courted.   The re-enactment and video offered spectators an outlet to relive their memories of the assassination, and also allowed Ant Farm and T.R. Uthco to criticize the process by which the media programs emotions through the continuous repetition of iconic images. Art historian Patricia Mellencamp highlights this aspect of the work when she lauds *Media Burn, Eternal Frame,* and *the Amarillo News Tapes* (a post-Ant Farm collaboration between Chip Lord, Doug Hall, and Jody Procter) as "the most intellectually sophisticated critiques of commercial television and media culture ever produced."[223] Following those initial screenings, the video was later re-edited to include the commentary of audience members who watched the video in New York and San Francisco.

The Eternal Frame deconstructs and then reconstructs the creation of a seamless media image. Like *Media Burn,* it revolves around a single image.[224] The video opens by showing the *ur*-text of the Kennedy assassination, the grainy, 26.6 second 8mm silent film shot by happenstance by a bystander, Abraham Zapruder. Although other amateur films, such as those by Orville Nix, Marie Muchmore, and Charles Bronson, were also made that day, Zapruder's was considered the most comprehensive by the Warren Commission because it offered a clear view of the grassy knoll, the much-ballyhooed location of the possible second shooter, and also provided clear details of the presidential motorcade. Three copies of the film were made by Jamieson Film Company in Dallas after it had been developed by Eastman Kodak, with Zapruder giving two copies to the Secret Service and keeping the original and one copy (Chip Lord contends that someone at the duplication lab had made an extra copy, which was the source of their bootleg version).[225] The day after the assassination, Zapruder sold the print rights to *Life* magazine, and the next day *Life* purchased all rights to the film. The November 29, 1963, issue of *Life* published some thirty frames of the Zapruder film in black and white, and film stills appeared in subsequent issues of the periodical (**figure 110**).[226] *Life* omitted frame 314, the one which showed a bullet

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[222] These showings were presented at the same day on both coasts, at 8 and 10 p.m. in New York and at 8:30 p.m. in San Francisco.

[223] Mellencamp, "Pyrotechnics and Emergence," 41.

[224] In a 2002 interview, Doug Michels explained that the two works were "kissing cousins." Chip Lord elaborated that they "have in common that they started from the idea of creating an image." "Interview with Ant Farm," 74.

[225] Lord, interview, *California Video,* 236.

[226] Among the issues in which photographs from the Zapruder film appeared were those published on December 6, 1963; October 2, 1964; November 25, 1966; and November 24, 1967. *Life* gave all rights back to the Zapruder family in 1975.

shattering the president's skull, determining it was too gruesome for public consumption. It was not until March 6, 1975, that the Zapruder film aired on television, when it was screened on *Good Night America*, a late-night program hosted by Geraldo Rivera.[227] Public outrage ensued from the screening, a response that prompted the formation of several investigations into the assassination.[228]

   The Eternal Frame suggests that what people recall as personal memories of the event are instead recollections of the media images—images have become substitutes for memories of the event itself. Those public memories were formed by the media, by the photographs that aired in *Life* magazine, by the images of the aftermath, such as Jacqueline Kennedy, still wearing her bloodied suit, at the side of Lyndon Johnson as he is sworn in as president aboard Air Force One (**figure 104** and **figure 105**). The frames from the Zapruder film, much discussed in relation to the Warren Commission's investigation, also wedged themselves into the public consciousness, such that the film became synonymous with the assassination. "Why has it taken so long to realize that the assassination and the Zapruder film are not one and the same?" Max Holland and Johann Rush asked in 2007.[229] Art critic Richard Woodward contends that "Kennedy's death is virtually unimaginable without Zapruder's film."[230] The film anchors the floating pictures of the event that circulated afterwards, providing a narrative context for them.

   The film offered a coherent narrative for the intense and frequently disjointed media coverage that ensued following the news of gunshots in Dallas. Television became the central focus of a nation's attention for four days in November; the "'boob tube,'" Ant Farm and T.R. Uthco remind us, "suddenly became an electronic window for millions of people connected in a ritual pathos."[231] My mother recalls that she was watching her favorite soap opera, *As the World Turns,* on CBS, when Walter Cronkite pre-empted the program to announce, "In Dallas, Texas, three shots were fired at President Kennedy's motorcade in downtown Dallas. The first reports say that President Kennedy has been seriously wounded by this shooting." Several of the

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[227] John J. O'Connor, "TV: Two Programs Exploit Subjects," *New York Times,* 27 March 1975, 44. O'Connor calls Rivera's programmed discussion of Kennedy's assassination and airing the Zapruder film a "case of having your sensationalism and denying it too."

[228] The Hart-Schweiker investigation, Church Committee Investigation on Intelligence Activities by the United States, and the House Select Committee on Assassinations inquiry all began following the March 1975 broadcast of the Zapruder film.

[229] Max Holland and Johann Rush, "J.F.K.'s Death, Re-framed," *New York Times,* 22 November 2007, A35. Holland and Rush are op-ed contributors, the former is the author of *The Kennedy Assassination Tapes* and the latter is as a television photographer who filmed Lee Harvey Oswald demonstrating in August 1963.

[230] Richard B. Woodward, "The 40th Anniversary of a 26-second Reel," *New York Times,* 16 November 2003, AR40.

[231] 2 pages of typed notes on T.R. Uthco letterhead, 1975. Ant Farm archive, 2005.14.153.

individuals watching Ant Farm and T.R. Uthco's re-staging of the event remembered where they were when the president was shot on November 22, and noted that they "saw a little bit of it on television you know after it happened." Of course, these spectators could not have seen footage of the assassination on television immediately afterwards because no live television crews were present and the Zapruder film was not televised until twelve years later. Yet the television coverage was unprecedented: "In a totally unforeseen and awesome crisis, TV immediately, almost automatically, was transformed into a participating organ of American life whose value, whose indispensability, no Nielsen audimeters could measure or statistics reveal."[232] The three networks offered continuous, commercial-free, live coverage for four days, from the first news of shots in Dealey Plaza to the burial at Arlington National Cemetery on November 25, 1963. Because of the technical limitations of television cameras in 1963, this type of coverage presented new challenges for the networks (in particular in relaying feeds from different locations); the fractured reporting, rife with technical difficulties, revealed how centralized the television broadcasting system was, a critique Michael Shamberg had waged in *Guerrilla Television* (and one that highlighted the usefulness of TVTV's handheld videotaping at the political conventions).[233] Due to trouble with the audio feed on NBC, correspondent Frank McGee had to repeat the words of Robert McNeil, who was reporting from Parkland Hospital, where Kennedy had been taken. Unbeknownst to McGee, the phone line from Dallas finally became audible just as McNeil was confirming the President's death, a miscommunication that created eerie repetition for television audiences. McNeill read from the official White House announcement, "After being shot at," after which McGree repeated for the TV viewers, "After being shot," unaware that the audience was now able to hear McNeill's voice. The doubling continued, "By an unknown assailant..." "By an unknown assailant..." This eerie echo, although an unintended effect of working around the technical problems of producing live television coverage from feeds in multiple locations, reinforced the redundancy of the circulation of images of the event. Describing the assassination of Kennedy as "the first of the great tele-visual spectaculars," Doug Hall explains that the event

> became convoluted as it unfolded over time, its original meaning mutating as it was filtered through the media. As the event became popularized, it lost its relationship to its source and spread out into the culture, as an evolving narrative that sort of folded back on itself like a Möbius strip.[234]

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[232] Thomas Doherty, quoting George Rosen, in "Assassination and Funeral of President John F. Kennedy," in Horace Newcomb, ed. *Encyclopedia of Television,* 2nd ed. (New York: Fitzroy Dearborn, 2004), 1253.
[233] Shamberg, *Guerrilla Television,* 32–35.
[234] Hall, interview, *California Video,* 235.

Looping infinitely (or seemingly, at least), the representations of the event confirm and extend the significance of the assassination, forming receptacles for the emotions associated with it, and in their circularity, they thus add to their own importance. In other words, the continued circulation of images of the event, particularly via television, seemingly amplifies their own authenticity.

In establishing the Zapruder film as a point of origin for their version, Ant Farm and T.R. Uthco initiate post-modern questions concerning what constitutes an "original" representation and what is merely a copy. What makes for an authentic representation? What accounts for a credible witness? *Life* magazine, itself a glossy predicated on the truth value of photographs, touted the Zapruder film as "the only unimpeachable" witness to the tragedy.[235] Ant Farm and T.R. Uthco establish the Zapruder version as a reference point to guide their filming of the re-enactment, carefully choreographing the exact movements of the Kennedy couple in the car and repeating them so as to make sure they resembled the "original." In their press release for the video screenings, issued on stationery bearing the seal of the President of the United States and the name "President John F. Kennedy," the groups billed the event as an "authentic remake of the original JFK assassination."[236] Releasing a statement from the office of a long-dead president announcing his death is ironic, especially given how mediagenic Kennedy was. Indeed, he was the first president to introduce the live, televised press conference, and, as *Life* correspondent Hugh Sidey proclaimed, "No official face has ever become so much a part of American consciousness."[237] The president projected his wit, charm, and confidence directly to the American public through television, impressing viewers that he was, indeed, "the genuine article," as television historian Mary Ann Watson observed. [238] Kennedy took an active approach to how he was portrayed on television, down to correcting the lighting and lenses, understanding so well how, as he once said, "appearances contribute to reality."[239] *The Eternal Frame* takes up this theme of how appearances are constructed as reality, particularly with the inclusion of behind-the-scenes footage of the performers readying themselves for the camera and interviews with the participants about the process of re-enacting the historic event (**figure 106**). This point is made particularly emphatically as the artist-president addressed viewers seated in a seemingly stately office: "It is truly fitting that I am only able to talk to you via television tonight, for like all presidents in recent years, I am in reality only another image on your television sets... Like my

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[235] "A Matter of Reasonable Doubt," *Life*, 25 November 1966. *Life* also devoted an issue to remembering JFK (23 November 1963) and to the Warren Commission's report (2 October 1964).
[236] Eternal Frame Press Release, 1975, Ant Farm archive, 2005.14.137.
[237] Hugh Sidey, quoted in Mary Ann Watson, "How Kennedy Invented Political Television," *Television Quarterly* (Spring 1991): 64.
[238] Watson, "How Kennedy Invented Political Television," 71.
[239] Ibid., 63.

elected predecessors, the content of the image I present is no different from the image itself," he declaimed, as the camera revealed footage of the actor preparing to assume his role as artist-president.[240] The medium and the message are presented as one and the same, such as when Zapruder's film is lauded as the only "unimpeachable witness" to the assassination, or when viewers commend Kennedy for his charisma and forthrightness after seeing him on an edited television special. The apparent truthfulness of these images is bolstered by the medium in which it is conveyed, and television relies on its quality of "facticity," or as critic David Antin explains, its "continual assertion that it can and is providing an accurate representation of reality, while everyone's experience continually denies it."[241] In *The Eternal Frame,* Ant Farm and T.R. Uthco attempt to pry apart image from medium and image from content by showing the behind-the-scenes footage, by reproducing the Zapruder film, and by repeating it so many times that it would appear to lose its force. And yet the reactions of the bystanders watching the live recreation, unaware of the making-of frame provided by the edited video, respond in awe and appreciation.

These responses are puzzling to the performers and to others watching the video. Is that woman really wiping a tear from her eye? Are there people *really* reaching for the instamatics to record the performance, itself a re-enactment of a film of the event? (**figure 107**) Ant Farm and T.R. Uthco play with this relationship between real and representation, offering just enough "reality effects," such as recalling Jacqueline Kennedy's iconic pink boucle suit, to conjure up the public's memories of the event. To the bystanders in Dallas who watched Ant Farm and T.R. Uthco circle Dealey Plaza some seventeen times, it did not seem to matter that a man dressed in drag was playing the fashionable first lady. As Chip Lord observed later, "The pink dress is more important than who is inhabiting it really. And if the pink dress and the hat are done well— actually they don't have to be done that well!"[242] Lord is right; the bystanders watching the re-enactment appreciated how "real" the scene looked. One woman, overcome with emotion, sighed, "That does look like her, my god."[243] The bystanders' reactions testify to their nostalgia,

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[240] Doug Hall notes another parallel with the Kennedy history: "Jody Procter was our Ted Sørenson; I was the Artist President and he was my speechwriter." Hall, interview, *California Video*, 235. Excerpts from the artist-president's speech were published in "The Eternal Frame: An Authentic Remake of the Original JFK Assassination," *La Mamelle* nos. 1-2 (1976): 30-31.

[241] David Antin, "Television: Video's Frightful Parent," *Artforum* (December 1975): 38. 36-45.

[242] Lord, interview, *California Video,* 236.

[243] Another bystander who initially thought the scene differed from what she "remembered" agreed, after some prompting from the cameraman, that maybe the size looked different and then announced: "It looks so real now. And the characters look so real." The reactions of the spectators are shocking, a response that clearly bewildered the performers, who had expected outrage at the poor taste of the proceedings.

They credit the cameramen, Skip Blumberg and Bart Friedman from the Videofreex for capturing (and sometimes eliciting) the feedback. Doug Hall explains, "I think Skip and Bart were really tuned into how to videotape an event like this." Hall, interview, *California Video,* 236.

not for the event itself, but for the memories they have based on the representation of it. As Richard Woodward astutely observes, "the Zapruder film is a home movie, its images suffused with nostalgia for an unredeemable past."[244] It is how this nostalgia inheres in the media images that Ant Farm seeks to deconstruct and reconstruct, although they also seem to recognize that the very nostalgia they would like to expose cannot be pinpointed. As *20/20 Vision* revealed, their own nostalgia colors their approach, situating them within their own historic moment, a time when people could remember what it was like without televised press conferences and continuous news coverage. For those who had returned to the scene of the crime at Dealey Plaza, the image of the assassination and its content had become so fused that the distance needed to appreciate the irony of Ant Farm and T.R. Uthco's gesture ceased to exist. It was only by folding the reception of the performance into their edited video that irony could be realized, in the staging of *The Eternal Frame* as the representation of the mechanisms of representation itself.

In registering different performance modes, *The Eternal Frame* offers a complex meditation on the process of representation and its reception, often with jarring juxtapositions, such as the sincerity of one bystander's response, wiping a tear from her eye, and Doug Hall laughing as he watched footage of the re-enactment, "This is really bad taste." These moments of friction in some ways mirrored the disjointed television coverage of the event, which generated, historian Thomas Doherty contends, "an almost vertiginous imbalance in televiewers, a sense of American life out of control and let loose from traditional moorings."[245] The Zapruder film itself could not hold together the semblance of a seamless narrative, yet as the details surrounding the story began to unravel (how many bullets were there? When were they fired? What was the location of the shots?), critics and supporters alike clung to the 486 frames of the Zapruder film as "evidence," breaking it apart frame by frame and shadow by shadow. Despite their close scrutiny of the images, they nonetheless maintained some faith in the image to represent a sort of "truth." Although Woodward declared in his fortieth anniversary tribute to the film that "[f]aith in the objectivity of the photographic image, still or moving, has never quite recovered," because "people read what they wanted (or were told) to read into the images," he overlooked these people's returning to the image as an originating site. Just as Ant Farm had to come to terms with the powerful images of the tomorrow crystallized at the 1939 World's Fair in order to

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[244] Woodward, "40th Anniversary," AR40.
[245] Doherty described, "The simultaneity of live video reports of a dead president intercut with recently developed film footage of a lively president delivering a good-humored breakfast speech that morning in Forth Worth make for a jarring by-play of mixed visual messages." See "Assassination and Funeral of President John F. Kennedy," 1252–3.

acknowledge their own ideas about the present and future, they too had to reckon with the power of the Zapruder film as a collective memory before they could dismantle it.[246]

Ant Farm's interweaving of items and events from other projects, from media coverage and audience reactions of their own works, to other footage, such as the Zapruder film, to the large array of ephemera that becomes folded in as integral aspects of the work itself mirrors the process by which events in the public imagination accrue meaning. The beginning of the *Eternal Frame* shows a clip from the artist-president's speech on July 4, 1975 that launched *Media Burn*; in this iteration, the artist-president figure has been recast as a specific individual, John F. Kennedy, a subtle legerdemain that builds continuity between the two projects. Just as the Living *Room of the Future* included references to *Cadillac Ranch* and *Media Burn*, *Media Burn* looked ahead to *The Eternal Frame,* which the groups staged the following month, and *The Eternal Frame* recoded part of the *Media Burn* festivities as a direct reference to their later project by fixing the identity of the artist-president as Kennedy. Referring to the assassination and its aftermath, Doug Hall explains how an "event happens, and then all this other stuff begins to glom onto it. It's like this huge media snowball that gathers force."[247] Ant Farm's collateral practice is thus a form of this "snowball" accretion, one that mimics the process by which media images gain significance.

The Eternal Frame has been interpreted by critics and historians as a sophisticated form of media critique, as in Patricia Mellencamp's assessment. And it is. But it also offers a tacky, tasteless, humorous reprisal of the Kennedy assassination, in a spirit completely in line with Ant Farm's (and T.R. Uthco's) other projects, yet one that differs from the serious, or often just dull, tone of many critical appraisals of media.[248] The project was funded in part by *National Lampoon,* the "humor magazine," and Jim Newman, proprietor of the Dilexi Gallery in San

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[246] In notes for event, the groups explain their sense that "the media removed us from the reality of the event so sufficiently that we never dealt with it on a personal emotional level. This we now intend to do by returning to Dallas in person and turning our own cameras on those feelings." The sentiment expressed here is the need for catharsis, to explore the individual feelings associated with Kennedy's assassination, yet given the nature of the performance and video, this rings as false. It is clear that the groups were emotionally invested in the event, but their cathexis resulted not from a need to express their repressed feelings, but instead because they wanted to expose how the "real event came to us only as media" and show those who felt a personal attachment to it that this attachment was fabricated by television and print media. 2 pages of typed notes on T.R. Uthco letterhead [re: Eternal Frame], 1975. Ant Farm archive, 2005.14.153.

[247] Hall, interview, *California Video,* 237.

[248] For example, Richard Serra and Carlotta Fay Schoolman's *Television Delivers People* (1973) uses a no-nonsense blue screen with yellow text to expose how television "delivers" viewers to commercial advertisers; *The Business of Television News* (1973) takes a documentary approach, interviewing station managers and intercutting news footage, and allows the force of their critique to come from the managers' own statements.

Francisco.[249] The page layout in the January 1976 issue of *National Lampoon* mimicked the layout of images on the assassination that appeared in *Life* magazine (**figure 108, figure 109,** and **figure 110)**. The *National Lampoon* headline promises "Never before published shots reveal a scene of split-second horror," and makes a play on the presence of a photographer-bystander, such as Zapruder: "In these as-yet-unreleased photos taken by Dallas resident Harvey Hunt from the railroad overpass with a 300mm telephoto fisheye lens." The captions convey the sensationalism of *Life*'s initial publication of the Zapruder photographs, while enhancing, even, the tastelessness of the groups' performance (such as the substitution of a rotten, discarded watermelon for brain tissue): "As a secret service agent rushes to climb aboard, and the limousine speeds away to Parkland Hospital, Jackie reaches back to place a fragment of smashed watermelon on the car trunk, a heroic act partially obscured by the intervening tall, dark thing." The grossly physical comedy in the *National Lampoon* photos should not be overlooked as simply playing to its audience, which of course it was. (One letter to the editor commented, "Talk about *funny*?! Ho-ho-ho…it was *terrific*.!!")[250] The emphasis on the body recurs throughout the video *The Eternal Frame,* with the camera repeatedly exposing the actors in make-up, putting on wigs, and going through their motions—the representation of the scene as image is thus resolutely contrasted with the actors' very material transformations of their bodies (and in the case of Doug Michels as Jackie, the very physical limitations of doing so) in another attempt to expose the seams of representation, particularly those disguised in the mass media.

As foils to the two-dimensional video image, Ant Farm and T.R. Uthco collected an impressive array of historical objects related to President Kennedy. They used them to recreate a 1960s-era living room which they used as a set for the display of their video at the Long Beach Museum of Art in 1976 (**figure 111**). Some items from the video, such as the bronze bust of Kennedy that opens *The Eternal Frame* and rests on the desk during Doug Hall's presidential speech*,* reappear in the living room installation. These objects offer one means of attempting to tie down the floating representations by fixing them to "real" objects. An attendee of one of the *Eternal Frame* screenings included in the final tape suggests that there are artifacts—souvenirs of the real—that the groups should have used in the video to anchor the representation. He complained, "They didn't use anything original at all. They should have either told what happened or made up their own story….They took a theme of a real man getting killed and they played little games with it."[251] Lord scoffs at the man's criticism, dismissing him as a conspiracy

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[249] Newman had also commissioned Ant Farm in 1971 to create a media studio for him.
[250] "Letters," *National Lampoon* (March 1976): 8.
[251] Ant Farm and T.R. Uthco, *The Eternal Frame,* 1976, video.

buff who sought more of a fetishistic approach to the material than *Eternal Frame* offered.[252] Yet

conspiracy theorist or not, the skeptic's contention that there is even a "real" to which to return

registers as naïve, in a similar way as the display of the president's 1963 Lincoln Continental at

the Henry Ford Museum, with its implication that the emotions attached to the event inhere in the

objects associated with it (this is the premise of many historical museums, that artifacts offer us

stories through which we can access the past.) This recreation of an average living room, with the

TV as the central focus, assumes another form of historical staging, and points to a different use

of the object as souvenir than the commodity objects Ant Farm sold as souvenirs associated with

their own events. In *The Eternal Frame* screening, these kitsch items sprouted up as part of the

consumer industry fueled by the president's death. His absence generated a demand for

"memorabilia," and an entire souvenir industry developed in the wake of the assassination. One

page of the *National Lampoon* sequence dramatized this, representing a popular souvenir

postcard that marked significant locations at Dealey Plaza (**figure 112**). Whereas the commercial

postcards detail the location of the shots fired (**figure 113**), Ant Farm and T.R. Uthco's version in

National Lampoon marks the site of cameras recording the assassination and the re-enactment,

effectively fusing all the different representations into one. Here, the groups play on the *double*

entendre of the word "shots" as both camera snaps and bullets, explaining in a caption, "Many

shots were taken, but only a few hit the mark." This word play recalls an early title for the

project, *Death Bullets,* which implied that the re-creation of the event was itself an assassination

of the president's memory. The postcard-simulation, with cameras as would-be assassins, also

parodies the souvenir industry: what exactly is the appeal of these postcards that dissect the

Dealey Plaza landscape overseen by an oval portrait of the president? Ant Farm had folded

commercial items such as postcards into their work—celebrating *Cadillac Ranch* and *Media Burn*

as best-sellers—and yet in *The Eternal Frame,* these items become fodder for their parodic lens.

This doubling back—from art to the commercial sphere back to the art-parody—reveals the

groups' unseating of any stable framing.

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[252] Lord explained the make-up of the audience at the *Eternal Frame* screening and possible reasons for the disappointment of some of those in attendance: "We traded them [a local tv station promoting the screening at the Unitarian Church on 22 November 1975] a copy of the Zapruder film for this plug on the air, but of course they described it as a 'who killed Kennedy?' presentation, so the audience included conspiracy buffs from the public at large as well as an invited art audience. I would imagine that the disappointed school teacher … was one of them. Our copy of the Zapruder film came from conspiracy theory sources and was originally bootlegged out of the *Life* magazine lab." The "school teacher" to whom Lord referred was most likely the man who criticized the group for not using anything "original." Lord quoted in Mellencamp's "Video Politics," in *Indiscretions: Avant-Garde Film, Video, & Feminism* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1990), 59.

The title of their re-enactment video underscores this resistance to creating a single, coherent frame. "The eternal frame" invokes the eternal flame commemorating Kennedy in Arlington National Cemetery (and lit by Jacqueline Kennedy at her husband's funeral). Images of the event promise an equally lasting record as the continuously burning torch, for even if "man fails to competently maintain his photo libraries," as a *National Lampoon* caption suggests, the images live on in the memory of those who have seen them and in the public's appropriation of those images as memories. The "eternal frame," the image, is enduring, but not immutable; as Doug Hall pointed out: "this other stuff begins to glom onto it." It is, after all, just a *frame,* a viewfinder for seeing the world, and yet it offers a lone perspective. In its incorporation of different "investigatory modes," to borrow Art Simon's terminology, *The Eternal Frame* exposes the limitations of this singular viewpoint to do anything but loop back on itself in an eternal regress.

This said, tackling the Kennedy assassination, with its host of conspiracy theories and elaborations on flinty evidence, had the potential to spin out of control into too many proliferating frames. The need for establishing parameters became clear early in discussions about the project; they contemplated reproducing "all cliché reproductions of famous media shots" or inventing "some of the highlights of the ass ass I nation that were never shown."[253] Thus it is no surprise that recorded in the minutes from a meeting between T.R. Uthco and Ant Farm is the ultimatum, "Michaels [*sic*], we're going to have to draw the line somewhere in this relationship."[254] In this context, the line was needed to demarcate the scope of the project, how far the groups would reach into bad taste, how much they would let the snowball accrue. Yet the reference to a need for a line recalls another oft repeated catchphrase in the correspondence among the principals involved in *The Eternal Frame:* "THE BEST ART WALKS THE THINNEST LINE BETWEEN LIFE."[255] Between life and what? Some of Ant Farm's past works, such as *Media Burn,* suggest that line exists somewhere between life and art, in that space sought after by Allan Kaprow or Claes Oldenburg, for example; projects like *20:20 Vision* and *The Eternal Frame* perforate the line between life and the representation of it, seeking to preserve some of the nostalgia for faith in the image to do what it claims—to represent—and yet also defiantly exposing its fallacies. This tension maintains the careful dance between diffuse, free-wheeling production and tightly controlled representation by incorporating enough self-referential elements and allusions to focus

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[253] 2 pages of typed notes on T.R. Uthco letterhead [re: Eternal Frame], 1975. Ant Farm archive, 2005.14.153.
[254] Minutes of Meeting T.R. Uthco/Ant Farm, 2 May 1975, Ant Farm archive, 2005.14.138.
[255] Letter from Chip [as Chuck] Lord to Stanley Marsh 111 on "here's a NUGGET of wisdom" letterhead, 1974, Ant Farm archive, 2005.14.125 (annotated 12-74 in pencil at the top of the page).

the attention back on their own work. They contain the collateral of their practice—the various spin-offs, audience reactions, collaborators (such as T.R.Uthco, the Residents, the members of Optic Nerve and Videofreex) and varied source footage—by exposing their very act of framing it.

The Eternal Frame reveals Ant Farm's intervention in a world of symbolic politics, yet their version differs from the Yippies' press conferences and demonstrations, in that the politics Ant Farm was interested in was that of everyday culture. They tackled "symbolic politics" at its roots—the symbol, the image—and expose the politics of the image in material ways. It is thus that Ant Farm manages to straddle the modern and the post-modern, looking towards the "both-and" model advocated by Venturi but still invested in social critique associated with modernism—the compromise position of "media politics." They understand that the image and the content are inseparable, and for this reason, simply substituting an alternate message for the existing one would not have much of an effect. As Michael Shamberg explains in *Guerrilla Television,* "true cybernetic guerrilla warfare means re-structuring communications channels, not capturing existing ones."[256] Ant Farm maintained an insistently ambiguous position in that they rejected both the austerity of conceptualism and the rigor of a committed position. Instead they negotiated critique and celebration, nostalgia and irony. With General Idea, as we will see, this line becomes increasingly ill defined, as their works in effect collapse the distance between perpetuating a myth to criticize it and simply perpetuating it.

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[256] Shamberg, *Guerrilla Television,* 29.

Chapter 4
Making the Myth of General Idea

On November 16, 1977, the Canadian trio General Idea staged an elaborate photo shoot in Kingston, Ontario, where they deployed smoke bombs, fire trucks, and even a newscast helicopter to enact the burning of their 1984 Miss General Idea Pavillion.[1] Since 1973 the artists' group had been designing, preparing, and rehearsing for an all-encompassing World's Fair-like extravaganza known as the 1984 Miss General Idea Pavillion, and yet seven years prior to its realization, they prematurely "burned" the planned but fictional edifice to the ground, leaving only hazy photographs of the structure's alleged demise, architectural plans, faux artifacts, and a smoke-filled portrait of the three "architects" of General Idea—A.A. Bronson, Felix Partz, and Jorge Zontal—fleeing the scene (**figure 114** and **figure 115**).[2]

The group acknowledges the mystery surrounding the event and the confusion it generated. In their 1978 video *Hot Property* a voice, speaking over aerial footage of a burning, smoking plot of land, inquires, "But what actually happened? Why did the 1984 Miss General Idea Pavillion burst into flames, burn to the ground? Was it a spontaneous reaction in the audience? Was it critical arson? Or was General Idea always planning to pull the rug out before the climax?"[3] Those are some of the same questions with which we are left as we survey the group's projects that led up or contributed to the 1984 Miss General Idea Pavillion. The voice-over, as if to acknowledge this confusion, teases, "So many unanswered questions, so many loose ends, so many ambiguities, and so many clues." Indeed, these questions grow as one hears more about this seemingly mythical structure; the need to define it, to say "The Miss 1984 General Idea Pavillion is this…," becomes even more urgent, even as the group itself takes pains to elude such specificity.

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[1] General Idea most frequently uses the spelling "Pavillion," although nonstandard in Canadian or American English.

[2] These elements were displayed in the exhibition *Reconstructing Futures* held from 10 December 1977 to 6 January 1978 at the Carman Lamanna Gallery, Toronto. An eponymous exhibition catalogue was published by the gallery. The show traveled to the Canada House Gallery, London (15 February to 8 March 1978) and to Le Centre Culturel Canadien, Paris (April 1978). The exhibition contained an installation of the same name, as well as the group's *Showcard Series* (200 photographs with text on card stock), and the video *Pilot.*

[3] General Idea, *Hot Property,* 27 min. Art Metropole, 1977–81. Videocassette.

What we do know about the Pavillion's burning is that General Idea repurposed an old factory site, covering its concrete foundation with dirt and then chalking the ziggurat outline of their Pavillion audience seating space on top of it to mark an area of 300 feet. To simulate fire, they released smoke bombs.[4] They had been preparing for an eventual fire, rehearsing their potential pageant audiences in Winnipeg and Kingston for how to evacuate when "Fire! Fire!" was exclaimed.[5] This was part of their series of performances relating to the 1984 Miss General Idea Pageant, a contest for which the group had been readying by holding dress rehearsals in which they instructed the audience on how to act (and react) correctly during the "real" ceremony to be held in 1984. Their practice for a panicked evacuation lessens suspense because it makes the fire seem inevitable, and yet this inevitability also heightens apprehension by feeding into a sense of impending disaster. The group pulled such tricks from Hollywood, where movie promotions reveal sensational explosions to pique viewers' curiosity about what might occur and to provoke fear at seemingly real disasters unfolding on screen. In a similar way General Idea builds a mythic, cinematic-like world with its Pavillion, except instead of using celluloid, they construct their arena of action by publicizing their efforts through myriad rehearsals, props, blueprints, architectural studies, surveys, editorials, prints, sculptures, and interviews.

Describing it as the proposed venue for their beauty pageant and listing the various forms it took does not capture what in practice the Pavillion became. In their notes, General Idea planned that the Pavillion would include

Publishing: books & magazines
                        newspapers
Television (& video)
Performance & Cabarets
Rock 'n roll
Disco
Color Bar Lounge & Food
Public transportation
        (the subway, the bus, the train, the airline)
(Fads)
(Sports)
(Politics)
(Religion)

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[4] In the finding aid for the General Idea fonds, Fern Bayer adds that some of the aerial photographs, taken by Tobey Anderson, were also chemically manipulated in the darkroom.
[5] General Idea performed *Hot Property!* at the Winnipeg Art Gallery on 22 October 1977; at the end of the event, the audience fled as "Fire" was yelled. In another audience rehearsal, the audience prepared for the "burning Pavillion" in *Fleshed Out*, which occurred on 17 November 1977 at the theatre at St. Lawrence College, Kingston, Ontario.

in active & archival forms[6]

They envisioned the Pavillion as a hub of connectivity "in active and archival forms," connecting people virtually and literally through vehicles for communication, promotion, entertainment, and travel. It also represented a temporal survey, drawing together previous vanguard movements (rock 'n roll) and the present/future mainstream culture (disco) and keeping abreast of the main currents of the time by incorporating whatever fads, sports, politics, and religion were hot topics or overworked clichés (the parentheses signal these as empty categories to be filled based on the exigencies of the particular moment). The range of items on this list only approximates the complexity and contingency of the Pavillion: it was a malleable enough container to be able to accommodate anything within its auspices, and in this aspect it excelled in its mimicry of the totalizing effects of the culture industry.

The burning of the Pavillion, although fictionalized—nothing actually was destroyed, because nothing was built in the first place—dramatized the performative and ephemeral nature of the group's art. What remained after the Pavillion "conflagration" is the same as what existed prior to it, and the same as what survives now, namely traces of it in photographs; periodicals and articles; edited videos; scripts, notes, and documents; accounts by others; props and costumes; and Art Metropole, the artist-run distribution center the group founded in Toronto in 1974.

Taking the Pavillion as a metaphor for their practice reveals that the group's art was as much about its circulation as about the material evidence of it. They fed on rumor, innuendo, allusions, and exchange; they mocked contemporary artists' growing penchant for publicity as they eagerly fed into and on it. One form of this publicity, an interview with a pageant contestant (**figure 116**), dramatizes how they honed a highly allusive and self-referential practice:

> Mannequin: "Hellow out there. I'm D'ynette and I'm going through the motions in a tri-tier V.B. gown sans helmute. All the better to play the part of a General Idea mouthpiece. They call us conversation pieces at the Pavilion. Walking, talking, living, breathing ideas-with-legs. Feast your eyes on my volumes you voyeurs. …can the camera catch both my recto and my verso?
> *Sorry D'ynette we'd need mirrors for that illusion. But tell me, do you ever get mistaken for a light fixture?*
> Mannequin: How illuminating. Who writes your lines? General Electric?
> *Well we know who writes yours.*[7]

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[6] A.A. Bronson's notes for the Pavillion, Notebook Series, hard-cover marble-pattern notebook from 1979, General Idea fonds, Library and Archives, National Gallery of Canada, box 47 (hereafter cited as General Idea fonds).

[7] "Ideas with Legs," *FILE* (Summer 1978): 20. This dialogue between Whitney Smith and Dynette is taped and included in the *Going thru the Motions* (1975) video; it is also referred to in *Pilot* (1977).

So many innuendos and hidden meanings abound in this snippet of dialogue that it becomes difficult to track them all or to know what to do after deciphering them. There is the reference to General Electric, the large multi-national corporation that General Idea seemed to pattern itself after, if in name only; the art world commentary through the literal mobilization of the idea—that bastion of conceptual art—into a material practice, "walking, talking, living breathing ideas-with-legs"; these ideas-with-legs turn into (or are created as) conversation pieces, publicity (General Idea mouthpieces) constructed to court publicity. Then there are the more oblique references to General Idea's own works—the tri-tier V.B. gown is a version of *Luxon V.B.*, a window installation of mirrored venetian blind slats, modified into a dress without the muting helmet ("helmute") of other incarnations of the dress, and the mention of needing "mirrors" to see both sides of the model (referred to as one describes the front and back of a work of art) recalls the group's early 1970s *Light On* project in which the group experimented with casting light reflections off of mirrors (**figure 162**). The latter examples require an insider's knowledge of the group, and reward that knowledge in the pay off of "getting it." The closing line of this exchange, "well we know who writes" your lines, signals that General Idea consistently retains the upper hand as the scriptwriters who create "conversation pieces," pawns and topics of conversation. Rather than constituting a series of allusions that add up to a cohesive narrative, these references seem to circulate around one another, creating a constellation of ideas and imagery *out of* their material products and drawing the audience into puzzling them out and fashioning their own provisional frames for making sense of the practice. This provisional framing process undermines traditional interpretive strategies, whereby art historians or critics seek to construct narratives, mythic or historical, to explain art and to insert it within the grand narratives of the discipline; in other words, it undercuts our conventional processes of meaning making.

Setting the scene for their art, building their frame of reference, came to be more important than the specific objects or works they produced. Indeed, it constitutes one of the more interesting aspects of their practice. In this the group paralleled the mystique cultivated by other artists, especially Andy Warhol, Joseph Kosuth, and Gilbert and George, all of whom General Idea admired.[8] Yet unlike Warhol, who was undoubtedly the "star" of his scene, and unlike the

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[8] General Idea even reproduce on their subscriptions information page a photograph of Andy Warhol reading the "Glamour issue" of *FILE* (Autumn 1975) in *FILE* (Spring 1976): 64 (**figure 111**); they had received a letter from Warhol requesting that he be added to their *FILE* mailing list and so they excitedly obliged—according to Bronson, he had been visiting Warhol's studio since 1973, where he met the factory stars du jour: Holly Woodlawn, Fran Leibowitz, Victor Hugo, and Jane Forth. Warhol inscribed a copy of *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol: From A to B and Back Again* (1975) for the Art Metropole collection: "*To the 1984 Miss General Idea Pavillion Archives, with affection, Andy Warhol*" alongside a drawing of a Campbell's soup can; this copy is in the Art Metropole Collection, National Gallery of Canada. In

conceptualist Kosuth, whose fame was heightened by the dealer-impresario Seth Siegelaub, General Idea cultivated their own celebrity and helped generate a Canadian conceptual-performance-mail art scene where there previously had been none. Their careers more closely resemble those of Gilbert and George, in that they shared with the British duo the desire to inhabit and re-invest hollow containers with new meanings—in Gilbert and George's case, those containers were their own bodies as "living sculptures"—and a penchant for releasing cryptic manifestos and for using parody and humor as critical tools.

Yet unlike the British artist-sculptors, who fought convention and conformity in the British (and even international) art world, General Idea had to create their own context against which to rebel because the Canadian art scene in the late 1960s was only just emerging. As part of contributing to the development of a scene, General Idea launched a periodical, *FILE,* and gallery/bookstore, Art Metropole, which were envisioned as parts of the decentralized Pavillion, a move "which mean[t] that a little piece of the action will be available to all galleries and art collections across Canada."[9] That the very centralized Pavillion—it enveloped within its auspices nearly all of General Idea's oeuvre from the 1970s—could also be a decentralizing force spreading its artifacts across the nation's commercial venues speaks to some of the central tensions in the group's practice—between generating centripetal and centrifugal forces, launching alternative institutions and becoming the establishment, and celebrating that which they also critiqued.

General Idea's establishment of *FILE* and Art Metropole, along with other artist-run centers being founded around the same time nationally, testified to a sensibility prevalent among Canadian vanguard artists in the mid-1960s and '70s that encouraged collaboration, decentralization, and exchange. With the growth of radio and television in the late 1950s and '60s in Canada, "communications had assumed a central position in Canadian discourse about how cultures develop, change, and relate to others."[10] In 1958, producer, librettist, and critic

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addition, the "Sex, Drugs, and Rock & Roll" issue of *FILE,* no. 25 (1986) featured a cover of Sid Vicious by Andy Warhol.

Bronson explains that the group was also in contact with Gilbert and George, as early as 1971. They would receive mailings from the British duo, "first a small but precious brochure, then a series of self-consciously archaic *cartes postales*," followed by their pink elephant cards, items General Idea considered among their "most treasured possessions." When Granada Gazelle and Jorge Zontal traveled to Europe in 1972 for their *Antic Across the Atlantic: A European Dance Engagement,* they met up with Gilbert and George, who hosted them for tea. Bronson, "Bound to Please: The Archive from the 1984 Miss General Idea Pavillion," in *Art Metropole: The Top Ten,* exh. cat. (Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, 2006), 132, 127.

[9] Janice Keys, "Unusual Artistic Group Rehearses the Audiences," article clipping in Press Clippings 1977 series, 1/2, General Idea fonds, box 65b.

[10] L.B. Kuffert, *A Great Duty: Canadian Responses to Modern Life and Mass Culture, 1939-1967* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2003), 187.

Mavor Moore assessed the effects that scientific developments and the space age had on the arts. Arguing that the new "co-operative" arts (he lists film, television, and exhibitions under this heading) had become central to navigating the modern world, he advises artists to "grow with the times" and "learn a good deal about allied arts."[11] In his view, collaboration was at the center of how artists could respond to the changes in their culture, through participating in the "allied" arts. In characterizing the current state of the arts, he asserted that the positions of artist and audience had become even more ambiguous due to developments in advertising and applied psychology. This ambiguity between performer and audience—an example of what the group described as a "borderline case"—is a situation General Idea would explore with their multiple "audience rehearsals."

Informing Moore's essay is his concern that the technological landscape is changing faster than the cultural front and that artists and audiences lack the tools to keep apace. He notes "at the same time as *what* we are saying undergoes this sweeping examination, *how* we say it becomes more involved."[12] This statement reflects a heightened awareness among an educated class of Canadians about the new media, in particular television and radio, and how they operated in society. With the increased attention devoted to these media in the postwar years, as well as the anxiety surrounding "further Canadian integration into a technocratic continental orbit," cultural critics and artists alike were eager to understand the implications the new "communication systems" held for modern life and the future of the arts.[13]

Artists, theorists, and bureaucrats in the 1960s were realizing that the means of communication fundamentally affected the messages transmitted—*medium* mattered, so to speak.[14] Such ideas were popularized by Marshall McLuhan and Harold Innis, two commentators who deeply influenced thought on media and communications in this period; the tremendous wave of publicity surrounding McLuhan, in particular, relayed his ideas to a wide audience. In promoting "media ecology," Mc Luhan contends that the characteristics of a medium alone affect society, regardless of the content delivered with it.[15] McLuhan's ideas resonated with General

[11] Mavor Moore, "What Sputnik Has Done to the Arts," *Canadian Commentator* 2, no. 1 (January 1958): 1–2.
[12] Ibid., 1 (Moore's emphasis).
[13] Kuffert, *A Great Duty*, 211.
[14] For more on McLuhan and Innis, see Robert E. Babe, "McLuhan and Canadian Communication Thought," in *At the Speed of Light There Is Only Illumination: A Reappraisal of Marshall McLuhan*, ed. John Moss and Linda M. Morra (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 2004), 37–62.
[15] McLuhan offers the light bulb as an illustration of this concept. Although it lacks a message, a light bulb, by illuminating otherwise dark spaces, has a social effect; as such, "a light bulb creates an environment by its mere presence." It is, according to McLuhan, a medium without content. Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1964; reissued by Gingko Press, 2003), 8.

Idea, who commended Image Bank's use of "media as a format, [an] available tradition."[16] In applauding their fellow artists, General Idea was in effect praising their own practice of cannibalizing formats from mass culture, such as the beauty pageant, global exposition, and photo magazine. McLuhan explains the force behind such an undertaking: "the artist and intellectual have had to turn to unmasking clichés and the mass mechanisms of sensibility as part of the business of survival."[17] General Idea did so not in the service of changing the content *per se* (although this occurred as a by-product of their interventions), but to make these mechanisms known and understood.

Myth became the group's primary and all-encompassing vehicle for achieving their goals, and their mythic Pavillion loomed, large or behind the scenes, in almost all of their 1970s undertakings. In notes from circa 1972, A.A. Bronson, querying the ontology of the Pavillion, equates it with an ark, and asks: "Is the ARK a BUILDING? If it is not, does it have to follow building codes? IS IT A BOAT? IS IT A STAGE SET? IS IT A DREAM?"[18] The ark appears not to be what it seems, merely an ark, but something else, maybe something less tangible than building or boat—a figment, a stage set, a dream. These illusions are fleeting and unstable, and yet they take a powerful hold in one's mind.

Bronson's interrogation of the ark calls to mind the biblical structure that was a privileged microcosm and chosen progenitor of a new postdiluvian Judeo-Christian society. As such Noah's ark became so much more than just a wooden craft to weather the surging waters; it became a foundation of a new society, a symbol of God's covenant, and an Old Testament tale of a founding patriarch. In General Idea's estimation, their Pavillion would assume the same central position in their mythology as Noah's ark did for legends of believers. Yet in the same text, Bronson recants, "THE ARC IS A WOODEN DUCK. DECOY." Here he conflates the ark with another tale, this time the Homeric story of the Trojan horse that the Greeks used to dupe their foes so that they could enter the city walls safely. So is the Pavillion the stuff of biblical genesis or an elaborate ruse? If the latter, who are the Trojans that the General Idea Greeks seek to infiltrate?

The Pavillion could be construed as a Trojan Horse to penetrate the ranks of the established artworld, to play at being artists and be accepted by a duped and mocked crowd of critics and congnoscenti longing to be "in the know" and abreast of the vanguard happenings but really bewildered by what was actually going on. The Pavillion-as-ruse suggests the art world itself as an elaborately constructed myth predicated on the notion of the avant garde artist. It

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[16] General Idea, "Pablum for the Pablum Eaters," *FILE* (May 1973): 28.
[17] Marshall McLuhan, "The Psychopathology of Time and Life," *Neurotica* 5 (Autumn 1949): 6.
[18] "ARC," A.A. Bronson's Notebooks, 1971–1972 folder, General Idea fonds, box 47.

reminds of us of another deception, Asco's *Gang War Victim Decoy,* and suggests that duplicity is one tactic the disenfranchised have when tackling entrenched structures of power. Yet General Idea devoted years and resources to constructing the myth of the Pavillion and to reconstructing its remnants, and thus the group seems to have invested too much in the project for it to be *just* an art world hoax. Moreover, the nature of its hoax seemed a bit one-note, if the 1977 fire was indeed the punch line. More clues on what it is, if not prank, come from Bronson's notes: "THE ARK IS NOT A BUILDING. IT IS A PLAN OF ACTION. IT CIRCUMSCRIBES THE ARENA OF OUR AFFLICTION. Consider Glamour."[19] "Glamour" was General Idea's abiding dictum; the group notoriously proclaimed their very outré desire to become famous, rich, and glamorous artists in a 1975 manifesto in *FILE* (**figure 120**). Reprising the avant garde form of the manifesto in the service of consumerist, fame-whoring values was a trick of the General Idea trade: they courted ambiguity, reconfiguring modernist strategies, such as the manifesto, to fit a developing post-modern sensibility, and seeking to blur the lines between truth and fiction.[20] Indeed their elaborate, fictional Pavillion questioned the stabilities of truth and fiction as heuristic categories—what demarcated the two and how was this division mobilized? If the group said they were rich, famous, glamorous artists, then they were, so if they said they created a Pavillion and it burned down, did it not?[21] Was it really fictional or was it simply a fictive edifice but very real in terms of the documents, plans, representations, and media that circulated around and out of it? If so, how does this differ from so many modern-day myths that exist first and foremost as ideas and representations moving through and installing themselves in the public consciousness, such as Marilyn Monroe and John F. Kennedy? We have access to these figures only in terms of how their images have been constructed in and by the public eye. In this respect, General Idea's

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[19] Ibid.

[20] Art critic John Bentley Mays observed how "Toronto's most intelligent new artists were reclaiming character, fiction, and rite, literary narrative and other sheer campiness—everything, in other words, that had been banished by the apostles of high church modernist seriousness" in his survey of developments from the previous year, "A Not-So-Fond Farewell to Modernism," *The Globe and Mail* (Toronto), 1 January 1983, 11.

[21] A multi-page spread in the May 1973 issue of *FILE,* "Pablum for the Pablum Eaters," launched some of the themes that recur in General Idea's statement on glamour; in this article, the authors focus more on the role of the art object than that of the artist (the topic of the glamour manifesto):

> Once upon a time we all realized … that what made art art was public veneration of the art object as art. Making art art made art art and so we made art without producing an object and said there we have made art art and we had. That was called De-materialization of art and that was when the whole shithouse blew up (16).

They continue, following a pictorial interlude: "This is the story to tell of art and what made art art and what was the myth of art and why was it so wonderful and so necessary." This language resembles that of the later "Glamour manifesto" ("This is the story of General Idea and the story of what we wanted"), revealing how they gently mock a conceptualist stance and yet also use it to promote their practice and to guarantee their success. If labeling something as art makes it such, then why not call oneself a glamorous artist? Naming is believing in General Idea's Weltanschauung.

"fictions" put pressure on the notion that form is a solid material presence and idea is some fiction of the mind and that the two represent distinct categories of aesthetics. In fact, one of the Pavillion's mottoes is "form follows fiction," a clever inversion of the modernist architectural ethos form follows function, yes, and also a pointed statement about how entire worlds are built on fictional foundations—how does one separate out the real from the faux in the realm of representation?

Their adage "form follows fiction" suggests that form stems from what it represents. In General Idea's practice, moreso even than in Asco's or Ant Farm's, their formal strategies derive from the investigation of the myths perpetuated by what they perceive as shaping forces of culture and society: Hollywood and television, glossy picture magazines, beauty pageants, art galleries, consumer marketing. Many conceptual artists sought to reveal the mechanics of representation—Joseph Kosuth's presentation of three chairs (material chair, picture of it, and its linguistic definition) is only one such overt investigation (**figure 118**). Yet General Idea, although billed as a conceptual art group and certainly invested in the expression of ideas, were far more concerned about the second aspect of the equation—the "chair" in the Kosuth example—namely, the way in which myths are sold to the public. Unlike Kosuth, the group sought to both expose the myths as myth and also use those same strategies to promote their own practice and feed their reputation.

In this chapter, I single out the ways in which the group developed their personal mythology. Although this approach may seem at first to be a narrow look at the motivations of a single collective, because General Idea's oeuvre was so expansive and in continuous dialogue with the people and ideas around them, an examination of their mythology explores concerns at the heart of this project: how collectives negotiated the commercial sphere and the mass media, how they developed new circuits within which their ideas and works could be exchanged with others', and how they forged experimental art practices based on their willingness to set up provisional works across various media and based on their own self-consciousness about how they represented themselves and how they were portrayed by others.   Thus by building an archive into and through their practice, by honing their mechanisms of self publicity, and by contributing to establishing an alternative arts network, they countered (and re-circulated on their own terms) existing mass-cultural and art world myths.

The most interesting and important of these counter myths is the development (and subsequent destruction) of the 1984 Miss General Idea Pageant Pavillion. Although seemingly only one project among many, the Pavillion came to command within its auspices almost all of the group's works from the 1970s.   As the projected venue for the 1984 pageant and its related

events, as a vehicle for publicity surrounding the pageant, and as a conceptual container for the group's works in progress and previous works, it constitutes the central framing device of their 1970s oeuvre. As the virtual and imagined repository for the group's different multi-media works, it functioned as an archive for their art. Their practice itself—not just limited to the ephemera associated with it, but their entire artistic attitudes and actions—depended upon the archive for its existence, in as much as it needed the archive to prove that it had existed.

An examination of the Pavillion through the lens of its status as archive provides us with a point of entry into the group's de-stabilizing and a-chronological oeuvre. It is befitting a discussion of General Idea's tautological practice to begin with an end of sorts, the end of one phase of the group's career, because the end is inextricably tied to their beginnings. In this story of General Idea, the Miss General Idea Pageant Pavillion is a central player, an archive that brings the provisional, ever-shifting whole of the group's practice both into and out focus.

One caveat must be acknowledged here before proceeding: General Idea's elaborate self-mythologizing testifies to the overall force and success of their practice, namely, how the group drew the voices commenting on their art within its very ambit, thereby precluding critical distance. As in their staged pageant rehearsals, where the group provided their audience with the "vocabulary" to perform their role as audience, in creating frames for their work—in the form of the Pavillion, for example—General Idea dictated the terms through which critics would appraise their art. In one of their "showcards," text-and-image mock-ups organized into five thematic "departments," the group dramatizes their incorporation of art criticism by including a snippet from an interview they gave to Willoughby Sharp for *Avalanche* magazine (**figure 119**):

> 'WS: You're propagating fake mysteries, aren't you? JS [Jorge Saia (Zontal)]: All over the place. WS: And mannerist decadence? AA [A.A. Bronson]: Unquote. RG [Ron Gabe]: We're writing history. AA: History is what you make it. WS: That must give you a very unusual feeling of power, to create history. AA: We have a definite sense of power. WS: Do you? How would you characterize it? RG: (snaps fingers) Control. AA: We're control addicts.'[22]

The exchange between Sharp and Bronson—"And mannerist decadence. Unquote"—reveals this literal appropriation, for all Bronson needs to do is signal the quotation mark to indicate that he has seized the newspaper interviewer's words as part of his own mythology—or "fake mystery." That this appropriation is part of the group's creation of their own history is apparent in their reclamation of this interview for the "frame of reference" department of their elaborate multi-year work, *Showcard Series.* Thus elements initially external to their art—such as publicity they curry, interviews they give, and criticism they receive—gets folded into their works, and becomes

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[22] *Showcard 5-004*, "Propagating Fake Mysteries," 1975, Art Gallery of Ontario.

another form of their self-mythologizing. General Idea sucked *into* their practice those attempting to get outside it, placing anyone who attempted to reckon with their work in the same ambivalent position that the group itself inhabited.

For this reason, of all the groups examined in this study, General Idea represents the limit-point of the in-between position, having advanced a counter-mythology so carefully developed that it enveloped critical appraisals as myths in their own right. Although I, too, must take on board the terms and framing devices that the group set forth, in the chapter that follows, I assume my own position as counter-mythologist, revealing the mechanisms by which General Idea operated and re-rerouting them to show how the group represented a characteristic moment in 1970s art. I am afforded this position because the passage of time allows me to take a long view of General Idea's work, with the knowledge that the group's demise due to the death of two of its members seals its mythology, turning it into tales of a recent past rather than active fodder ripe for their appropriation.[23]

"Manipulating the Self": The Mythology of General Idea

Like any good myth, that surrounding General Idea originated in the group's very creation. General Idea was founded in 1968 by Michael Tims, Ron Gabe, and Jorge Saia, or so the story goes.[24] However, curator Fern Bayer, who catalogued the General Idea archives, discovered the group's "little secret:" the group members came together mid-1969, subsequently adding a year onto their collective past. Bayer dismisses this "artful dissembling," explaining that "for three artists whose whole careers were grounded in artifice and the manipulation of reality, lying about a year or two was, to put it mildly, 'no big deal.'"[25] Yet counter to Bayer's assertion that the fudging of a year or two was "no big deal," it was, in practice, *central* to General Idea's self-mythologizing.

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[23] In her essay on the group's beginnings, curator Christina Ritchie acknowledges in a footnote the danger of gaining much of her information about the artists' early years from interviews with A.A. Bronson: "There is, of course, an obvious vice to this procedure: beyond the all-too-familiar tricks of memory, we cannot assume that the myth-making impulse that guided General Idea through the years has yet been extinguished." Ritchie, "Allusions, Omissions, Cover-Ups: The Early Days," in *The Search for the Spirit: General Idea 1968-1975,* exh. cat. (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 1997), 16, fn. 4.
[24] These are the General Idea members' birth names; hereafter I will use their chosen pseudonyms: A.A. Bronson (Michael Tims), Felix Partz (Ron Gabe), and Jorge Zontal (Jorge Saia, né Slobodan Saia-Levy). The group ceased to exist in 1994 after the deaths of Felix Partz (on 5 June 1994) and Jorge Zontal (on 3 February 1994). Bronson continues to work as a solo artist.
[25] Fern Bayer, "The Search for the Spirit," in *The Search for the Spirit*, 10–11.

1968, as one year in a turbulent decade, was itself a potent cultural signifier. Mention of the eventful year conjures the student and worker protests in France, Mexico, Czechoslovakia, Poland, Yugoslavia, Germany, Italy, and Argentina, as well as the hopes dashed by the assassinations of Martin Luther King, Jr. (and the ensuing riots) and Robert F. Kennedy. 1968 was a year of action, of resistance, of political and social protest. Almost immediately following the May protests, and in the subsequent decade, the year's events were relived in popular cultural forms, such as in films by René Viénet, Guy Debord, and Chris Marker, songs by the Rolling Stones and the Beatles, and novels, among them those by James Jones and Robert Merle.[26]

Thus naming their origin in 1968 had less to do with mischievous time-keeping practices (although this, too, was a factor) than with tying themselves more securely to the symbolic year and the period of immense social change in the late 1960s more broadly. Within General Idea's cosmogony, 1968 stood as a placeholder for idealist activism, which the group disavowed in favor of creating alternative community institutions: "We had abandoned our hippie backgrounds of heterosexual idealism, abandoned any shred of belief that we could change the world by activism, by demonstration, by any of the methods we had tried in the 1960s—they had all failed," A.A. Bronson recounted in a 1997 essay. "As children of the Summer of Love (1967) and spectators of the Paris riots (1968)," he continued, "we were well aware of the International Situationists and *Society of the Spectacle* on one hand, and of Marshall McLuhan, drug culture, digger houses, underground papers and free schools on the other."[27] In these statements, made thirty years later, Bronson situates the group's early approach in between two outlooks, hippie idealism and political agitation. General Idea ultimately adopted a third stance, one in which they sought institutional tactics to "beat-the-system-with-the-system."

While this may be the result of clear-headed periodizing courtesy of hindsight, a brief look at the group members' interests prior to their forming General Idea suggests that there may be truth to Bronson's claim. As both Fern Bayer and Christina Ritchie have shown, in Manitoba, Bronson (then still known by his birth name, Michael Tims) was involved in the underground press, producing with his friend, architect Clive Russell, *Junkigram*!, a satirical presentation of

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[26] See works such as René Viénet, *Can Dialectics Break Bricks?* (1973); Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle* (1973); Chris Marker, *A Grin Without a Cat* (1977); The Rolling Stones' "Street Fighting Man" (1968) from *Beggar's Banquet*; The Beatles' "Revolution" (1968) from *The White Album;* James Jones's *The Merry Month of May* (1971); and Robert Merle's *Dérriere la vitre* (1970, published in English two years later as *Behind the Glass*).

[27] A.A. Bronson, "Myth as Parasite/Image as Virus: General Idea's Bookshelf 1967-1975," in *The Search for the Spirit,* 17–18.

the university curriculum (and a riff on the British techno-futurist architecture group Archigram's eponymous journal) and also contributing to the Winnipeg newspaper *The Loving Couch Press*.[28]

Both the Vancouver-born Bronson and Jorge Zontal had been encouraged by the actions of the Intermedia Society, an artists' center promoting multi-disciplinary, non-structured, collaborative undertakings.[29] Between 1967 and 1972, the Society hosted numerous performances, spontaneous and planned, and embraced within its auspices a variety of events occurring throughout the city of Vancouver. Many of the activities sanctioned by the Society were coterminous with the "hippie scene," related to countercultural activities such as demonstrations and sit-ins, and were indistinguishable from the artistic performances also promoted by the Society.[30] The center maintained an open door and free access to its equipment, espousing a participatory aesthetic that mirrored communal living situations and vanguard theatre groups.[31] It was this democratic spirit that guided its members' free-form and experimental collaborations. Yet the Intermedia Society, according to art critic and curator Alvin Balkind, was a necessarily doomed venture, damned by the very optimism that made such an undertaking

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[28] There Bronson came across the International Situationists, circa 1967, when he was publishing *The Loving Couch Press*; he recalls that the Situationists occasionally sent cartoons to the paper, which his group never ran because they were in French, but that nonetheless impressed them. "When Guy Debord's Society of the Spectacle first came out in English in 1970," Bronson remembers, "it became our bible instantly." "Bound to Please," 130.

[29] Bayer notes that in 1968, Jorge Zontal participated in workshops held by Deborah Hay, a member of the New York Judson Dance Group, at the Intermedia Society. See Bayer, "Uncovering the Roots of General Idea," in *The Search for the Spirit*, 23.

[30] Alvin Balkind detailed the range of activities the Society sponsored, among them:

> the Fourth Avenue hippie scene…the massive Be-ins and Love-ins at Stanley Park…rock festivals in the open air…raucous, angry, sometimes gentle street demonstrations…the beach party at Douglas Gallery (invented, designed, and masterminded by Michael Morris)[…] the activities at a beehive of artists' studios called the Granville Grange, with another one at the New Era Social Club…from chrysalis into butterfly of 60s neo-Dada via the New Era and Image Bank.

Balkind, "Body-Snatching: Performance Art in Vancouver," in *Living Art Vancouver* (Vancouver: Pulp Press, 1979), 75. Balkind managed the New Design Gallery/ Arts Club, a Vancouver establishment (active from 1958 to 1961) that hosted performances, poetry readings, and talks, and promoted the social interaction among artists. Both it and The UBC Festival of the Contemporary Arts (which Balkind, as curator at the University of British Columbia Fine Arts Gallery, played a central role in organizing) helped create an audience for experimental art in Vancouver, which contributed to the success of the Intermedia Society.

  For more on the Vancouver arts scene, see also Michael de Courcy, "For the record: the Intermedia Experience," in *Surveying a Territory: Urban Wilderness Revisited, A Twenty-Five Year Retrospective* (Richmond, B.C.: Richmond Art Gallery, 1994), 39–40; *Vancouver, Art and Artists, 1931–1983* (Vancouver: Vancouver Art Gallery, 1983); and Michael Morris et al., *Hand of the Spirit* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Fine Arts Gallery, 1994).

[31] Tensions resulted from this democratic model, which produced an unintended hierarchy of production. Balkind equates the approach to "Pandora's Box," noting how a "number of Mickey Mouse artists and axe-grinding dialecticians had jumped on the band-wagon, nudging the talented artists aside and competing for the electronic equipment and the Roneo" (74).

possible; the spirit of collectivity that galvanized individuals and prompted them to participate in "something larger than themselves" could (and *would*, inevitably) dissipate, and then

> they could find themselves up a blind alley, now closed behind them, a hunk of their aesthetic baggage left there at the barricade. Would they ever be able to come out of it and find their individual paths again once the fireworks had burned themselves out—which, instinctively, they know must happen one day.[32]

After receiving government funding for twelve salaried positions, the loosely organized, free-wheeling center devolved into factions. The inevitable disintegration of the collaborative experiment stemmed from the centrality of the politics of the individual at the heart of the communal, an idea that literary historian Marianne DeKoven argues is embedded within 1960s-era notions of "participatory democracy."[33] To believe in a participatory democracy was to affirm the reconstitution of the *self* in political life (which DeKoven asserts as a key moment in the shifting from a modernist ethos to the postmodern). In adopting their group form and maintaining it consistently throughout their career, General Idea put aside such concerns of the "politics of the self," a position often realized in the 1970s via consciousness-raising practices. Instead, they performed their group personas publicly and presented a unified front—their fonds at the National Gallery of Canada even attest to this type of staging, considering it contains few effects that testify to their lives outside the group. In this respect, they were similar to Gilbert and George, although the English twosome was even more committed to maintaining a consistent public image.

For many young artists, including those in General Idea, Intermedia stood as a successful example of an artist-initiated institution, one that created an appreciation within the public for its events (in the case of Intermedia, "institution" is a very loose descriptor). Although the Society fizzled out in 1972, it had a profound impact not only on the Vancouver art scene, but on the national level as well, because it initiated ties among artists across Canada. Bronson bemoans that "when Intermedia faded we all felt something great had faded, something great inside us had faded, this clue to a future lifestyle, completely independent of the gallery system, the museum system, yet able in fact to cooperate with the Vancouver Art Gallery."[34] Intermedia, for Bronson, signaled the rise of a *parallel* alternative organization, one that operated outside the small but established art world in Vancouver, but also one that had built up enough political clout to work

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[32] Balkind, "Body Snatching: Performance Art in Vancouver," 73.

[33] See DeKoven's discussion of the Students for a Democratic Society's "Port Huron Statement" in *Utopia Limited: The Sixties and the Emergence of the Postmodern* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 123–142.

[34] A.A. Bronson, "The Humiliation of the Bureaucrat: Artist-run Centres as Museums by Artists," *Museums By Artists*, ed. A.A. Bronson and Peggy Gale (Toronto: Art Metropole, 1983), 31.

with those institutions when necessary. He continued, "we all felt that this sort of community involvement and self-determination on the part of the artist was the only way that anything would ever happen for us here. And now it was gone." Bronson's link between "community involvement" and "self-determination" identifies the crux of this type of participatory aesthetic—promoting communitarian ethics while maintaining individual responsibility. Others shared Bronson's concomitant sense of loss and potential spawned by Intermedia; although the Society no longer existed, many of its members promoted its multimedia, collaborative ethos elsewhere, such as in the New Era Social Club, Little Hot Stove League, Video Inn, Satellite Video Exchange, Metro Media, Intermedia Press, and, perhaps most notably, at the Western Front. The Western Front became a central player in the mail art network of which General Idea was a part, and perhaps galvanized by the precedent of Intermedia, General Idea would build off elements and contributions from other artists and groups, among them the Western Front, in developing their own projects.

Intermedia's demise also registered as a warning for the individuals that would form General Idea. Unlike much performance art, which was often carefully documented, Intermedia's largely ephemeral, collaborative activities resulted in few material traces. The center's legacy circulated primarily by word of mouth, spreading from past participants to attendees at events to friends of friends; its success was fueled by "hype," that ill-defined, nonmaterial, circulating force courted by advertisers to sell their products. Intermedia participant Michael de Courcy regrets how "for over 35 years I carted around an unorganized inventory of more than 3,000 pictures, the majority of which had never been seen and in most cases stood as the only evidence of the artwork which they represented."[35] Without an archive of sorts and a chronicler or group historian, who or what would prove the center's existence and, moreover, its importance, over time?

Bronson's lament, "And now it was gone," evokes the loss of tangible documentation of what had happened in Vancouver in as much as it bemoans the dissolution of Intermedia as an institutional presence. In forming its own network, and generating its own mechanisms of publicity, General Idea responded, perhaps not consciously, to Intermedia's cautionary tale with a material overflow of their own archive, accumulating countless textual records, some 36,000 photographs and negatives, nearly 3,000 drawings, 138 collages, 82 videos (among other audio and visual materials), 78 notebooks and albums, 76 sculptures, paintings, models, and props, and

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[35] Michael de Courcy, "Intermedia: The Missing Link," 2005; text available at http://www.michaeldecourcy.com/intermedia/intro.htm, last accessed 22 October 2007.

64 rubber stamps.[36] They cemented their artistic legacy by founding *FILE "Megazine,"* which they published from 1972 to 1989, and Art Metropole, their shop-front distribution center still in operation today.

General Idea thus, consciously or not, negotiates the transience of their intermedial practice by shoring up their own archive: through their printing of *FILE* they occupy the overtly public spaces of their public discourse and gossip, and through their vast accumulation of documents and items pertaining to their practice they inhabit the quasi-public quasi-private space of the personal archive, intended at some point for public eyes, but frequently viewed by others as a private peek into behind-the-scenes workings of a group's more public practice. Such documents, often considered as "ephemera" by curators and critics seeking to categorize these items relative to an artist's main production, were described as such because they were seen initially as only useful or important for a limited time, such as tickets, flyers, and pamphlets. The rise in the 1960s of time- and process-based art, such as performance, conceptual, and site-specific practices, contributed to an emphasis on artistic ephemera by art historians seeking to understand these practices.[37] As the clues historians use to tell a story, they are much more permanent—and integral to the "main" practice—than their name would suggest, a point architectural historian Beatriz Colomina makes in her excellent study of modern architecture's engagement with mass media.[38] Several decades after Le Corbusier and Adolf Loos (the architects Colomina profiles), Genereal Idea sought to secure a place for their own type of intermedial art practice within history, and this is a history that the group endeavored to write for themselves by aligning other, sometimes critical, sometimes salutary, voices with their own.

General Idea understood the contextualist's dictum that one cannot separate an object from the circumstances of its production. In fact, they lived this principle and it defined their overall artistic practice. For all the "art into life" rallying calls in the 1960s, the group stood for the converse, in that they turned their lives into art—their practice resembled the staging of its own World's Fair-like event, with accompanying exhibition and performances. "Their entire lives become public events," a newspaper critic quoted Michael Tims (better known under his assumed name, A.A. Bronson) as characterizing General Idea.[39] In Tims' discussing his own

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[36] Information tallied from the General Idea fonds finding aid compiled by Fern Bayer.

[37] Alexander Alberro, *Conceptual Art and the Politics of Publicity* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2003), 57.

[38] Colomina examined the changing sites of architectural production—from the literal construction site— "into the rather immaterial sites of architectural publications, exhibitions, journals" (14); Beatriz Colomina, *Privacy and Publicity: Modern Architecture as Mass Media* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1994).

[39] A.A. Bronson (as Michael Tims), quoted by Virginia Nixon, "General Idea's Bizarre Pursuit of Glamour Masks Genuine Interest in 'Cultural Cliches,'" *Montreal Gazette* (5 February 1977), clipping in the General

group in the third person, he exemplifies and instantiates his own point. By submitting to an interview, he not only puts into action the practice of making his life a public event , but also, by feigning a third-person distance from it (in his use of "their" rather than "our"), he provides commentary on it. The result is that Tims (and by extension the other members of General Idea) is both participant and witness, both actor and commentator, in the trial runs that are and are always in the process of becoming the group's practice.

Throughout most of their career, the group sought to be interviewed and pictured as a threesome, in an attempt to manage their public image. They realized how frequently one member of a group is singled out to speak for the group as a whole, and how this figure is often elevated in status relative to the other members, as in the band frontman or the resident group theorist. (This happened with Asco, where Gamboa's own personality and prolific writing led critics and columnists to see him as the group's leader, a status with which Gamboa at least partly identified.)

In cultivating their group image, General Idea made use of traditional mechanisms long employed by artists for self-promotion, such as the self-portrait. Self-portraiture had been practiced since antiquity and was an artistic form popularized by early modern artists seeking to elevate their status. In keeping with the genre, General Idea showed themselves with their artistic implements, just as painters showcased themselves with a palette in front of an easel. In one example from 1974 photographed by Rodney Werden, they position themselves at a drafting table with tools of their trade, including pencils (one which Bronson poses pensively to his lips), a compass, binoculars, hard hat, saw blades, calipers, and measuring tape (**figure 120**). Coffee mugs and an ashtray stuffed with cigarette butts suggest that the three have been at work for some time, poring over the *Floor Plan for 1984 Folding Chairs in Four Colours* in front of them. Among the items pictured are the group's artistic products, among them the *Dada Sawing Blade Wheels* (which are later transformed into tires for the *1984 Miss General Idea Vehicle*, itself an adaption of an image by artist Robert Fones and based on a 1950s "Dinky Toy" car prized by Felix Partz); the *Luxon V.B. Measuring Tape*; and the *Hand of the Spirit.* General Idea printed this self-portrait alongside their "Glamour" manifesto in the Autumn 1975 issue of *FILE,* a nod to the importance of self-presentation in making an artist's reputation ("we were conscious of the importance of berets and paint brushes," they announced). Confounding this idea, the group staged itself not as artists but as architects and construction workers—how did this relate to the artist myth?

Idea Artist Documentation File, book 1, Library and Archives, National Gallery of Canada (hereafter referred to as General Idea artist file).

General Idea adopted the self-portrait genre and yet also adapted imagery they found in such different periodicals as *Life, Fortune, Architectural Record*, and *l'Uomo Vogue* to depict themselves in various guises. They built up a large collection of what they called "three men imagery" from popular culture and they used these as inspirations for modeling their own portraits. Thus *Self-Portrait (drafting)* drew from a photograph from *Fortune* magazine revealing three architects consulting plans at the drafting board (**figure 121**), a found image that is also incorporated in one of the group's showcards.[40] Although they eschewed the pyramidal pose of the *Fortune* picture—they sought to place their three members on equal footing—they adopted the general sense of the scene of architects at work late at night. They then played with the conventions shown in this picture, elevating its status and importance; in *Self-portrait (drafting),* Felix Partz nods to construction work as he tilts his hardhat, whereas Jorge Zontal and A.A. Bronson don relaxed business garb. As Pavillion builders, this portrait demonstrates their architectural prowess and shows them acting the appropriate part relative to the myth they promoted. They assumed all available devices—the artistic self-portrait, show card, and imagery popularized in magazines—as a frame for their practice and to build their mythology.

General Idea used self-portraiture to showcase different aspects of their practice or to emphasize particular qualities. In 1969 they mimicked the Velvet Underground, perhaps nodding to Warhol, and in 1975 they reprised the musician motif, this time as a more generic rock band (**figure 122**); from 1974 to 1977 they created several portraits in the guise of architects or construction workers; in 1977 they tipped their hats to the cowboy genre; in 1977 and 1978 they staged several photographs dealing with the burning Pavillion and their exhibition of fragments from it in *Reconstructing Futures* (**figure 115**)*;* and in 1978 they feted themselves with a "10th Anniversary" portrait (shoring up the validity of their fictional beginnings) where Partz and Bronson, flanking Zontal, attempt to blow out ten candles embedded into the latter's bald pate (**figure 123**). Their dramatization of some of these stock scenes reminds us of how we commonly see groups represented—in a band, as individuals of the same profession or with common interests, as architects or outlaws—and also suggest how we do not, as in sharing a birthday. In their ode to being a threesome, where three skulls accompany and mock the headline, "Three Heads Are Better," the group claimed that such self-staging allowed them to inhabit the roles of "mass-media audience pleasers," as a rock band does (**figure 124**).[41] Bronson, Partz, and Zontal's inhabiting of sanctioned masculine identities like those that might be pictured in *Life,*

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[40] *Showcard* #1-018 "It Was at One of those Late Sessions in the Small Hours," 18 October 1975, CMCP EX-80-157. Hand of the Spirit imagery and the circulation of it is explained in chapter 1, 21–22.
[41] "Three Heads Are Better," *FILE* (Summer 1978): 14. Their self-portrait as rock band was reproduced with this essay.

such as the cowboy and the construction worker, also challenges our expectations of what a gay group of male artists would or should look like. In the 1980s they revisit this idea, picturing themselves as wide-eyed moppets tucked into bed in 1984's *Baby Makes Three* (**figure 125**) and as poodles, that ultimate symbol of effete, foppish opulence, in a memorable 1983 self-portrait that recasts the group's earlier glamour manifesto into a form of self-parody (**figure 126**). The title of *Baby Makes Three* upends our sense of the family unit as two parents and a child; instead General Idea reconfigures the familial group to consist of three youthful siblings without a hierarchical structure.[42] These varying representations illustrate General Idea's desire to evade pinpointing who they are even as they so self-consciously performed different identities.

This self-staging is one of the most significant aspects of their practice, and a defining element of their ambivalent position relative to the mass-cultural mechanisms they unveil and perpetuate. Of course, artists had long engaged in tactics designed to control the interpretation of their work, often through manifestos, self-portraits, interviews, and self-written articles. In addition, providing a framework for one's art was central to much of Conceptual art, which relied heavily for its effect on the format of an exhibition, the specific context of the art work's display (on the wall, in a catalogue), and the existence of supplemental documents like reviews, articles, and public discussions by the artists (what the art historian Alexander Alberro refers to as "outside information.")[43] Yet rather than being *exterior* to the art work—circulating around it and defining it from the outside—as the contextualizing elements of much conceptual art were, General Idea's oeuvre contained *within it,* as an integral part of it, its own framing devices.

In fudging the date of their origins, amassing their own archive, and representing themselves in self-portraits, General Idea effectively created their own context: they created a historical frame through which critics could understand and interpret their work. This process of self-mythologizing was no different from what they achieved when they mimicked the beauty contest format: they seized a trope of criticism, namely, reading the importance of a subject's current work in light of its past, looking for foundations and "defining moments," and incorporated it into their editorials and interviews. This had the effect of robbing the critic of his critical insight—the group had already publicized it—and also introduced the different roles the group members sought. They were, in a sense, their own best critics.

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[42] The picture of three boys in a bed is acceptable, A.A. Bronson laughs, because they look so innocent; he implies that without the projection of youth and innocence, an all-male threesome might suggest aberrant sexual behavior. Contributing to the image's look, General Idea hired a professional to airbrush these self-portraits so that they looked like corporate advertisements.   "Excerpts from a Conversation: Mike Kelley and A.A. Bronson," in Barbara Fischer, ed. *General Idea Editions 1967–1995,* exh. cat. (Mississauga, Ont.: Blackwood Gallery, University of Toronto at Mississauga, 2003), 288.
[43] Alberro, *Conceptual Art and the Politics of Publicity*, 57.

"Mirroring a nation," Mirroring a Scene:
Artist-run Initiatives and Canadian Cultural Nationalism

When the three Canadian artists came together in Toronto in 1969 to form the group that they would later call General Idea, there was no art "scene" to speak of, as critic Jay Scott explained, "no dominant school against which to rebel, no Clement Greenberg to document the rebellion, no Tom Wolfe to misunderstand it."[44] Yet in a few short years, the trio (along with others who were attached to the group during its early period) would be credited with contributing to the development of a vast art network, not just in Toronto, but across Canada and even the United States. Through their mail art projects, the publication of their journal *FILE*, public performances, and videos, they created a scene and acted as its mirror, proof positive that they had indeed made themselves appear to be famous, glamorous artists (a hope they announced in their 1975 editorial).

As with many of their conceptualist peers, General Idea was interested in unmasking the workings of art institutions and the dynamics of power. Unlike other conceptual artists who intervened within established venues as a locus of their critique (for example Hans Haacke's 1970 *MoMA Poll*, Daniel Buren's 1971 installation in the Guggenheim museum, or Dan Graham's *Homes Across America* spread in *Arts Magazine*), General Idea, for the most part, created their own forums for their artworks. They established themselves as an alternative institution, which like Marcel Broodthaers' Musée d'Art Moderne: Département des Aigles, N.E. Thing Co., and Image Bank, redefined the parameters of institutional critique. Rather than infiltrating the institution, attacking it as an outsider breaking in, General Idea launched a parallel critique by simulating successful corporations and using the strategies which made those businesses successful to guarantee the group's own success. And what better model to adopt than the bloated, obfuscating multinational conglomerate?

In the mid-late 1960s, only a few artist-governed organizations were forming across the nation. By the early 1970s, a veritable Canadian art scene was expanding nationwide, galvanized by public grants from the Canada Council, a governmental organization that promoted the production, study, and enjoyment of the arts. Parallel arts institutions developed, such as Image Bank, the Western Front, and Video Inn in Vancouver; the Parachute Centre for Cultural Affairs, in Calgary; CAR, in London, Ontario; Plug-In, in Winnipeg; Nova Scotia College of Art and

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[44] Jay Scott, "Going through the Notions," *Canadian Art* 1, no. 1 (Fall 1984): 81.

Design and the Centre for Art Tapes, in Halifax; Open Space in Victoria; Véhicule in Montreal; and A Space, Art Metropole, Open Studio and Trinity Square Video in Toronto. Propelled by the Canadian "bureaucratic tendency and Protestant work ethic," artists launched these independently run institutions to provide exhibition venues, form points of contact with other artists, locate an audience in the public, distribute artworks, and communicate across Canada via lecture series, publications, and traveling performances and exhibitions.[45]

The proliferation of artist-run galleries, centers, and publications served both to create and validate a national art scene. In the late 1950s, when the Canada Council was founded, contemporary critics lamented the status of their national culture, and condemned the influx of "lowbrow" commodity culture exported by their American neighbors. Many cultural commentators feared being reduced to derivative "nobodies, shabbily dressed in bits of borrowed material," deprived of an authentic (and "elite") national cultural identity.[46] The draw of artist-initiated activities was that they gave the *appearance* of organic enterprises of a distinctly Canadian (or if not Canadian, at least European) flavor, which distinguished them from what was perceived to be the pernicious influences of American mass culture.[47]

Although critics and theorists in Canada called for a national arts that they could distinguish from imported American consumer culture, in practice the alternative developments in Canada shared much with their Southern neighbors, who were also founding artist-run organizations to counter established institutions.[48] The practices of these alternative institutions were similar, and carried very little in the way of a distinctly nationalist vibe. If anything, many such institutions exuded local sensibilities, with homegrown institutions in Los Angeles, San Francisco, New York, Toronto, Montreal, and Vancouver often supporting regional artists and

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[45] See Peggy Gale's entry on Ontario artist-run organizations in *From Sea to Shining Sea: Artist-Initiated Activity in Canada, 1939-1987,* exh. cat. (Toronto: Power Plant, 1987), 15, and A.A. Bronson, "The Humiliation of the Bureaucrat," 29–36.

[46] For detailed accounts of post-war Canadian culture, see Kuffert, *Great Duty*; S.M. Crean, *Who's Afraid of Canadian Culture?* (Don Mills, Ont.: General Publishing Co., 1976); Garry Sherbert, Annie Gérin, and Sheila Petty, eds. *Canadian Cultural Poesis: Essays on Canadian Culture* (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfird Laurier University Press, 2006), and *From Sea to Shining Sea*.

[47] Critic Philip Monk acknowledges the tradition in Canada to "fetishize the image of production and distribution in the mantra of the 'artist-run'" in "Picturing the Toronto Art Community: The Queen Street Years," *C Magazine* 59 (1998): n.p. This was an unpaginated insert into *C Magazine* co-published by the Power Plant Contemporary Art Gallery to coincide with an exhibition of the same name.

[48] Julie Ault has chronicled the development of alternative art centers during this period in New York, revealing a tremendous surge from 1965 to 1985 in city-wide artist-initiated organizations. For more on this development in the United States, see Ault, *Alternative Art New York, 1965-1985* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press; New York: the Drawing Center, 2002) and Ault, Brian Wallis, Marianne Weems, and Philip Yenawine, eds., *Art Matters*: *How the Culture Wars Changed America* (New York: New York University Press, 1999). See also chapter 1 of this study for an overview of alternative arts practices across the United States.

styles. What is important to note here is that the Canadian press and artists viewed their artist-operated institutions as largely free from American influence, as indicative of a new national cultural outlook, and they perpetuated this in their writing and in grant applications to establish such centers. These artist-run organizations became parallels or corollaries to the only slightly more established mainstream artistic culture. Because Canada boasted little in the way of an independent art market, many of the centers and publications that cropped up were supported, even nominally, by funds from the Canadian government.[49] In addition, the exhibitions, videos, performances, and periodicals that flourished alongside the artist-run organizations publicized the goings-on of the nascent art scene, and also gave a visible, tangible form to the scattered events occurring across Canada.   If not "distinctly" Canadian, they nonetheless concentrated their efforts on reporting on or representing the goings-on in Canada—a *national* but not necessarily *nationalist* focus.

In 1974 General Idea launched their own artist-run organization with funds from the Explorations Program of the Canada Council.[50] Described in its first trade catalogue as "a non-profit agency formed to document and promote the activities of artists working in new and collaborative media," Art Metropole carried artists' books, periodicals, recordings, videotapes, and prints, and published a number of books under its imprint.[51] As with many of their other endeavors, in creating Art Metropole General Idea assumed a pre-existing structure to inhabit: they *literally* moved into a 1911 building that had housed Toronto's first art supplier (**figure 127**). They borrowed the name and even the logo of the previous business in establishing their own bookstore/distribution center.

More than just a bookstore, though, General Idea envisioned Art Metropole under the auspices of its Pavillion. It related to both *FILE* and their performance projects in that it was

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[49] France Morin and Chantal Pontbriand acknowledge this aspect of the Canadian scene when discussing their periodical *Parachute* for a survey conducted by *International Studio* magazine: "In Canada it is very difficult to talk about a market. The market hardly shapes anything, and therefore regular advertisers are hard to find and will never be in a position to monopolize the milieu. That is why the two largest and oldest art magazines in Canada, *Artscanada* and *Vie des Arts,* receive respectively from the Canada Council (federal government) $160,000 and $100,000 annually, plus their regular grants from the provincial governments, advertisers, and subscriptions." *Studio International* 193 (September/October 1976): 178.

[50] In their initial catalogue, they also acknowledged receiving supplemental funding from the Ontario Arts Council and The Samuel and Saidye Bronfman Family Foundation. They admit no irony, however, in a group that posited to be outsiders receiving government monies; however, as outsiders they sought a space parallel to existing institutions, as a true alternative, and not necessarily as an "other." Moreover all of the groups in this study sought government money, with Asco and Ant Farm applying to the National Endowment of the Arts and other organizations. In some ways government money signaled an alternative to market-driven galleries, and certainly offered creative freedoms that could otherwise be restricted by dealers and curators.

[51] From Art Metropole's first trade catalogue (1974); see Art Metropole folder, Projects Series, General Idea fonds, box 3.

viewed as extensions of them—it could provide lasting material evidence of the group's activities, especially for those connected to the mail art network but not part of the growing Toronto scene, for example. In this sense, it was an archive of the group's practice, like the Pavillion itself, one in which their work was placed in relationship to that of their peers in the art scene (a result the group acknowledged in saying, "Art Metropole, the whole archive thing, that's quite a part of the Pavillion for us; the archive and the network it establishes").[52] Art Metropole provided a concrete manifestation of the "scene," announcing the recent developments in the art world with its gallery, yearly sales catalogues, and books, videos, and ephemera for sale. The collecting impulse also "became deeply intertwined—to the point of becoming indistinguishable from—their art practice," as Director of the National Gallery of Canada Pierre Théberge observed.[53] Thus the archival bent of the Pavillion shaped not only the group's legacy but also the work that they produced.

In establishing Art Metropole, General Idea added another business to their growing "empire," another proverbial hat to wear. They already had chosen a corporate sounding name for their group, reminiscent of big businesses like General Motors and General Electric, and they had also incorporated Art Official as the publisher for their magazine *FILE.* They carefully maintained the fiction of the separate nature of each of their enterprises, while at the same time intertwining them in such a way that it became difficult to distinguish one from the other: according to a contract dated 20 October 1978, Art Official, Inc., hired General Idea to design and edit at $2500 per issue. To ratify the document, Michael Tims (A.A. Bronson) signed on behalf of Art Official, Inc., and Ronald Gabe (Felix Partz) for General Idea. Likewise, their letterhead recognized all three corporate entities, with check boxes to select the one in operation for the letter in question. In folding Art Metrople and Art Official, Inc., into their own artistic identity, they truly were approximating the corporate structure with a megalithic superstructure and subsidiaries with sometimes unknown or overly complicated relationships to the larger corporation.

General Idea tended toward the corporate as one model for their collaboration, rather than the unstructured individualism which defined Intermedia's workings.[54] Nonetheless they

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[52] Clive Robertson, "Backstage at the Pavillion with General Idea: Rehearsing the Receptionist," *Centrefold*, nos. 7/8 (1977): 2–3.

[53] Pierre Théberge, "Foreword," in *Top Ten,* 5.

[54] Deborah Barkun argues for General Idea's "cohesive partnership" as constituting a "collaborative body," a process she likens to the Surrealists' "Exquisite Corpse" game. She centers her argument on the group's later work and on Bronson's portraits of Zontal and Partz after their deaths, which perhaps reveal a shift in General Idea's collaborative approach in their later years. While some of her argument has merit, General Idea's beginnings are, I would argue, more clearly rooted in the tradition of artist-initiated activity in Canada than in a Surrealist conception of collaboration as forming parts of an organic whole. Deborah

eschewed some of the hallmarks of such a corporation in naming no chief executive officer and revealing no internal hierarchy, a commitment demonstrated by their insistence on presenting their group as a unified triumvirate. Their name contributed to the perception of the group as a corporation, yet as a company, what was General Idea's product? Their name indicates that they produced ideas, a suggestion which was both a riff on and a stated allegiance to conceptual art. In tying explicitly artistic practice to the production of commodities, the group name (and thus the group by proxy?) was itself a conceptual artwork; what they produced under that name also fell within a conceptual paradigm. Thus already in the articulation of their name, General Idea established a multivalent and self-referential frame for their work, launching a tactic that would continue to define their practice.

Mirroring a Mirror: *FILE* "megazine" and *Life* magazine

General Idea was among a contingent of Canadian artists in the 1970s who turned to parody as a critical means of questioning structures of power and privilege, as Jayne Wark has recently shown.[55] Parody, Linda Hutcheon has theorized, necessitates "a reassessment of the process of textual production."[56] The group admitted the force behind their tactics: "If something is in need of depowering it will be depowered by understanding how it operates."[57] Similar to the creation of parallel arts organizations, which mimic established institutions but attempt to run independently of them, General Idea's perpetuation of existing formats demystifies the power relationships between those who control the source material and those who advance the alternative.[58] In reproducing institutions of consumer culture, such as the gallery, they "phenomenized" the structures by which these institutions operated; in so doing, General Idea opened them to greater scrutiny and critical purchase. One such institution that the group tackled was the popular postwar photo-magazine, *Life*.

Because it parodied such a recognizable format, because it circulated throughout Canada, the United States, and Europe, and because it became a tangible image of the burgeoning Canadian art scene, *FILE* "megazine" was perhaps the most effective of General Idea's

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Barkun, "General Idea's Exquisite Corpse: Configuring the Collaborative Body" (paper presented at the annual meeting of the College Art Association, New York, N.Y., February 2007).

[55] Jayne Wark, "Dressed to Thrill: Costume, Body, and Dress in Canadian Performative Art," in *Canadian Cultural Poesis*, 175–193.

[56] Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art Forms* (New York: Methuen, 1985), 5.

[57] A.A. Bronson quoted in Virginia Nixon, [review of *Going Thru the Motions* at Optica Gallery].

[58] Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody,* 5.

interventions in the 1970s (**figure 128**).[59] It, according to Bronson, *"represented a non-*geographical community."[60] Like Art Metropole, it sought to unite like-minded people with alternative visions for society, yet unlike the gallery-distribution center, it was not physically rooted in a specific location. *FILE* marketed itself as a "transcanada" organ to unite artists across Canada, and it did, but it also boasted international appeal and drew readers and press from a host of international countries. Ultimately, the "megazine" refused to be defined by its international, national, or local contexts (and the issues and claims surrounding them), although it occupies all three registers.

The medium that *FILE* inhabited was, of course, that bastion of American middle-class mores, nationalism, and consumerism, *Life* magazine (**figure 129**).[61] *Life* proved the perfect model to assimilate, because it was "assembled almost entirely of images being groomed as media myths."[62] In founding *Life* in 1936, Henry Luce envisioned that the periodical would, primarily through photographs and picture essays, enable people "to see life; to see the world; to eyewitness great events … to see and be amazed; to see and be instructed."[63] Through features such as "Life Goes to a Party," "The Week's Events," and "Modern Living," *Life* teemed with images of American plenty. It struck a balance between showing the diversity of the American experience and uniting its readers under a forced spirit of a shared imagination. As *Life* contributing photographer Carl Mydans reminisced, the magazine attempted to mirror the American public and its readership: "We had an insatiable desire to search out every facet of American life, photograph it, and hold it up proudly, like a mirror, to a pleased and astonished readership. In a sense our product was inbred: America had an impact on us and each week we made an impact on America."[64] It was, to quote historian Terry Smith, "a public archive of

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[59] General Idea's appropriations of Robert Indiana's recognizable LOVE lettering for their AIDS campaigns in the 1980s were more widely circulated than the group's 1970s works, and, arguably, more effective, certainly in raising social consciousness. In inhabiting an art form and advertising mechanism (displaying the logo as wallpaper, ads on the side of a bus, and in billboards and posters, to name a few sites of circulation, **figures Figure** 167**, Figure** 168**, and Figure** 169) they maintained their emphasis on targeting mass media mechanisms, but in centering these works around AIDS, they privileged the content of the message more than their earlier works did.

[60] Bronson, "Myth as Parasite/Image as Virus," 18.

[61] The two publications only overlapped in circulation in the 1970s briefly: *FILE* released its first magazine in May/June 1972, and *Life* published its last regular weekly issue on 29 December 1972. *Life* resumed monthly publication in 1978, which continued until 2000. From 2000 to April 2007 it continued as a weekly supplement. *FILE* closed its doors in 1989.

[62] Bronson, "Myth as Parasite/Image as Virus," 18.

[63] Henry R. Luce, "Prospectus for *Dime, Show-Book (Life)*," 8–29 June 1936, quoted in Erika Lee Doss, "Introduction," *Looking at LIFE Magazine,* ed. Erika Lee Doss (Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2001), 2.

[64] Carl Mydans, *More Than Meets the Eye* (New York: Harper and Row, 1959), quoted in Terry Smith, "LIFE-style Modernity: Making Modern America," in *Looking at LIFE Magazine*, 37.

Americana as it was lived."[65]   As a "public archive," *Life* provided the content and imagery for its readers, but they provided the framework to make sense of the varied pictures and stories contained within it.

FILE had similar goals in mind. Like *Life*, it operated as an archive of a particular collective experience; this archival bent was suggested literally by its title anagram and also in the content of its pages. It was a clearing house for Canadian artists' projects, letters, and ideas, and like the tales of society mavens and Hollywood stars, it followed the many alter-egos and pseudonyms of the members of Canadian conceptual and performance art scenes. The magazine's first issue, for example, printed photos of The New York Corres-Sponge Dance School of Vancouver's "Grand Tore"; awarded Ray Johnson with *FILE*'s "Golden Rubber Stamp Award"; boasted a top-ten chart (with more than ten artists' names) and listed 75 honorable mentions; reproduced Art Rat, Mr. Peanut, and Dr. Brute's various re-imagined city sky lines; published Image Bank's image of the month series, image request lists, and artist's directory; publicized Miss General Idea 1970 Honey Novick's diaries; and included a handful of letters to the editor.   Even in its initial offering, *FILE* suggested that such a scene was already ongoing, provided tangible evidence of its existence, and dramatized the need for a periodical to capture it all. The inclusion of the various mailing lists, reader surveys, letters to the editor, and announcements of events also encouraged others to join in on the burgeoning movement.

Like *Life, FILE* sought to create a shared public imagination and serve as its mirror. In fact, this was the central plea of the group's application for funding to the Local Initiative Program, a program designed to provide monies to support local economic development projects (with the prospect that more jobs would be created). General Idea proposed that their magazine would provide an "outlet" for artists to show work in progress, would serve as a forum for correspondence among artists, and would finance artists' projects to be showcased in the magazine. It was General Idea's hope that some of these projects "might eventually expand to become separate concerns providing additional sources of employment (artists [*sic*] co-operatives, video exchange banks, and so on)."[66] They envisioned *FILE* not only as an image of the new art scene and site for new interventions, but they believed that the magazine could encourage more such collaborative endeavors that would further contribute to expanding the

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[65] Smith, "LIFE-style Modernity," 37.
[66] Local Initiatives Program Grant Application, November 1971, in FILE Megazine Series, General Idea fonds, box 30.

Canadian art world.[67] In distinction to *Life,* the public *FILE* sought out was a small subset of the Canadian population, a minority art scene rather than a national imagination.

The photographs and stories from *Life* represented the "myth of American life"; from parties and gossip to beauty pageants and the accomplishments of select individuals, the scenes *Life* reported often promoted a desire to inhabit the trappings of the lives publicized on its pages. These were not the lives of its readers pictured, but they could be, through the projected fantasies of reading and through buying into the so-called American dream of social mobility. General Idea recognized this propensity for such imagery to carry a broad appeal, announcing in *FILE,* "We are astounded at the diversity of common images and common fantasies."[68] They also noted the potential for myth to transform, and seemingly to erase divisions through its projection of desire: "The myth slides down the center, slicing realities into thin transparencies shuffling lives like leaves and dissolving dualities into fabled tales. In the story, it all comes together."[69] For General Idea, this involved their own personal mythology and the stories they sought as frames for it, and also effected the dissolution of nationalist boundaries even as they sought to re-establish them. The fantasies *Life* engendered were not distinctly American; they were as American as any other commodity culture export, and in this way their Canadian readers shared in the myth too. Yet General Idea publicized *FILE* as a "transcanada organ," seeking to impart some of the specificity that myth denied.

In envisioning a public and striving to create it, *FILE* differed from *Life* in its distinctly regional and artists-specific appeal. Its content emphasized, especially initially, Canadian artists and work, and the magazine announced its primary concern as reaching a Canadian arts public.[70] In contrast to existing Canadian art periodicals such as *Artscanada* and *Vie des Arts*, which catered to a general public interested in cultural affairs, *FILE* was intended to be for artists by artists. Architect B. Montgomery Rasch, writing in support of General Idea's grant proposal for start-up costs for *FILE,* agreed that it would fill the gap left by *Artscanada*'s more conventional approach and mainstream coverage: "A new publication reporting on the more innovative, intimate, and experimental approaches to the arts would certainly be welcomed." Another letter

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[67] Michael Goldberg, shortly prior to the publication of his Video Exchange Directory, a listing of those involved in non-commercial video activity, sent a letter addressed to Michael [Tims, aka A.A. Bronson] in 1972 where he expressed a need to "begin facilitation services for inter-group, cross-community, trans Canada, and international communication." Both *FILE* and the Video Exchange Directory were projects intended to further networking. "Video In, Vancouver" (1972) in Correspondence Series [Business], General Idea fonds, box 55.

[68] General Idea, "Editorial: Some Juicy and Malicious Gossip. Myth-taken," *FILE* (April 1972): 3.

[69] Ibid.

[70] *FILE*'s circulation was between 3,000 and 5,000 copies in the 1970s, mainly through direct mail subscriptions although it also sold issues at bookstores in several Canadian cities and at Art Metropole.

writer, an art instructor at the Georgian College of Applied Arts and Technology in Barrie, Ontario, added, "It is both discouraging and disappointing that there is no existing publication which acts as an open voice <u>between</u> artists." The Executive Director of the Ontario Association of Art Galleries, Toronto, expressed his opinion that the magazine could have far-reaching implications for public opinion, anticipating that *FILE* "would be instrumental in changing the attitude of Canadians to the artist and in changing the traditional image of what an artist is."[71] In total some fifteen individuals, representing a range of art world institutions, wrote on behalf of General Idea's project, acknowledging that the development of a "'house organ' for the arts" was a welcome and much needed venture for the Canadian art scene of the early 1970s.

What these supporters of General Idea's endeavor picked up on was the need for a "connective tissue" among artists, one exempt from the pressures exerted by a mainstream public and that bypassed existing institutional structures. In this particular sense *FILE*'s aims countered those of *Life*. Whereas *Life* represented "nationalism, capitalism, and classlessness, a sense of confidence, optimism, and exceptionalism, and the sure belief that the American way was the way of the world," *FILE* promoted a "transcanada" experience, built from the ground up—an example of the "by the people, for the people" ethos spurring the development of artist-run organizations. The group envisioned their magazine as "a connector, an empty space we offered to our friends."[72] Despite this seeming small circle of cronies to whom it marketed itself, circulation records and letters from subscribers indicate that *FILE* reached individuals in Britain, Germany, Italy, Holland, Australia, and the United States. In fact, the distinction between American and Canadian culture, which was certainly something Canadian critics and theorists were at pains to demarcate, seemed less of an issue in practice and more likely the result of rhetorical posturing. With the steady importation of publications and consumer items from the United States into Canada, the culture produced was less distinctly "American" and more pervasively "consumerist." Indeed, for General Idea, the tropes and mechanisms of consumer culture were their targets and aims, a way of life often derided as American but something that they, as Canadians, were well versed in nonetheless. *Life* was a central player in circulating the myth of celebrity and consumer culture, that one's own "life" was somehow reflected on its pages. In this, in the mechanisms of projecting a shared vision of their reading public and

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[71] B. Montgomery Rasch, letter, 5 January 1972; Mrs. Kornelia Meszaros, letter, 4 January 1972 (Meszaros' emphasis); Jeremy M. Watney, letter, 11 January 1972; these letters, among others solicited by General Idea on behalf of their LIP grant proposal, can be found in the FILE Megazine Binder of Correspondence folder, FILE Megazine Series, General Idea fonds, box 29.
[72] Bronson, "Myth as Parasite/Image as Virus," 18.

achieving such imagined communities, the two publications, *Life* and *FILE,* were remarkably similar.

Central to *Life*'s success was its style of "corporate modernism" and *FILE* replicated this with considerable fluency.[73] *FILE* adopted *Life*'s recognizable title lettering, large white block letters on a red rectangle, a move that drew the ire of (and the threat of a copyright infringement lawsuit from) Time-Life Incorporated in 1976.[74] The interior layout also borrowed from *Life's* editorial design and typography, creating a formal likeness of the American glossy. Even many of *FILE's* features carefully mimicked its American inspiration: it attempted to copy the cultural divisions upheld by *Life's* table of contents, among them art, books, film, and editorials.

The force of these visual similarities is that, after seeing the world through *Life's* gaze for forty-odd years, its distinctive format was imprinted on the collective psyche of much of the North American public. (Estimates peg *Life*'s circulation, in its heyday in the late 1940s, to some 22.5 million people).[75] What was considered news was that which was covered on the pages of *Life.* Its editors dictated what aspects of life were worth reporting, and shaped their particular vision of national identity.

FILE drew on this collective memory of *Life* for its effect. Although it offered mundane and even at times downright *boring* accounts—for example, a survey of the contents of artists' refrigerators, a pun perhaps on the notion of the starving artist?—they became news by virtue of inhabiting *Life*'s format. Jamie Craig, critic for the *Vancouver Sun*, made this connection clear: "the name and the layout of File parody Life magazine to trick you into perceiving a truth: all things are created equally newsworthy."[76] Of the mainstream press critics, Craig was one of the most perceptive and insightful about the developing mail art movement, considering it part of a move toward forging a harmonious cultural ecology, "best assessed by compiling cohesive files of the culture's products, most easily collected and kept accessible by making images of them. The result is concrete history." Otherwise, Craig laments, "each of us encounters a daily parade of images that need a home; homeless, without a file, they are lost forever." By reproducing and redistributing images that are part of the cultural past or present, one participates, according to

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[73] Erika Doss describes *Life's* "corporate modernism" style. "Introduction," 11, fn. 20.
[74] In their agreement with Time-Life Inc., Art Official, Inc. (General Idea's name for their *FILE* publishing venture) agreed not to use *Life*'s "logo"—block letters against a rectangle or white or red letters on a background of either color—in its subsequent issues. See Time Incorporated Lawsuit against FILE Megazine, FILE Megazine Series, General Idea fonds, box 30. General Idea publicized their feud with Time-Life, Inc. and several newspapers mentioned what they perceived as Time-Life's corporate bullying; see Noë Goldwasser, "Time-Life Files a Suit," *The Village Voice*, 15 March 1976, 24, and Gregory Battock, "The Last Estate: *FILE Megazine*," *The Soho Weekly News* (New York), 27 May 1976, 22–23.
[75] Doss, "Introduction," 2–3.
[76] Jamie Craig, "In Spite of All That," *Vancouver Sun*, 9 February 1973, 4A, from Press Clippings series, 1973 folder 1/2, General Idea fonds, box 65a.

Craig, in the maintenance of the cultural ecology.[77] Both *FILE* and *Life* produce archives as living, tangible history—they are perpetually accumulating archives, on display while they are being made and formed.

Yet Craig's instruction to make a "concrete history" also hints at one of the central differences between *FILE* and its well-known inverse. *Life's* photo-laden editorial style depended on an assumption of the transparency of images, as historian Erika Doss notes in her thoughtful essay on the magazine.[78] The premise of the photo-magazine assumed that viewers could readily grasp the meaning of photographs. In contrast, much of *FILE* was obtuse, populated with *double entendres*, inside jokes, and allusions to other images or ideas. Images took on a life of their own in *FILE*. Indeed, investigation of even a single image reveals multiple permutations and associations. To wit: the cover of *FILE* from May/June 1972 boasted a photograph of Ashram Rrac (an anagram for Marcia Carr) "manipulating the self," or performing a gesture in which she wraps her arms around the back of her neck so that they clasp in the front (**figure 128**). Ashram Rrac's untenable and undecipherable pose—why do we not see her armpits as her arms reach back behind her head?—indicates that the photo itself may have been manipulated, a move that suggests photographic portraits as equivalents for the physical bodies they capture (selves to manipulate). That year General Idea had sent out a mailer asking recipients to submit images of themselves in a similar guise (as demonstrated by Jorge Zontal, **figure 130**), and had received 171 such submissions. Some of the entries included photographs pasted onto the original mailer image, replacing Jorge Zontal's face with their own. The "manipulating the self" gesture was itself derived from various advertisements and found imagery (**figure 131**). In performing the gesture, General Idea claimed that "[h]eld, you are holding. You are object and subject, viewer and voyeur."[79] Reproducing this action made the actor both the instigator and the recipient of the action.[80] In this project, the group demonstrates how the readers also become integral in creating the content of their periodical, a format that links *FILE* to other magazines whose content is based on artists' contribution such as *Avalanche* and *Vision*.

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[77] Ibid., 5A.

[78] Doss, "Introduction," 15–16.

[79] Among the 171 respondents to the "Manipulating the Self" circular were Ant Farm, Ray Johnson, Image Bank, and then-curator at the National Gallery of Canada, Pierre Théberge. See "Manipulating the Self" folder, Projects Series, General Idea fonds, box 1.

[80] During their "Flair of the Future" performance at Columbia University, New York, on 16 October 1973, General Idea directed the audience to perform the manipulating the self gesture: "Wrap your arm over your head, lodging your elbow behind and gripping your chin with your hand. The act is now complete. Held, you are holding….You are subject and object, context and content, viewed and voyeur." This event foreshadowed General Idea's rehearsing of the audience in their performances *Blocking* (1974) and *Going Thru the Notions* (1975).

In *FILE's* third issue, the charge to "manipulate the self" was taken up in new form by one of the magazine's readers. The December 1972 publication reproduced a grainy page-length photograph of New York Correspondence School founder Ray Johnson "looking through" the previous issue (**figure 132**). He had quite literally torn a hole in the magazine's cover to reveal his grinning mug peering through Ashram Rrac's cover image, and photographed his gesture. In keeping with this turn of events, the May 1973 publication reveals A.A. Bronson "licking through the last issue of FILE," by cutting out the shape of Johnson's mouth and poking his own tongue through the void created (**figure 133**).

The "content" of these images was minimal—a sort of hall of mirrors with each one reproducing the other. Yet their inclusion in *FILE* testifies to the tangibility of the material form of the printed image. In the photographs of Johnson and Bronson, their hands are shown visibly holding the publication. Both physically altered the original photographs, cutting holes, penetrating the page with their bodies—leaving the traces of having been manipulated, as the Ashram Rrac photograph was itself an index of a self (and photograph?) having been manipulated. With *FILE* co-author (Bronson) and audience stand-in (Johnson) reproducing one another (and enacting the "manipulating the self" dictum that "you are object and subject, viewer and voyeur"), these photographs embody *FILE*'s goal: both to create a scene and be its mirror.

The circulation of the imagery continued, with General Idea retaining the upper hand. In 1973, they produced a four-color lithograph of the iconic Ashram Rrac picture surrounded by 60 photographs of others performing the gesture, and publicized it as "Manipulating the Scene."[81] In directing others to "manipulate the self" and collecting the results, General Idea was indeed playing puppeteer with their audience. Their advertisement for the lithograph (available at Galerie B, Montreal) boasted of their central presence in shaping a Canadian art scene, another example of how they promoted their importance in the national arts arena (**figure 134**). These "manipulating the self" modifications create a seemingly closed circuit that contrasted with the openness of the network model within which they operated.

Far from transparent photographs intended to express a clearly defined, singular point of view, the images in *FILE* were material objects, meant to be circulated, accumulated, cut up, recombined, and re-circulated. They were pictures in motion. Their significance derived from their relationship to other images; they were context-creating and context-dependent. To "get it,"

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[81] The version of the *Manipulating the Self* print in the National Gallery of Canada collection (no. 40/65) has the word "self" crossed out in the lithograph's title, replaced by "scene" written in pencil. Fern Bayer explains that the publisher, Roger Bellemare (proprietor of Galerie B) altered five versions of the work in this way to boost sales—an act, she notes, approved by General Idea. See Bayer, "Uncovering the Roots of General Idea," 51.

to comprehend the punch line (when there even was one), required plugging in to the network, playing along, and connecting the dots, as several perplexed columnists complained.[82] Images were the primary currency of the correspondence network, fueling exchange among artists. These expanding networks of artists connected to one another via the mails were further evidence of the spirit of collaboration and commitment that fostered the growth of the alternative arts movements across Canada.

"Moticos," Icons in Motion: Circulating in the Eternal Network

From 1970 to 1975 General Idea were active participants in building and maintaining a vast network of artists across North America; they sent out response surveys, launched their *Borderline Cases* through the mails, and conducted projects with other artists with whom they corresponded primarily by post.[83] In a time of cable television, telephones, and radio, the renewed interest in the postal system recalls much earlier, low-tech means of linking people to one another, such as through chain letters, a practice used since the late 19th century to secure good fortune or scam unwitting dupes.[84] Mail art was low-cost, required no infrastructure other than the postal system, and fed on collaboration and exchange, principles shared and encouraged by the artists developing alternative arts centers in Canada and the United States. Through the mail artists had the potential to reach across the vast Canadian terrain (some 9 million square kilometers) as well as internationally, reducing huge geographic barriers to a matter of postage.[85]

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[82] Among these is Philip Marchand who suggests something of the exclusive nature of the FILE and the network in which it circulated when he asks in 1975,

> can anyone outside the network understand this?...Can anyone outside of Carlos Rumoli, who in the pages of *FILE,* requests 3-D interiors of bowling alleys, and R. Triste who requests real moss, lichen and algae, and the folks at the Maple Tree Farm, who request videotapes of crowds cheering, people riding in the car with the radio on, death scenes… can anyone else plug in here too?

Marchand, "The General Idea behind General Idea," *Toronto Life* (November 1975): 37.

[83] Some early projects were *Manipulating the Self* (1970–1971); *Orgasm Energy Chart* (1970–1972), a mailer requesting individuals to report on their orgasms in a month-long period and return to General Idea; *Postcards* (1970), cards designed by A.A. Bronson and passed out to street-goers; and the *Line Project* (1970), where General Idea invited radio listeners to call in with their addresses. The group visited the homes of the Toronto-area callers the next day, and invited the participants to submit photos of themselves and their homes. General Idea used the photos to create a map of Toronto marked by the homes they had visited (which were connected by lines). The "line" was performed and recreated subsequently in various settings.

[84] Daniel Van Arsdale maintains an extensive chain letter archive and bibliography; http://www.silcom.com/~barnowl/chain-letter/evolution.html, last accessed 20 April 2009.

[85] In the 1970s, the Canadian mail in particular was periodically unreliable due to work stoppages, which led to the 1981 Canada Post Corporation Act. The 1981 act made provisions to guarantee mail delivery for

In places that lacked an established artistic culture, artists circulating works through the mail could feel connected to a "scene," even one without a geographic center. These were key factors for why correspondence art took off especially in Canada and developed into a rich, vibrant scene.

General Idea viewed their activity in the mail art network as an extension of their Pavillion. A.A. Bronson's notes characterize the "Miss G.I. Building as [a] manifestation of network activity of artists in Canada today."[86] Bronson's language parallels that which the group used to describe the rationale behind publishing *FILE,* and reveals that General Idea's collaboration was not limited to the workings of their threesome, but the result of an active exchange with likeminded individuals across Canada, the United States, and abroad. Thus what follows explores the growth of the mail art network in Canada and General Idea's centrality to it so as to deepen our understanding of the impact and importance of *FILE* on that scene.

Precedents for correspondence art exist in Dada, when the geographically scattered Dadaists maintained their connections through nonsensical and humorous letters, and in the anti-art sensibility of Fluxus artists in the 1960s. The overt expression of links to a Dada sensibility is reflected by the mail artists' invocation of words and sayings that were accompanied by "dada": Canadada, Dadaland, sugardada, Dada Sawing Blades, Dadacademy awards, among others. In addition to these influences was New York artist Ray Johnson, who was a central force in building an extensive mail art network, starting in the early 1950s. He contacted people—artists, friends, critics, curators—and sent them "paste-ups of pictures and pieces of paper and so on" that he referred to as *"moticos."*[87] Johnson was the godfather, or "sugardada" (as he was affectionately called by members of the network), of the growing mail art network, and thus his tacit approval of *FILE* signified by his "looking through" collage ratified General Idea's periodical as a legitimate force in the network.

Johnson's term "moticos" is a useful metaphor for thinking about General Idea's practice. As with much mail art, the mention of "moticos" gives rise to a web of associations and meanings*,* spurring an etymological search, attempts to arrive at all possible anagrams, and a desire to pin down what remains unfixable.[88] As Lucy Lippard explains in a humorous, inventive, and perplexed way, the possibilities for the derivation and connotations of *moticos* are almost endless. She suggests as a possible origin "*cosimot,* loosely seen as space traveler, or

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all individuals (including rural outposts) and allowed for greater autonomy of the newly formed crown corporation's daily operations from the federal government.
[86] "ARC," A.A. Bronson's Notebooks, 1971–1972 folder, General Idea fonds, box 47.
[87] Ray Johnson, in "The Village Square," *Village Voice,* 26 October 1955.
[88] That Johnson specified the word was both singular and plural only added to the confusion and possibilities of signification.

'almost word' in French, or a cousin Quasimodo; or *cosmoti,* with some alliance to the flower, or more portentously cosmotological; *tomocis* or *mistoco*—searching for smooches, or somehow mistaken?"[89] Curator Donna de Salvo settles confidently on *osmosis* (and its adjectival form, *osmotic*) as the derivation for Johnson's term, because it implies the permeability and flow characteristic of the artist's collages.[90] "Moticos," to me, also conveys something of icons in motion, circulating through the network. It is this interpretation of Johnson's word that General Idea upholds, and the type of networked practice they develop through this circulation signals an important formative model for their later art.

This sense of the perpetual movement of images, their circulation and recirculation, is communicated by the term Johnson subsequently adopted to describe his activities—the New York Correspondence School. Describing it as an "art of witty resemblances," writer William Wilson, an active correspondent with Johnson who did much to popularize the term in the press, explained that the 'school' "originates with Ray Johnson, but any number can play." He adds that the term draws on the popularity of the New York School of painters and "schools of art by correspondence in which famous artists teach commercial art through the mails, and it combines them into a satiric portmanteau that carries still other meanings."[91] This motility of words and their semantic flexibility was a characteristic prized in the mail networks; with the addition, subtraction, or substitution of a letter or letters, words hinted at new meanings, while carrying their previous denotations along with them. The New York Correspondence School even spawned its own Canadian imitator, the "New York Corres-Sponge School of Vancouver," a performance and mail art phenomenon started by artist Glenn Lewis circa 1970 (who performed at the 1974 Decca Dance in Hollywood). Thus, the network was built through interchange by post as well as by semantic exchange.

In the early-mid 1970s, Fluxus artist Robert Filliou's concept of the Eternal Network became a loaded signifier of the hopes ascribed to the correspondence scene of building an audience of participants outside of the established mainstream arts institutions.[92] He publicized

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[89] Lucy Lippard, "Special Deliverance," in Donna de Salvo and Catherine Gudis, eds. *Ray Johnson: Correspondences* (Paris and New York: Flammarion; Columbus, Ohio: Wexner Center for the Arts, 1999), 141.

[90] De Salvo relates Norman Solomon's account of Johnson's origin of the word *moticos*. According to Solomon, Johnson was searching for a word to explain his recent collages and asked Solomon to read aloud the word he was studying in the dictionary at the time. The word *osmotics* gave rise to the anagram *moticos*. De Salvo, "Correspondences," in *Ray Johnson: Correspondences*, 21 fn. 16.

[91] William Wilson, "NY Correspondance School," *Art and Artists* (April 1966): 54. The group is occasionally referred to by others as "New York Correspondence School," although it appears that Ray Johnson favored the correct spelling ("correspondence").

[92] Robert Filliou, "Research on the Eternal Network," *FILE* 2, no. 3 (September 1973): 7. Five years or so earlier Filliou and fellow Fluxist George Brecht had founded the Non-School of Villefranche, dedicated to

the Eternal Network concept, an idea he had originated with George Brecht in 1968, in the September 1973 issue of *FILE,* with a small column, "Research on the Eternal Network" (**figure 136)** in which he declared the network an alternative model to the avant garde. With many mail artists adopting the "Eternal Network" terminology, the correspondence network allowed for "word of mouth" publicity and organic collaboration among like-minded individuals, which encouraged the sense that an alternative scene was being created. It came to be seen as parallel to the growth of artist-run centers, and many individuals involved in the founding of such organizations also participated actively in the mail network.[93] Unlike many of the artistic centers, which were operated by artists with an arts public in mind, the correspondence network allowed for the participation of non-artists, reaching society's "subliminal." The network was a democratizing force, as Image Bank historian Scott Watson asserted, and as such it reached out to "cottage industry communication networks, demonstrating that 'ordinary' people could and did actively produce their own image worlds and did not just passively consume what the corporate industry produced."[94] Letters to *FILE* and subscription records indicate that "ordinary" people did indeed read General Idea's periodical and participated by returning mailers and surveys and

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the "carefree exchange of information and experience." Brecht's departure for England in 1968 prompted the two to identify an "Eternal Network" through which they would continue to collaborate and correspond. The literature on the Eternal Network overlaps with that on correspondence art; *Eternal Network, Correspondence Art,* and *Networking* are the three most extensive sources on the topic.

[93] Some participants envisioned the network as an outgrowth and continuation of the "spiritual, mystical utopian tradition," viewing it as "the lasting interconnection of spiritual events, whether animal, vegetable, mineral or thought energy." See Chuck Welch, "Introduction: The Ethereal Open Aesthetic," in *Eternal Network*, xix, and Michael Crane, "The Origins of Correspondence Art," in *Correspondence Art,* 98.

[94] Scott Watson, "Hand of the Spirit: Documents of the Seventies from the Morris/Trasov Archive," *Hand of the Spirit* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Fine Arts Gallery*, 1994), 14.

   Mail artists had been exhibiting the works they exchanged as early as 1970, and the ethos of these shows, at least initially, was an open submission format: anyone could select a theme and solicit contributions. The tacitly agreed upon standards were that every work sent in response to a solicitation must be included and all who submitted works must receive some form of documentation of their participation. The exhibition format was, as Clive Phillpot acknowledges, "the principle of public manifestation of the academy" and therefore integral to the viability of the movement. Phillpot, "The Mailed Art of Ray Johnson," in *Eternal Network,* 25.

   In 1971 Image Bank organized an exhibition, to which General Idea and Ant Farm contributed, of 5,000 postcards by some 300 artists at the Fine Arts Gallery of the University of British Columbia. The National Gallery of Canada Extension Services circulated the show to various towns across Canada. For press on the exhibition, see Michael Morris, "Greetings from Image Bank," *Artscanada* (December 1971/January 1972): 133–136; Joan Lowndes, "Art Images," *Vancouver Sun,* 28 April 1972, 6A; "5000 Post Cards in Show at Rothmans Art Gallery," *Stratford [Ont.] Beacon-Herald*, 18 November 1972; "Post Card Show at Gallery," *Stratford [Ont.] Beacon-Herald,* 2 November 1972; Constance Howitt, "Post Card Show," *Guelph [Ont.] Mercury,* 12 May 1972; Irene Rau, "Image Bank Postcard Exhibit on Display in Central Library," *Regina [Sask.] Leader-Post,* 4 July 1972; Glenn Howarth, "The Pleasure of Places," *Victoria [B.C.] Times,* 30 October 1971; Carol Hogg, "Postcard Exhibit Even Includes 'Feelthy Peectures,'" *Calgary Herald,* 21 April 1973.

   For a detailed listing of mail art exhibitions, see John Held, Jr., *International Artist Cooperation: Mail Art Shows 1970–1985* (Dallas: Dallas Public Library, 1986).

writing letters. The reality of the network's open-ended nature, however, ultimately lead to the end of the "first" phase of the mail art scene, as we will see.[95]

Through exchange among the network, artists accumulated imagery, largely from magazines and postcards, so that they could change the frame of reference from the original and alter its meaning. The image request lists and artists' directories were a primary vehicle for this type of sharing of source materials.[96] Requests ranged from the general to the specific, the concrete to the abstract. For example, Doug Michels of Ant Farm asked for "comparisons," while San Franciscan Tim Mancusi sought "images of 19th century hot air balloons plus images of street and trolley cars [prior] to 1920." The lists also revealed a common "idea bank" to which many of the artists involved in the network were privy; artists shared preoccupations, likely encouraged by ideas that were "in the air" and circulating by word of mouth. As Image Bank explained in their first (and only) Annual Report, the preponderance of images in society

> belong to everyone. They form what Ant Farm (another group in Texas) calls the 'enviroimage' of our collective existence. There can be no copyright on that which defines the imagination: recycling of media information in new contexts helps break down the control programmed into the original information, enabling it to become legal tender.[97]

Their rationale behind collecting and circulating images was to destabilize and decontextualize the original imagery, goals aligned with General Idea's own in establishing *FILE*. The network was in turn sustained by the very practices that had provided evidence of its existence.[98]

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[95] For participants' frustrations with the mail art scene, see below, 201–205.

[96] The objective of the artists' directory, compiled by Fluxus West in England, Image Bank, and Fluxus Ltd., was to erase geographic constraints and connect artists and institutions to one another. As a self-proclaimed "transcanada art organ," *FILE* was an appropriate forum for circulating the list, which, even in its initial incarnations, read like a who's who of the correspondence network and Canadian conceptual art scene. *FILE's* first publishing of their annual artists' directory boasted 282 entries for individuals and groups across Canada, the United States, and Europe. The list testified to the growing popularity of artists' groups; some of those included were Ant Farm, the Videofreex, T.R. Uthco., N.E. Thing Co., Transcanadian Fluxus, Guerilla Art Action Group, Pulsa Group, and Archigram. Periodicals and arts organizations were likewise well represented, with entries for Radical Software, Avalanche, A Space, Art Information Registry, Artists' Co-op, Coach House Press, Granville Grange, Intermedia Press, International Directory of Arts, Laff Arts, and Flash Art, among others.

[97] Quoted in Joan Lowndes, "Art Images," *Vancouver Sun*, 28 April 1972, 6A, from the Image Bank artists' documentation file, Library and Archives, National Gallery of Canada. The West coast group (then comprised of Michael Morris, Vincent Trasov, and Gary Lee-Nova) had been publishing its "Image of the Month" along with artists' addresses and lists of requested images since 1970. The sheer quantity of submissions Image Bank received in response to their request in Dana Atchley's *Ace Space Co. Space Atlas* and their own mailings testified to the international interest in circulating art through the post.
    The idea of image as currency furthers the economic mode of Ant Farm's Truckstop Network.

[98] The phrase "image bank" was actually in circulation at this time, appearing in Claude Lévi-Strauss's book the *Savage Mind* ("The decision that everything must be taken account of facilitates the creation of an image bank") and also in William S. Burroughs' *Nova Express* ("And he breaks out all the ugliest pictures in the image bank and puts it out on the subliminal so one crisis piles up after the other right on schedule.")

The slogans "Cut Up and Shut Up" and "Collage or Perish," maxims repeated by mail art networkers, emphasized collage as the medium of choice, inviting artists to slice up and reconfigure the world around them.[99] Collage, according to Canadian book critic Walter Klepac, was "an attempt to create new meanings, new contexts for olds images, past visions, to break through old perceptual habits."[100] It was an aggressive means of reclaiming a sphere dictated by the mass media, which had a stranglehold on the selection and circulation of imagery. It also required little in the way of resources or skills, and had an important art world precedent in Dada as an added bonus. Collage's malleable and additive nature made it an appropriate technique for mail artists, who could alter or add elements to an existing work and send it on. In General Idea's *The Split Project* (1972), for example, the group mailed postcard "splits" in which they combined imagery from one half of a postcard with another; these were frequently re-split by their recipients and returned to circulation.[101] In one split, a scene of bathers in Great Salt Lake, Utah,

Although Scott Watson credits Levi-Strauss with the impetus for the group's borrowing of the term, the language Image Bank used clearly reflected an awareness of Burroughs' novel as well. See Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind,* trans. John Weightman and Doreen Weightman (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966); William Burroughs, *Nova Express* (1964; reprint, New York: Grove Press, 1992), 12; and Scott Watson, "Hand of the Spirit," 5–6.

Image Banker Gary Lee-Nova relates that he contributed to the spread of Burroughs mania by passing along copies of *Nova Express* to friends. Burroughs also gave a reading and presented films in Vancouver in 1974, an event that was widely attended. The event was sponsored by the Pacific Cinematheque Pacifique and the Western Front, an artist-run center in which Lee-Nova and the members of Image Bank were involved. A handbill advertising the event is located in the Western Front artists' documentation files, Library and Archives, National Gallery of Canada. Burroughs also published the short story, "It Looks like Measles, Doctor," in the "Glamour" issue of *FILE* (Autumn 1975), 49.

In Burroughs' *Nova Express*, first published in 1964, and two others that comprise the "Nova Epic," the writer constructs "a mythology for the space age." Describing the "Nova Epic" for a BBC audience in 1964, scholar Eric Mottram explained this mythology as "a monstrous, ambivalent parody of organization, commerce, fertility, and travel, through forms of prose and plot which are themselves experimental acts of revolt" (55). Indeed, the use of language is a central aspect of the novels, both in the story and the telling of it—the novel centers on a language virus as the source of control mechanisms enslaving humanity. Eschewing conventional diegetic progression, in the "Nova Epic" Burroughs employs two "guerilla tactics" to resist the control of the language virus (and to advance the story): cut up and fold in. The first entails slicing a finished, typed text into pieces and recombining those splices into a new text. The latter involves interspersing two different texts so that they read as a single hybrid product. These techniques resemble the collage strategies the correspondence artists employed, generally signified by the rallying cries, "collage or perish" and "cut up and shut up." Burroughs also employs "flash back" and "flash forward" sections in order to link the three books in the epic to one another, a technique in shifting time similar to General Idea's own. Mottram, "The Algebra of Need (1964)," in *Burroughs Live: The Collected Interviews of William S. Burroughs,* 1960–1997, ed. Sylvère Lotringer (Los Angeles and New York: Semiotext(e); Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2001); "Interview with Gary Lee Nova: Reading Burroughs Since the Beginning," online interview, realitystudio.org, published 5 February 2007; accessed 1 August 2007.

[99] "Collage or Perish," reminiscent of that academia truism "publish or perish," also evokes the sense of collage as the artist's métier.

[100] Walter Klepac, "Getting It All Apart," *Books in Canada* (July/September 1973), article copy in Press Clippings Series, 1973 1/2 folder, General Idea fonds, box 65a.

[101] In addition to being an apt description of the action performed, the term "split" likely alluded to Ray Johnson's "spits." The Library and Archives at the National Gallery of Canada contains 36 "splits" mailed

is awkwardly paired with a photograph of the contents of a refrigerator—bathing beauties and perishable food offered up for our delectation (a bag of salt attached to the split furthers the metaphor—both are being "cured" for preservation, **figure 135**). These splits were indexes of the activity of the network in that they accumulated the rubber stamps, postage and postmarks, partial messages and addresses from their travels—they were testimony to its expansion and circulation. The overt materiality of these collage forms—they were grubby and torn, man-handled, stamped, cut, pasted, inscribed, and excised—reveals a productive interplay in the mail artists' and General Idea's art between a material practice and what could seem as dematerialized circulation; these collaged forms and "splits", for example, reveal themselves to be artifacts of the networked *practice*, constantly changing instantiations of the network.

Yet art critic Harold Rosenberg offers a more sobering view of collage as a mirror itself of the mechanisms of mass culture: "The mingling of object and image in collage, of given fact and conscious artifice, corresponds to the illusion-producing processes of contemporary civilization." The technique, he asserts, enables the use of raw, undeveloped information in support of ideological readings:

> In advertisements, news stories, films, and political campaigns, lumps of unassailable data are implanted in preconceived formats in order to make the entire fabrication credible….Twentieth-century fictions are rarely made up of the whole cloth, perhaps because the public has been trained to have faith in 'information.' Collage is the primary formula of the aesthetics of mystification developed in our time.[102]

Rosenberg saw collage as a means of propaganda—a way to dupe the public by offering snippets of the "truth" conveniently arranged.

Was this true of General Idea's practice—were their elaborate mythologizing and collage tactics ruses of mystification, rather than mechanisms for establishing a counter mythology? Toronto art critic Philip Monk subscribes to that viewpoint, advancing a considered and persuasive critique of the group based on what he describes as the "myth of inhabitation." The devices of "inhabitation" the group adopts to critique mass cultural mechanisms, Monk asserts, basing his argument on an analysis of General Idea's *FILE* editorials, ultimately reflect the tools of capitalism they sought to criticize.[103] To recast Monk's argument into the terms of myth,

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to General Idea which they did not resend. See "The Great Canadian Split Project," Project Series, General Idea fonds, box 2.

[102] Harold Rosenberg, "Collage: Philosophy of Put-Togethers," in *Art on the Edge: Creators and Situations* (New York: Macmillan, 1975), 178.

[103] Philip Monk, "Editorials: General Idea and the Myth of Inhabitation," *Parachute* (December, January, February 1983–1984): 12–23. To be fair, Monk softened his critique in a later article, "Picturing the Toronto Art Community: The Queen Street Years," *C Magazine* 59 (1998): n.p.

General Idea's establishing of a counter-myth failed, because it was always-already instantly incorporated into the dominant myth.

In latching onto General Idea's *FILE* editorials as his case in point (a move he justifies by claiming the editorial as a "site of the politics of art"), Monk makes the part assume the role of the whole. The editorials are but one aspect of General Idea's practice, and in adopting the editorial as the "limit-work," he in effect negates how the group suggests a totality that is never fully formed. Their overall practice is constantly in process, thereby resisting any autonomy ascribed to the pieces in circulation. The editorials are one strategy among many, and, as is characteristic of all the group's projects, they are conditional, referential, and relative. They make insistent allusions to other works in the General Idea arsenal, refusing to allow anyone to pinpoint the work by saying, "General Idea is basically this…" This point is made concrete in the group's framing devices where their definitions of their group, the pageant, the pavillion, and the spirit, circle endlessly around one another—a point thematized in their pictorial layout for *FILE* (**figure 137**):

> GENERAL IDEA is basically this: a framing device within which we inhabit the role of the artist as we see the living legend. We can be expected to do what is expected within these bounds. We are aware of the limitations of this and refer to it as our Frame of Reference and act accordingly behind the lines...
>
> The 1984 Miss General Idea Pageant is basically this: a framing device we have framed for our own devices to contain our frame-ups. The Search for the Spirit of Miss General Idea is the ritualized pageant of creation, production, selection, presentation, competition, manipulation and revelation of that which is suitable for framing.
>
> Miss General Idea 1984 is basically this: an idea framing device for arresting attention without throwing away the key….
>
> The 1984 Miss General Idea Pavillion is basically this: a framing device for accommodation. A terminal in which to rest the case of open and closed frameworks….
>
> The Frame of Reference is basically this: a framing device within which we inhabit the role of the general public, the audience, the media. Mirrors mirroring mirrors expanding and contracting to the focal point of view and including the lines of perspective bisecting the successive frames to the vanishing point….[104]

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[104] The framing devices are also known as "General Idea is basically this…." "General Idea's Framing Devices," Projects Series, 1974–1976, General Idea fonds, box 3. For the whole published text, see "General Idea's Framing Devices," *FILE* (Summer 1978): 12–13. In their video *Going thru the Motions* (1975), Jorge Zontal explained the group's five framing devices; in their later *Pilot* (1977) video, Felix Partz read the framing device text as a voice-over. See also the files for Pilot and Basically This (a.k.a. General Idea's Framing Devices) in Manuscripts Series, General Idea fonds.

Each one of these projects provides a frame for their practice, and is one of many provisional framings—of artist, of audience, of media, of artwork—that the group shuttles among, like shifting lenses on an optometrist's phoropter. If General Idea is "this," then it is also "this" and "this" and "this," ad infinitum. Moreover, they maintain the upper hand in determining what is suitable for framing and what those possible frames might look like.

The "capitulation" argument, such as that advanced by Monk, only applies to self-consciously critical processes that lose their edge. Yet General Idea appeared deeply ambivalent; they were both critical of and receptive to the strategies they employed. Their collage ethos contributed to this ambivalence, as it was, in a Burroughsian way, a war tactic against the controls of instrumentalized language, and in Rosenberg's model, a tool of the ideologues to control the flow of information. General Idea negotiated these poles by continuously articulating new frames for both the world and their work, a practice signaled by the allusions and aliases they circulated.

The democratizing force of the mail art network that critic-historian Scott Watson seized on and its potential for anonymity had the effect of encouraging individuals to take control not only of the imagery and linguistic representations of their world, but of their own self-representation. General Idea's many versions of self-portraits were one aspect of shaping their own presentation, and they, like their fellow networkers, also assumed pseudonyms, using the still-developing scene as a means to try out new identities and roles: Marcel Idea/Marcel Dot, Mr. Peanut, Art Rat, Bum Bank, Chicken Bank, Flakey Rosehips, Genesis P-Orridge, Dr. Brute and Lady Brute were just some such names. Some *noms de plume* projected the air of business institutions, signified by the frequent use of "bank," "Inc.," and "Co.," a strategy which made the artists into anonymous, impersonal corporate hierarchies pushing paper in an evocation of the so-called Canadian "bureaucratic tendency" and at a remove from the art world, with its singular artistic "geniuses."[105] Although the members of General Idea adopted permanent pseudonyms, unlike some of the more temporary names chosen by others in the network, they nonetheless invoked playful permutations of those aliases (e.g. Felix Partz often becomes Private Partz, a pun that combines a militaristic connotation befitting the "General" theme with a euphemism for genitals) to unseat what had become, through their persistence, more stable artistic identities.   In this parallel network society, individuals and groups were supposedly free from the strictures and censure of the mainstream, and were able to project and act on their desires and fantasies in an

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[105] See A.A. Bronson, "The Humiliation of the Bureaucrat," 164–169.

arena that tolerated, even welcomed, the queer, campy, glamorous, and transgressive.[106] The adoption of personas destabilized the concept of identity, rendering it fluid and conditional.

The fluidity of identity engendered partly emerged from the group's intermedia practice. Jayne Wark observed the relationship between their varied performance modes and their "performativity of lifestyles," which refers to General Idea's parodic self-staging of glamorous artists, rock 'n roll performers, hard-working architects, suave emcees, or campy stars:

> General Idea's acute awareness of the need to intervene in a culture dominated by media and images helped create an ironic, stylized, and highly parodic milieu in which fashion, art, cabaret theatre, and music merged not only in performance per se but also in the performativity of lifestyles, enhanced in their case by a self-fashioining explicitly aimed at a critique of assumptions about both art and popular culture.[107]

Some of General Idea's critics dismissed their ironic and stylized performances as trivial or decadent, a tendency Wark has noted of the reception to Toronto performance art practices more broadly.[108] Rendering these as mere entertainment, or "detailed triviality," *Globe and Mail* critic James Purdie's denunciation, overlooks the purchase of their actions. General Idea not only re-examines the way that the public's desires have been stoked by representations in the media, but also shows its audiences how they can make these representations their own, so to speak, by literally trying them, identifying with some aspects and mocking or rejecting others. The self-staging evidenced in their many self-portraits is a willful instantiation of this process, a liberation from fears stemming from deep-seated cultural norms (e.g. three men in a bed, as in *Baby Makes 3*), that not only shape their audiences' responses but also structure behavioral and representational codes in society at large.

The abundance of puns, lexical somersaults, and obscure allusions to god-knows-what contributed to a sort of pig Latin for the young at heart spoken by those who were part of the network subculture. General Idea pointed to the factionalizing of the network in a statement in *FILE* in 1973, when they noted, "This is an age of subcults, whether they be age groups, lingo groupings, or sexual coteries."[109] Other than signaling one's participation in such a subculture through the development of a separate language (and excluding others not conversant in it), the

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[106] For more on General Idea's performative camp and relationship to gay culture, see Nayland Blake, Lawrence Rinder, and Amy Scholder*,* eds., *In a Different Light: Visual Culture, Sexual Identity, Queer Practice* (San Francisco: City Lights Press, 1995); Robert Ballantyne, "Glamour, Pageantry and Knives: Gay Identity in *FILE Magazine*," Master's thesis, University of British Columbia, 1994; and Wark, "Dressed to Thrill," 175–194. See also Donald W. McLeod, *Lesbian and Gay Liberation in Canada* (Toronto: ECW/Homewood Books, 1996).
[107] Wark, "Dressed to Thrill," 182.
[108] Wark, "Dressed to Thrill," 184.
[109] "The Magazine Addicts Have Hit It Rich," *File* (May 1973): 8.

mail artists' witticisms also indicated an expressly parodic and subversive tactic, one reminiscent of *FILE*'s inversion of *Life* and also Asco's puns as a performative strategy to engender an active audience. Indeed, we are reminded of how parody, as Linda Hutcheon has theorized, necessitates "a reassessment of the process of textual production," a notion that parallels General Idea's own contention that puns function by "pull[ing] a 'text' into crisis."[110] Employing nonconventional language, as William Burroughs' prose has demonstrated, can be "experimental acts of revolt," ways of undercutting or rerouting linguistic standards to escape their normalizing controls. (The most well-known, and perhaps effective, cases of such linguistic redefinition have been feminists' condemnations of the male bias of historical English). General Idea invokes this type of re-ordering when they refer to "Myth General Idea." Not only does the substitution of "myth" for "miss" reinforce the pageant winner as a fantastical figment of glamour and unattainable beauty, but also it suggests a lisp, a vocalization commonly associated with, or adopted by, as the case may be, gay men. Rather, though, than making the contest a drag alternative to the national pageant, their occasional rephrasing of it as "Myth General Idea" opens up the discursive possibilities the pageant holds by revealing the very material accumulations that accrue to individual and group identities—the host of symbols, phrases, and images that work to fix identities into stereotypes, for example.[111] The mail artists' wordplays were poised between the strategic power plays of the feminists and the semantically open, nonsensical trilling of the Dadaists.

The underside of the adoption and permutations of these pseudonyms is that they can appear to be an uncrackable code to the uninitiated. Deciphering what names refer to what person can be tricky, which perhaps afforded the individuals involved a certain distance from their bureaucratic lives as citizens and also imparted to them a measure of freedom from the controls of criticism, where the artists discussed are identified, often by their most well-known works, tagged with dates, and placed within their artistic pedigrees, schools, movements, or precedents. Thus the circulation of often changing pseudonyms poses a critical frustration to outsiders and offers a means of insulating the network, dampening its supposedly democratic spirit.

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[110] Hutcheon, *Theory of Parody*, 5; General Idea, "Editorial," *FILE* (Summer 1978): 7.
[111] In this respect, the 1984 Miss General Idea Pageant recalls the photograph of drag queens at Casa Susanna posing for each other's cameras that graces the cover of Michael Warner's book, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone Books, 2005). The drag queens, Warner suggests, create "a space of collective improvisation, transformative in a way that depends on its connection to several publics—including a dominant and alien mass public" (13). Likewise General Idea's pageant interpolates different publics, those of the art world, the Toronto and Vancouver scenes, mainstream pageant culture, gay subcultures, the Eternal Network, and so on, opening up these discursive spaces as sites of self definition.

Its rhizome-like nature made the mail network a decentralized and destabilizing entity. Other than the reluctant father figure Ray Johnson, who connected individuals to one another with his frequent instructions to "please send to…", there were too many points of origin along the network and too many nodes that had spread out, criss-crossing one another, doubling back, and redirecting, to create any family tree or genealogical model to map the network.[112] In fact, after the release of the artists' directory, Image Bank request lists, and three articles in the mainstream press, the network became inundated with new players, so much so that many established participants called it quits.[113] Johnson, frustrated by "copy-cats," announced the death of the New York Correspondence School in 1973 (although, by his own accounts, the school had "died" and arisen phoenix-like several times); an obituary appeared in the September 1973 issue of *FILE* (**figure 138**).[114] Although the network promoted inclusivity and participation, it conversely held onto traditional artistic values of origination, as in Johnson decrying "copy-cats" (a charge that echoes Patssi Valdez's indictment of the quality of local murals). Mediums like mail art and muralism are initially appreciated for truly embracing open and wide participation, yet that very open-endedness eventually becomes a point of restriction, as the mediums begin to assume sets of standards (of quality, display, pedigree, and participation) of more traditional or accepted forms.

Thus countering this centrifugal force is a strong centripetal one, which contributed to General Idea's ambivalent position. As a "clearing house for information," FILE established itself as a focal point within the network, a central originating node that offset the rhizomic sprawl of the mail activity. As publishers of the artists' directory and image request lists from

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[112] Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari contrast rhizome-like development with the more prevalent tree-laden models in *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).

[113] Two of the mainstream press articles were by Thomas Albright: "New Art School: Correspondence," *Rolling Stone* 1, no. 106 (13 April 1972): 32 and "Correspondence Art," *Rolling Stone* 1, no. 106 (27 April 1972): 28–29; the third was by David Zack, "An Authentik and Historikal Discourse on the Phenomenon of Mail Art," *Art in America* 61, no. 1 (January/February 1973): 46–53.

[114] In a 1982 interview with Henry Martin, Johnson expressed his frustration at the explosion of the mail art scene, with so many participants claiming him as the "movement's" founder:

> And then, when the school began to die…I decided to give up on calling it the New York Correspondence School. I was angry with *FILE Magazine*, so I thought I would call it 'Buddha University.' They were doing the New York Corresponge Dance School of Vancouver, they were being copy-cats, so I thought, 'Well let them copy "Buddha University."' [all spelling as per the published interview]

Henry Martin, "Should an Eyelash Last Forever? An Interview with Ray Johnson," in *Ray Johnson: Correspondences*, 189.

> Johnson also sent an obituary to the *New York Times*; in the letter dated 5 April 1973, he announced, "The New Correspondence School, described by critic Thomas Albright in "Rolling Stone" as the "oldest and most influential" died this afternoon before sunset on a beach where a large Candian goose had settled down on it's Happy Hunting Ground…." [spelling as in original], New York Correspondence School folder, Lucy R. Lippard papers 1940s–2006, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

1972 to 1975, they were gatekeepers of who was added or removed from the lists. Alongside subscription cards were blanks to fill in to send *FILE* to friends—a process that contributed to the immense growth of new "subscribers." These mailers often included image requests and spaces to write one's favorite artists du jour; one such mailer included the tagline, "FILE is there. On the newsfront of the world," a riff on *Life* magazine's motto and also a playful reference to the notion of the avant garde as the advance front of the army, here shown as the consumer front. The picture accompanying the caption reveals Hitler presiding over a row of stiff backed women proudly holding their weapons of choice, Hoover vacuums (**figure 139** shows Ant Farm's submission).[115] Adding to the sense that they were not simply reflecting a scene but actively controlling it were their Top Ten lists, which represented an "in crowd" of the mail art network, with the ranks populated by friends and sometime collaborators, such as Image Bank and Ray Johnson (**figure 140** displays a Top Ten ballot sent by Skip Blumberg, member of the collective Videofreex).[116] Some critics, sensing this obvious favoritism, cried foul, arguing that the lists were created "*arbitrarily and without even counting the votes* sent in through the mail."[117] Considering that in their first issue, General Idea essentially admitted to vote tampering in the election of the first Top Ten list winner, Ray Johnson ("we suspect ballot stuffing by numerous rabbits and a certain duck," playfully alluding to symbols frequently drawn by Johnson in his correspondence), this charge spoke to the perceived inclusivity of what purported to be a "connective tissue" for artists across Canada.[118] Ultimately, the Eternal Network was simply a loose association of individuals, ones with changing identities and priorities, who subscribed to various cliques with slightly rotating casts of characters, not unlike a high school. These aspects

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[115] General Idea produced a slew of militaristic references, from "Private Partz," the nickname sometimes adopted by Felix Partz, to various invocations of "the General," such as in the letters Victor Coleman addressed "Dear General" and to which A.A. Bronson responded. In one letter, Bronson opens,

> Thirty years ago today, General Idea (as they then called themselves) composed a letter to a writer, much like yourself, in which the present was projected as if written thirty years hence (and hence today) and in retrospect. In this letter allusions were made to the supposed messages from the General…The General, of course, was none other than the Major R.E.A. Morten, a mysterious man with a variety of disguises and pseudonyms.

In the General Idea fonds is Morten's green leather scrapbook, which he compiled during a visit to Europe in 1931–1932. General Idea found the scrapbook a fertile source of imagery and ideas. Fern Bayer notes how the designs for the program (based on one from the Folies-Bérgere) and the admission ticket for the 1971 Miss General Idea Pageant drew on items from what the group described as the *General's Scrapbook*. "Dear Victor/Dear General Project," Projects Series 1968–1971, General Idea fonds, box 1. See also The General's Scrapbook, Scrapbooks Series; The 1971 Miss General Idea Pageant, Projects Series 1968–1971, General Idea fonds, box 1.

[116] Skip Blumberg's mailer, as well as submissions from Hudson Marquez from Ant Farm and Marcel Idea, is contained in "FILE Top Ten Chart 1972–1973," FILE Megazine series, Early Mailers, General Idea fonds, box 29.

[117] Zack, "Authentik and Historikal Discourse," 53 (Zack's emphasis).

[118] General Idea, "You're Not Just One of the Herd," *FILE* (April 1972): 8.

of *FILE* betray the apparent paradox in the group's desire for the magazine to create a scene and act as its mirror: to mirror a scene, all heads have to point directly at the reflecting surface.

FILE eventually assumed a conflicting stance in the mail art scene. Beginning as a critique/homage to *Life*, it, in turn, prompted others to launch their own parodic versions of it. In 1974 in San Francisco, Anna Banana, a member of the mail art network and later chronicler of its history in Canada, released her own 'zine, *VILE,* which, she claimed, "took over from *FILE*" (**figure 141**).[119] Yet *VILE*, she admits, never had the distribution and mainstream "credibility" that *FILE* obtained—"*VILE* had little impact outside its own community, while *FILE* moved in more mainstream channels."[120] *VILE* was a 'zine—a small circulation, instant-print fanzine—to *FILE's* "megazine." For a periodical aimed to fill a void in the Canadian art world, *FILE* had certainly succeeded. Little screams "establishment" more than being the subject of parody by a newly developing underground. General Idea had indeed become a parallel institution, now ripped off by a sub-sub-culture.

The presence of *VILE* indicated a sea-change in the mid-1970s: the mail art system forged by General Idea began to self-destruct, a devolution that occurred directly as a result of the mechanisms that had built it. After the publication in *FILE* of the artists' directory and image request lists, moves aimed at publicizing the scene, participants' mailboxes were flooded with materials. Soon, the individuals that had nurtured the network were calling for its demise. In its fifth issue, *FILE* printed Ant Farmer Hudson Marquez's letter to the editor, in which he deems "FILE another boring art mag" and complains, "The correspondence scene has gotten so out of hand—every day I have to reject 2nd rate junk mail art that asks you to send to their shows… Nothing by mouth, everything by Quikkopy."[121]

Marquez's objections were two-fold, and touch on issues central to the waning of the first phase of the correspondence scene.[122] In their use of photomechanical reproduction techniques, the "new" mail artists had veered from the hand-made craft aesthetic that had sustained the early network. He condemns the quality of the work he was receiving as "2nd rate," a curious value judgment for a network that had upheld the circulation of imagery and the sustenance of the

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[119] In keeping with suggestion of time warps common to network participants such as General Idea and Ant Farm, the year on the first issue of *VILE,* which appeared in 1974, is postdated 1985.

[120] Anna Banana, "Vile History," in *Eternal Network*, 48; in "Mail Art Canada," 233–264, she divides the Canadian mail art scene into two "waves," the first from 1965 to 1974, and the second beginning around 1975 and still active as of her writing in 1984. See also idem, *About VILE: A Book* (Vancouver: Banana Productions, 1983).

[121] Hudson Marquez, "Letters to the Editor," *FILE* (September 1973): 63. It is perhaps not a coincidence that the death of the New York Correspondence School was announced in the same issue.

[122] The correspondence scene continued well into the 1990s (and is likely still ongoing). See Anna Banana, "Mail Art Canada," in *Correspondence Art,* 233–263.

network above the fetish of the material object. In addition, participation, in Marquez's eyes, was now geared towards public exhibitions, instead of building interpersonal relationships aligned with the oral tradition ("something by mouth"—which happened to be a popular tag line of General Idea's in the early 1970s). Ray Johnson had always maintained that the social element was a major—if not the defining—aspect of his art, and Marquez laments the increasingly impersonal connections that the correspondence scene was generating. In the same issue, erstwhile avid mailer Robert Cumming also bid adieu to the correspondence scene and conveyed a hint of the elitism that Marquez emanated. He writes in acknowledging "a responsibility as a guy in the spotlight (thru media coverage, in part) amongst others that have given a toehold to this monster."[123] Although he recognized that he was complicit in the change of the network, Cumming realized he was powerless to stop it. The self-sustaining principles that artists had welcomed in joining in the mail art scene—the lack of juried exhibitions, the free communication among interested parties, the crossing of geographic boundaries, the inexpensive means for creating works, and the freedom to inhabit various personas—had become a liability. The influx of too many people expands the circle of "friends" or subculture such that it becomes a more diffuse mainstreamed practice; as this majoritizing occurs, the network begins to lose a centralizing focus and the framing devices that had helped to make sense of it. As the network expands, it also reduces the opportunity for the type of lived interconnectivity prized by Ray Johnson.

Since they had, in fact, launched a scene, by 1975 there was no need of a mirror to validate it. General Idea acknowledges this in "Bulletin from the Ivory Tower," in which they announce a change of focus—"FILE, no longer mirroring a scene, mirrors the mirror. We re-establish our ability to see with a long look into the mirrored mirror, passing through silvered slivered splintered layers of apparent transparency, moving within the arena of our affliction."[124] By then *FILE*'s focus had mostly turned away from the correspondence network, and they ceased publishing the artists' directory and image request lists that year. Instead they entrenched themselves more fully in developing their own personal mythology, which they accomplished through increased performances, exhibitions, and videos. Yet they did not leave the network behind as they turned more insistently toward their own practice; instead they incorporated the archival approach represented by *Life, FILE,* and the Image Bank, and also the networked sensibility fostered by the mail artists. What they came to lack with the explosion of the mail art network, a central framing device to make sense of all that was going on, returned in the open

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[123] Robert Cumming, "The Letters of Robert Cumming," in *FILE* 2, no. 3 (September 1973): 41.
[124] General Idea, "Bulletin from the Ivory Tower," *FILE* (May 1973): 15.

form of the 1984 Miss General Idea Pavillion. General Idea effectively internalized the external structure of the network and made it part of their artistic process, as can be seen in their various pageant rehearsals for the Pavillion.

"The Multiple Motif": Going thru the Motions and Notions

In their series of rehearsals for The 1984 Miss General Idea Pageant the group built up an elaborate personal mythology, based on performing "dry runs" for a projected future event that never actually occurred. The format of the pageant mimicked stock elements of American beauty contests, with its pre-pageant festivities, parade of contestants, cringe-worthy talent competition, hokey master of ceremonies, and defining moments (in particular, the over-hyped "May I have the envelope please?" ritual). Part of the pageantry of the beauty contest was the arrival, like red carpet ingénues or grand dames on the society pages, of past queens to the festivities, and the tearful surrender of the crown to the new winner. [125] Yet in their execution of those elements, General Idea drained them of their first order effects—asking for the envelope in a 1975 rehearsal for a 1984 pageant was a moot point: the "winner" is perpetually deferred in an event that is not actually a contest, but simply a staging of an anticipated one.

This forging of an event history was central to the premise of the beauty pageant and to General Idea's effective propagation of the mythology surrounding it. In the 1970 contest, Miss Honey Novick and five hopefuls costumed in bear garb rounded out the field of contestants. While the bears sang and danced, Miss Honey won the talent competition with her telex machine typing skills. The *1970 Miss General Idea Pageant* offered all the stock moments of such a pageant and inaugurated the group's career practice of parodying the defining elements of common social rituals; they publicized this approach in an editorial in *FILE*: "The Miss General

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[125] The telex machine featured prominently in another General Idea performance during the Festival of Underground Theatre at the St. Lawrence Centre, held from 19 August to 6 September 1970. In the production *What Happened*, inspired by Gertrude Stein's play of the same name, seven to ten performers were given Polaroid cameras, sketchpads, and videotape recorders with which to create detailed records of performances and events. During five acts and four intermissions over three weeks, General Idea performed and displayed material recorded previously. A telex machine also sent a transcription of the Gertrude Stein text to the Toronto Stock Exchange, Simon Fraser University Library, and Canada Packers meat-packaging company in Toronto. Printouts from the telex machine, including Miss Honey's winning talent demonstration, are in "What Happened and 1970 Miss General Idea Pageant," Projects Series, General Idea fonds, box 1.

Idea Pageant was an archetypal format containing archetypal scenes requiring an archetypal audience performing archetypal responses."[126]

If myth is a means of "going without saying" (as Barthes describes), then General Idea's strongest weapon in their counter-myth arsenal lay in announcing the "archetypal format" and "archetypal scenes" of the beauty pageant.[127] The 1971 contest furthered General Idea's exploration of the beauty pageant format. In 1970, the pageant's voting procedures were not exactly transparent, and the outcome seemed determined from the start (after all, Miss Honey's fierce competitors for the title were dressed in bear costumes). The 1971 pageant launched a new means for determining the queen: a submission kit that contestants would return by mail (**figure 142**). In a letter from Miss General Idea 1969, Granada Gazelle instructed the sixteen finalists, "hand-picked by the General's personal staff," to submit a minimum of eight photographs wearing the General Idea gown, a 1940s brown taffeta dress provided in the kit.[128] Among the contestants were Tess Tickle, Myra Peanut (also known as Vincent Trasov), and Janis Campbell, who denounced the contest as a "male chauvinist pig idea" and rejected the dress because it was "obviously designed to display what you pigs call 'feminine charms.'"[129] Thirteen of the sixteen contestants responded, and their photographs were shown in an exhibition at A Space, Toronto, in the week leading up to the pageant itself on October 1, 1971. Also included in the entry package itself were a General Idea business card; an autographed photograph of Miss Honey, the previous year's winner, and The 1970 Miss General Idea Pageant program published specifically for the kit; a perforated entry form listing the contest rules; an application asking for the contestant's name (or the name of his/her replacement) and the name of the photographer responsible for the entered pictures; a reply card in a pre-addressed return envelope; a photograph of an article from the *Globe and Mail* that featured the Miss General Idea gown; and a black-and-white photograph of the *Artist's Conception: Miss General Idea 1971* (**figure 143**).

Each of these elements mimicked standard models available in mass culture. The application parroted the legalese of a waiver form ("I, the undersigned, am pleased and excited to accept…I agree to follow the rules and regulations…. I wholeheartedly consent that any documentation of the pageant….") and the rules and regulations aped those of corporate-

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126 "Frame of Reference: Rehearsal of the Audience," *FILE* (Summer 1978): 50.
127 Roland Barthes, *Mythologies,* trans. Annette Lavers (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972).
128 The dress was actually a central feature in the group's 1970 installation *Betty's*.
129 General Idea enlarged a chosen photograph from each contestant's entry, and, along with the brown latex print, *Artist's Conception: Miss General Idea 1971*, the submissions were exhibited in *The 1971 Miss General Idea Pageant Documentation* at A Space from 24–30 September 1971. The group framed Campbell's letter and included it with the pageant contestants' submissions at A Space. 1971 Miss General Idea Pageant, Projects Series 1968–1971, General Idea fonds.

sponsored competitions and beauty contests such as the Miss America pageant. Always attentive to detail, General Idea even included alongside the dowdy brown dress a letterpress tag that imitated a retail catalogue advertisement (**figure 144**); the tag proclaimed the "Dress Town Original" to be "Expertly styled with verve and spirit, so gay and up to the minute. This unique model will make you tingle with the joys of possession, no matter what your calendar whispers. style 800 GI 71." Beneath an orange South Seas logo were the garment care instructions: "wash with care in warm water and mild soap." Recycling these commercial formats—the entry form, the application, the RSVP card, the dress tag, the publicity materials—created a myth around the pageant before it had even happened. Once mailed to the finalists, the entry kit literally put into circulation discussion about the event, building "hype" and setting the corporate myths in action.

In addition to drawing on pre-existing models to validate their pageant entry kit, in choosing a mail-in submission procedure, General Idea approximated the early Atlantic City beauty contests—precursors to the Miss America pageant—where the contestants were selected by mail-in newspaper competitions in various U.S. cities.[130] In the Miss America pageant's first decades, the contest was publicized mainly through sponsoring newspapers and word of mouth, tactics similar to General Idea's. Of course, that changed in 1954, when a portion of the program was telecast by ABC, affording the contest a much larger, national, audience than the localized Atlantic City studio audience ever could summon. That year, according to historian A.R. Riverol, 27 million viewers in 8,714,000 homes tuned in to the first televised pageant, where Miss America 1955 was presented to the crowd as host Bob Russell sang "The Spirit of Miss America."[131]

General Idea took up this idea with their own "The Spirit of Miss General Idea," a generalized representation of the "search for the motivation, the aspirations, the illumination, and the allegorical research inherent in any cultural activity" that began as the artist's muse ("Artist's Conception," **figure 143**).[132] In their "framing devices" manifesto, General Idea describes the search for the spirit "as the ritualized pageant of creation, production, selection, presentation,

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[130] For more on the early days of the Miss America pageant, see A.R. Riverol, *Live from Atlantic City: The History of the Miss America Pageant Before, After and in Spite of Television* (Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1992) and Kimberly A. Hamlin, "Bathing Suits and Backlash: The First Miss America Pageants, 1921-1927," in *There She Is, Miss America: The Politics of Sex, Beauty, and Race in America's Most Famous Pageant,* ed. Elwood Watson and Darcy Martin (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004).
[131] This initial telecast was awkward; the show producers experienced some difficulty converting the live format into one suitable for television viewers; beginning the broadcast at 10:25 p.m., the televised program picked up mid-competition, during the talent portion. The final announcement of the winner was rather anti-climactically recorded backstage. See Riverol, *Live from Atlantic City,* 49–56.
[132] Fern Bayer, "Uncovering the Roots of General Idea," 98.

competition, manipulation and revelation of that which is suitable for framing."[133] By this logic, the search for the spirit and the pageant itself are synonymous. The moniker "Spirit of Miss General Idea" might be derived from the Miss America pageantry and Russell's song, but as true *bricoleurs,* they drew the imagery for the "Spirit of Miss General Idea" from found photographs, most notably of an androgynous figure clad in skintight black leather kneeling provocatively on the edge of a bed.[134] In the aptly titled videotaped performance, *Going thru the Motions* (1975)*,* billed as a "rehearsal for the 1984 Miss General Idea pageant," the "Spirit of Miss General Idea" enters to a woman's voice announcing, "And then she dragged into the 84 pageant, packing her urns like luggage. Right on cue, she barged into historical context. The air was heavy with the stench of total control, and it seeped up her thin nostrils like a fix." The voice-over continued as the "Spirit" made her way through the audience. The text itself mirrored the prose style and jazz rhythm of John Clellon Holmes' short story, "Tea for Two." The editor's explanatory lead-in to Holmes' story celebrates how the author's "use of vocabulary of the jazz world lends itself to transcription and seems pliable enough to encompass such a thing as an expanding delusion," factors that made the story's structure resonate with General Idea's Burroughsian sensibility.[135]

As of-the-moment as their tactics were, there was also something retardataire about General Idea's selection of the beauty pageant as the "available format" that they chose to fill. The primness of the frumpy brown contestant gown (a frumpiness only highlighted by Janis Campbell's mock-outrage), the bureaucratic formality of the entry kit (which harkened back to the 1920s-era of Atlantic City "Fall Frolics"), and even the pageant program (reproducing the format of a 1930s pamphlet for the Folies-Bergère) all showed General Idea to be looking backwards, to a past age, rather than on the cusp of a revolutionary present (**figure 145**). Even their choice of 1984 as an overly fraught future date seemed outmoded, as the 1939 World's Fair had long staked a claim on projections of the "world of tomorrow." A.A. Bronson commented on their goal date of 1984, "It was an outrageous idea, especially in the early '70s, when the whole ethos was about *not* setting goals, about going with the flow and that whole tail-end of hippiedom. It was definitely—not politically incorrect—but something incorrect."[136] As with

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[133] General Idea, "Framing Devices," 12.

[134] In a 1977 performance by General Idea, Anna Dupuis, Miss Montreal, entered as "the Spirit of Miss General Idea," outfitted in a costume similar to that of the found image and the photograph in the 1971 pageant entry kit. The silhouette of a veined figure perched against a globe would prove fruitful in transforming the Artist's Conception into the "Spirit of Miss General Idea."

[135] [John] Clellon Holmes, "Tea for Two," *Neurotica* 1, no. 2 (1948): 36–43. Several unidentified pages of this story are included in "Going thru the Motions," Projects Series, General Idea fonds, box 3.

[136] David Vereschagin, "What's the Big Idea?" *The Body Politic,* no. 115 (June 1985): 29.

their bald-faced expressed desire to become famous, glamorous, and rich artists, the group relished in being out of sync with prevailing attitudes and upending expectations.

General Idea launched their first pageant during a time of high anxiety for the Miss America pageant. Feminist protests disrupted the Atlantic City event in 1968 and 1969, and in the 1971 preliminary competition at Montclair State College, New Jersey, protesters brandished signs that read "Meat on Parade" and "Welcome to the Miss Montclair Steak Pageant."[137] Feminists, among other cultural critics, vociferously condemned the form as sexist and objectifying—Janis Campbell's angry response to the pageant finalist packet voiced this position. Many argued that pageants enforced a cultural homogeneity by promoting singular standards for beauty.[138] Yet for all General Idea's adherence to the stock elements of the pageant ritual, in its enactment their performance encouraged heterogeneity and alternative lifestyles; it was campy and irreverent, with the chosen 1971 winner the gender-bending Marcel Dot (Image Bank member Michael Morris). Their entry form specifies that, unlike the Miss America pageant, which limited its contestants to unmarried women between the ages of 18 and 28, "there are no restrictions as to race, color, sex, or class."[139] Against the backdrop of formal similarities to the Miss America pageant, the non-conformist nature of General Idea's contestants became all the more striking. In her essay on costuming and dress in Canadian performance art, Jayne Wark notes how 1970s and '80s Canadian performance artists' "colonization of popular culture enabled them to avail themselves of its pleasures and artifice, and to enact a critical mimesis of its entertainment strategies so as to expose and politicize those power relations that construct the body as the site where difference and deviance are inscribed."[140] Unlike Roselee Goldberg, who views performance practices such as General Idea's as little more than "decidedly entertaining," Wark maintains that "these performative manifestations not only rely upon popular modes of entertainment, but also actively assault those modes by way of the excesses of queer camp, the intertextual meanings of parody, the exaggerations of satire, and the defiance of self-mocking humour."[141] Thus General Idea's strategies, their inhabiting of the mass cultural forms of the

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[137]Riverol, *Live from Atlantic City,* 92–93. See also Susan Brownmiller, *Femininity* (New York: Linden, 1984), 24–25; Redstockings, Inc., *The Censored Section of Feminist Revolution* (New York: Redstockings of the Women's Liberation Movement, 1975); and Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard, eds., *The Power of Feminist Art: The American Movement of the 1970s, History and Impact* (New York: Abrams, 1994).
[138] Lois Banner, *American Beauty* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 249.
[139] "Entry Form with Rules," 1971 Miss General Idea Pageant, Projects Series, General Idea fonds, box 1.
[140] Jayne Wark, "Dressed to Thrill," 188.
[141] Ibid. See also Roselee Goldberg, *Performance: Live Art, 1909 to the Present* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1979), 117–120 (the section "Life Style: That's Entertainment" received only few, minor modifications in the revised and expanded edition published in 1988 under the title *Performance Art: From Futurism to the Present*; see 177–181.)

beauty pageant, had a critical purchase that allowed them to contest and negotiate competing identities.

The beauty pageant delineates a site where individual and collective identities are constructed and performed. Like all pageants, General Idea's version shaped a "specific imagined community"; while their actual audience was mostly limited to friends, fellow artists, critics, and art world personalities, the community that their pageants visualized was a diverse group, raised on post-war television and *LIFE* magazine, appreciative of burlesque variety shows, and open to alternative lifestyles and art forms. 1971 Miss General Idea Pageant contestant Victoria Barkoff exemplified such an audience member, a follower of General Idea and mainstream media events. In a handwritten note accompanying her pageant submission she exclaimed, "This year I saw the Miss U.S.A. Pageant on color T.V. and when they asked the girls who they wanted to meet most in the world, they said President Nixon and I would have said General Idea and I hope you pick me so I can meet General Idea." Envisioning herself in the position of a Miss America contestant answering probing questions—particularly with a non-comformist answer— allowed Victoria Barkoff to gain entry simultaneously as a member of General Idea's "in-crowd" as well as a member of the imagined community surrounding the Miss America pageant. Periodically detractors charge General Idea with catering to an "in-group," a specialized clique of "groupies" or supporters. The crowd was not limited, however, to the group's friends, although it consisted primarily of supporters of the arts. Journalist, Nora McCabe, after noting reigning Miss General Idea Granada Gazelle's glamour-puss entrance arm-in-arm with "real life" actor and pageant judge Daniel Freedman, listed some of what she called the "straight" attendees of the event: Bill Withrow, Art Gallery of Ontario director, and his wife June; Marni Wigle and Joan Redfern, members of the women's committee; and Donella Taylor, a curator of the gallery's jewelry exhibit, with her husband, Michael.[142] Although the eventual winner, Marcel Dot, was purportedly selected by the judges (Freedman, art consultant Dorothy Cameron, and culture bureaucrat David Silcox), the audience was given ballots to vote for "Miss Generality 1971," a measure to elect a contestant as "the Public's Choice" (**figure 146**).[143] Margaret Coleman was selected as the audience favorite, a reversal of pageant congeniality awards where the winner is

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[142] Nora McCabe, "Star-studded Cast at Awards Dinner: Men Join in Beauty Contest," [review of 1971 Miss General Idea Pageant], Press Clippings 1971, General Idea fonds, box 65a.

   An audience survey completed after their 1977 performance *Fleshed Out* indicated that a very small majority of respondents believed General Idea to appeal to more than just an art audience; as the survey failed to inquire about the respondents' art world involvement, it is difficult to gauge how well these responders mirror the views of the general public, let alone those of a more established museum-attending public.

[143] Along with the admission ticket (bearing the slogan "beauty without cruelty") was a form to elect "Miss Generality 1971."

chosen by her fellow contestants.[144] Having the audience of mostly art aficionados select Miss Generality 1971 dramatizes the parallels between the contest, rivalry, and self-staging of the pageant system and that of the art world.

Two related events in 1975, the performance *Going Thru the Motions* and the exhibition *Going Thru the Notions*, presented a cross-section of General Idea's practice to date; both events drew on previous art works and performances, plans for new projects, and fetishized props as stand-ins for the group's ever-changing and conditional career work. They also assumed as operational models the stock elements of their respective media (beauty pageant rehearsal, museum exhibition). As a result, they extended the group's already-elaborate mythology.

Going thru the Motions, performed on September 18, 1975, at the Art Gallery of Ontario (the site of the 1971 Miss General Idea pageant), was billed as a rehearsal for the 1984 pageant.[145] (**figure 147**) Employing a crew of forty, the trio filmed and videotaped the event, editing some nine hours of footage to create the 1976 video of the same name.[146] The video, like the performance it captured, makes apparent the seams of its own making; for example, A.A. Bronson, as the master of ceremonies, frequently interjects camera directions and confirms that the three video cameras are indeed ready for filming. Throughout the event Bronson explains in advance each scene (e.g. "The second scene we're going to record is the entrance of the Spirit of Miss General Idea…") and ends the taping by calling out "cut," moves that underscore the event as a trial run rather than a polished, live performance. Interview segments interspersed with the action also call attention to the staged nature of the video and performance; these insertions give the impression of a "making of" television program (often used to drum up publicity for a movie or event), wherein viewers are afforded special access to behind-the-scenes action and insider commentary from those close to production.

The performance script dramatizes the staged quality of the pageant by promising, but never delivering, a resolution to the endless waiting. To begin the event, Granada Gazelle, Miss General Idea 1969, welcomes the audience with assurances of closure to come:

> And the spirit of Miss General Idea is revealed in the possibility of climax. So tonight the final curtain goes up for the final time. So let's all gather the story

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[144] Margaret Coleman's son, Victor, was a popular figure in the Canadian art scene. A founding editor of the Coach House Press, a collaborative literary publishing company in Toronto, he worked with General Idea occasionally and was involved in the Hollywood DeccaDance (known there by his pseudonym Vic d'Or).

[145] The five-dollar ticket price included General Idea's performance, music by Rough Trade, and the *Censor Sunglasses*, black cardboard cutout frames designed to obscure one's vision. See Performance Props Series, General Idea fonds, for another version of the *Censor Sunglasses.*

[146] *Going Thru the Motions*, prod. and dir. General Idea, 53 min., col., sd., 1975, videocassette. The premier screening of the video was held at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, in 1976.

pieces, let's all tie the loose ends together, let's get down this final chapter, let's get it down on paper, down on videotape, down by word of mouth, committed to memory and taken for granted. Get down Miss General Idea 1984, get down in history!

Yet the promise of closure quickly gives way to disappointment when, during the opening of the envelope to declare the pageant winner— the clichéd moment at the heart of all pageants—white lettering across the bottom of the screen acknowledges its own provisional nature by declaring, "Judge's decision to be inserted here in 1984." The deferred announcement of a winner is, of course, anti-climactic and a disappointment, but the performance title, "Going Thru the Motions," indicated to visitors that what they would be seeing would be just the "motions" behind an event as a substitute for the performance itself. Granada Gazelle implied another element of closure— to "tie the loose ends together"—of General Idea's multi-year pageant project, that some answers might be offered and written "down in history." Her speech hinted that the audience might come to an understanding about what this all *meant*, at least for a few short moments until the performance returned to rehearsal-as-usual, a container for provisional content, another framing device.

 Going Thru the Motions was not simply a rehearsal for the performers, but also a dry-run for the audience. The stage audience actually played a "starring role" in the production, and for this reason, according to the master of ceremonies, their actions needed to be picture perfect. In a move that emphasized the reproducibility of the event, that it was merely a dress rehearsal, scenes from the previous year's rehearsal, *Blocking*, were screened for the current audience. This prerecorded footage would be replaced by the tape of the audience entering the Art Gallery of Ontario for the *Going Thru the Motions* performance. To prepare for their "starring role" in the production, Bronson (as emcee) prompted the audience to gasp, laugh, and give a standing ovation on his cues, in emulation of the audience reaction to judge Dorothy Cameron's fall off the stage at the 1971 pageant. This footage was in turn used in the opening scenes of the trio's video *Pilot* (1977).[147]

 General Idea's inversion—of audience as performer—fulfilled Mavor Moore's assessment in 1958 that the state of modern culture had rendered artist and viewer ambiguous. The critic asserted that the audience was increasingly faced with the "break-down of old familiar categories" and the onslaught of new intermedial forms, such as "recordings of 'literature,' magazines enclosing records, teachers who clown and clowns who preach, orchestras who act, dancers who sing, 'live' television shows partly filmed, music to read by or (for hens) to lay eggs

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[147] *Pilot* (1977) was commissioned by an Ontario television network and envisioned as a parody of a made-for-television special.

by."[148] The examples the critic offers indicate his unease with the new pressures placed on cultural entertainments to provide more than they did in decades previously, to perform double duty in being the dancer with a killer voice or the magazine with bonus music track. In *Going Thru the Motions,* as with the previous pageants, the fluidity of subject positions is foregrounded—at one moment viewer of a performance, at another, directed actor in the production.

In the 1978 performance, *Towards an Audience Vocabulary*, General Idea reprises the audience rehearsal aspects of *Going Thru the Motions*, engendering the confusion that results from an audience unsure of its duties. Part of a video festival, the event was envisioned as a "television-style studio format," where a pre-cast stage audience (of approximately thirty "local celebrities") would enact stock reactions (such as laughing, booing, sleeping, and clapping) in response to the direction of performers also on stage (**figure 148, figure 149,** and **figure 150** show audiences at another General Idea rehearsal, *Hot Property!* engaging in these reactions).[149] They were, as with the claques of *Blocking* and *Going Thru the Motions*, developing an "audience vocabulary," a set of gestures they could use depending on the context. The event was staged in front of a live audience, offering another layer to the audience/performance relationship. Yet the directors guiding the thirty-member stage audience's reactions turned their backs to the "real" audience (those attending the performance of *Towards an Audience Vocabulary*) so that they could face their "extras," the stage audience transformed into actors. This set-up caused "restlessness" on the part of the "real" audience, who were stripped of their traditional roles— how were they supposed to react in such a situation? In activating the "extra" audience and deactivating the "real" audience—the terms used by the group to describe the performance— General Idea draws attention to the ways in which expected formats of mass media, in this case the television studio show, condition certain responses. Taken out of context, those formats can produce anxiety, alienation, or boredom in viewers, who often prefer watching a familiar stand-by and performing an expected role. This audience-within-an-audience staging transforms more established story-within-a-story or play-within-a-play meta-constructions, highlighting the

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[148] Moore, "What Sputnik Has Done to the Arts," 2.

[149] An article edited by Jo-Anne Birnie Danzker and "rewritten" by General Idea counts a "pre-cast 32 member group of extras," whereas Fern Bayer, in the Finding Aid for the General Idea fonds, describes the stage audience as "30 local Toronto celebrities." See "General Idea: Towards an Audience Vocabulary," *Centerfold* (December 1978): 13.

Performed 22 October 1977 at the Winnipeg Art Gallery, *Hot Property!* was the last of the pageant rehearsals, and the audience practiced fleeing in the event of fire. Music group *The Dishes* played.

Towards an Audience Vocabulary was performed during the "5th Network Video Conference" at the Masonic Hall, Toronto, in 1978. The focus of this performance is solely on rehearsing the audience—the pageant frame had slipped away.

activation and deactivation of the audience as a "target" group. The selection of the television "studio" audience as a small subset that becomes a performer of the show suggests the consumer strategies afforded television, as it literally delivers consumers to advertisers, as Richard Serra famously revealed in his 1973 video, *Television Delivers People*. For General Idea, the audience as a target market became another mass media form to expose and inhabit.

General Idea's ambivalence—to their own project, to the art world—was epitomized by the performance's title as well as it events. They were "going through the motions" of being artists, just as they were going through the motions of putting on a staged production.   They also "went through the motions" of their career, bringing a number of seemingly unrelated works of art together into the single event. As a rehearsal of the 1984 Miss General Idea Pageant, the "Spirit" (acted by Suzette Couture) made a prominent appearance, "barg[ing] into historical context," arriving to see the results of her inspiration finally achieved.[150] The performances occurred against a large banner imprinted with silhouetted, stocking-clad legs punctuated by the *Miss General Idea Shoe[s]*, black-and-brown patent leather laced heels.[151] This image was featured as the cover of the "Glamour" issue of *FILE* and was also recycled as advertisements for the performance (**figure 151**).[152] Incorporated into their Pavillion myth, this imagery became a hybrid form, with the shoe's heel morphing into a compass to fuse Miss General Idea's attributes with the implements of an architect, recalling their self-portraits in this guise (**figure 120 and figure 152**). Expanding the web of references coded into the photograph is the reference to the Hand of the Spirit motif, as the form drawn by the compass-heel. The group's use of collage to generate polysemic images creates richly referential art forms that contribute to their development of a truly archival networked practice.

General Idea included references to their other projects as a way of extending a work's possible meanings and associations. For example, their mirrored venetian blind sculpture *Luxon V.B.* served as the backdrop for the stage and runway of the *Going thru the Motions* performance. Originally installed in the window of Carmen Lamanna's Toronto gallery, *Luxon V.B.* (1973), which they deemed the first Pavillion prototype, consisted of 168 mirrored venetian blind slats that could be angled to bring the outside in or project the inside out. In looking at *Luxon V.B.* one looked *through* the work to the space outside the gallery and yet could also see himself as viewer in the gallery space reflected on the mirrored slats (**figure 153** shows Ashram Rrac demonstrating

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[150] Felix Partz, in an interview during the show, made reference to the *Miss General Idea Vehicle* as well.
[151] See No Mean Feet, 1973–1974, Projects Series 1972–1973, General Idea fonds.
[152] "Glamour" is also the title of an hour-long slide lecture that the group performed in 1975 at Columbia University; from 1977 to 1978 they presented "Glamour" in London, Bristol, Naples, Basel, Vancouver, Calgary, and Winnipeg and in the group exhibition *03 23 03* organized by Parachute Magazine and the Institut d'art contemporain, Montreal.

a vacuum cleaner in front of Luxon V.B.).[153] The in-between properties of the installation—it was both inside and outside the gallery, reflecting and reflected—alluded to what General Idea termed a "borderline case," "the contradictory space between nature and culture."[154] The group's constant toying with the borderline, both exposing culture as artificial and simultaneously naturalizing it, generated the ambivalent stance that came to dominate their overall attitude.

Continuing to engender a host of projects and allusions, *Luxon V.B.* served as further inspiration, this time for the pageant contestants' attire. In the pageant ritual element the "Parade of Contestants," the stand-ins for beauty queen wannabes marched down the runway holding *Hand of the Spirit* Plexiglas wands and wearing *V.B. Gowns*, which were enamel plated, slatted aluminum sculptures visually derived from the *Luxon V.B.* installation (**figure 154**). The dresses obscured the participants' faces and bodies and eliminated their individuality, resulting in a procession of near-automatons. (This march of clones was itself a playful commentary on the dehumanizing force of both beauty pageants and technology). These costumes were re-cast as "architectural massing studies" for the Pavillion, serving as model projections for what shape the building would take (**figure 155** reveals one such study against the Toronto skyline, a photograph that recalls the manipulations of cities undertaken by Art Rat, Mr. Peanut, and Dr. Brute that were reproduced in *FILE,* **figure 156**). The form of the dresses (and, ostensibly, of the Pavillion itself) resembles the ziggurat shapes of Felix Partz's early paintings, which would inform the seating plan at the Pavillion; this form also recalls advertisements boasting the pyramid-topped Bankers Trust building on Wall Street, an image which General Idea clipped from a magazine and saved as source material for their Showcard series and Pavillion projects (**figure 159**).[155] The *V.B. Gowns* gave off a futuristic, Jetsons vibe, one in keeping with the projected date of the final event and in stark contrast to the 1940s throwback that was the drab *Miss General Idea Gown*. The various permutations of *Luxon V.B.* testified to the mutability of form: in their hands, a window blind was transformed from interior decoration to contestant costume to city landmark by way of Mesopotamian stepped terraces. The form was also incarnated in different media, in line drawings, photographs, and advertisements; aluminum sculptures and mirrored wooden slats; and day-glo paintings. In the backstage interview with D'ynette, General Idea had already reminded us of the group's propensity to produce such image transformations (**figure 116**). In another of

[153] The screenprint *Lux-On* was produced in 1974 at Cranbrook Academy of Art, Bloomfield Hills, Michigan, the result of an artist-in-residence program.

[154] Fern Bayer, "Uncovering the Roots of General Idea," 87.

[155] Other disparate sources of inspiration for the *V.B. Gowns* (and consequently, for the Pavillion) were a sign bearing two traffic cones and the admonition "Turn to Better Driving" and a postcard view of 362 Brookland Church and its steeple, a stepped pyramidal structure built adjacent to the main church building. See "Showcard Series, Pavillion Imagery," Projects Series, General Idea fonds, box 3.

the rehearsal performances, *Fleshed Out*, Felix Partz repeats the sentiment: "our ideas are mobile...our ideas have legs."[156] Thus the group updates Johnson's "moticos" to create complex, multi- and intermedia projects that are continuously being added to as they circulate. In this way General Idea internalizes characteristics of the network that they prized—its ability to amass, distribute, and transform ideas and images—into their own practice.

The exhibition *Going Thru the Notions,* which was on view at the Carmen Lamanna Gallery, Toronto, from October 18 to November 6, 1975, attempted to frame General Idea's work relative to the dominant themes that had preoccupied the group for the past five or so years (**figure 157**).[157] Fern Bayer, curator of a 1997 exhibition of General Idea's early work, praised the show as "seminal," and claimed it "summarized ideas about the Search for the Spirit, the Pageant, the Pavillion, the borderline and culture/nature interfaces."[158] While it is true that the exhibition displayed items pertaining to these different categories, to say that it "summarized ideas" about them implies that the show mounted a cohesive presentation that attempted explication of what the categories meant or how the works related to them. Despite the group's own attempts at categorization in their *Showcard Series* (on display in the exhibition)*,* ultimately "what the group does," in the words of critic Georges Bogardi, "is beyond classification."[159] Another reviewer weighed in more negatively, charging that "after two weeks even the gallery owner hasn't yet been able to read all the pseudo-philosophy and one-liners that come with the package."[160] As much as General Idea's skeins of allusions can draw critics and viewers *into* their webs, for those who resist, who do not "get it" or do not want to, those same webs create barriers that exclude individuals and thwart their understanding.

General Idea produced overarching framing devices for viewers to grapple with their work (and by proxy, the cultural mechanisms), such as the Pavillion, and also created embedded meta structures, frames-within-frames, such as their showcards*.* The *Showcard Series* consists of 130 silkscreened, rubber-stamped, and handwritten cards that categorized original or found imagery and text into five different "departments" that correspond to General Idea's framing devices. Some of the cards contain photographs and drawings of General Idea's other projects and designs, or selections of dialogue and/or text from their performances or published writings. In this way they are equalizing forces—the uniformity of the showcard medium places images

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[156] *Fleshed Out*—Felix's Slide List*,* Manuscripts Series, General Idea fonds.
[157] The exhibition traveled to Galerie Optica in Montreal, under the title *Going Thru the Motions.*
[158] Fern Bayer, "Uncovering the Roots of General Idea," 111.
[159] Georges Bogardi, review of *Going Thru the Motions* at Gálerie Optica, Montreal, *Montreal Star*, 5 February 1977, clipping in the General Idea artist documentation file, book 1.
[160] James Purdie, "General Idea Still Detailed Triviality," *Toronto Globe and Mail*, 1 November 1975, General Idea artist documentation file, book 1.

from popular magazines, for example, on equal footing with their own work; they lend their voice-overs to recognizable motifs just as they caption their own products. Thus the cards are a survey of both the group's interests and their undertakings, and are perhaps most interesting and useful when seen as an *index* of their working methods, rather than as an explanation of their artworks. The vertical image-text pairing suggests a more traditional photograph-caption relationship, but, rather than prompting a specific reading of the photograph, the text in most of the showcards engenders allusive, dialogic thought. For example, *Showcard 2-015*, "Slow Zoom Into the Ziggurat Tower," (**figure 158**) pairs a picture of the Bankers Trust tower from *Architectural Record* with the following "voice-over":

> The extras have become more aware, and learned to be severe, simple & depouillé in their way of dressing. The extras know that individuality cannot be tolerated in the Miss General Idea Pavillion. They mix and match culture & nature with a discriminating eye. In this massing study for the Pavillion we see a fashion note: a severe pattern motif to maintain a balance of content cut out of context.

In this showcard, the text and image work in tandem to create a series of allusions that contribute to generating an impression about the Pavillion. The various references are visual, conceptual, and material, ranging from *Ziggurat* paintings (**figure 160**) to Bankers Trust building to videotape techniques to *V.B. Gowns* to the nature/culture, outside/inside divide of *Luxon V.B.,* to *Towards an Audience Vocabulary* (in the suggestion of extras) to *V.B. Gown* qua architectural model to the Pavillion. The text's message shows an about-face from the diverse inclusivity promised in the 1971 Miss General Idea Pageant, promoting conformity rather than heterogeneity. Addressing the photograph caption as a voice-over implies an intermedial form, revealing the showcard to be a picture in motion with its own sound track. Instead of defining or explaining the Pavillion (and the exact relationship of all the conjured elements to it), the showcard traces the group's own fertile and generative process—the showcards are archives within the larger archive that is the Pavillion.

Other works in the *Going Thru the Notions* exhibition are similarly process-oriented and appear, at first glance, to reveal a behind-the-scenes view of the group's workings. *The Hoarding of the 1984 Miss General Idea Pavillion* is an incised plywood structure resembling a jigsaw puzzle with missing pieces, which was installed on the sidewalk outside the gallery (**figure 161**). Its title suggests that it was the construction scaffolding for the Pavillion, and the presence of blueprints inside the gallery bolsters this connection. Yet as the exhibition was billed as "props and proposals for the 1984 Miss General Idea Pageant Pavillion," these objects register an indeterminate function. Were they actual remnants of the Pavillion construction process, or

props—rehearsals for the event as in the performances *Blocking* and *Going Thru the Motions*? The two *V.B. Gowns* displayed as part of the exhibition do little to answer this query: they are both architectural models *and* performance ephemera; they are hand-made and yet invoke the machine age; they dissolve the individuality of the wearers and yet they are utterly iconic. Far from being simply stand-ins for the "real" things, as the "going thru the motions/notions" titles would suggest, these items, the hoarding and the gowns, offer us example of the very materials of the group's practice, and when taking in account the exhibition title, remind us that it is these structuring containers, the archetypal forms, that General Idea seeks to expose, interrogate, and re-use.

Going thru the Motions and Going thru the Notions provide a new frame of reference for General Idea's earlier works, among them *Double Mirror Video* (1970) and *Light On* (1970–1974). The prominence of the *V.B. Gowns* in the pageant underscored how all of General Idea's art to date (and, indeed, even as yet undeveloped elements, such as the exact Pavillion seating) could be reconciled within the group's five "framing devices" (**figure 137**), and within the Pavillion format overall. Felix Partz makes this connection overt during his *Fleshed Out* slide show presentation when he inscribes the group's *Luxon V.B.* and *Light On* projects as searches for the Pavillion site.[161] For *Light On* Partz, Zontal, and their friend and collaborator Paul Oberst traveled to Ottawa, Peterborough, Niagara Falls, Janetville, Frenchman's Bay, and London, where they experimented with the angle and placement of mirrors in various landscapes, recording the reflected light beams photographically. They installed the resulting photographs at Carmen Lamanna Gallery in 1972, where they also included two mirrors in a parking lot facing the gallery, such that passersby could manipulate them to cast reflections and shadows into the gallery, a process that the group videotaped (footage they later edited into the 20-minute video *Light On*, **figure 162**). Like *Luxon V.B.* would do the following year, *Light On* eroded the distinctions between inside and outside, and it mobilized those outside the gallery to penetrate its interior. These projects are precursors to the "borderline case" studies the group conducted, and are testament to how General Idea's later works encouraged viewers and critics to read backwards as it were, to assume the role of historians and archaeologists looking for clues in the rubble of the past.

Reading backwards from *Light On* reveals the work's obvious debt to Robert Smithson's *Yucatan Mirror Displacements*, a series of photographs of twelve mirrors he placed and subsequently removed from the Mexican landscape, which he published in the September 1969

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[161] *Fleshed Out*—Felix's Slide List, Manuscripts Series, General Idea fonds.

issue of *Artforum* in the essay, "Incidents of Mirror-Travel in the Yucatan."[162] **(figure 163)** As art historian Gary Shapiro inquired of these mirror displacements, "*where* is the work of art?...Is the work in those ephemeral incidents themselves, in their photographic documentation, or in the essay that describes them and contains the photographs?"[163] The notion that an artwork could register across different media and forms is ultimately what most influenced General Idea's practice: Bronson explains how the group particularly admired Smithson's "collision of the poetic, even mystical, and the conceptual," and perhaps most importantly, how he conceived of art "in the service of a vision and not itself the primary activity." This aspect of Smithson's art, according to Bronson, generated the entire "seeds of our elaborate and invented universe: the entire superstructure of Miss General Idea, the Pageant, Pavillion, and all of that."[164] Thus the origins for their all-encompassing visions were not just the totalizing myths of consumer culture, but those from artistic culture as well.[165]

  Going thru the Motions and the related audience rehearsals, *Blocking*, *Towards an Audience Vocabulary*, *Hot Property!* and *Fleshed Out,* underscore how hosting the 1984 Miss General Idea Pageant would neutralize the purchase of their years of planning. The counter-mythical force in General Idea's repeated rehearsals derives from their very staging—they dramatize the mechanisms by which glamour and ideals of beauty are naturalized in society; they unveil the means by which suspense and drama are created. Hosting the "actual" Miss 1984 General Idea pageant—the long anticipated event—would simply contribute to the existing myth by substituting its own version for those in mainstream society.

  The group acknowledged as much in *Hot Property!*, confessing to abiding by a "decentralized concept," or what they also referred to as "the multiple motif."[166] The "multiple motif" allowed the Pavillion to circulate among their own projects and other peoples', such that it began to have reaches greater than any centralized site could, even one that would occupy "as much space on real estate as it does…in the media," as they claimed of the Pavillion. As a result, the Pavillion, "like some sort of cultural parasite, could be built in other people's architecture." The concept for the complex's colonnade, for example, a liminal space that separated the

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[162] A.A. Bronson notes how he, Partz, and Zontal revered Smithson's article, acknowledging the tremendous influence Smithson had on their practice. Bronson, "Bound to Please," 131. General Idea's "borderline case" idea recalls Smithson's *Nonsites*, earth and rock pieces taken from a landscape and framed within a gallery space as a way of moving between inside and outside.

[163] Gary Shapiro, *Earthwards: Robert Smithson and Art after Babel* (University of California Press, 1997), 98.

[164] Bronson, "Bound to Please," 131.

[165] Certainly in this regard Lévi-Strauss, whose works the members of General Idea had read, was also influential.

[166] General Idea, *Hot Property,* 27 min. Art Metropole, 1977–81. Videocassette.

audience seating from the Colour Bar Lounge, drew from a photograph Rodney Werden shot of Eric Metcalfe's 1973 performance at Toronto's A Space in which he bound himself to a column decorated in leopard-print. Referencing this performance, General Idea's architectural plans for the Pavillion colonnade reveal a series of columns with a corresponding nude male bound hand and foot to each (**figure 164**). Since 1970 Metcalfe and his partner in Banal Beauty, Inc., Kate Craig, had been collecting leopard themed images and items in an exploration of the processes of fetishization, and the two dressed in the animal pattern, staged photographs, painted saxophones and sets, and performed as Dr. and Lady Brute.[167] (Note the leopard-print border that frames the "temporary blindness" item in *FILE* in **figure 138**). By 1975 they had suffered from "image bondage," having become trapped within the alter egos they had created, and thus organized a final exhibition *Spots Before Your Eyes* at the Western Front in Vancouver, to help rid them of their now-damning spots. General Idea seized on this sense of "image bondage" and the notion of being a slave to one's fetish in their rendering of the Pavillion's colonnade, perhaps acknowledging the way that their practice had been subsumed by the totalizing source of their fetish, the Pavillion. Yet in repurposing the columns to bolster their colonnade, General Idea reveals the Pavillion to be capable of escaping the hold of image bondage because their circulative practice transformed the images and ideas it adopted. Unlike Metcalfe, who pursues the fetish concept through a single type of imagery, General Idea's investigations spanned the beauty pageant, the magazine as index of American life, the gallery as site of artistic exchange, and the publicity and documentation surrounding them. By drawing from the practices of others, such as Dr. Brute's, to form their Pavillion and its associated pageants, General Idea continually shifts their frames of reference and the objects and ideas that come under those frames.

"It's Time for Another Re-Write": The Pavillion Redux

In 1984, A. A. Bronson returns to the theme of the ark, this time describing the group's gallery/bookstore/art collection:

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[167] In 1971, Metcalfe initiated *Leopard Realty*, series of postcard views of Vancouver's skyline revealing the city's buildings slowly being taken over by leopard spots; these images were subsequently projected in public places around the city. Two years later Metcalfe painted the façade of the Vancouver Art Gallery with his signature spots, the first work in what became the mural series, *Endangered Species*. For more information on Metcalfe, see Luis Jacob's exhibition catalogue, *Golden Streams*. The Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery at University of British Columbia holds the Eric Metcalfe fonds.

Art Metropole is a museum of cultural flotsam, housed in a home-made ark and cast on a sea of the very material it collects. A history of seaweeds and minor organisms surrounds us, a continuous chaos of colliding flora and fauna and their cast-off skins, shells and skeletons. Like Jacques Cousteau we dive into these primordial depths, collecting fragments, retrieving relics, and…looking. For it is this very hunger to see which animates our voyage.[168]

In this evocative passage, Bronson identifies looking as the life-giving force for their Art Metropole practice. The same could be said of the Pavillion, and of General Idea's practice more broadly—it forms a "museum of cultural flotsam," turning its lenses inward, to their own works, thoughts, and pasts, and outward, to elements on a cultural horizon that both articulate clearly from the distance and ride along as a vanishing point, a borderline whose borders become increasingly erased. Their collaborations assume different "skins, shells and skeletons," but at the heart of their practice lies a commitment to the collection as a provisional index of different moments, crystallized for an instant in some object, ephemeron, or idea.

The Pavillion's fiery demise (**figure 114**), fabricated and fictionalized, acknowledged the impossibility of its own existence. Projected as the culmination of General Idea's seven-odd-year odyssey, as the fulcrum around which the various tangents of beauty pageants, audience rehearsals, props, reader-response surveys, and Art Metropole archive revolved, the Pavillion could not be realized without fixing the group's art in one place and time. For a group whose practice was characterized by elaborate plays forward and backward in time, by art works that made insistent reference to others, and by the spread of the myth of General Idea throughout the media, building the Pavillion would require all these elements to be pin-pointed and "stopped" in time. It would halt the circle of references; it would freeze the frame through which to view their work, establishing a dominant viewpoint. As the General Idea archive extraordinaire, the Pavillion constituted the central frame of an elaborate, circular myth-making system; constructing the Pavillion would reify a center in General Idea's complex decentralizing project.

The burning of the Pavillion offered a proverbial ground zero for the artists, ashes from which their phoenix could rise. *Showcard 1-083,* "It's Time for Another Re-write," pictures three fleeing from a flame-engulfed forum, accompanied by the "voice-over" text (**figure 165**):

'Without waiting for flames to diminish we throw off our fireman's drag and rush into the ruins. Like archaeologists collecting fetish objects we rebuild images for the future from found fragments of our cultural environment. It's

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[168] A.A. Bronson, "Postscript," in *Evidence of the Avant Garde Since 1957*: *Selected Works from the Collection of Art Metropole, Including Audio Tapes, Records, Videotapes, Film, Multiples, Kitsch, Manuscripts, Stamps, Buttons, Flyers, Posters, Correspondence, Catalogues, Porn, T-shirts, Postcards, Drawings, Poems, Mailers, Books, Photographs, and Ephemera,* exh. cat. (Toronto: Art Metropole, 1984), n.p.

always exciting when the Pavillion burns to the ground—It's time for another re-write.'[169]

Their rebuilding process does not differ much from their construction process, corralling found images and ideas, releasing them among the network, adding to their allusive meanings, recasting them in different guises, and harnessing them to new projects. Part of the myth is that the process is natural and eventual; when they exclaim, "It's always exciting when the Pavillion burns to the ground," they imply that the cycle has happened before and will repeat, as part of the historical process. Indeed, the burning of the Pavillion recalled one of Felix Partz's projects from 1968–69, in which he photographed ziggurats ablaze. This ziggurat motif, which preoccupied Partz in the late 1960s, resurfaced in the designs of the seating area for the 1984 Miss General Idea Pavillion (see the drawing *Proposed Seating Arrangement* [*Form Follows Fiction*] from 1975), and served as a model for the complex's ground plan. Even as older projects are burned or filed away, they provide creative fodder for new practices. General Idea's archival and network tendencies allow for ideas to return, transformed and given new life.

This is how they seem both fixated on time and simultaneously appear to elude its entrapments. They project forward in time, to the over-determined Orwellian year, while looking to the past for the mass cultural tropes to use as the infrastructure for their planned events. They cast an inevitability on many of their projects by including references to their past works (e.g. the Pavillion had been germinating since Felix Partz's 1968 designs of ziggurats), and yet defer the realization of the inevitable moment (the Pavillion will never be built). They invent birthdays and fake anniversaries, living the fiction for so long that it is almost universally taken as fact (as in the case of their "10th Anniversary" party, *High Profile*, held in 1978). In these aspects, they mimic mechanisms of mass culture, whereby products are made to seem both refreshingly new and always already in the collective consciousness. Ant Farm had also tackled time as a culturally fraught signifier; in relating time to vision in their exhibition *2020 Vision*, they examine how our projections for the future tell us more about fears and dreams in the present and our nostalgia for the past. For Ant Farm, highlighting key moments in history and the future (1939, 1955, 1973, 1984) allowed them to explore clichéd cultural sentiment—the moon race, the surge of the tail fin, Kennedy's assassination. General Idea, in contrast, took up time as a framing device. In his notes on the Pavillion as ark, Bronson explored the resonances of using time itself as a constructed frame, as a medium: "Time lag. 1974 as 1984. Projected time, projector time. Time

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[169] *Showcard 1-083,* "It's Time for Another Re-write," 1977. Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography, no. EX-93-280.

lapse studies, culture study."[170] By denaturalizing it and thereby identifying it as a cultural construction, General Idea renders time as another type of myth, another form for them to inhabit.

In rejecting a linear narrative (much like Burroughs' literary model) General Idea keeps their artistic practice briskly in motion, juggling with their own chronology, and recycling and reconfiguring ideas and works for new contexts. Unlike many artists whose careers are additive, following a clear progression, theirs resembles a network. Their projects orbit around central nodes, or themes, which roughly correspond to the five framing devices introduced in their "Glamour" issue of *FILE* (and which were repeated by Felix Partz at the start of *Going Thru the Motions*). In this, the group's career work stays true to the instability and allusive nature of their intermedia undertakings. They often produced related works in several registers: as documents to be mailed, published in *FILE* and other print media, and collected in archives; as photographs for portraits or to be incorporated in other works; as a performance, with prepared scripts, performers, and audience members; as videotaped event, with shooting schedules, and buttressed by still photographs for publicity; as announcements and descriptions of events in *FILE,* in others' publications, 'zines, and reviews; as sculptures and props, used in performances, videos, exhibitions, and installations; as rumor, "something by mouth" constituted by others in the network (to recall Hudson Marquez's lament); as alter ego personas and corporate identities (e.g. Art Official, Inc.); and as institutional structures, such as Art Metropole.

The Pavillion's chronological de-stabilizing paralleled the mechanisms of archives. Just as an archive promotes a sense of chronology in an artist's work by ordering events and traces of an artist's career, it also has the opposite effect: archives displace traces and works from their original context and re-contextualize them into the (researcher's) present. In creating the *idea* of the 1984 Pavillion, General Idea acknowledged the temporal instability of the archive model.

The Pavilion is thus the group's networked archival practice in practice. It is not just a structure or building to house events or people, no ark. It is a provisional, constantly shifting frame to allow us to make sense of what was going on. Understanding the Pavillion allows us to plug into General Idea's practice in the way that Philip Marchand wanted to with the network. It models for us the mechanisms of mass culture, and in so doing, calls us to look at the world as an archive not as a ready-made representation. It acknowledges the constructedness of representations and lifestyles, and it relishes in this very constructedness by revealing how we all create, perform, recycle, and interpret these archival elements into meaningful wholes, generally doing so without even knowing it. General Idea makes us know the process, makes us realize

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[170] "ARC," A.A. Bronson's Notebooks, 1971–1972 folder, General Idea fonds, box 47.

that we have been "going through the motions," and encourages us to take pleasure even as we critique. After all, they do.

Their overall artistic practice—their archive, their network—reproduces something of the ephemeral nature of the scraps and traces of these various registers, just as it mimics the network structure that it helped create and that helped create it. The contingency of such an imtermedial practice, constantly spinning off in different directions, provokes frustration on the part of critics who try to make coherent sense of it. In trying to comprehend General Idea's art, many attempt to superimpose an order, by establishing a chronology, for example. Yet such attempts fail, in that pointing to a work's antecedents generates little meaning, just more searching. In picking apart the individual traces of various projects, the whole of their practice falls out of focus, leaving little behind but inchoate remnants. It is in the planning and destroying of their Pavillion where this aspect of their work is perhaps most clear and most fragile.

Chapter 5
From the Boob Tube to YouTube: Modernism, Postmodernism, and Dreams

While screening a tape of Ant Farm and T.R.Uthco's *Eternal Frame* during a guest lecture I gave on video for a mid-level undergraduate art history class, I observed several students using their laptops, half paying attention to the video and half focused on their screens. As I walked around the room to see what was diverting them, I noticed one student shopping for shoes, another buying a plane ticket, two girls seated next to one another conversing via instant message, and another two each watching videos on the website YouTube. The videos they were watching? They were none other than the Zapruder film, digitized, uploaded to the site, and made available to anyone with a computer, internet connection, and the desire to watch it. Too young to have been alive when Kennedy was assassinated, they were in search of the "original" representation, unsure what to believe in Ant Farm and T.R.Uthco's video essay. The place they turned for information was the internet, and, distrusting the 26.6 second clip played at the start of the *Eternal Frame* (or perhaps not knowing even what it was), they put their faith in YouTube to answer at least that question.

In that classroom that day the internet represented a node, a mechanism of connectivity—it connected them to virtual stores (zappos.com, where the student picked out a lovely pair of chocolate suede boots), to mobility (purchasing his flight home, maybe?), to one another, to sources of information, and to the past, via representations. Typing "Zapruder film" (in quotes) today in the YouTube search box pulls up 295 listings; tomorrow more videos could be added. The offerings range from close-up or wide views of the film, to an animated cartoon reimagining of the events, to analysis of the frames (with voice-over), and to a version where the Zapruder film is intercut with images from the game JFK Reloaded. Clicking on one of the videos brings up a list of related videos on the right; for the last example, these include links to the videos of Orville Nix's film of JFK's assassination, Cuba & Russia Reloaded (presumably scenes from games), and "Palin Can't Name Supreme Court Cases," footage of governor Sarah Palin interviewed by CBS news' Katie Couric. These offerings represent the rhizomic nature of YouTube, and of the internet more broadly, in that a single stimulus gives rise to a network of options that multiply with every click. Attached to each video is a description provided by the user who uploaded the content to the site and then often comments from viewers. In this way

YouTube is an index of individual and collective thoughts, interests, and habits, and it is shaped through the exchange and interaction among individuals.

From the *Eternal Frame* to YouTube seems initially like quite a jump: from analog tape and film to digital video; from the projection screen to the computer screen; from face-to-face interaction to online chat; from television as a disseminating tool to the internet; from paper documents from the Ant Farm archive to YouTube itself as an archive. This is not to say that the latter terms in these pairings have replaced the former; rather, that in my classroom in 2008, they were co-existing, and that even in that environment, the *Eternal Frame* still had things to say, still was able to communicate to the students, even those who did not raise their hands when I asked if they knew what the Zapruder film was (a full 80% of the class, I should add).[1] Instead the students invoked 9/11, recalling the scenes of the planes hitting the World Trade Center towers on television and remembering the ensuing 24/7 media coverage, and they debated what those images have come to mean—in short, they understood history mediated through television and the internet, and reacted to the tastelessness of the *Eternal Frame* as if it were the more recent tragedy that was being spoofed in *National Lampoon* magazine.

Indeed, many of the issues that Ant Farm, Asco, and General Idea explored in the 1970s have emerged as dominant themes in the 21st century. The promise of free mobility and circulation the groups sought through video, the mail, and periodicals such as *FILE* has been realized by the internet, with its attendant downsides of spam, cyberbullying, and commodification of even the darkest dens of cyberspace. Artists in the 1970s concerned with the circulation of commodity culture focused primarily on material culture—the way images were presented in magazines and on television, for example, and how and what they came to signify in society. Thinking about circulation for them required considering the mechanisms by which the commodities were disseminated; thus the focus of their explorations was often the systems of mass media. In the 21st century the medium and the message are so intertwined that distinguishing the mechanism from the commodity has become increasingly difficult. Even the "dematerialization" of objects, an idea at one time considered by conceptual artists to be an alternative to the forces of the market, has been commodified, as digital representations are sold to be given and exchanged in virtual worlds.[2] Enthusiasts involved in multi-person role-playing

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[1] Patricia Mellencamp makes a similar observation in a 2005 essay; she notes how rather than using Ant Farm's *Eternal Frame* to illustrate post-modern theory, she claims it *as* theory: "Over time, art outlasts and outruns theory." Mellencamp, "Ant Farm Redux: Pyrotechnics and Emergence," *Journal of Film and Video* 57, nos. 1-2 (Spring 2005): 46.

[2] In one installment of his weekly magazine column, "Consumed," Rob Walker recounts how someone sent him a "Lonely Otter" graphic through Facebook. The friend purchased the digital representation for one dollar and sent it to Walker to acknowledge his birthday. As Walker points out, "The dollar was filtered

games create alter egos, for example, and purchase virtual equipment to outfit them and shape their personalities. Is this really that much different than the Eternal Network, where individuals corresponded with people they had not met in person, circulating images through the mail, adopting pseudonyms, and logos?

One of the biggest differences, apart from the analog to digital jump, is scale. Mass media systems have become at once larger and more pervasive and also smaller and less influential as individuals are able to seek out different feeds, add new content, and create sub-sub-cultures. Social networking applications allow individuals to connect with one another in provisional groupings, as participants on listservs and bulletin boards, readers of blogs, or tweeters on twitter. These sites have become dynamic archives of a lived practice of engaging with the mediated world, akin to Ant Farm's timeline or General Idea's *FILE* but in customizable, interactive, and expanded forms.

To say Asco, Ant Farm, or General Idea anticipated these directions is to adopt 20/20 vision, as Ant Farm both longed to do and mocked, and read history backwards, which is always a little bit of what we do anyway, even when we try our hardest not to. But emerging from their collected bodies of work, as least as I have constituted them, provisionally, in my own mind, are central themes particular to the preoccupations of these groups in the 1970s and that are still meaningful vehicles for considering the demands of present-day society. Placing Asco, Ant Farm, and General Idea's works in relation to one another may minimize what seem like sizable differences (geographic, cultural, art historical) but at the same time it exposes important common threads and approaches among the groups. These could even be said to be themes central to a certain type of 1970s practice as a whole—ambivalent, provisional, networked practice—rooted in the artists' collective experiences of mass culture, through television, magazines, and the post-war consumerist boom.

Why were these themes important at the time? Society had been racked by the sometimes violent demonstrations of the late 1960s and early 1970s, sit-ins at college campuses, occupations by the National Guard (with the publicized tragedies at Kent State and Jackson State), and various public trials (of the Chicago 7 and Black Panthers Bobby Seale and Huey Newton, for example). Even more upheaval followed this period, with the Watergate scandal, the Arab oil embargo, Nixon's resignation, and increasingly vocal calls for the equal treatment of women, gays, members of minority groups, and individuals with disabilities. It has been described as a period of exhaustion and one of re-examination, of pulling oneself up by the bootstraps, of switching

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through the popular social network's 'gift points' setup, but ultimately it wasn't a representation, the way the Lonely Otter is. It was an actual dollar." Walker, "Digital Goods," *New York Times Magazine*, 29 April 2009.

gears to launch new fights at home. "Collectivity was," as artist Alan Moore reminds us, "a general condition of both cultural and political work" in the late 1960s and early 1970s. No single model reigned; instead, a spectrum of collective practices effloresced: electrified Merry Pranksters, militant cells, dropped-out communes, tuned in Yippies, crowded rock festivals, localized cultural centers, politicized college students, decentralized media groups, organized activist groups, and decadent DeccaDances. Many of these were short-lived experiments, borne out of the counterculture's groundswell, yet unable to be sustained in such large numbers in the ambivalent and "exhausted" clime of the mid 1970s.

During this time, however, artists continued to band together to form collaborative groups; indeed in the 1980s the artists' collective would become even more visible in the art world and the mainstream press. Perhaps the most well-known example is the Guerrilla Girls, who humorously exposed sexism and discrimination of museums and galleries just as tenaciously as they secreted their own individual identities (**figure 166**). The public health crisis initiated by the spread and identification of AIDS (and fueled by then-president Ronald Reagan's almost six-year silence on the subject) prompted artists, some schooled by late 1960s protests, to launch campaigns to raise awareness about the disease. Groups such as ACT-UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power) and a spin-off, Gran Fury, harnessed the power of advertising—through posters, video, and demonstrations—to call attention to the pandemic. General Idea also invoked advertising principles, recasting Robert Indiana's *LOVE* emblem as an *AIDS* meme, papering the streets of Toronto, Berlin, San Francisco, Seattle, and Amsterdam with the "viral image" and even projecting the image on the Spectacolor Board in the dizzying urban center, Times Square; they also printed 200 sheets of stamps to be included in an issue of *Parkett* as a fundraiser for the American Foundation for AIDS Research, better known as amfAR (**figure 167, figure 168,** and **figure 169**). Although they re-inscribed these interventions within their Pavillion myth, most notably in their 1988 exhibition, *AIDS: The Public and Private Domains of the Miss General Idea Pavillion*, General Idea's appropriation of Indiana's icon into the red, blue, and green AIDS logo fully signaled a shift from 1960s idealism to 1980s pragmatic activism.[3] During the recent presidential campaign, Indiana re-appropriated his own image to spread Barack Obama's message of hope (**figure 170**)—a move that showcases how images in motion (or "moticos," to recall Ray

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[3] Indiana also produced a series of LOVE stamps in 1973. General Idea's exhibition was held at Arstpace, San Francisco, 12 January–5 March 1988. Following Indiana, they also produced a welded metal *AIDS* sculpture (installed in Hamburg). General Idea literally produced images in motion; in 1989 their AIDS design appeared in every second car of New York City subways (a project supported by the Public Art Fun); two years later their posters circulated throughout Amsterdam and Seattle aboard trams.

Johnson's neologism) can build complex, aggregate meaning systems, like hyperlinked versions of post-modern novels.

General Idea's work from the 1980s maintains some of the key aspects of their earlier art: a commitment to a project as a constellation of works dispersed across different media and times, an appropriation of mass cultural formats to advance an individual agenda, and their trademark wit and self-consciousness. What distinguishes their 1970s practice from the later work is indicative of a broader cultural shift at the time: in the 1980s they had a target and message, and thus strategies they had used ironically, experimentally, and spontaneously in the 1970s supported activist ideals in the following decade. As one proponent explained, "What counts in activist art is its propaganda effect; stealing the procedures of other artists is part of our plan—if it works, we use it."[4] The strategies that suggested open-ended possibilities in *FILE*, for example—the adoption of *Life's* format—had been somewhat instrumentalized in their later practice. The ambivalence, playfulness, and irony that characterized the 1970s had given way to a directness and surety that registers at times as aching earnestness. (One only needs to look back at Barbara Kruger's 1983 attack on essentialism [**figure 171,** "We Won't Play Nature to Your Culture"] to be reminded of this).

Today the visibility of the direct address of what we will call 1980s activist strategies (knowing the approach garnered proponents in every decade and in particularly sizable numbers in the 1970s, particularly among feminists and under-represented ethnic groups, and in the 1990s) has waned. Artists are continuing to form collaborative groups, and their interests reveal a renewed fascination with the mechanisms and myths of mass media. For the present-day collective Bernadette Corporation, this took form as available surfaces to try on, like skins, as in their appropriation of the fashion magazine format for their periodical *Made in USA* (**figure 172**)*;* their initial issue

> is devoted to how people create their own spaces, spaces that can be invisible or
> imaginary. You may have heard this trend called DIY (do-it-yourself) or
> Amateurism. We like to call it the EMPTY WIDE SPACE trend, a place we can
> all disappear to, instead of being anti-everything and writing the new manifesto,
> or instead of being pro-everything and buying the latest CD.[5]

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[4] Douglas Crimp and [Adam] Rolston, *AIDS Demographics* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1990), 16, quoted in Alan W. Moore, "Artists' Collectives: Focus on New York, 1975-2000," in *Collectivism After Modernism,* eds. Blake Stimson and Gregory Sholette (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 208.
[5] Their first issue, for example, announces remade Calvin Klein and Hugo Boss advertisements by artist Thomas Hirschhorn, "fashion shows reviewed by hippies," and "actress, a band that pretends it's a band (dresses like a band)." Prior to publishing *Made in U.S.A.,* the enterprising group also designed five collections of women's ready to fashion from 1995. From http://www.bernadettecorporation.com/musa.htm, last accessed 8 May 2009.

In this undated statement, the group express what they see as the futility of "being anti-everything and writing the new manifesto" and yet they also resist the identification that comes through consumption ("buying the latest CD"). Instead they push between these two poles of resistance and identification.

As Bernadette Corporation's recasting of the fashion magazine suggests, groups from the past two decades continue to explore the imagery and mechanisms of mass media. In 1993 Art Club 2000 re-imagined the popular format of the artist's group portrait through the lens of popular commercial adverts for Gap (**figure 173**). When General Idea recast Absolut Vodka's well-known campaign as an "ImageVirus" to promote AIDS awareness (**figure 169**), we got the message. Art Club 2000's riff on the Gap's well-circulated advertising campaign that showed different people, among them Sharon Stone, William Burroughs, Dominick Dunne, Jim Dine, John Galliano and Naomi Campbell, expressing their individuality (and celebrity) through the company's products (**figure 174** and **figure 175**) is less clear—they do not advocate a boycott of the store, decry exploitive labor practices, or unveil a conspiracy involving the mall staple.[6] Rather their exhibition is more meditation than agitation, a stance they share more with their 1970s progenitors than 1980s rabble rousers.[7]

hobbypopMUSEUM's recasting of the real history of the Baader-Meinhof group into fiction underscores how present-day collectives are removed from the time of insurgent, and sometimes violent, collective political action that informed 1970s groups' sensibilities. (Remember General Idea's A.A. Bronson's recollection of the initial efforts of social activists in the 1960s and his disappointment in knowing that even in the early-mid 1970s, those tactics were no longer tenable.) In 2000 hobbypopMUSEUM transformed the story of Ulrike Meinhof and Andreas Baader, the German Red Army Faction radicals, to end in storybook fashion—they live happily ever after. Imprisoned for having committed "urban guerrilla war" acts in the 1960s and

Their turn to fashion resembles Asco and General Idea's own moves, and it also brings to mind Max Ernst's prints *Fiat modes pereat ars* (*Let There Be Fashion, Down with Art)* from circa 1919, an inversion of the Latin maxim, "Let there be art, down with fashion."

[6] The members of Art Club 2000 apparently returned the items they had worn for the shoot afterwards, taking advantage of the store's refund policy. In addition to the group portraits, Art Club 2000 presented store-display materials (among them, text stenciled on the walls drawn from Gap literature, such as "Every customer will have their needs determined and merchandise suggested to meet those needs") and an "Individuals of Style Portrait Center," where visitors could order their own Gap advertisements. They also exhibited items they had pulled from the trash bins of the franchise's Manhattan stores, which included discarded clothing, a nominal amount of cash, a novel by William Gibson, memos, staff evaluations, contact information for employees, and the company's shoplifting-prevention manual.

[7] Reviewing the exhibition for *Artforum*, Glenn O'Brien applauds the group for avoiding "faux-Marxist pouting often practiced by Comme des Garcons-wearing semioticians." Rather, he continues, "they presented the problem of the Gap with an honest ambivalence that would well serve anyone involved in creative criticism." O'Brien, "Into the Gap: Art Club 2000," *Artforum* (February 1994): 72.

1970s, both Meinhof and Baader died while incarcerated—debate remains whether by suicide or murder—yet in hobbypopMUSEUM's eight whimsical painted scenes, the duo are shown enjoying the daily rituals of domesticity.[8] The paintings are signed Ulrike and Andreas, a fiction that suggests the former activists are writing their own history and in charge of the way their images are presented. Yet for hobbypopMUSEUM, that past is as much a story as Hansel and Gretel.

Instead groups today grapple with more recent history, as in Bernadette Corporation's *Get Rid of Yourself* (**figure 176**). The 61-minute movie intercuts scenes from a fashion shoot with images of rioters clashing with police in Genoa in 2001, a pairing that exposes how the chaos of destruction can be sanitized, appropriated, and repackaged as seductive images in a fashion magazine. Interspersed among these scenes are shots of the indie actress Chloë Sevigny rehearsing statements made by the Black Bloc, an anonymous bunch of black-clad activists that interrupt mainstream demonstrations (by looting, for example). According to the group's statement about their work, the film explores the "potential of community based on a radical refusal of political identity."[9] In this respect, *Get Rid of Yourself* distinguishes Bernadette Corporation's approach from the artistic protests of the 1970s and 1980s, when one's political

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[8] This type of fantastical revisionism can be dangerous; while Alison Gingeras, reviewing the group's work for *Artforum,* views hobbypopMUSEUM's project as a "jab at state-sponsored collective reconciliation by replacing acceptance of historical responsibility with a retreat into individual delusions," Gregory Sholette faults the group for recasting the solemn sociopolitical agenda of collectives from the 1980s and '90s into "cultural distraction without the heavy intellectual pricetag." Alison M. Gingeras, "hobbypopMUSEUM," *Artforum* (March 2004): 174; Gregory Sholette, "Calling All Collectives [Letter to the Editor]," *Artforum* (Summer 2004): 16.

More than attacking hobbypopMUSEUM's actions, Sholette faults Gingeras' critical response, in that critics who celebrate this type of ambivalence as "insouciance" contribute to the appropriation of oppositional tendencies—such as "egalitarian collaboration"—by enterprise culture. Gingeras responds to Sholette's remarks by asserting that the two differ in how they envision the role of criticism; she claims that Sholette subscribes to an "ideological vision of criticism," wherein all resistance must assume an oppositional stance (she describes her own approach as "crypto-collusion," an attitude that may appear to accept the status quo while at the same it questions or "plays with" it.)

In taking a culturally loaded historic signifier and transforming it into a subjective fantasy itself informed by existing fairy tales (from the Grimm Brothers to Hollywood and Disney), hobbypopMUSEUM opens that very history up to re-evaluation, re-appropriation, and debate. Moreover hobbypopMUSEUM's own appropriation of a history of collective action in Germany becomes fodder for the reassessment of other groups' actions, prompting a chain of events that has us asking how we read the past through the light of our own projections and how we then project those ideas coded as "historical" fact as the basis for the interpretation of other cultural moments. The interpolation of external, critical voices into the web of associations that orbit around a work calls to mind General Idea's practice, how they drew critics' assessments and journalists' voices into their works. General Idea differs in this regard from hobbypopMuseum in that the Canadian trio's appropriations were conscious and part of their larger myth-making structure; the present-day group's work elicited critical commentary and debate, yet they did not actively fold this discourse back into their projects.

[9] Bernadette Corporation quoted in Bennett Simpson, "Techniques of Today: Bennett Simpson on Bernadette Corporation," *Artforum* (September 2004): 220.

stance was tied up with one's identity, as in collectives such as the Art Worker's Coalition, Guerrilla Girls, and Gran Fury; it wears its own brand of political idealism on its title, so to speak, advocating to "get rid of yourself," to slip into anonymity as a means of re-forming political communities outside potentially co-opting mainstream forces.[10] The group does not seem to espouse losing oneself in the collectivity, exactly, but rather suggests that efforts in making connections with others and protesting injustices might best be waged underground. This sentiment is in line with Nicolas Bourriaud's characterization that the "relationship between people, as symbolised by goods or replaced by them, has to take on extreme and clandestine forms."[11]

Bourriaud's philosophy of relational aesthetics has become an influential concept for thinking about art practices in the 1990s and 2000s; he posits art as a "social interstice," which "creates free areas, and time spans whose rhythms contrasts with those structuring everyday life, and it encourages an inter-human commerce that differs from the 'communication zones' imposed on us."[12] For him art is a tangible means of linking people to one another, of staging encounters, a form of interaction that becomes especially important in a period when our interactions are becoming increasingly virtual. While Bourriaud's focus is 1990s art (and a specific breed of 1990s interactive art), the gist of his argument extends to earlier practices, particularly those in the 1970s when artists of the Eternal Network were reaching out to each other via the mail just as technology was making virtual communications less a projection for the future and more a soon-to-be realized actuality. In contrast with "participatory" art, which depends on the interaction or active involvement of the audience to realize the work, 1970s groups forged creative connections with other artists to produce their works—they sought to create and maintain networks within which they could express themselves. This helps to explain the preponderance of art-world individuals in attendance at their events and performances; they identified and built an audience for their work and created meaningful connections with those people in spaces that they could label and shape (which account in part for the emergence of artist-initiated activity in this period). Bourriaud explains 1990s artists' interests in reconnecting in a personal way, as in the work of Rirkrit Tiravanija, as a result of the commodification of

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[10] In Bernadette Corporation's *Reena Spaulings,* Maris Parings observes, "it was first of all a question of emptying out the space behind the company logo, which functions as a sort of mask or fog bank behind which anything at all, or nothing, could take place." Bernadette Corporation, *Reena Spaulings* (New York: Semiotext(e), 2004)*,* 173.

[11] Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics,* trans*.* Simon Pleasance and Fronza Woods (Dijon: les presses du réel, 2002), 9. Bourriaud's characterization of the "society of extras" recalls one of General Idea's showcards from the 1970s, in which they conceive of the audience for their art as "extras."

[12] Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics,* 16.

social spaces: "[t]he ideal subject of the society of extras is thus reduced to the condition of a consumer of time and space…Before long it will not be possible to maintain relationships between people outside these trading areas."[13] Already in 1967 Guy Debord was cautioning that social relationships among people were becoming increasingly mediated by images.[14] Responding to this situation, artists in the 1970s forged links between the two models of connectivity, seeking out networks precisely by negotiating the image world. (Image Bank is a prime example of this phenomenon, in that they established a vehicle through which to collect and trade images that allowed for greater control of the uses of those images and generated meaningful collaborations in the process).

Although on the surface artists' groups from the 1970s, 1980s, 1990s, and the present differ markedly from one another in their degrees of commitment to "socially conscious art" and in the participatory aesthetics they cultivate, their collaborations are all, at least in part, staked on valuing connectivity; they see the value in connecting to one another, whether through networks as in the 1970s, through direct community engagement in the 1980s, or through traces of interpersonal interactions in the 1990s (to characterize some of the broad trends groups participated in for the past forty years). More recently groups such as hobbypopMUSEUM have drawn attention to the topic of participatory aesthetics by thematizing it in their work. In the *Melody of Destiny* (*Schicksals Melodie III*) at the Tate Britain, the group demarcated a "fantasy" performance space by erecting a folding paper fence in the British art galleries (**figure 177**).[15] Parts of this paper divide were painted, and, according to the group, in their absence, "the painted figures become stand-in performers." Visitors' attention was directed away from the paintings on the walls (part of the Tate Britain's regular collection) toward the space of possibility in the center of the room, yet the group did not interact with its audience. Rather it sought to create mediators, such as the paper fence, between their own performance and their audience.

They are also equally conscious of shaping their own history. In *20/20 Vision,* for example, Ant Farm placed its own work along a timeline of important moments when people were looking to the future for ideas about how to transform the present. Moreover, for Asco, Ant Farm, and General Idea, documenting their projects, writing about them, and building a collective archive was central to their practice, all of which lent a gravitas to their sometimes seemingly puckish work. Forming an archive carved out a space in history for them, and allowed them to be

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[13] Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics,* 9.
[14] Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle,* trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone Books, 1995); *La société du spectacle* was first published in France in 1967.
[15] This performance is documented in hoppbypopMUSEUM, *Werte Schaffen* (Köln: Walther König, 2004), 86–105; accompanying photographs of the performance is a list of the works in Gallery 9 (the room the group occupied) and program notes.

active tellers of their own stories. This tendency has intensified in recent years, with groups or individuals receiving retrospective exhibitions or monographs early in their careers. *Gelatin ACBD,* published in 2008, is a compendium of letters, photographs, drawings, articles, thoughts, plans, and documentation of the Viennese group's projects since 1996, all in a cacophony of languages.[16] Like Ant Farm's time capsules or *20/20 Vision*, Gelatin's consciousness of its own place in history informed the works they produce. In a 2007 performance the group's four members linked arms to form a line in Yale University's Beinecke Library so that the individual on one end touched a display case containing the Gutenberg bible and one at the other end pointed to a vitrine with a catalogue of Gelatin's work (**figure 178**).[17] This literalization of teleology implies that the group's own catalogue exists as a result of the invention of movable type, epitomized by the Gutenberg bible, but the group's intermedial practice, consisting of drawings, collage, three-dimensional modeling, performance, photography, installation, and text, negates such a linear account of technological progress. Thus the linear model of Ant Farm's calendarLOG and suggested by the Viennese group's line in the Beinecke begins to outlive its usefulness—new models are necessary in order for us to productively trace back continuities and departures.[18]

In addition to their rejection of some of the aspects of collaborations of the more recent past, these present-day groups also reveal some telling differences with 1970s formations. The current groups are working at a time when the internet has realized a global means of connecting individuals; this means that the need for networks to connect like-minded artists and to overcome geographic divides is no longer an issue for present-day groups.   Some even are returning to pre-millennial age inspirations for new-old models of connectivity, as in Gelatin's *das chinesische telefon,* a human telecommunications system, made out of 1000 individuals, who "form a line, a network, with crossings and diversions" (**figure 179**). Trafficking not just in speech, this initial idea for their contribution to 2002 Shanghai biennale would "transfer messages as well as goods and feelings. It is a multi-faceted pipeline that can transfer spoken word, pizza, and even a kiss."[19] In *das chinesische telefon* Gelatin imagined a new means of connectivity, one in which digital immateriality is replaced by old-fashioned, in-person materiality.

[16] In this book, the group (also known as Gelitin) pairs the traditional vehicle of the artist's retrospective publication with more interactive elements, such as a DVD with videos and photographs bearing folded over paper scraps, which when turned back reveal naughty bits (sort of like a children's pop-up book but very much intended for adult eyes); *Gelatin ACBD* (Köln: Walther König, 2008).

[17] This performance is related to Gelatin's *Fuck Me Fuck Me Everywhere* at the Yale University School of Art, 2007.

[18] Adding another layer to their performance is that the selection of their catalogue a somehow on par with an artifact as significant as the Gutenberg bible also elevates their own cultural import markedly.

[19] "das chinesische telefon," *Gelatin ACBD*, n.p.

This renewed emphasis on materiality is telling, and it recalls how Asco, Ant Farm, and General Idea negotiated the image world in very material ways. In a time when images were becoming increasingly ever present—in print, on television, in movies, in advertisements, along the highway, on people's bodies—they trafficked in images, sending them to one another, cutting them up, collecting them in banks, making them into objects, and reimagining them in new contexts. They pieced apart the image world and the host of desires, ideas, and histories that accrued to various imagery, as in Ant Farm and T.R. Uthco's *Eternal Frame,* and in so doing, generated new artistic practices, ones based on the archives and networks of the worlds they experienced.

Bernadette Collection also acknowledges the way we interact with the image world, through bits and pieces, different slivers at a time. "If you look at a city, there's no way to see it. One person can never see a city…It has to be informed, imagined, by many people at a time."[20] Thus begins the preface to *Reena Spaulings,* their collaborative multi-author novel. The book, according to its authors, was written based on the Hollywood script-writing system, where a host of screenwriters are given specific parts to craft. Though based on a Hollywood model, this method suggests that how we come to interpret and understand the world we inhabit and the people we know is a provisional, collaborative, and mutable process. In this respect they approximate Bourriaud's characterization of the contemporary artwork's form: "it is a linking element, a principle of dynamic agglutination," one that "acquires the status of an ensemble of units to be re-activated by the beholder-manipulator."[21] As fragments contingent on individuals to realize their own wholes—just as one's experience of a city differs from someone else's—the images that form the basis of *Reena Spaulings* and that it itself constructs "are images that the spectacle cannot fully absorb."[22] This recognition of the machine of the spectacle—the chimera that chews up all in its way—and yet the desire nonetheless to create outside it, even for a limited time, parallels 1970s groups' efforts, cognizant of the limitations of 1960s models but still holding onto a belief that their interventions could have some effect.

Such interventions are generative. In addition to critique, they invite viewer-participants to imagine open-ended possibilities, in contrast with closed-systems approaches, which often only reinforce the critique. Such is the case with a television prank from a Czech group of artists called Ztohoven, who momentarily hacked the stationary camera feed of a regular morning weather program on Czech Television's CT2 to broadcast their own menacing fabrication: a mushroom-

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[20] Bernadette Corporation, preface to *Reena Spaulings*, n.p.
[21] Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics,* 20, 21.
[22] McKenzie Wark, review of Bernadette Corporation's Reena Spaulings on http://amsterdam.nettime.org/Lists-Archives/nettime-l-0502/msg00025.html, last accessed 8 May 2009.

cloud blasting the serenity of a bucolic Czech pastoral scene (**figure 180**). The footage bore a time stamp (indicating a live broadcast) and the web address ztohoven.com.[23] Evidence of Ztohoven's disruption spread virally the next day, with footage promptly uploaded to YouTube, and the story subsequently picked up by European and American news outlets.[24] For their prank, Ztohoven was fined CZK 50,000 (EUR 2,000) for interfering with a public service broadcast; the members of the group were also arraigned for disturbing the peace and fear-mongering, charges which have since been dismissed. Although they found themselves embroiled with legal drama, the "directness" of their intervention was lauded by the National Gallery in Prague, which awarded Ztohoven a CZK 333,000 prize for artists under 33. The museum's director, Milan Knizak, noted how *Media Reality* reminded him of his own 1960s art actions, such as when he mailed hundreds of packages to apartment buildings throughout the city in the attempt of changing "the everyday life of everyday people. It didn't take place in a gallery or museum, it just happened. Like love. You don't reason why. It just is."[25]

The two qualities that Knizak appreciated in *Media* Reality—its "directness" and the fact that "it just is"—present the most marked contrast with the 1970s practices that are the focus of this study. Ztohoven's "prank," as it has been called, seems to be just that: a hoax designed to promote greater awareness of media. In the scheme of media pranks, its critique registered as more Ashton Kutcher than Asco.[26] Asco's *Decoy Gang War Victim* (**figure 20**)*,* on the one hand, is not quite what it seems—its valences shifting, its intentions unclear, and the facts surrounding the event inscrutable. It inserts itself within discourses on Mexican-American representations in the media, gang violence in the *barrio*, and the form Chicano art should take, and, more importantly, it continues the circulation of those discourses. While Ztohoven adopts the rhetoric of politics, what is ultimately the point of their intervention? Ztohoven's experimental practice deviates from that of the 1970s groups', whose rerouting of conventional systems of representation and means of communication open up spaces of new possibility, if only temporarily. As ambivalent and ironic as they were, the artists' groups in the 1970s still *believed*,

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[23] Ztohoven's *Media Reality* was part of a tradition of media hoaxes, with Asco's *Decoy Gang War Victim* just one. One of the most well known media pranksters is Alan Abel, who in 1959 launched the Society for the Indecency to Naked Animals or S.I.N.A., a campaign he promoted actively in the media with the slogan "a nude horse is a rude horse."

[24] On YouTube, Ztohoven's *Media Reality* is linked to a video of Czech news coverage of the group's intervention that morning as well as to Hiroshima and filmed thermonuclear tests.

[25] Knizak quoted in Michael Kimmelman, "That Mushroom Cloud? They're Just Svejking Around," *New York Times,* 24 January 2008.

[26] Actor Ashton Kutcher's series *Punk'd*, a hidden-camera television show (an updated *Candid Camera*) in which hired jokesters played pranks on celebrities, aired on MTV from 2003 to 2007.
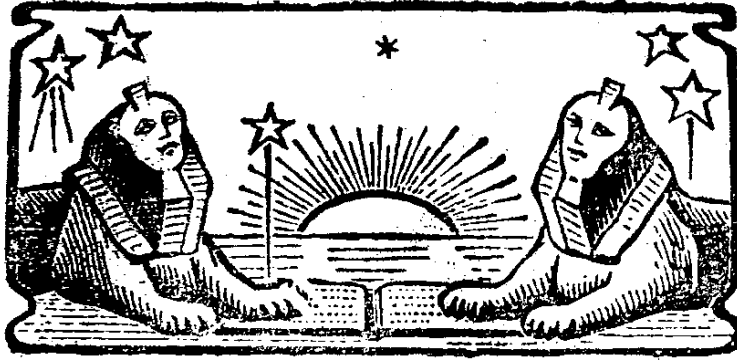
sometimes in spite of themselves. Ztohoven's discrete disruption suggests that the time for big dreams, modernist dreams, may, at least for now, have passed.

Figures

Figure 1
Corres Sponge Dancers on the L'Escalier d'Honneur, DeccaDance, 1974

⊙ **SPHINX D'OR AWARDS** ⊙

BEST ANIMAL IMPERSONATION - Irene Dogmatic for *Mildred Doggerel* Oakland.

ART'S DEAD BUT GOSSIP'S STILL ALIVE - Noah Dakota Toronto.

BEST CONTRIBUTION IN A RAPID OFFSET ZINE - John Dowd N.Y. and Bum Bank Vancouver for *Fanzine Fanzini.*

BEST GLOSSY ZINE - *Ifel* Toronto and *Fanzini Goes To The Movies* Vancouver.

ROOKIE OF THE YEAR - David Young Toronto.

BEST ALIAS - Willoughby Sharp N.Y. for *Mighty Mogul* and Lowell Darling Hollywood for *Dudley Finds.*

BEST NEW TALENT - Gilbert and George England.

BEST MAJOR WORK - Flakey Rose Hip for *Great Wall of 1984* Vancouver.

MS. CONGENIALITY - Anna Banana San Francisco.

I NEVER PROMISED YOU A RROSE GARDEN MOSTLY FLOWERS AWARD - the judges were unable to reach a decision so there was no winner.

TOM OF FINLAND BULDGE EVENT FOR BUDDHA UNIVERSITY - Pablo Picasso posthumously.

BEST CONTRIBUTION TO ART DECO IN 1984 - Ms. Rhonda Vancouver.

BEST XEROX ART - Les Petites Bonbons Los Angeles for *Meet Andy and David.*

BEST CAMOUFLAGE - Dr. Brute Vancouver for *Spots in Front of Your Eyes.*

BEST BUSINESS WOMAN - Sandy Stagg Toronto for *Amelia Earhart Originals.*

THE SPHINX D'OR AWARD - Count Fanzini Vancouver for *Bum Bank.*

Sphinx d'or Claims "S" at Dadacademy

Figure 2
List of Sphinx D'Or Dadacademy Awards, Hollywood DeccaDance, 1974
published in Art's Birthday insert

Figure 3
Robert Filliou lighting Art's Birthday cake, Aachen, 1973

Art's Birthday and the Hollywood Deca-Dance

Dear Friends,

You've probably heard rumours of our activities but have been at a loss to understand how you can find out more about them and participate in the network consciousness on the tips of so many peoples' tongues. Keeping this in mind, we have planned an event to throw some light on the story so far. It is a very old story, over a million years old to be exact and perhaps that is why it has been so hard to figure out.

On February 2nd and 3rd, 1974 IMAGE BANK, MR. PEANUT, DR. BRUTE of BANAL BEAUTY INC., FAT CITY SCHOOL OF FINDS ART, THE NEW YORK CORRES SPONGE DANCE SCHOOL OF VANCOUVER, THE JOHN DOWD FAN CLUB, GENERAL IDEA, ACE SPACE CO., ROBERT FILLIOU OF THE TERRITOIRE DE LA REPUBLIQUE GENIALE, WILLOUGHBY SHARP and others will throw a party for Art's one million and eleventh birthday at the Elks Hotel in Hollywood, California. This event will be the first to bring together an international group of artists who have been working closely together on the subliminal.

Its a first for us and a first for you, first come first served. We've planned this ourselves travelling back and forth across the globe and have decided as with most of our activities that it should be done and so we are doing it ourselves. We've worked out the script and booked the space and now we would like to inform you of some of the surprises in store. All of us would like this to be an occasion to make available a substantial body of work and information that you can actively work with, as we do, changing things by seeing them differently.

We have received a great deal of enthusiastic encouragement from the international artists' community. ANT FARM is applying for a grant under the National Endowment for the Arts to provide video coverage of the event. Willoughby Sharp, Mighty Mogul of the art scene, has provided advance publicity in AVALANCHE MAGAZINE. The correspondence network's very own zine FILE published by GENERAL IDEA, Toronto, is planning a special supplement. And there is lots more, including prints, publications, multiples, zines and the grand birthday dinner for one hundred guests.

If you would like to find out more about ART'S BIRTHDAY and THE HOLLYWOOD DECCA DANCE, reserve seats for the dinner or put in an advance order for the information art package, please contact us right away.

Best regards,

Michael Morris

Michael Morris
(for the Eternal Network)
c/o Image Bank
303 East 8th Avenue,
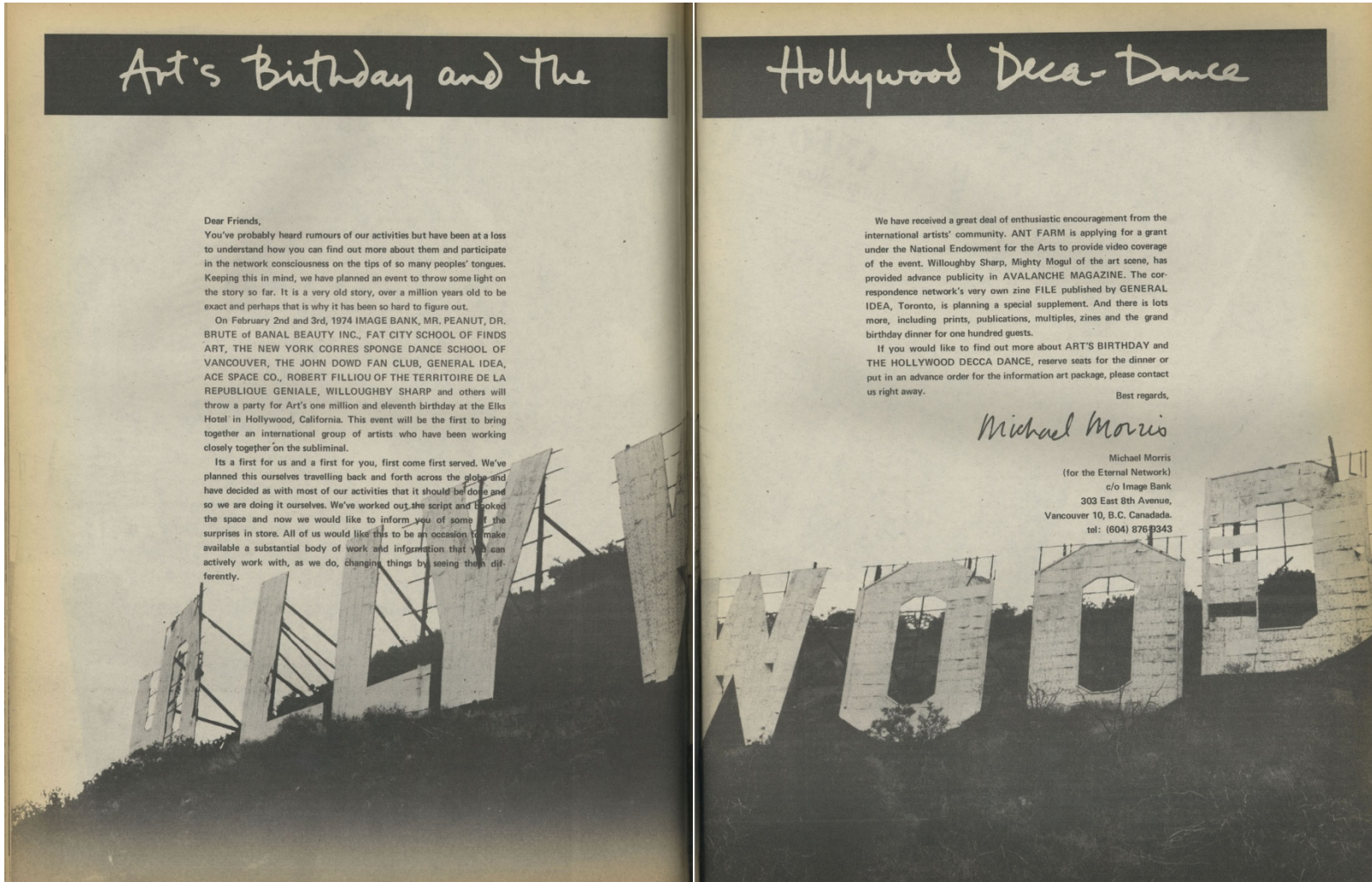Vancouver 10, B.C. Canadada.
tel: (604) 876-9343

Figure 4
Michael Morris, Announcement for Art's Birthday, in *FILE* (December 1973)

Figure 5
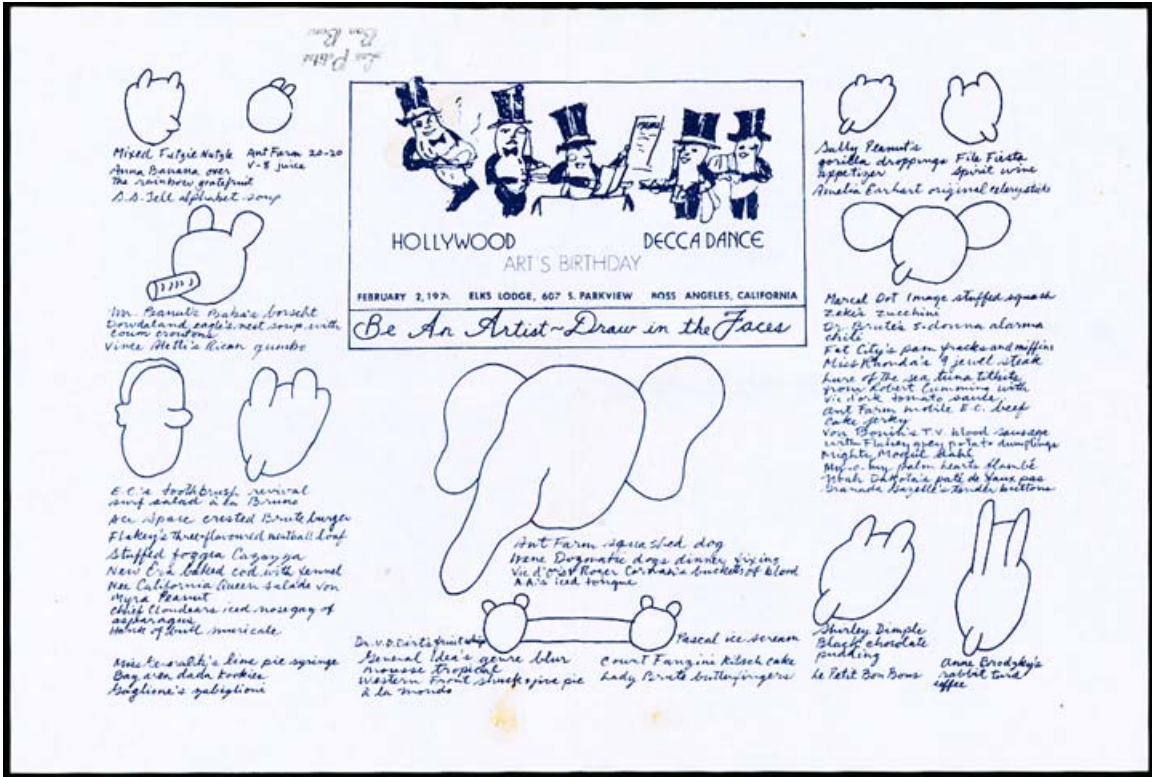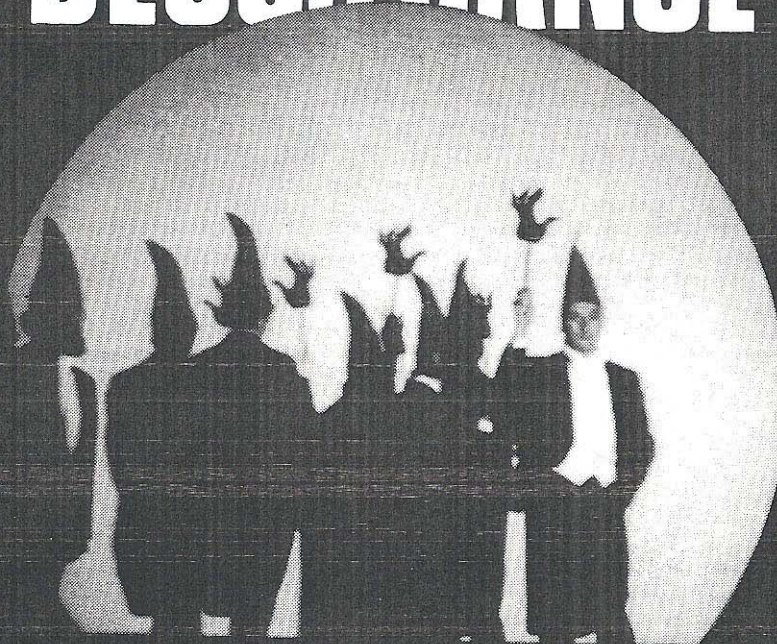"Mondo Artie Episode No. 1681," *IS.* (Fall 1975)

Figure 6
Be an Artist Draw in the Faces, placemat, 1974

Figure 7
Flyer for screening of Art's Birthday at A Space, 1974
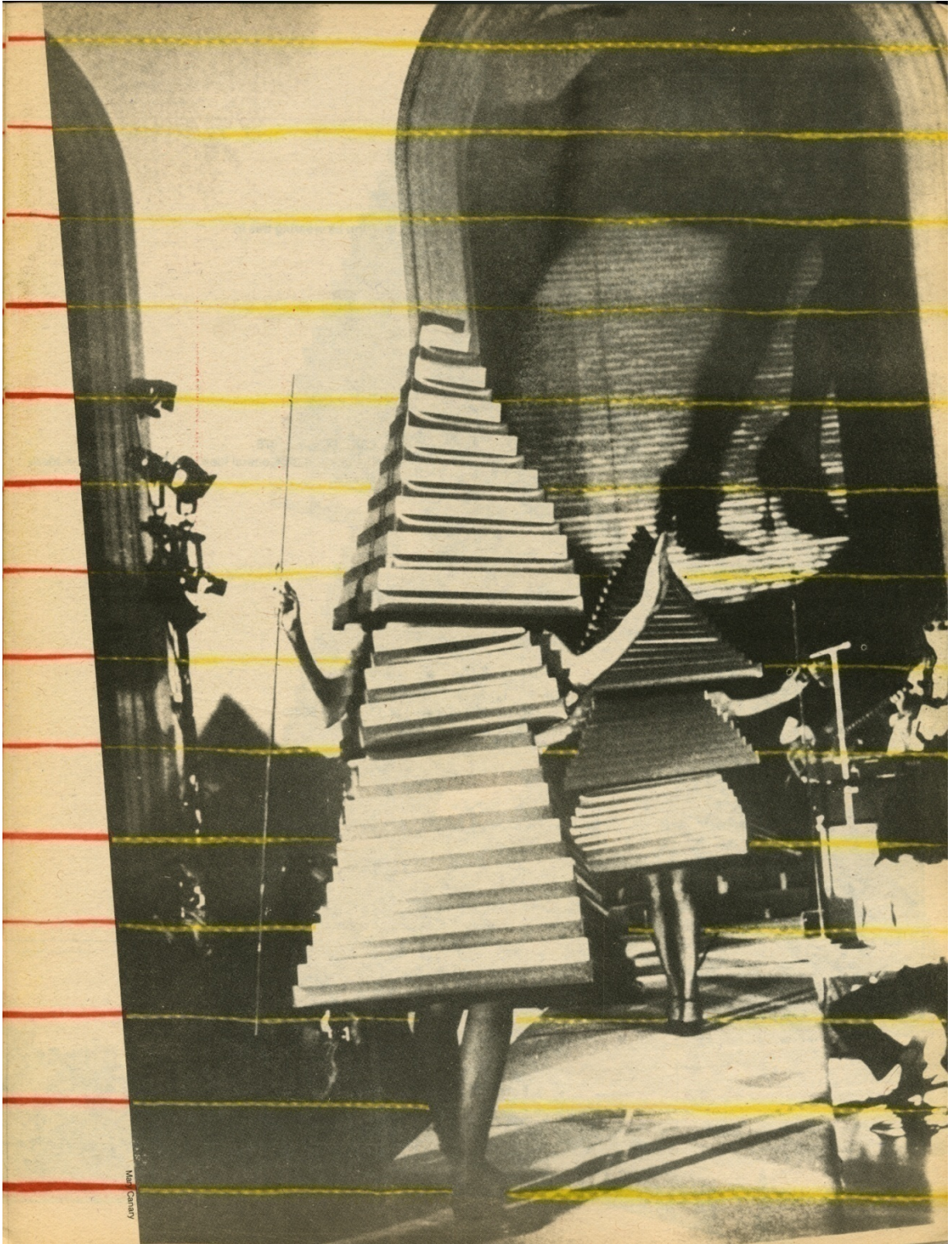
Figure 8
Corres Sponge Dancers on L'Escalier de Honneur, Hollywood DeccaDance, 1974
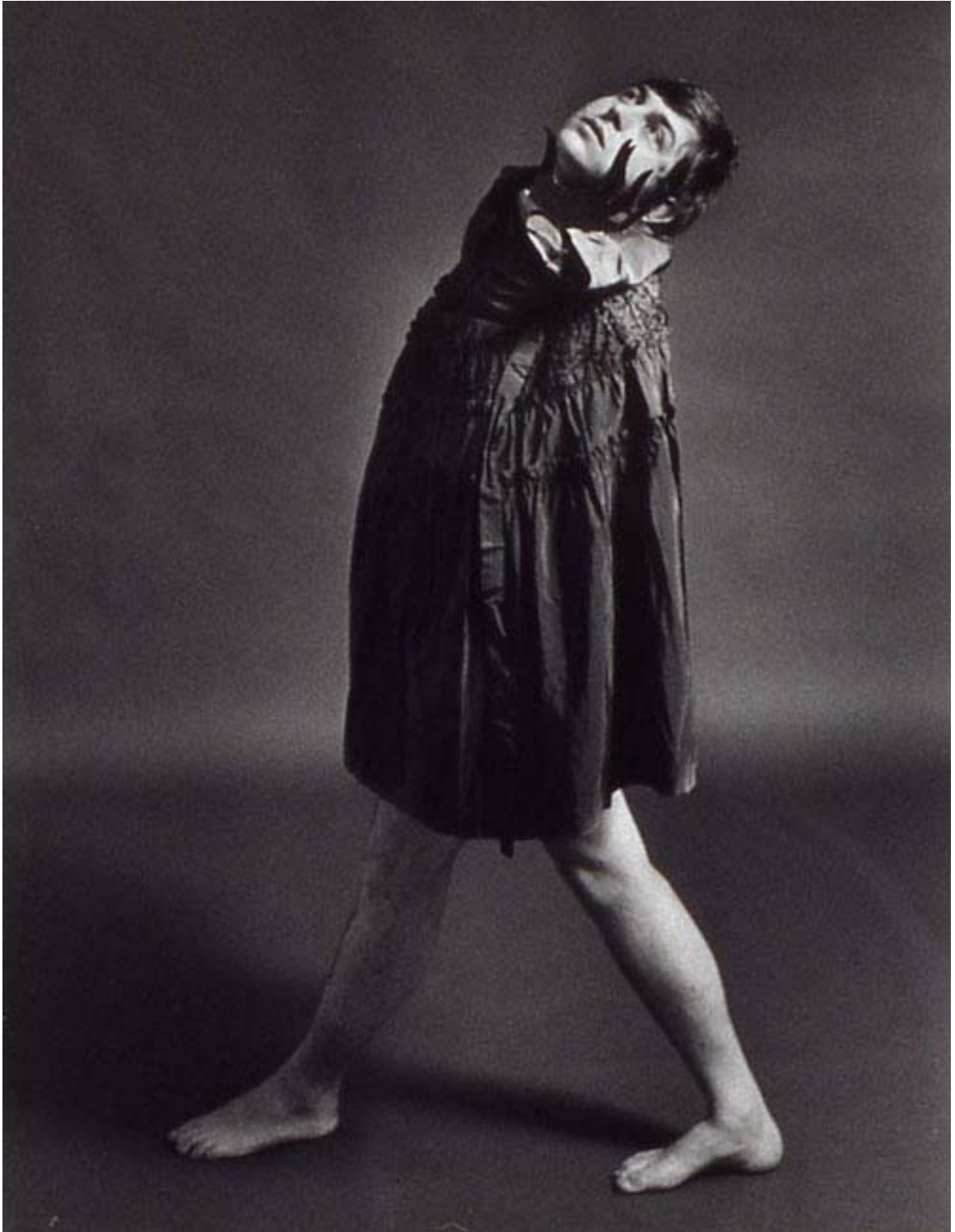
Figure 9
Marcel Dot, entry photograph for the 1971 Miss General Idea Pageant, 1971
Photograph by Vincent Trasov

Figure 10
General Idea, *Going Thru the Motions*, 1975, from *FILE* (Summer 1978)
(showing models carrying Hand of the Spirit wands)

Figure 11
Sandy Stagg modeling Hand of the Spirit Makeup, c. 1974

Figure 12
Found imagery of hand mannequins, from General Idea fonds

Figure 13
Glenn Lewis, *Great Wall of '84*, 1974

Figure 14
Michael Morris, *Hand of the Spirit Talisman*, 1972

Figure 15
Michael Morris wearing *Hand of the Spirit Talisman*, 1974

Figure 16
Advertisement for *Fanzini Goes to the Movies* in *FILE* (February 1974)
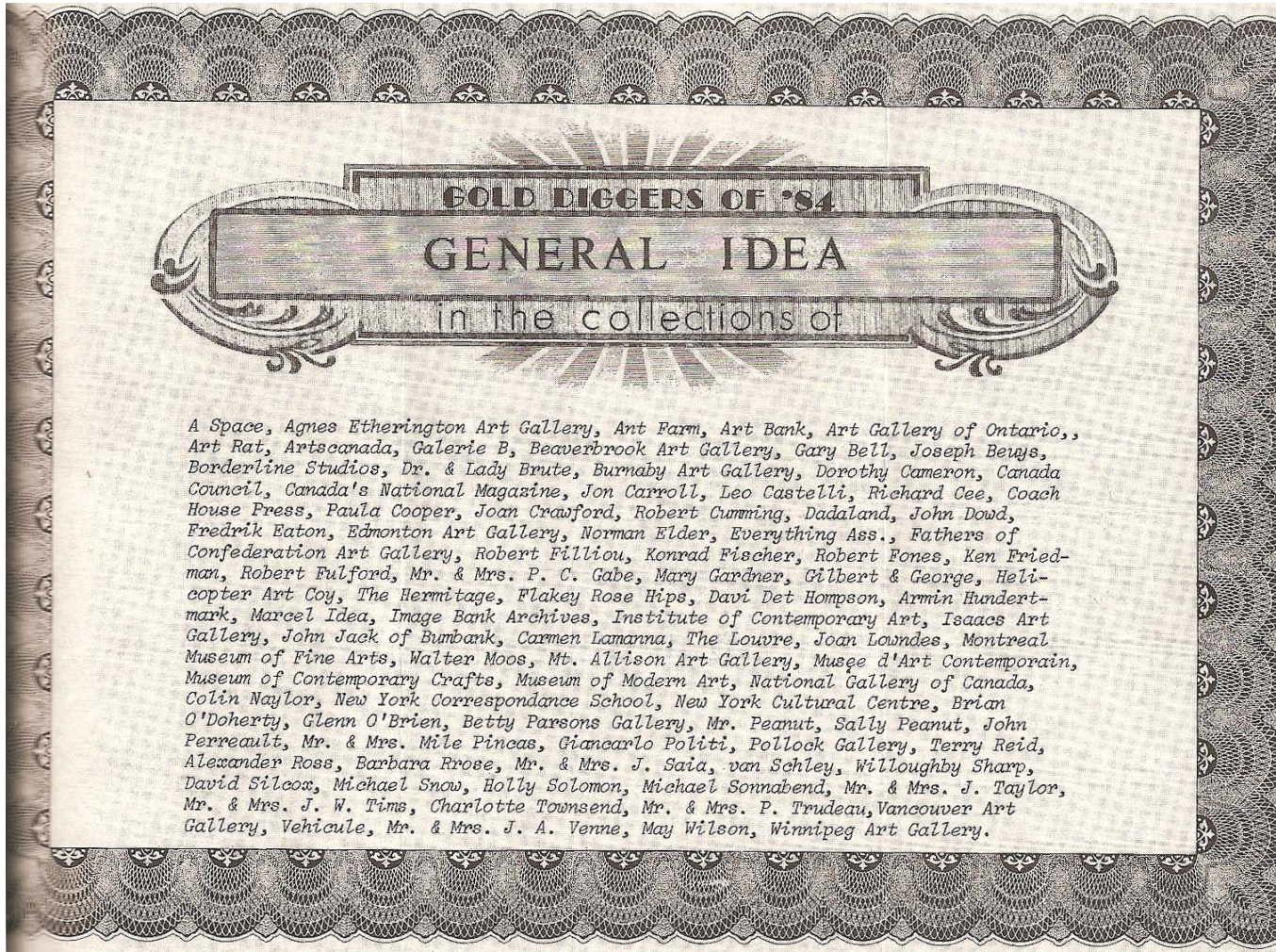
Figure 17
Kate Craig, *Flying Leopard*, 1974

Figure 18
General Idea, *Gold Diggers of '84*, **1972**

LETTERS
TO THE EDITORS

CONTINUED

A Banana by any other name . . .

Dear Anna Banana

I'm coconuts about you. When kissed do you taste like Rice Crispies and [bananas]? Are you thick skinned? "Don't tread on me!" is your motto—if they do, they'll slip. Next to Fay Wray, are you King Kong's true love? Banana, you are all natural with no artificial anything. Do you split on Sunday? Is Bill Gaglione for real?

—Aram Boyajian

THE WITNESS

—by Al Blaster

It emerged into a wide horizon of ice and wind. There was a whirling blast of steel blue and eerie orange. Tell me that it will tweak a nerve of nostalgia for the sociologically minded and that this is communication without information.

For the sociologically—wait. This is an interlude for performance at ART CAUSE GROUP during the next visit by a lady or gentleman of the press corpse ("The Witness.")

Or ANYONE, for that matter; this short pulp play is an attempt at manipulating the alternative universe theme to the point of momentary reality based on pure collusion:

20 below zero; THE WITNESS enters.

In their dead-of-winter-gallery-laird, THE ART CAUSE GROUP persuades THE WITNESS to have a chair and discuss THE THEORY OF RECONSTITUTED ENVIRONMENT. This theory teaches the possibility of subduing a hostile environment by use of Selected Archetypes and Radical Hypnotic Suggestion.

For example, low-cost heating for cold climates could be achieved by introducing Archetypes from Mexico or one of the southern desert states. THE GROUP elaborates on this excitedly for the WITNESS:

"Suppose this space was transformed into Replica of 1930's Arizona truck-stop cafe?"

That is, THE GROUP explains, set up a grill, install stools, a fly-specked counter broken screen door, etc. The sensation that this model was in fact THE ONE AND ONLY TRUE ENVIRONMENT could be augmented by Hypnotic Suggestion. The temp would rise accordingly, with resulting big savings in fuel-heating costs. And this Suggestion via Hypnosis could be extended as time went on, beyond the immediate confines of the original space—farther and farther out-of-doors, ultimately. No end to the possibilities says THE GROUP.

"Put in some scrub and cactus outside." "Gas pumps—"

"Lots of those truck-stop places have little zoos out back—we could have a few animal cages, have some bear cubs. A coyote . . . "

"A mangy puma would be nice!"

THE WITNESS blinks, regarding them. They seem so—

"Keep augmenting the Hypnotic Suggestion!" "Eventually take in a whole city block with it—" "City block my-eye! The whole town."

—so gone on this.

"Buzzards wheeling in the sky—!" "Sky as blue as a copper penny and Ray Bradbury—" Etc, etc. It should build and build.

Just a fervor of the GROUP for this THEORY OF RECONSTITUTED ENVIRONMENT begins to strain the limits of decency, a Martin or gumbus is whipped out for the last straw, a moaning impassioned song:

PING . . .
. . . . PING
PING . . . .
. . . . PING

. . . . menus printed in purple ink. Unbearable sounds at noon of sizzling meat. Ticking gas pumps count the heat—go ping!

Ping . . . .
. . . . ping
Ping . . . .
. . . . ping

. . . . I think if we could make it hot enough I think we could make it warm enough . . . . PING . . . . (etc)

At this point, the issue is put directly to THE WITNESS: "WELL, WHAT DO YOU THINK?"

Reticence. Skepticism: "Huh. . . well— I don't know . . ."

The Subject is immediately dropped. Change it—go on to something else. There should be, however, a note of sadness. A vague tinge of regret—as though a doorway to a beautiful world has been reluctantly—but firmly—closed, THE WITNESS somehow excluded from something wonderful, a secret, forever. Later as he/she comes out of the building, THE WITNESS meets a MAN going in dressed only in red bathing trunks. And the MAN is whistling. The WITNESS goes slowly on out into the wide blast horizon of freezing ice and wind and how it might have lived—shivers?   —C.A.S.F.C.
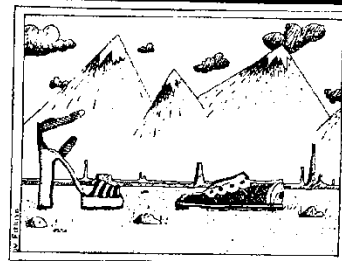
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Figure 19
Page from *VILE* 3, no. 2 (1977), showing Asco's No Movie at bottom