

No
Beginning
and
No
End

Since the early 1990s Matthew Barney has made a name for himself on the international art scene as a multimedia artist. His best-known work is the five-part Cremaster cycle, which he began in 1994. The numbering alone contradicts the series' ordering principle: Cremaster 4 dates from 1994, followed by Cremaster 1 in 1995, part 5 in 1997, part 2 in 1999 and finally the (so far) final part, numbered 3, which dates from 2002.

"Cremaster" is the medical term for the muscle which raises or lowers the human testicles depending on the ambient temperature. The title of the cycle thus stands as an image for the conflict with will-power, which cannot control the muscle, for active sexuality and physiological dependency.

Anyone who sees the films, or even just stills from the films, or the sculptures or installations or drawings of this visual artist will understand immediately that Matthew Barney has no beginning and no end. He is pure fantasy, which the artist nonetheless seeks to rationally control. Like no other artist of our age, the artist Matthew Barney plays as Homo ludens with the Homo sapiens Matthew Barney. The Homo ludens is strong, drenched in fantasy, infinite. The Homo sapiens intervenes time and again, he controls the finite. Nothing is mere chance in Matthew Barney's eruptions of fantasy.

At the presentation of these videos in the context of the Guggenheim Foundation's exhibition in the Kunstmuseum Bonn (2006/2007), Matthew Barney showed them simultaneously in one room and in a particular selection. This made it clear that in the simultaneity of the pictures the statement was constantly changing, if only because of the different running times of the videos. New associations between the pictures were continually forming, which for their part release undreamt-of fantasies in the viewer.

The Cremaster cycle is not a medical cycle, however, seeking to explain to students what goes on below the belt in the male body, but rather a self-contained aesthetic system, albeit one of extreme complication. Barney's films and sculptures, his photographs and installations, deal primarily with human beings and their corporeal potential. To this end Matthew Barney uses the

ancient myths and legends. His art is characterized time and again by legendary figures such as the American football star Jim Otto, the escapologist Harry Houdini or the double murderer Gary Gilmore. They embody the rational trigger for the fantastical, often surreal-seeming pictorial worlds which, kaleidoscopically, address themes that we otherwise know only from sport, medicine, biology, sex, dreams and nightmares, history and mythology. Matthew Barney can combine all of this, relate these elements to each other. He brings together pictorial worlds that are not meant for each other. He uses these references and interferences to show that the potential of a world which nowadays we can measure down to the last nanoparticle is very far from being plumbed. For human beings, the world remains the biggest secret.

Matthew Barney snatches a wide variety of pictorial worlds from this secret by visually ritualizing them. Thus also in the latest work, "De Lama Lâmina". This Portuguese title can be translated into English as "Of Mud, A Blade": contradictions of contrasting aggregates and images.

The tools the artist uses to create his art consist therefore not just of painting with brushes, turpentine etc. Barney is an artist who thinks out and invents alone, before collaborating with an incredible number of people, particularly in the Cremaster cycle. Barney needs choreographers, a production team, digital animators, film editors, make-up artistes, hair stylists, composers, sound-designers, publishers, administrative assistants, fabricators, production assistants and the rest. A list of all those involved in just one Cremaster tape would, it is true, be exciting, but would take up too much space.

The artist uses specialists for various tasks without thereby simplifying his role as artist. Only through his impulses can these experts collaborate in a team in such a way that the maxims of Barney's challenges can take on pictorial form. He has constantly to fall back on the skills of his fellow-players in order to conjure up the incredible visions which sometimes recall the effects of epic films. However Matthew Barney is not concerned with the

narrative, but primarily with expanding his own abilities to encircle body, imagination, finances, organization and intellect. For this reason in the Cremaster cycle he plays an important role himself as an actor. Barney's success lies in the fact that he plays a part and has the pictures continually escalate in order to master the difficulties of his enterprise. This applies likewise to viewers when they experience this boundary-defying art.

Resistance implies interference. This is a basic element of Barney's artistic intention. Jerry Saltz writes in the catalogue of the Sammlung Goetz (Munich, 1996) of "the third sex. Note to Matthew Barney's Cremaster 4". Saltz seeks give instructions to help the viewer to understand the complexity of Barney's art, which however is still always idiosyncratic and of almost primitive directness. Cremaster 4 ushers in a new phase in the artist's development.

In 1991 Matthew Barney, who was born in San Francisco, California, in 1967, graduated from Yale University with a BA in 1989, and now lives and works in New York, had his first solo exhibition in the city's Barbara Gladstone Gallery. In 1991 his art was a kind of coarse mixture of sculpture, psychosexual performance, video and athletics: works that turned increasing to film, an aesthetic crossover of hitherto unknown dimensions. In the early works there are sculptural elements with monitors. Thus "Drawing Restraint 7", a work dating from 1993, and a harbinger in many respects of Cremaster 4, dispenses almost entirely with objects of any description: instead, three monitors hang with a single connection from the ceiling. The installation is a response to the narrative video works of Nam June Paik, who was awarded the Kaiserring in 1991. The only component of "Drawing Restraint 7" which could be called sculptural is a shimmering pencil and Vaseline drawing in a frame of self-lubricating plastic, hanging on the wall of a room lit by a "high-abuse fluorescent fixture". Saltz writes in this connexion: "Sometimes a checklist of Barney's materials resembles a spooky industrial catalog."

With Cremaster 4, Barney has for the first time made a stand-alone video film. Cremaster is set on the

Isle of Man. The first picture depicts a house at the end of a long pier extending out into the sea. A red-haired satyr-like Loughton Candidate (played by Barney himself) starts to tap-dance a hole in the floor, in the process of which three muscular fairies keep trying to help or hinder him. A motor-cycle race begins. The Loughton Candidate dances his way through the floor of the pier, through the sea and through the sea-bed, and then down a long narrow subterranean tunnel, through which he crawls with great effort, the longest sequence in the film, in order finally to work his way up to the surface: life, death, birth.

The fairies appear in changing guises, picnic, play and languish, act as a pit-stop team for one of the two motor-cycles. They stymie progress. The motor-cycles race in opposite directions to meet again at the end.

The at first confusing film has a magnificent soundtrack: brisk, rhythmic tap-dance noises, the sound of air bubbles, gooey Vaseline being dug through, drumming, bag-pipes, the roaring of two-stroke motorcycle engines – and all without a word being spoken throughout the film, as in early silent movies, or ballet, or symphonies or mime. Cremaster 4 shows pictures which localize, move and trigger inner energies, in order to allow the experience of alternative actions and realities.

The video is 42 minutes long, and has a rapid alternation of takes. A single scene is never on screen for long. No narrative hierarchy emerges. The actors cannot develop. They remain themselves for ever. They do not act towards any culmination.

Dreamlike, hallucinogenic characters in the story stage a drama in which special effects, prosthetic aids and eerie locations result in an action adventure consisting of ordeals, deaths, trials and adversity. There are accidents, frustrated plans, despair and successes, blood and courageous behaviour. Between horror and biological thriller all the way to pornography, sexually unusual, sexually determined biological objects are shown, which are more or less at the focus of the film. Sigmund Freud would immediately think up a new book. Without Freud, Barney could not have been so precise about his controlled breaks with the normal. But Barney

seeks to define this latter differently from the psychologist. The artist re-discovers the normal. He acts within its parameters. Matthew Barney has no beginning and no end..

Jerry Saltz seeks to describe the problems of reception with encouragements. First: pay close attention. For everything that happens in the film happens for a particular reason, nothing is arbitrary. Secondly: the speed. In *Cremaster 4* everything happens very fast. In the 39 minutes before the final credits, which you really have to read to understand this film, there are roughly 325 cuts. A scene is on average 7.2 seconds long, some last only an instant and a lot happens in all of them. We continually recognize in passing symbolic images, colour significance or material interpretations. The film can never be appreciated in its entirety. It has no beginning and no end.

Thirdly: the element of time plays a particular role. Saltz talks about a developmental time which prevents things ever being still in Barney's world. Fourthly: the idea of trial or ordeal dominates. Barney always sets a task that has to be fulfilled. For the artist, resistance equals growth.

Cremaster is something like Barney's *Ring Cycle*; not the one from Bayreuth, but the one from New York. As with Richard Wagner, what we hear in *Cremaster* is a super-hero, a gangster from the world of comics, but it is at the same time the medical term for a muscle in the male body. In the search for a space-world without aesthetic niches, Barney meets another Kaiserring holder: Anselm Kiefer.

In *Cremaster 4* four persons play a major role, thus for example the Loughton Candidate. He stands for the Loughton ram, in other words the animal indigenous to the Isle of Man. The Candidate tries to be a Loughton. Barney deploys the accompanying colours in a Symbolist way. But they remain encrypted. The symbolic use of colours in the visual arts is old enough: if we address the Western canon, black stands for death, red is feeling, love and hate, yellow is the sun or the divine or also humiliation, jealousy, deceit and betrayal.

The fairies function as minor supernatural beings. In *Cremaster 4* there are three of them, played by three

female bodybuilders, people who shape their bodies by their own rules. Barney found them by placing ads in newspapers. The film deals with gravity and asymmetry. In an interview from Thyrza Nichols Goodeve (cat. Goetz) we learn something about Matthew Barney's thought-fields. He compares his work metaphorically to a bullfight.

Matthew Barney: "Have you ever seen a bullfight? There's this passage when the bull's head gets heavy and tired and it bows down to the bullfighter. The bullfighter cocks his hips and walks toward the bull, exhibiting his crotch. They call it 'showing sex', I think that's the translation." What it's all about are the images that come across, this roller-coaster ride experienced by the images and the beholders; precision and control play a dominant role in the process.

Matthew Barney is concerned with a new visual centre which lies as an option between them, but not with boundary-crossing as an intuitive condition which harbours the possibility of boundary-crossing. He seeks the kind of intuition which one obtains through the cognitive experience of a physical process. "Back at school I was working on these drawing projects that were about the relationship between resistance and creativity. I was interested in hyper-self-imposed resistance, so I wore a restraining device to make drawings. They were linked to my interest in how a muscle can grow under the resistance of a weight."

Sport and above all American football play a major role, since here order can be created out of a totally confusing field of people. For Barney it is "really beautiful how – eventually – a hole is made in that haze."

Matthew Barney researches and searches for a complex, labyrinthine field. Each work stands on its own, and at the same time has a series of many, many more levels. Barney seeks a superordinate system for the whole. "I always think of those videos as only a possible narrative of what might have happened in that space: rather than being truths, they're proposals. For me it's like that Caspar David Friedrich painting, 'Wanderer above the Sea of Fog', where a man with his back to the viewer is standing in an exaggerated contrapposto on a

rock looking out over the valley. The painting is in a state of suspension – you know eventually he's going to have to turn round and activate the proscenium, but for the moment he's trapped in a state of potential."

These contrasts live between desire and ability, between hubris and repressed omnipotence. Matthew Barney seeks the threshold, because that is where those amazing things happen, which become event and reality as exciting stories that take their course in the interior. Space is thus also the interior space for the inwardness of the ego, which with the help of today's technologies is dissolving the boundaries between body and machine.

When everything is put together, the result is a great game of combinations, a game of glass beads played by Homo sapiens. "The pieces have become more about story-telling: 'character-zones' are created for a different project, and as they reach their limit of development (or lack of it), the remaining, unarticulated aspects of that zone become the outline for the next set of characters." (M.B.).

The materials used by the artist are not of great robustness. They have a transient character: Vaseline for example plays a particular role, that of the continually changing materials, impossible ever to pin down and define, which only ever bear numerous possibilities within them. Here Barney's artistic intention, in particular in the drawings, but also in his fundamental considerations, coincides with that of another holder of the Kaiserring, Joseph Beuys.

Like the cosmo-aesthete from the Rhineland, the Californian is interested in science and philosophy. For Cremaster he attended a preparatory course for would-be doctors ("pre-med"), in order to understand what the physical reality looked like.

Matthew Barney likes to talk about the idea of a pre-genital model such as is played out especially in. The sexual is present everywhere in the artist's works, everywhere or nowhere, with no beginning and no end. Matthew Barney: "Well, I guess for me, if it's erotic, it's autoerotic."

With the Cremaster cycle Matthew Barney has become the only video artist to succeed in getting into

public cinemas. He has managed to reduce the fantasy claims of Hollywood to a minimum, because his pictorial worlds already serve as stimuli for Hollywood productions. But commercial productions can never achieve this artistic standard. Barney works, not least thanks to his dealer Barbara Gladstone, with large teams, but without the economic pressure to recoup production costs at the box-office and then go on to make a profit. Here Barney shows himself to be the classical artist who does not think in terms of an ulterior purpose, an artist whose path is determined by himself alone.

Even as a student Barney succeeded in amazing the art world. Many fellow-artists saw him as the frontrunner and the forerunner in this professional race. When he was 30, he catapulted himself into the firmament of art stars. He had already held touring exhibitions, Artforum had devoted a title story to him. He was involved in documenta IX, in two Whitney Biennials. He won the Europa 2000 prize, took part in Aperto '93 at the 45th Venice Biennale, and won the Hugo Boss Award in 1996. His career was the subject of a New York Times Magazine. At the age of 34, he became the youngest artist ever to have a full-scale retrospective offered him at the Guggenheim Museum in New York: it opened in February 2003. At the tender age of 28, Matthew Barney was regarded as "the hottest young conceptual/performance artist/sculptor in the history of modern art and definitely the hottest at this moment." (Vicki Woods, Matthew Barney, Personality Parade, Vogue, January 1996, 160). In the New York Times Magazine (10 October 1999) Michael Kimmelman called him "the most crucial artist of his generation" and Thomas Frank speaks, in view of the economic-aesthetic boom, of "cathedral capitalism" (quoted from Linda Weintraub, Making Contemporary Art, 2003, Matthew Barney).

Barney's world consists of a modest personality and spectacular art. A Cremaster video costs 1.7 million dollars to make. Barney is intent on maximizing the energy in his productions, of vocalizing his metabolism. Here he is helped by his experience as a pre-med student and by his training as an athlete. This playing with the knowledge of the human body and the machines with which it alters

itself. The deployment of all these experiences serves him as a symbol of all the forms of human enhancement. For all the complexity of his works, Matthew Barney is concerned only with their production, not their consumption. He seeks output, not input. He knows the cost, but it does not dictate the price which determines the artistic definition of Matthew Barney's success. That is why, in her investigation, Linda Weintraub leaves the last word to Matthew Barney: "I used to think about a three-phase diagram: Situation, condition, production ... between discipline and desire ... a form that has form, but it isn't overdetermined (quoted from Goodeve, "Travels in Hypertrophy" 117, Artforum, May 1995, 68/69).

In the (now much sought-after) supplement to the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* of 12 November 1998, edition no 46, which was designed by the then 31-year-old artist, Matthew Barney says: "My head is like a cockpit". In an interview, Matthew Barney defends himself against the idea that he isn't a proper director, or a proper painter, or a proper action-artist. Matthew Barney makes it clear that he is a sculptor, and as such he fits seamlessly into the series of Goslar Kaiserring winners (which do not include any film-makers). He describes how when he sets to work, he has a clear goal in view, namely a sculpture. The films serve him primarily as a kind of quarry, from which he can break out individual pieces which then stand for themselves. Individual elements that occur in the film as props or part of the scenery then become an installation, so in the stricter sense, he says, they are already sculptures.

When the artist speaks of hypertrophy he notes, without quoting Leonardo's body-in-a-circle, that the muscle is shaped, and he believes it to be the same with the artistic form. In this way it can grow, and what he has done is translate the system into the language of art. He compares it to a digestive system: everything has to pass through, it takes on various forms, and is finally excreted. Art cannot be more human, human beings cannot experience their bodies in a more imaginative way.

Dieter Ronte, Bonn, September 2007