When Fans of Pricey Video Art Can Get It Free

By GREG ALLEN

MATTHEW BARNEY had long since captured the attention of art world insiders, but this year he was catapulted into mainstream cultural awareness, largely by "The Cremaster Cycle," his spectacular five-film opus. At the Guggenheim Museum last spring, over 300,000 people came to see a huge exhibition of his work, including a continuous display of his videos. The final and most elaborate of his films, "Cremaster 3," screened at this year's Sundance Film Festival. Palm Pictures is currently releasing the entire seven-hour-plus cycle in movie theaters around the country.

Not so long ago, the idea that video could be a medium for artistic expression was radical fringe; today, as Mr. Barney's success shows, it has become conventional cultural wisdom. And so, increasingly, is the idea that video, along with film, animation, and slide-based work, can be sold in the same exclusive manner as painting and sculpture. Through the Barbara Gladstone Gallery, Mr. Barney sold each "Cremaster" film in a limited edition of 10, numbered and encased in table-size vitrines. These pieces have since sold at auction for as much as $387,500. Other emerging stars like Pipilotti Rist, the Swiss installation artist, or Pierre Huyghe, the French recipient of the 2002 Hugo Boss Award, also now command five- and six-figure prices for their video work.

But while artists and dealers are limiting the supply of videos, and placing them in the private homes of wealthy patrons, a new breed of collector has staged a quiet revolt. These aren't the people who keep auction prices afloat, or whose lavish support turns struggling newcomers into art-world celebrities. Instead, these are journalists, gallery staffers, professors and art students who trade bootleg copies of the coveted videos — just as Napster users did with MP3 files. Because digital technology makes these bootlegs so easy to duplicate and distribute, and because they are so close to the "original" editions sold in galleries, they pose an intriguing challenge to the authenticity on which art's value is traditionally based.
Bootlegs might be made from promotional copies sent out by galleries to critics, curators and potential buyers, or by artists in search of a gallery. "Long before the 'Cremaster Cycle,' Matthew Barney provided VHS copies of his works for 'private use' to those closely involved in the productions," recalls Jade Dellinger, a curator and friend of the artist, by e-mail. "In at least one instance, a former assistant-crew member distributed some copies (of his copies), and has not worked for Matthew since." Sometimes collectors who have bought the videos at full price have even discreetly passed unauthorized copies to fellow enthusiasts.

Even if it's for love and not money, though, copying and distributing work without the artist's permission is against the law. "Whether it is video or a painting, the principle is the same: artists own and control the copyright to their work," explains Dr. Theodore Feder, president of the Artists Rights Society, which manages and monitors copyrights for artists. None of these underground traders have been prosecuted — yet — but the music industry's recent legal pursuit of online file swappers prompts most traders to keep a low profile.

Nevertheless, Chris Hughes, a 25-year-old artist and self-taught video art expert, has put his entire catalog online, at www.freehomepages.com/crhughes/. With 1,500 works, representing early pioneers like Vito Acconci and Yoko Ono as well as current stars like Mr. Huyghe, Douglas Gordon and Gillian Wearing, the breadth of Mr. Hughes's collection rivals those of many museums. The difference, however, is that he got almost all of it through unsanctioned trading.

Mr. Hughes knows that his hobby isn't exactly prudent, but argues that it's in keeping with the spirit of video art, if not the letter of the law. "Video art specifically arose out of a desire to create an immediately accessible, infinitely reproducible art form," he explains via e-mail. "The viral quality of video is essential to the nature of its artistic use." He says he meets his sources on the annual circuit of art fairs, or they find his Web site deep in the Google results for some obscure title. Whatever their background, though, he says they have one thing in common: they request the "Cremaster" films above all others. "Hands down," he says. "I must get half a dozen requests a week for those." The fact that the Barbara Gladstone Gallery never sends out promotional copies is one reason the bootlegs are so scarce; so, presumably, is the high cost of the originals. Mr. Hughes had managed to scare up high-quality copies of the first four films, but he's not satisfied with the quality of his copy of "Cremaster 3." He has spent nearly a year patiently working his connections, so far in vain, to locate a DVD-quality copy to complete his set.

In its earliest days, video art had little market value. Few people knew about it, and fewer still thought it could be collected. "Back then," notes Barbara London, associate curator of video at the Museum of Modern Art, "video was as intangible as performance art." When the art dealer Leo Castelli showed projected film works by four sculptors (Richard Serra, Bruce Nauman, Bob Morris and Robert Smithson) at his inaugural exhibit in 1971, Ms. London continues, "Leo distributed their tapes as 'unlimited editions' for around $250. This was affordable to museums, public libraries, art schools and young collectors."

The point was to make broader audiences aware of the emerging medium, and it worked. As dealers and collectors became interested, however, the inexpensive, unlimited tapes were transformed to very limited, valuable art objects.

But some critics — even some video artists themselves — have argued that such a business model, useful in the sale of prints, cast sculptures and photography, is meaningless for video. "For videos, editions are fake," says Pierre Huyghe, in a
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When Rodin could only cast three sculptures of a nude before the mold lost its sharpness, it made sense. But all my works are on my hard drive, in ones and zeros." His dealer, Marian Goodman, has nonetheless sold certified copies of Mr. Huyghe's videos for prices estimated in the high five figures. Artists have the same right as anyone else to make a living, she points out, and limited editions represent a "logical, established tradition" which makes that possible.

Most of the people who trade bootleg videos wouldn't be able to afford the real thing, so just how directly their activities diminish artists' profits is hard to calculate. But indisputably they diminish the control that artists are able to exert over how and where their work is seen. Consider Steve McQueen, for example, who values the all-encompassing sensory experience of his video installations so much, he resists all attempts to screen his work on a monitor. So far, Mr. Hughes says, that guarded approach has kept Mr. McQueen's works out of traders' hands. But it may be only a matter of time until the first bootlegs appear, and then they could even be viewed on a laptop.

Loss of control can also yield fortuitous results, however, by allowing video artists to experiment with one another's work in much the same way that musicians sample and remix one another's songs. (Because the experiments are artistic projects in their own right, they may not violate copyright law.) In an editing tour de force, the Swiss artist Christian Marclay combined over 600 sound and film clips from over a hundred classic movies to create an intense, 15-minute musical composition, synchronized over four 10-foot screens. In preparing the work, which was commissioned by SFMOMA and the Grand Museum of Luxembourg, and exhibited in New York at the Paula Cooper Gallery, Mr. Marclay didn't bother to pursue the rights to any of those films. Instead he pulled freely and without permission from whatever movie tapes or DVD's he could lay his hands on.

And a young Baltimore video artist, Jon Routson, whose work explores bootlegging itself, has tackled Matthew Barney's work head-on. In April at New York's Team Gallery, Mr. Routson showed his "made for TV" version of "Cremaster 4." He cut a grainy VHS bootleg of Mr. Barney's 45-minute film down to 22 minutes, dropped in actual commercials, compressed the end credits and even floated ABC's logo in the lower corner of the screen. The result: a hilarious, smart, and brazen work, which drew critical praise and which may be a sign of things to come.

A few artists of the current generation have even begun to experiment, once again, with making their work available in unlimited editions. In explaining the point of "Point of View: A Contemporary DVD Anthology of the Moving Image," the New Museum of Contemporary Art, which co-produced it, says the 11-disc set "will address the growing need for accessibility to the work of some of the most important artists working in film, video and digital imagery today." Tentatively priced at $1,000, it's more expensive than "The Sopranos: Season 2" by a factor of 10 or so. Some artists are even venturing into the mass market. The Finnish artist Eija-Liisa Ahtila announced a DVD compilation that will sell in stores, not galleries. And on Aug. 26, Art House Films, a specialty distributor, will release "The Order: From Cremaster 3," a DVD excerpt from the film, in which Mr. Barney scales the rotunda of the Guggenheim Museum. At $25, it's an inexpensive — and legal — way to watch "Cremaster" at home.

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