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Matthew Barney, Barbara Gladstone Gallery, October 19 - November 16, 1991

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Osweet and glorious it certainly must be, as an artist of 24, to have a one person show at a big money gallery, to be a major buzz up and down the SoHo streets, to be featured on the cover of Artforum a month before showing in New York (!), to have collectors lining up around the block. In short, to be a nascent superstar in the art firmament, a pumped up commodity in the making, with all the subtle apparatus of art power and career building clicking into place behind you like a well oiled stack of weights in a Nautilus machine.

Such is the enviable fate of Matthew Barney, recently of Yale's art school, an athlete turned aesthete, a climber of gallery walls and ceilings, a practitioner of the new, sexy body/installation/performance art, 90s style, that has them all wowed. This review will not conjecture on Barney's career moves nor on the market manipulations of his art handlers (although what transpired between Gladstone Gallery and Artforum to secure that timely cover picture is anyone's guess). Suffice it to say, in terms of career, that neither the artist nor his gallery are in dire need of coverage from this particular reviewer. They are already playing with a very loaded deck, and have garnered much commerce and gained much critical purple prose for their Major Young Talent. My natural streak of perversity would be to ignore the Barney bandwagon, which seems so ready to coopt my critical prerogative with the juggernaut of consensus (Jerry Saltz in his Arts, May 1991, review of Barney: "...it feels very central, very indispensable. You feel as if this guy may be really important.") On the other hand, as a footnote in Barney's bibliography, perhaps I can execute some deft career moves of my own. At the very least, I might get invited to a fabulous Gladstone dinner or, dare I conjecture, be recognized on the street and smiled upon by the Gladstone mafia.

But art politics aside, what constitutes Barney's great leap forward is to take sports as his cultural readymade, and to bleed all aspects of athletic endeavor – its contents, its discontents, its equipment, its terminology – into the stuff of his performance and his artmaking. Given the centrality of sports to the American ethos, it is surprising that some other inquisitive practitioner has not already appropriated the stuff of

sports. And we don't mean LeRoy Neiman with his action illustrations.

The idea of spectacle, with the gallery as arena and the body, in its various representations, given center stage, is a cornerstone of performance art. And currently, with the emphasis on antiaesthetics, process and performance/installation looming so large in art praxis, the influence of Beuys, Acconci, Nauman and Burden and their work of the early 70s seems to have the greatest resonance. The themes that they advanced – endurance, ritual, rites of passage, shamanism, mortification of the flesh, desire, meditation – are still current and seminal in the contemporary arena of the gallery.

An erstwhile jock, Barney takes the four horsemen of performance art and reinterprets them as the Four Horsemen of Notre Dame; he transforms the gallery/arena into the gallery/gymnasium, while his work incorporates the sweaty ebullience of the workout. (In this context, it is interesting to note that Barney's senior art thesis at Yale, a performance/installation entitled *Field Dressing* (1989), was not held in a typical Art and Architecture School venue, but rather in the huge, neogothic, sarcophogean expanse of the Payne Whitney Athletic Complex, a big gym on the north end of campus fondly referred to as the *Temple of Sweat*) Barney carts the tools of his trade – barbells, dumbbells, free weights, incline benches, pads, curl bars – into the already gymnasium-like space of the gallery, with its polished wood floors, tall white walls, and major airspace. He goes through a particular routine of exercises, which determines the positioning of the equipment on the floor. The actual workout, videotaped in private, is visible on monitors mounted well above eye level and installed throughout the gallery, which play it back for the duration of the show.

The placement of the total installation, incorporating the actual weights and objects of training on the floor (you gotta look down) and the apotheosis of training, the body beautiful poised in videotaped athletic ecstasy (you gotta look up) seems to be leading to an expression of the mind-body duality, of process and affirmation, of feet in the dirt and head in the sky. But Barney is a jock with a difference. His dumbbells, for



Photo: Larry Lane

Matthew Barney, *Transsexualis (decline)*, 1991. Walk-in cooler, petroleum jelly, human chorionic gonadotropin and silicon gel; 12 x 14 x 8,6 feet.

example, are cast from petroleum jelly, and are kept intact by small refrigeration units. The wrestling mat on the floor has a hole stretched out of its middle that is maintained by a sternal retractor. In the Gladstone basement, a large walk-in cooler houses an incline bench, also made of cast petroleum jelly, augmented by supplies of human chorionic gonadotropin (a sexual hormone) and a silicon gel pectoral mold. This latter piece, entitled *Transsexualis (decline)*, seems poised on the cusp of sexual ambivalence and sexual role playing, alternating between the confluence and the polarity of chest = breast.

That last equation, of my own derivation, is somewhat typical of the way Barney titles his pieces, in which a simple title is rarely enough, but is compounded by references and suffixes until it reads like some sort of unholy marriage of anatomy textbook, sports training manual, and technoporn. The full title of the *Transsexualis (decline)* piece referred to above, for example, continues with the notation:

- *Hypertrophy (pectoralis majora) H.C.G.*
- *Jim Blind (m.) - hypothermal penetrator*
- OTTO: Body Temp 66°*

Whatever this might add to our appreciation or understanding of the piece, one thing is clear: Barney is not at all afraid of jargon, adorning the titles of his work with notations such as *Wad in, Wad out, OTTO-shaft, Hemmorioidal Distractor, unitBOLUS* and *Fornication with the Fabric of Space (2 1/2)*, all of these subtle and not so subtle reminders of the body as a metabolic site and a sexual entity, a set of orifices available for filling, emptying, penetration and retraction.

In the videotaped performances, which Barney characteristically jargonizes as “docfragments”, sexual

randiness is again heated up on the bunsen burner of pseudo science. As we first enter the gallery, selected videobits feature the electroBarney, nude save for jockstrap and white bathing cap, straddling a padded gymnastic bench and applying glucose syrup to his abdomen with the slow, in and out thrusting of a hydraulic jack. Remind you of anything? *The mise-en-scene* shifts from a full profile shot of Barney with jack to a closeup of Barney’s corrugated rectus abdominus as it lovingly accepts its application of sticky, sweet syrup. A companion monitor shows two figures (one Barney, the other a hulking shoulder-padded behemoth wearing a black jersey with the number “00” sewn on the back – more on this later) colliding together like opposing members of an offensive and defensive line in football.

Other video monitors crackle with other delectables. Barney crossdressing in a white wedding gown. Barney, in his characteristic costume of jockstrap and bathing cap, scaling the gallery walls and perambulating the ceiling with the aid of a harness, mountaineering clamps, and titanium ice screws, with one particular ice screw often lodged securely up his anus, and dangling provocatively towards the camera. As Lane Relyea notes in his September Artforum essay (the one that accompanied the famous cover pic): “Odds are Barney’s never met a boundary he didn’t want to violate ; besides suspending, contorting, and poking himself, he’s often shown crossdressing as well”.

Barney does take us fairly far along the psychosexual axis, far enough that he could be accused of attempting to arouse our prurient interest, were it not for his extreme dissociation and self-involvement. The character of electroBarney never confronts the camera with anything so direct as a glance or a smile ; his pre-

tense is to totally ignore the viewer, a hermeticism which tends to isolate and privatize the spectacle, as if we were surprising Barney in the unsuspected privacy of his fantasy workout. His energy, rather than being focused on his potential audience, is completely internalized and bent inwards towards the slow, repetitive, ritualistic fulfillment of particular goals: the syringing of his stomach, the navigation of a ceiling. Like a true jock/champion, his eye is on the prize, and all else pales by comparison.

Yet despite the established distance and absence of direct interaction between Barney and his audience, it's still fairly obvious that, one way or another, he is trying to turn us on. Whence arises the question: if this is what he thinks turns us on, then what turns him on?

As befits his self-actualized identity as the art world's Tom Sawyer of sadomasochistic electroporn, Barney adorns his personalized mythology with two male role models who might well be boyhood idols: Harry Houdini, the magician and escape artist from the early part of this century, and Jim Otto, who played center for the Oakland Raiders football team from 1960 to 1975.

The resonance of Houdini seems fairly straightforward: the body in danger, the body confined, the body mortified, and then the body free, escaped, triumphant. Houdini's entire *œuvre* tested and challenged the limitations of the flesh, in much the same way that Barney would like us to view his autoprod-*ding*, his suspensions from gallery walls and ceilings à la the Human Fly. Houdini seems a relatively new mentor, recently grafted onto Barney's pantheon of acknowledged heroes. More fundamental, more seminal, if you will, is the influence of Jim Otto. There is, first, his position of center: a man squatting down, waiting for a signal, then passing a ball between his legs and under his butt to another man who waits, expectantly, to receive this gift and commence action. Center is one of those strange team sport positions, like catcher in baseball, that requires unusual body contortions and carries the additional equipage of subliminal psychosexual paraphernalia. Otto, moreover, played most of his career with a plastic right knee, adding a prosthetic kink to Barney's boyhood identification.

Probably more important to Barney, the semiotician and lover of jargon, than Otto's prowess on the

field, more important than his prosthetic transcendence of physical limitation, is the formal iconography of his name, a quality of which Otto himself was not at all unaware. I remember watching the Raiders on Sunday TV and seeing Otto's famous, autographic, double zero jersey. It made quite an impression, let me tell you, those twin noughts on a field of Raiders black, a double blast of nihilism that cut right through the steady drone of beer commercials and nasal, midwestern sports announcers. For Barney it was, dare I say, the origin of pigskin conceptualism.

In how many ways can Barney OTTO? Let me count the ways. A black and white publicity photograph of Otto, signed and framed in flesh colored prosthetic plastic, greets us as we enter the gallery. The double zero jersey is featured nearby, part of a piece called *The Jim Otto Suite*, and, as mentioned earlier, it also plays a major supporting role in the videos. The word is constantly repeated, like a bit of *poésie concrète*, in the titles of pieces, recurring in mutated forms such as *OTTOblow*, *OTTOshaft*, *Ovalue* and *OTTOgate*. As a reified glyph, OTTO comprises dual orifices, dual exhausts, dual entries, that are mediated, but can also be stuffed or prodded by the T's, mirroring the holes in his work and in himself that Barney is continually evacuating and filling with Vaseline, syrup, surgical hardware, and ice screws.

Circling his O's and crossing his T's are part and parcel of Barney's polymorphous worldview, of flip and flop, gender reversibility, the binary oppositions of open and closed, full and empty, in and out. Similarly, there seems to be a central, binary contradiction at the core of Barney's art that makes it all the more fascinating. Despite his ostensible exhibitionism and the undeniable fact that his work and video performances are created for exhibition, there is an internal compulsion, located viscerally within his bunched muscles, or willfully within the folds of his cerebral cortex, to do exactly what he does regardless of audience. As he plays with himself, self absorbed and oblivious to our gaze, sublimating the needs of untrammelled desire to the imperatives of the flesh, we can almost believe that he would be doing the same even if the camera were turned off. Almost.