On Matthew Barney: Deadpan Conceptualism, Animality, and Sculpture

by

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Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Doctor
of Philosophy in the Department of
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2015
ABSTRACT

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Abstract

This dissertation offers a critical investigation of the work of American artist Matthew Barney (b.1967). Over the past two decades, American artist Matthew Barney (b. 1967) has become synonymous with cutting-edge, critically acclaimed expanded artworks that span in a range of artistic media that includes drawing, sculpture, photography, performance, and film. In 1999, while still at work on The Cremaster Cycle (1994-2002), the five-part sculpture-film project for which he is best known, Barney’s fame exploded beyond elite art circles when New York Times art critic Michael Kimmelman declared Barney a “genius” and “the most important artist of his generation.”

On Matthew Barney: Deadpan Conceptualism, Animality, and Sculpture explores the artist’s oeuvre through a number of themes and issues, including the artist’s reception in the both the art world and public sphere; the face as a conceptual locus for the artist’s work and its intersection with his self-presentations; his sculptural approach methods and a theoretical consideration of his contributions to expanded sculpture involving performance, video, and film; and his interest in narrative and temporality, particularly as it pertains to representations of animality and material processes associated with life and death. From antecedent works by Richard Serra and Adrian Piper, to artistic and cultural contemporaries in the 1980s, such as Michael Jackson, who challenged the limits of probity and taboo in representations of identity during the Culture Wars, Barney’s multivalent explorations of art, which proceed through the face and pierce the body in sculpture, and performance, situate him at the center of an evolving and ever re-focusing
attention to humanity, and its confounding confrontations with animality, as a function of the creative process. His continued significance in contemporary art, in the present, and in his historic rise in the 1990s, may be located in his relationship to conceptual art, performance, and process art of the 1960s, which following the 1980s, was steeped in the visuality of a globalized and increasingly sensationalized art world.

This dissertation considers the ways in which Barney’s work represents an investment in an intersubjective experience of the artist in relation to art history, literature, cultural moments and events, and material processes that probe and develop new paradigms of being in a post-human, transgenered world. Further, this dissertation illuminates the ways in which Barney brings to the fore the power of style and masquerade in simultaneously hiding and conveying conditions of identity, and confronts skeptics of his work with sculpture that complicates conventional views of objects and art, provoking questions regarding the status of spectacle in contemporary art. Fomenting his visual investigations to narrative and poetics, this dissertation finally proposes that Barney’s elaborate concepts and stories distend time in the way that dissociation veils access to traumatic experience, illustrating how art happens at the intersection of identity, experience, and materiality across genres, media, and ideas, and thus offers a pedagogy of looking and thinking about art.

Theorizing Barney’s work through the concept of “deadpan,” I argue that the detached, unemotional, expressionless face associated with a deadpan rhetorical mode of delivery in performance or speech, figures into Barney’s work conceptually, performatively, and materially. Further, this dissertation I explore the centrality of sculpture to Barney’s work and consider its relationship to the genre’s critical devaluation.
in the history of art, in order to develop a theory of deadpan in Barney’s work that draws out the implications of his stone-faced presentations of trauma, alterity, gender, physical and ontological hybridity, base materialism, and conditions of animality. As observed in the many visuals explorations of his own image throughout his work, this dissertation contends that Barney, through the mechanism of deadpan, and its translation into sculpture and representations of animality, proposes more questions than answers as the artist continues to pry open liminal spaces between what is above and what is below, and between flesh and its mirrors, and their generative images.
Dedication

For Kristine, Stephanie, and Ken
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“But you know where you came from,
You know where you’re going,
And you know where you belong…”

- The Smiths, These Things Take Time

When I first undertook research for this dissertation, I had no idea where it would take me or how I would get there. Only two things were clear to me: first, that the project would explore the work of Matthew Barney, and second, that the Department of Art, Art History & Visual Studies at Duke was a place where I felt I belonged, largely because I was lucky enough to have Dr. Kristine Stiles as my adviser and mentor. The many paths I took, linear and winding, eventually revealed themselves, but I would not have been able to arrive at this moment without the careful and sensitive guidance of Professor Stiles. On Matthew Barney: Deadpan Conceptualism, Animality, and Sculpture is therefore dedicated, above all, to Kristine, whom I first met in February 2003 after my undergraduate adviser, Professor Andrew M. Shanken of the Oberlin College Art Department, had recommended that I apply to study contemporary art with her at Duke. The instant rapport and connection I felt with Professor Stiles during this interview was uncanny and profound, and I remember feeling as though I had known her my whole life. Some months later, in May 2003, I saw The CREMASTER Cycle in its entirety for the first time, just as Barney’s Guggenheim exhibition was about to close. Simultaneously perplexing and intriguing, I knew I had stumbled upon an artist whose richly varied body
of work palpated my voracious curiosity and seemed complex enough to serve as a subject for the sustained inquiry of dissertation research. Barney was, at that time, a controversial figure in the art world who many felt compelled, for various reasons, to reject and dismiss, and who many scholars therefore were unwilling to touch. Kristine enthusiastically my interest in and excitement about pursuing research on the artist. Thus it was under her creative and perceptive mentorship, that I immediately began to develop the basis of this dissertation.

Kristine Stiles has taught me almost everything I know as a scholar. She has been most my ardent supporter, most profound interlocutor, and most significant inspiration. Kristine believed in my research every step of the way, including during its many twists, turns, and variations, and she’s steadfastly backed me both during exciting times and at moments when I struggled under the weight of working on a divisive celebrity artist. She has been my most important intellectual influence, my most profound interlocutor, and my most consistent supporter, while also becoming an incredible friend. As a wise, sensitive, loving, strong, persistent, awe-inspired and inspiring woman and friend, Kristine has also served as a model for living, as she has taught me not just about art history, but also about what it takes to survive and to thrive, how to focus, how to manage self-consciousness and self-doubt, and how to move through experiences and how to go forward.

During the final months of writing this dissertation, when complicated circumstances seemed to challenge me from every angle, Kristine rescued the project (and me) by welcoming me into her home, where she allowed me to live and work in a totally peaceful and supportive environment. Much of this dissertation was re-written or
revised in the office she set up for me in her dining room, which she freely and graciously gave over to me as I sprinted to the finish line. She offered her undivided attention as well as her intellectual, emotional, and material support, not to mention delicious meals every night and homemade coffee cake. Kristine’s wit and incredible sense of humor sustained me throughout, and I was often doubled over in stitches with laughter. There are so many more things I could say, and will one day, but suffice to say, I am forever indebted to Kristine for believing in me and seeing me through to the very end of this labor of love that is my dissertation. (For these reasons, I am also forever grateful to Andy Shanken for his perceptive sense of who I was as a young student and thinker, and for his wisdom to recommend I study at Duke with Kristine.)

I also want to extend my deepest thanks to my dissertation committee, whose continual support and inspiration has been invaluable to my work: Dean Richard J. Powell’s writing on black art and portraiture has been a major influence on my interests, thinking, and method, and his critical observations of my work on Matthew Barney, have helped me at crucial moments during this project. Dr. Neil F. McWilliam has encouraged my writing through thick and thin, while also challenging me with tough questions and criticisms. He pushed me to be a better scholar at every step of the way, and I have benefited greatly from his extensive knowledge of sculpture and caricature, as well as his sharp-witted attention to my writing and ideas. Dr. Joseph Donahue joined my dissertation committee after I worked with him for two years in the context of Duke’s Poetry Working Group. Since then, he has encouraged my both my creative and scholarly writing, and has been an inspiration to all of my work, as well as an insightful and helpful commentator.
Several other faculty members at Duke University and Oberlin College contributed to the development of my as a scholar over the years. Sincere thanks are offered to Duke professors: Anne Allison, Fredric Jameson, Mark Antliff, Patricia Leighten, Annabel Wharton, Jane Gaines, and Frances Hasso. I also wish to thank professors Hans Van Migroet, Sheila Dillon, Sara Galletti, and Gennifer Weisenfeld for administrative support during key moments. At Oberlin, I want to thank Professor Erik Inglis, who inspired me to become an art historian, and who supported me throughout my time there; and Professor Patricia Townley Mathews, who taught me about the work of being an art historian when she mentored me during my undergraduate thesis.

Many colleagues and friends have encouraged and supported me over the years. For their myriad contributions to aspects of my intellectual, professional, emotional and social life, I want to thank: Leigh Campoamor, Caleb Smith, Aurelia D’Antonio, Sara Appel, Ralf Michaels, Octavian Esanu, Zoë Marie Jones, Jasmina Tumbas, Erin Hanas, Sarah Jones Dickens, Dwayne Dixon, Laura Jaramillo, Kathy Wright, Harry Halpin, Ricardo Lagomasino, Alita Pierson Feek, Jeannine Drost, Toni-Cara Stellitano, Kathryn L. Pringle, Umair Kazi, Farnum Brown, Chris Vitiello, Angela Goldman, Michael Rees, and Sarah Bryce. Special thanks are due to Erin Hanas, who, in addition to being a fantastic colleague, extended her support to helping me format my dissertation and images. I also want to express my deep love, admiration, and gratitude for Leigh Campoamor, who was always there for me, with an endless supply of encouragement, nourishment, and love, and who has at times been what I might call my “lifeline.”

Finally, I feel immense gratitude toward Damien-Adia Marassa, who brought new worlds to my mind and heart at a point when my life and work needed to be broken open, and
inspired me at every moment with his infinite passion, intuition, and brilliance. His influence may be observed throughout this dissertation.

I wish to thank my parents, Shakti Routh and Freda Routh, for introducing and encouraging my study of various art forms, from ballet to photography and beyond—and, of course, for their years of love and support. I also want to thank them for teaching me about perseverance, restraint, endurance, and patience, all which I needed at various moments during this dissertation. I thank my sister, Sumona Routh, for always believing in me; and my cousin, Ashish Ghosh, for his consistent love and support.

Finally, in addition to Kristine Stiles, this dissertation is also dedicated to my most persistent and enthusiastic supporters, Stephanie E. Wavle and Ken Maffitt, without whom I would not have survived this experience, and whose sense of family, generosity, and love has sustained me at every stage of graduate school. Stephanie, my closest friend and sister since 1990, has seen me through nearly all of my formative experiences with massive amounts of intelligence, thoughtfulness, humor, music, inspiration, and unconditional love. Her emotional fortitude and resilience is unmatched by anyone else I know; at the same time, she never misses an opportunity to remind me of my own strength. There are no words to adequately convey what she has meant to my life, especially in the last couple of years, when she listened to me on Skype for more hours than seem humanly possible, offering advice and cheering me on. Stephanie is ever-present in all that I do, including this dissertation, and for her love, sisterhood, and intellectual contributions, I am eternally thankful. Ken, who was my partner and comrade for ten years, has played a significant role in my dissertation, from its fruition and now its completion. Ken’s huge presence in my life, and his endless patience, support, care, and
generosity, kindness, and love, have been utterly invaluable to me throughout graduate school. He was by my side during key moments of my writing, and accompanied me on more research trips than I can count, including Barney exhibitions, films premieres, panel talks, and even one of the artist’s live studio performances. Throughout these experiences, Ken brought his sense of adventure, and offered significant advice, which he drew from his own experiences in academia, his intellectual excellence and expertise as a historian, and his superb abilities as a writer and editor. His brilliance in these ways has bolstered me at times when I felt defeated, serving as a sounding board for a great deal of my thinking about Barney’s work, engaging me in conversation, reading countless drafts, and helping me flesh out ideas in writing. Ken has driven innumerable miles with me in the passenger seat, or to visit me in Durham, taken care of me when I was ill or injured, and dutifully prepared meals or picked up books from the library when I was narrowly trying to meet a deadline. He always made sure I had what I needed, whether it was the right outfit for a conference talk, or a new computer; and he has loved and cared for my two cats, Valie and Marcel, as much as I have, taking them in when my living arrangements did not permit pets. More recently, he brought Valie back to health from a devastating flare-up of a chronic illness that happened just as I was finishing this dissertation. As the most patient and understanding person I know, I took it to heart when he would say that he just wanted to see me finish. Because he is so present in this project, for him, I finally did—with immense gratitude and love.

For their part, Valie and Marcel deserve heaps of feline praise for being the most hilarious, loving, and beloved companions I could have ever hoped for throughout these years. Keeping me company while napping on my desk, and waking me up on cold
mornings when I needed to get back to work (a.k.a. they wanted to eat), they’ve been with me more than anyone else. They raise my joy, tune my laughter, and keep me enamored and in awe of life every single day.

Thanks are finally due to Matthew Barney for his immense and engaging artworks and films, all of which captured, inspired, and sustained my interest and curiosity throughout this dissertation.
Introduction

I. Everything and Nothing

Imagine watching a scene on a Japanese arts and culture television program as it unfolds from a broadcast inside a stark gallery space. Captured crudely on a VHS recording, the streaming images are dim and unclear as they quiver across the screen. The host of the program, a young Japanese woman in a gold dress, stands interviewing a robust man, who has been whisked into the scene for an interview. His receding hairline and the faint lines on his face reveal premature aging. He wears dark blue slacks and a button down shirt of nearly the same color, attire that is simple, unexceptional, but particular, as they are the clothes of a worker. A mechanical pencil is stuck in his left breast pocket. (Figure 0.1) Behind them, a video screen hangs above a massive, indiscernible object sculpted from Vaseline and plastic. Immobile and abject, it lies on the floor next to a large rocky platform covered in a murky pile of detritus. Close-ups of this object reveal that it contains a large decrepit spine, the skeletal remains of an animal caught amidst the lines and splintered wood and metal of a sea vessel. (Figure 0.2) Barnacles encrust the surface of the cadaverous heap of body and dross. The video gradually reveals the representation of a whaling ship, which is conceptually related to sculptural carcass of a whale below. A broken winch from the ship, corroded and still wrapped in line, sticks out from the wreckage, plunging viewers into the narrative dimensions of a complex, multidimensional work of art.

As the television interview continues, the man is understood to be the artist of this installation, and his answers to straightforward questions grow ever more complex as he
tries to explain his work. When asked, for example, what brought him to work in Japan, he explains that Vaseline, a material that is essential to his sculpture, is a petrochemical, which comes from the fossilized remains of prehistoric creatures, including whales and their predecessors. He then attempts to trace the broader cultural history of its materiality, and attributes his engagement with the country to his interest in Japanese whaling culture. He also explains that his art merges local myth and folklore with a transnational global discourse of images and ideas. With each question, the discussion pauses for translation, but with each complicated translation the interview moves forward awkwardly.

The artist is Matthew Barney (United States, b. 1967), who was being interviewed in the gallery of his 2005 retrospective exhibition at the New 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art in Kanazawa, Japan. The exhibition covered Barney’s ongoing project known as DRAWING RERAINT (1987-present), a series of performances, drawings, sculptures, and videos on which he has continuously worked since the late 1980s. The series, at that point, had culminated in the full-length feature film, DRAWING RESTRAINT 9 (2005), a production that featured Barney’s then-partner, Icelandic singer, composer, and artist, Björk. The installation in the television interview is a composite sculpture known as Holographic Entry Point (2005), and represents a material manifestation of DRAWING RESTRAINT 9’s narrative. Squeezed into the tight frame of the television screen, however, neither the impact of the installation nor the significance of the event could be felt during the interview.

2 The couple partnered in 2000 and divorced in 2014.
Barney’s work, known for its visual precision and conceptual sophistication, which the artist achieves through a combination of complex narratives and stunning production materials and design, seems to crumble into disorganization and improper lighting during the media coverage. Meanwhile, Barney appears to strain beneath the dual challenges of explaining his arcane ideas while navigating the imperfect interface of translation. Echoing the sculptural wreckage of *Holographic Entry Point*, the whole scene seems plagued and broken down, a jarring contrast that affectively recalls a word painting by the artist Ed Ruscha, *This is it* (1990). (Figure 0.4) Ruscha’s painting, which visually mimics the look of silent black and white film stock withering from age and chemical decay, presents an ironic assertion of a statement of significance (“This is it”) that is suffering from a case of self-denial. Fuzzy and out of focus, the painted words appear to bleed out like ink on a wet page, blurring under striations and dust particles caught on the “film.” Here, a proclamation of certainty falters under the weight of a visual presentation that is shoddy, unclear, and anticlimactic. In a similar twist of fate, in the recorded interview, Barney seems important, but feels anonymous and untethered from his own identity. The sense that viewers are watching an event and a person of significance comes to mind only vaguely, flying in the face of what was already known far and wide: Matthew Barney is an international art star and among the brightest.

Over the past two decades, Barney has become synonymous with cutting-edge, critically acclaimed contemporary art on a global scale, rising to prominence in the New York art scene in the early 1990s with his innovative and art-historically-grounded performance videos and unusual sculptures constructed from unconventional materials. In 1999, while still at work on *The Cremaster Cycle* (1994-2002), the five-part sculpture-
film project for which he is best known, Barney’s fame exploded beyond elite art circles when *New York Times* art critic Michael Kimmelman famously christened Barney a “genius” and “the most important artist of his generation.”3 Such proclamations catapulted Barney’ international recognition to new heights and sent shock waves through the broader U.S. artistic community. Then, in 2003, when the artist was just thirty-six years old, the New York Guggenheim mounted a blockbuster retrospective of *The Cremaster Cycle*, which was lauded for drawing more visitors than any other single-artist exhibition in the museum’s history and ranking second overall.4 Such attention punctuated Kimmelman’s bold claims and solidified the artist’s place in contemporary art historical discourse and criticism, as well as in the histories of both American and global art. Today, in 2015, at only forty-eight years old, Matthew Barney has garnered wide-ranging success and recognition, and achieved an aura that few artists can claim.

Yet on opening day in Kanazawa, as the television image described above suggests, Matthew Barney could be seen as a normal artist discussing his work in a foreign land. A mere shadow of the man in the spotlight of the American media machine, and relieved of the burden of his reputation as the accomplished former athlete, the contemporary art world’s favorite cover-model, and the darling of the New York art scene, as well as far away from the object of both intense fandom and sharp-tongued

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contempt, Barney proved unpretentious, contemplative, and introverted, the antithesis of the glittering celebrity ascribed to him by the art world and mass media alike. More than ten years later, in September 2015, a similarly modest Barney appeared in a portrait in *The New York Times*, the “paper of record” that named him a genius. Standing before a sculpture of an uprooted tree preserved in mud, the immensity of his own work dwarfs the artist in the otherwise empty gallery space.\(^5\) *(Figure 0.5)* Once again seen in the uniform of a worker, his relaxed, yet serious demeanor and facial expression are echoed in the subtle, resistant glare he returns to the consumptive gaze of the camera’s eye. At ease as Matthew Barney, the prolific and infinitely focused artist, in this moment, he may well be one of the art world’s most reluctant celebrities.

For years many people within and without the global contemporary art world held a set of vastly different and competing images of Matthew Barney. Few would have forgotten, for example, the artist’s electric portrayal of “The Kid” in *DRAWING RESTRAINT 7* (1993), a young satyr character who displays a spectacular convergence of sexual exuberance and the flamboyantly grotesque, or Barney’s follow-up performance as the “Loughton Candidate” in *Cremaster 4* (1994), a portrait of the artist as a dandified sheep-man. *(Figure 0.6) (Figure 0.7)* These images, and the vaudevillian tenor of these two performances in which the artist pranced and tap-danced, became iconic early in Barney’s career, and stand as testaments to his unabashed sense of the performative, and his flare for developing characters that queer the stakes of masculinity. Coupled with an

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extensive use of prosthetic make-up, Barney’s performances further reveal a brazen sense of spectacle, one in which vanity and eroticism converge with humor. (Figure 0.8) When Barney was unmasked from these playful caricatures and performances, he appeared altogether perplexing, a quality revealed in non-production photographs, such as the portrait that appeared alongside the now famous Kimmelman essay. (Figure 0.9) In this startling and quixotic picture of Barney, the artist is framed in extreme close-up, facing just off center against a flesh-toned backdrop, and cropped as though from a larger seated portrait. Barney’s skin is warm and weathered, still tan perhaps from summer holidays; his hair is buzzed short and his face brims with freckles, lines, and a stubbly beard. Under bright studio lights, the camera grazes the uncompromising architecture of the artist’s face, capturing Barney as an arresting and imperfect crystal of human form and expression. His piercing blue eyes avert slightly down and left, narrowly missing the direct gaze of viewers. Yet these oceans track and penetrate each and every vantage point. Here, Barney appears deep in thought, while also self-consciously aware of his own jarring and provocative visage. As he raises one quizzical and suspicious eyebrow, he seems to challenge viewers to take him on. Do we dare?

This dissertation offers a critical investigation of Matthew Barney’s artwork. It does not attempt a comprehensive view of the artist, nor is it hagiography. Rather, I explore the artist’s oeuvre through a number of themes and issues, including several already presented here: the artist’s reception in the public sphere; the artist’s face as a conceptual locus for his work and its intersection with his self-conscious self-presentation; the artist’s expanded sculptural practice and a theoretical consideration of his contributions to intermedia, involving performance, video, and film; and his interest
in narrative and temporality, particularly as it pertains to representations of animality and material processes associated with life and death.

In the years following Kimmelman’s article, the critic’s words have clung to the air like stale smoke, often making it difficult to engage in serious discussions of the artist’s work, with many critics and fellow artists only too eager to denounce and refute Kimmelman’s assessment and Barney’s acumen. Kimmelman’s celebration of Barney, described in his own words as the result of “spend[ing] a year watching him and his creative crew” film Cremaster 2 (1999), generated enough news to set off a maelstrom of discourses on Barney’s work that extended well beyond the esoteric walls of art-world professionals and into the realm of public conversation, wherein experts and non-experts debated Barney and the significance and meaning of his art. Not surprisingly, much of the discussion on Barney occurred on the Internet, fixing Barney’s rise to “art-stardom” firmly in the digital age, an era when anything and everything that is said makes its way into a freely accessible database of knowledge.

For his part, Kimmelman was well aware of the controversy that erupted following his 1999 article, which some seemed to consider a journalistic blunder. Kimmelman’s error may be understood as that of a white male American art critic crowning a white male American artist “a genius” in a world that was still grappling with the fallout from the Culture Wars of the late 1980s and early 90s. This period witnessed widespread support within the New York art scene for AIDS activism and gay and lesbian rights movements, and the scene had been deeply influenced socially and

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7 See Chapter 1, “Cremaster Panic,” in this dissertation.
conceptually by feminism, postmodernism, and multiculturalism that had permeated both academic artistic discourse and broader public debates. It is important to point out, too, that the infamous Sensation show at the Brooklyn Museum had just opened on October 2, only eight days prior to Kimmelman’s game-changing article published on October 10. The Sensation exhibition (October 2, 1999 – January 9, 2000), which featured an array of artists from the famed Saatchi collection known as the “Young British Artists,” or the “YBAs,” notoriously landed the institution in a controversial debate with conservative critics.

As the market share of contemporary art sales threatened to be subsumed by the YBAs, and a dangerous new precedent was being set for reprimanding and controlling arts institutions, one could argue that American art, and specifically contemporary art in New York, desperately needed a prominent figure, and perhaps one who represented a

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8 https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/opencollection/exhibitions/683/

9 Most notably by then-mayor Rudolph Giuliani, who proceeded to have public funding for the museum revoked after Christian groups protested Chris Ofili’s painting of the Virgin Mary that portrayed her and the baby Jesus as black Africans, and featured such embellishments as pornographic putti and elephant dung. http://www.nytimes.com/library/arts/092399brooklyn-museum-funds.html

Given the intensity of the moment in New York, and the attention being awarded to the YBAs, Kimmelman may have been emboldened to make a broad sweeping claim for Barney’s importance, over and above such major artist contemporaries as Damien Hirst, Rachel Whiteread, Jake and Dinos Chapman, and Jenny Saville, among others—a multivalent move that had the added potential of staking out territory for contemporary art in the U.S. For it is worth considering that a second controversy was bubbling beneath the surface of The Sensation show, as financial speculators within the contemporary art market were bracing for record-breaking auction sales at Christie’s London for work by artists shown in the exhibition. The Giuliani administration accused the Brooklyn museum of working in cahoots with Christie’s (one of the exhibition’s sponsors) to profit from the social controversies by inflating the market value of works included in the exhibition. In other words, 1999 marked another watershed moment for contemporary art and the twin futures of both the contemporary art market and public art museums in the U.S. Of the latter, the Sensation show debacle signaled that public institutions were only one controversy away from being forced into the ring over their freedom of speech, their claims on public funding, and their ability to serve and excite a broad public audience in the eyes of museum goers and supporters, as well as the legislators and corporate sponsors who were charged with financial oversight. http://www.nytimes.com/library/arts/093099brooklyn-museum.html

perfect blend of controversial and mainstream art poised at the intersection of different artistic media. Kimmelman, a powerful actor at a critical moment in the New York art scene, could not have ignored all of these forces. As a sincere supporter of Barney and his work, such circumstances may have galvanized him to take liberties in his own effusiveness in order to generate increased interest in an American artist for whom he firmly believed such publicity was not only well-deserved, but also sustainable over time. Kimmel most likely also had faith that Barney’s fame would be effectively managed by the artist as well as by the well-heeled institutions and scene-makers that were mobilizing around him.

This esteemed circle included gallery owner Barbara Gladstone, Guggenheim curator Nancy Spector, and New York stalwart and renowned bad boy, the two-time Pulitzer Prize winner Norman Mailer. Among other admirers and friends, Barney could count internationally esteemed sculptor and process art innovator Richard Serra, who was no stranger to New York art controversies, especially following the 1989 destruction of his huge outdoor steel sculpture, *Tilted Arc*, after the public rejected it for interfering with the light and open space of New York’s Federal Plaza. With this kind of support building for Barney, Kimmelman confidently re-iterated his original position (and proclaimed vindication) when he published a second article on the artist, based on early previews of *The Cremaster Cycle* retrospective before it opened in 2003 at the Guggenheim.10 This victory lap included a coy interrogation of his own commentary, which he admitted, “still rankles Barney skeptics”:

Does he deserve all the fuss?...After going to the Guggenheim I want to amend my remark [that Barney is ‘the most important artist of the his generation’] now: Hands down, he is, at just shy of 36, the most compelling, richly imaginative artist to emerge in years.\footnote{Ibid.}

This is Kimmelman having a bit of fun at the expense of his readers and Barney detractors alike. The “fuss” about Barney proved as entertaining as it was exciting within and without the art world, spawning an array of responses that poked fun at aspects of Barney’s works that were well-positioned for humor, especially through plays on words and innuendos. The low-hanging fruit in this equation was the artist’s persistent use of Vaseline, slippery as it was already with sexual connotations. Meanwhile, that the conceptual framework of *The Cremaster Cycle* left many viewers perplexed left the work vulnerable to mockery by jokesters and art world cranks, which *New Yorker* cartoon artist Roz Chast captured in a full-page cartoon in June, 2003. (\textbf{Figure 0.10})

Conceptually derived from the thermodynamic process of the ascending and descending male cremaster muscle, *The Cremaster Cycle* seemed to participate in the theater of the absurd by juxtaposing esoteric elements of a biological process with both overt and covert displays of sexuality, making Barney’s work fair game for playful reactions and even ridicule. So, for example, although in 1999 Kimmelman staked his bet on the artist with a serious proclamation on “The Importance of Matthew Barney,” by 2003, his non-apology freely indulged in the liberating potential of sexual fodder that had become associated with Barney. Just as the artist does so often at the center of his work,
Kimmelman declared himself, “Free To Play and Be Gooey,” a rare exhibition of cultural power, and an appropriate use of it in the media.\(^\text{12}\)

While it may have seemed important for the critic to capitalize on the moment of Barney fever in New York, it remains to be seen to what extent his initial use of art historically loaded terminology had an impact on Barney’s artistic legacy. Still, the comedic potential was now writ large across Barney’s art and reception, which, as I will later discuss, already proposed an underlying affinity with, if not a conscious investment in, deadpan, as attitude, commentary, humor, and intellectual critique. In other words, the storm brewing about Barney seemed to indicate a collective desire for the artist’s ludic release, a possibility that must have presented some relief to an art world eager to loosen the tensions around the serious claims being made by Kimmelman. Open season on Barney’s *Cremaster Cycle*, mining its potential for entertainment and bawdy humor, seemed more than fitting, given that the series seemed to serve its own head on a platter,\(^\text{13}\) blurring its serious mood and composition with an interrogation of its own hubris and its concomitant failure, and dabbling in tongue-in-cheek references to musical theatrics and variety shows.\(^\text{14}\) Moreover, Barney seemed at ease placing himself in potentially compromising, and even humiliating, circumstances—and what more could viewers ask of their favorite love/hate obsession? Indeed, a very short piece published in *Esquire* in 2003 cited Barney on a list of “Things people pretend to like but really hate.”

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\(^{12}\) Ibid.

\(^{13}\) *The Cremaster Cycle* featured a number of scenes throughout the series in which characters, having met their tragic deaths with a blow, were shown with their heads displayed prominently, either in a film close-up or production photo. See for example, the character of *The Diva*, played by Barney, in *Cremaster 5* (1997), the gas station attendant in *Cremaster 2* (1999), and *The Entered Novitiate*, played by Aimee Mullins, in *Cremaster 3* (2002).

\(^{14}\) See especially the Busby Berkeley-style musical dance routine on the field at Bronco Stadium in *Cremaster 1* (1995) and the performances by the Rockets, featured prominently in *Cremaster 3* (2002).
The full list included: “brown rice, Wynton Marsalis, any Marsalis, baseball, Coldplay, Matthew Barney, James Joyce, Wolf Blitzer, eggplant.” Nonetheless, Barney bared it all, and laid all of it to bear for audiences, many of whom left the film screenings and exhibition rapt and eager for more.

Within this context, one that was at times equally laudatory and contentious, Matthew Barney continued to produce work, developing several new artistic projects over the past decade that have expanded the range and significance of his oeuvre far beyond that which earned him his initial fame. These included several new iterations of his DRAWING RERAINT series of performances, drawings, sculptures, and books (including the aforementioned DRAWING RERAINT 9); major installments of the artist’s work in exhibitions worldwide, such as the DRAWING RERAINT retrospective at SFMoMA in 2006; comparative installations of Barney’s work alongside that of such famous artists as Joseph Beuys (at the Deutshe Guggenheim in Berlin) and Mario Merz (at the Fondazione Merz in Torino, Italy); a high-profile performance collaboration with painter Elizabeth Peyton on the island of Hydra in Greece; formal and informal live and recorded performances staged in a variety of venues all over the world, including in Salvador de Bahia, Brazil, Manchester, England, and aboard a boat that Barney, Björk,

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15 See anonymous, “Things people pretend to like but really hate,” Esquire 140, no.3 (September 2003): 74.
16 It has been suggested that the numbers the Guggenheim posted for The Cremaster Cycle exhibition included a large number of repeat visitors.
and the curator Neville Wakefield sailed from the Strait of Gibraltar to New York.\textsuperscript{20} His most recent project, \textit{River of Fundament} (2014), a major artistic undertaking with his long-term collaborator, the composer Jonathan Bepler, is a six-hour opera filmed in locations across the United States, which, together with its accompanying traveling exhibition, represents Barney’s most extensive work to date.\textsuperscript{21} \textit{River of Fundament} culminated in an accompanying catalogue with essays by such major figures as Okwui Enwezor, Homi Bhaba, and Hilton Als.\textsuperscript{22}

This dissertation developed parallel to a critical period of expansion in Barney’s oeuvre, years that also fomented the artist’s impact on contemporary art and its histories. As the dissertation continued to shift, broaden, and evolve, the literature on Barney did not develop and expand as one might expect it would. Though Barney’s work became the subject of numerous exhibition catalogues and magazine features updating the art world on the artist’s latest appearances and work habits, his art received far less scholarly attention. Moreover, the attention Barney’s work did garner rarely ventured beyond close analysis of the artist’s specific cosmologies to situate and theorize it within a specifically art historical framework. In other words, in some ways everything and nothing has been said about Matthew Barney. This was both unforeseeable and, yet, plausible. For the immense detail and intricate complexity of Barney’s work, which was frequently panned by critics as confusing and hubristic, both lends itself to close, sustained analysis, on the


\textsuperscript{21} Kennedy, “Matthew Barney’s Most Punishing Tour.”

http://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/20/arts/design/matthew-barneys-most-punishing-tour-river-of-fundament.html?_r=0

\textsuperscript{22} Okwui Enwezor, \textit{Matthew Barney: River of Fundament} (New York: Skira; Munich: Haus der Kunst, 2014).
one hand, and overwhelms and, to some extent, even distracts from its own art historical significance, on the other. That Barney’s work resists full and immediate exegesis signals not only the strength, depth, and breadth of his oeuvre, but also the unique challenges it presents for scholars.

This dissertation scrutinizes some of Barney's most significant themes and aspects in order to grapple with their relationship to key moments and threads in the history of art, aesthetics, philosophy, and literary and intellectual history, as well as to recent cultural and social trends and contexts. This dissertation departs from traditional monographic studies in that it resists an all-encompassing argument about the artist and his work. There are two primary reasons for this, both of which will become clear in the chapters that follow. First, not only is Barney a living artist who is continuously producing work at a dizzying pace, but he is also one who maintains a very specific conceptual orientation toward his art, defining each and every project as a development in a temporal and transformative process he calls “The Path.”23 Many of Barney’s artist’s books begin with a frontispiece that simply says “To the Path,” and thus the artist may be said to merge the conceptual framework of “The Path,” with connotations of a spiritual journey or path toward enlightenment, a common trope in Eastern religions such as Buddhism and Hinduism.24 Just as Barney positions his representations as intertwined with his own ongoing personal and artistic transformations, each of his projects must be

23 In an interview with the curator Hans Ulrich Obrist, Barney describes “The Path” as: “a three phase cycle,” that represents “a meditation on the creative process.” The three phases are: “Situation,” which is “characterized by raw drive or hunger”; “Condition,” which “takes content that Situation had consumed and begins to give it form”; and “Production,” a phase in which “form begins to emerge.” Barney adds that The Path may be conceived of as a “digestive tract,” wherein Production is “its anal or oral output.” Matthew Barney, Drawing Restraint, Vol. I, 1987-2002, edited by Hans Ulrich Obrist (Köln: Walther König, 2005), 88.

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considered as a passage from a history that is still being written, a life in and of art that is still being lived. Second, despite being labeled by critics as “hermetic,” in the sense of being conceptually inaccessible, Barney’s work in reality is extensively grounded within an expansive and varied history of art, and in a way that denies the closure of a grand narrative. Rather it pries open the sarcophagi of art historical narratives to probe the interfaces and reception of images and their multiplicity of meanings in order to recast them within his unique cosmology. In this way, his art offers the possibility for multiple alternate understandings that re-enliven the visual and conceptual impact of his art, as well as the art of others from which he frequently appropriates and upon which he comments in unique ways. It could be said that Barney raises the dormant potential of well-known art historical images, and his exhaustive readings and reconfigurations of them breathe new life into their relevance, signifying new possibilities for his many sources, inspirations, antecedents, and comrades.\textsuperscript{25} This dissertation represents one scholar’s effort to lay the groundwork for future studies (my own included) of Matthew Barney’s art.

\textbf{II. Literature}

The literature that has informed this dissertation is as far-reaching and varied as Matthew Barney’s complex body of work, which itself draws on numerous sources in the history and theory of contemporary art, literature, film, and criticism. My work also locates Barney within a history of sculpture, performance, and film with a specific focus

\textsuperscript{25} This is true also of his appropriation of literature, a critical topic in his art that is beyond the scope of his dissertation but that will be part of my work in the future.
on the intermedial implications of the artist’s expanded sculptural praxis, and likewise presents a meta-critical examination of specific themes and discourses relevant to the 1990s and 2000s, threaded through the lens of Barney’s work. Literature on the artist’s work has appeared primarily in artist’s books and exhibition catalogues published in accord with his exhibitions over the past two decades. These include books devoted to each of the five Cremaster films and the major catalogue for The Cremaster Cycle, which is a massive 530-page overview of the themes and sources in the artist’s work, published on the occasion of his exhibition at the Guggenheim Museum in New York.\textsuperscript{26} It serves as a “comprehensive guide” to The Cremaster Cycle, containing documentary and archival sources for the artist’s ideas, drawings and film storyboards, as well as introductions to the narrative threads, collaborators, and the artist’s multivalent aesthetic pre-occupations. This catalogue includes an important 89-page essay by Guggenheim curator, Nancy Spector, titled “Only the Perverse Fantasy Can Still Save Us,” and “The Cremaster Glossary,” an extensive supplement of terms, topics, and aesthetic foci by curator Neville Wakefield, a frequent collaborator on the artist’s books and catalogues.\textsuperscript{27} Both pieces introduce the major themes in The Cremaster Cycle and delve comprehensively into the mythological, etymological, and historical roots of Barney’s work.

The Cremaster Cycle is the project that tends to dominate scholarship on Barney, mainly because it was groundbreaking work that attracted the most widespread attention.


\textsuperscript{27} Nancy Spector, “Only the Perverse Fantasy Can Still Save Us,” (pp 2-91) and Neville Wakefield, “The Cremaster Glossary,” (both in Spector and Wakefield, Matthew Barney: The CREMASTER Cycle, 2002).
Beginning with *Cremaster 4* (1994) onwards, each installment of the project generated various series of visually stunning and enigmatic images and characters, all which served to enliven the focus of journalists, art and film critics, and a public drawn to and repelled by the sensationalizing aspects of Barney’s aesthetic. The importance of *The Cremaster Cycle* to understanding Barney’s work, notwithstanding, its critical value is arguably more instructive as it pertains to Barney’s reception, the literature of which I address below. The narrative specificity of *The Cremaster Cycle* limits its own ability to maintain its status as representative of Barney’s work as a whole. For that, Barney’s *DRAWING RESTRAINT* series, a project the artist began as an undergraduate art student at Yale University, has proven the most potent and reliable. Each installment and its associated catalogue or artist book contain clear and focused expositions of Barney’s aesthetic vocabulary, including source material for his images, ideas, and interests, his experimental methods and modes of production, and most importantly, texts and images that elucidate the core of Barney’s thinking and his conceptual approach to the range of source materials he encounters.\(^\text{28}\)

Additionally, a handful of early catalogues of the artist’s work have been vital to locating Barney within the history of performance art, in particular, as he began his career as an artist with a specific interest in using his “body as a tool.”\(^\text{29}\)

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Barney has indicated that the history and mythos of Houdini, endurance performances and video works by Vito Acconci and Chris Burden, Robert Smithson’s concept of the Non-Site, and James Lee Byars’ object-focused performances were key influences on his early work exploring the body as a site for resistance and process. In such artist-as-athlete projects Barney is also concerned with the body as a vehicle for pretensions toward perfection, common in athletic discourses, and its inevitable release and surrender to failure.30 Further, in addition to the conceptual underpinnings of this work, Barney highlights the structural and narrative potential of objects in performance, referring to the breadth of his work across a spectrum of media as “essentially sculptural.”31 Thus, Barney may be located within the literature on the broader history of intermedia and expanded artistic practices that included sculpture, performance and body art, moving images, and all of their convergences.32

Barney’s most important expository text on the convergence of artistic creation and the implications of hypertrophy (or the process by which muscles are conditioned in training) appears in “Notes on Athleticism,” which was reprinted in the second edition of Beuningen, 1995). See also the documentary film, “The Body as Matrix: Matthew Barney’s Cremaster Cycle,” directed by Maria Anna Tappeiner, in collaboration with Matthew Barney (Princeton, NJ: Films for the Arts and Humanities, 2004).

Kristine Stiles and Peter Selz’s *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art*.\(^{33}\) (Figure 0.11) Prior to inclusion in their book, few instances exist of Barney’s own writing being treated for its legitimate significance and relationship to the history of contemporary art. Meanwhile, major publishers of art historical texts were often found capitalizing on Barney’s immense fame, repeatedly using spectacularized images from *DRAWING RESTRAINT 7* and *Cremaster 4* on the covers of the books, banking on the widespread recognition of these works, on the one hand, and their ability to provoke or titillate, on the other.\(^{34}\) (Figure 0.12) The eagerness on the part of the editors to feature Barney as their cover boy (pointing again to an issue I remarked upon above about Barney’s value as an object of visual consumption and delight) rarely translated into a willingness to give equal attention to the value and impact of his art.\(^{35}\)

Although this situation is beginning to change, such a lacuna within mainstream art history textbooks, which is nevertheless simultaneously shrouded and bolstered by the persistent appearance of Barney’s face (a significant topic of this dissertation) presents enormous challenges to scholars and students working on Barney today. For example, the most notable absence of Barney’s work appears in the survey textbook, *Art Since 1900: Modernism, Anti-Modernism, Postmodernism* (2005), published by editors of *October* magazine. Organized to address significant works and moments in modern and contemporary art by decade, the book fails to note the resounding impact of *The


\(^{34}\) See for example, David Hopkins, *After Modern Art: 1945-2000* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); and the second editions of Goldberg’s *Performance Art: From Futurism to the Present*, 2001, and *Performance: Live Art since 1960*, 2004. Although all three texts do mention Barney, it is striking that the publishers utilized Barney’s images in what seems to be a bid for contemporary caché, rather than their art historical significance.


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Cremaster Cycle exhibition in 2003. Thus, as Barney’s work has been slow to gain attention and legitimate treatment among academics (an issue I further discuss in Chapter 1), the formation of a bibliography of critical, scholarly texts on the artist’s work, which are not specifically associated with his exhibitions or otherwise commissioned by the Barbara Gladstone Gallery, has been equally hard to come by. For example, one might turn to influential critic Terry Smith’s essay, “The Intensity Exhibit: Barney World at McGuggenheim,” a scathing, superficial indictment on globalized contemporary art disguised as a serious critical overview of both Matthew Barney and The Cremaster Cycle. Here, Smith accuses Barney of trying to do “philosophy,” styling the artist as a straw man, who he swiftly blows down with just a few clicks on his keyboard, when he writes that Barney’s conceptual framework is “not exactly profound.” Smith’s treatment of Barney is slick and dismissive, illustrating a particular style of criticism that bespeaks the vehemence with which critics, academics, and journalists alike have so often adopted in relation to Barney over the years. A version of Smith’s views on Barney first appeared in Critical Inquiry under the title, “Contemporary Art and Contemporeity,” and his approach remains representative of the broad sweeping criticisms The Cremaster Cycle received in film journals, newspapers, and other critical venues. All of these venues find authors wielding an uncompromisingly self-righteous tone against work that, ironically,

38 Smith, 107.
they simultaneously claim holds little importance or interest, which is accompanied by insinuations that readers and audiences of contemporary art ought to restrain interest in the very topic about which they write.

Reviews by journalists have tended to be mixed, often erring on the gentle side of criticism, while playing up the impenetrable aspects of Barney’s work. Indeed, a key agenda in this early criticism was to highlight the “hermetic” and esoteric aspects of The Cremaster Cycle, characterizations that were strategically deployed to emphasize how confusing or convoluted Barney’s project was, and to communicate annoyance about Barney’s specific preoccupations (sports, for example, a field of human activity and education that is often considered stereotypically opposed to the arts) and the artist’s multilayered approach. Nevertheless, especially at a particular moment in art criticism following the Guggenheim show, authors of such reactive critiques belied their own disinterestedness, as they seemed to revel in the chance to pass a ruling on Barney’s epic and likely drive up their own readership. Given the broad appeal that Barney held for artists, students, and the public, an issue I have already begun to address, and to which I return in Chapter 1, one would imagine those reviews and criticisms did what they were supposed to do. The dubious state of Cremaster criticism in the early to mid-2000s seemed to have the added impact (and goal) of foreclosing the possibility for “fair and balanced” evaluations of Barney’s work, to coin the famous Fox News phrase from the past decade, one of the more blatant and ironic misnomers of a vicious period in

40 For example, in his review of Cremaster 2, Steven Henry Madoff added the by-line: “Matthew Barney creates films that are hard to look at, hard to understand and hard to resist,” which speaks both to the challenges of Barney’s work and its visual appeal. Steven Henry Madoff, “Hallucinatory Acts,” Time 154, no. 9 (August 30, 1999): 67.
American culture and politics. The aftereffects of such intellectual and art historical black-ballimg are still being felt, the evidence for which may be observed in the continual dearth of scholarly work on Barney.

Despite the disparaging tone of much of this criticism, glimmers of hope and interest can be found. Returning to Smith, for example, one finds that his damning portrayal of Barney The Failed Philosopher unwittingly highlights a key aspect of Barney’s work. The critic’s swift undress of Barney’s conceptual framework concludes with a mention of its “underlying emptiness.”41 Smith’s not untypical reaction is necessarily helpful to my discussion of the “unknowability” present in Barney’s work, which is the result of a haunting reticence that circumscribes trauma through a utilization of deadpan expression. Similarly, this dissertation has benefited, and indeed at times depended upon, the echo of frustration that reverberated in early criticism of Barney, which ceremoniously denounced or ridiculed the artist’s claim to be a sculptor. Such criticism insisted that the artist was most certainly a filmmaker, and excoriated Barney for his psychological games and sins against artistic identity or language or both.42 The repeated interrogation of Barney’s self-identification with sculpture was often made a point of interest in early criticisms of the artist’s work and, as such, the ever-present inquiry played a key role in developing this dissertation, especially in examining Barney’s relationship to intermedia and other expanded artistic practices.

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A handful of other essays that are neither exhibition-related nor specifically oriented toward a critical devaluation of Barney’s work have proven the significance of the artist to wider discourses in contemporary art and cultural studies. For example, Michael Jay McClure’s essay on Barney’s “queering” of cinema offers important commentary on the artist’s relevance to and impact on both queer and film studies.⁴³ Marquard Smith’s early essay, “The Vulnerable Articulate: James Gillingham, Aimee Mullins, and Matthew Barney,” analyzes the signifying impact of prosthesis and its concomitant erotics in Barney’s work with Aimee Mullins in Cremaster 3, situating the artist and his real-life “alter ego” within the burgeoning field of disability studies, an area of literary and cultural studies that is swiftly being reorganized under the term “crip.”⁴⁴

Among the most important texts published on Barney is art historian Lynn Brunet’s essay, “Homage to Freemasonry or Indictment? The Cremaster Cycle.”⁴⁵ Brunet closely analyzes the signs of trauma in Barney’s work, drawing specifically on her specialized knowledge of the extensive vocabulary of signs and images of sexual abuse in Masonic rituals.⁴⁶ Brunet argues that Barney’s sense and re-presentation of such imagery, narratives, and texts indicate the artist’s personal connections to such trauma. Brunet’s

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⁴⁴ Both essays, published before an explosion in masculinity and trans-performance studies that would also include studies of failure, and major developments in animal studies and non-human/non-animal and post-biological sentience, maintain their importance to Barney studies, even as their particular methodologies are quickly becoming eclipsed.
⁴⁶ Brunet’s analysis of the traumatic valences of Barney’s work emerges from the research she undertook for her doctoral dissertation. See Lynn Brunet, Terror, Trauma and the Eye in the Triangle: The Masonic Presence in Contemporary Art and Culture, unpublished doctoral dissertation, School of Humanities, University of Newcastle, Australia, 2007.
convincing, insightful assessment of specific marks of ritual abuse in *The Cremaster Cycle* proposes the importance of trauma to the artist’s work.\(^47\)

A discussion of the broader scope of traumatic evidence in Barney’s work, including the visual repetitions of a discontinuous self, through psychic numbing, doubling, and dissociation appears in my Chapter 2 and again in my Chapter 3, as I begin to draw connections between the emergence of specific tropes in Barney’s art that visualize and expand the implications of trauma. In Chapter 2, for example, webs of trauma are explored in comparative images of deadpan in Barney and one of his early career contemporaries, pop star, Michael Jackson. Jackson, a persistent and undeniable voice of the 1980s and 90s, and Barney, a kind of mute witness to the icon, mirror each other in ways that speak to larger issues within American culture in a post-traumatic, post-biological age.

The introduction of Jackson to this discussion of the Barney literature indicates the broader scope of this dissertation’s visual and theoretical discourses and investments, and therefore it is important to address the approaches and methodologies employed herein. As I remarked earlier, one major challenge for Barney scholars arrives in the sheer scope of the artist’s work, and the ease with which one can become mired in the minutiae of his vision. The obsessive, intricate fabric of Barney’s art lends itself easily to narrowly framed expositions on the artist’s narratives, cosmologies, and iconographies. A second challenge may be located in the impact that Barney’s work has had on the art

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\(^47\) In an essay that Brunet published for World Art, she recounts the ancillary support she received from Barney and his gallery: “Having made a number of attempts to contact Matthew Barney since 2003, including sending him drafts of a proposed journal article on his work, I received an email response from his gallery on June 28, 2008 saying, ‘We would love to help you with this exciting project!’ and freely offering his images for publication.”
world and public sphere, and how that excites a thirst for a social and political critique of him in the context of the big-business of a globalized contemporary art world. \(^{48}\) It is tempting to direct attention to the ways in which the mobilization of his projects shed new light on how big artworks get made, the ways artists generate funding, corporate sponsorship of art, and the significance of celebrity. Neither of these approaches are in themselves invalid, but a third challenge emerges in posing questions about why we should care about Barney’s work, and indeed why we do. That is, how does the specificity of the artwork allow for entry points into broader discourses on art and culture that have sustained and expanded its relevance and impact in the public sphere? What does Barney’s art tell us about history and how it is felt through the activation of quotidian threads of aesthetic experience? This dissertation attempts to draw out the specificity of Barney’s images and works and their multivalent connections to the social and cultural contexts and conditions of the last thirty years, while meta-critically analyzing the visual and conceptual interfaces among them.

**III. Dissertation Chapters**

Chapter 1, “Cremaster Panic,” provides the entry into Barney’s reception in the public sphere during the first two years following *The Cremaster Cycle* exhibition at the Guggenheim. This research, which was conducted in 2005, was undertaken at a critical moment when the crossover appeal of Barney’s films and the artist’s celebrity and popular culture cachet had reached an apotheosis, while the artist’s work struggled to

\(^{48}\) In this dissertation I use the term “public sphere” to denote a general notion of a sphere of public knowledge, interest, and discourse.
gain respect among certain circles within art criticism and academic art historical discourse. At the time, it became clear that research on Matthew Barney and his work could not avoid the significance of his reception, including the critical response and discourse that had erupted on internet blogs and discussion boards. This chapter approaches Barney’s reception ethnographically and through the lens of the literatures on popular and fan culture, in particular. The most important source for this chapter comes from the New York conceptual artist Eric Doeringer, the creator of the Barney fan website, “Cremaster Fanatic,” and with whom I conducted an interview in April 2005. Situating “Cremaster Fanatic” at the interface of the public sphere and the art world, this chapter evaluates the liminal spaces that Barney’s work inhabited on the internet, focusing on the repartee it generated among fans and so-called “haters,” many of whom also appropriated Barney’s iconography to generate artistic responses, participating in what media critic Henry Jenkins has called “textual poaching.” Finally, this chapter analyzes Barney’s reception on the internet alongside reactions observed in art publications and mainstream news articles, locating the broad spectrum of responses within a discussion of the ways that certain age-old debates regarding high vs. low art intersected with anxieties about the artist’s interrogation and framing of gender, especially his self-conscious presentations and deconstructions of his own masculinity, and their convergence with his celebrity. The case study is not and was never intended to be exhaustive; however, it is a critical window into a moment in time.

49 http://www.cremasterfanatic.com
Chapter 2, “Deadpan Conceptualism,” discusses Matthew Barney’s face and identifies it as the conceptual locus of the artist’s work. Barney uses his face photographically and performatively with the aesthetic precision of a topographical survey. *The Cremaster Cycle*, in particular, features numerous instances in which Barney’s face embodies an elastic visual and conceptual material deployed to excavate the narrative, thematic, art historical, and cultural conditions of possibility within the project as a whole, synthesizing and transcending fixed paradigms of space, time, meaning, and their material manifestations. Yet even as Barney’s visage is a key interface, a sieve through which his driving themes and aesthetic curiosities are filtered, it also functions as an abundant site for resistance, in what could be called an interpellative encounter, both hailing the viewer to identify with the work, and refusing to disclose its secrets to full understanding. The face shrouds meaning, and trips up the search party for certain truths, screening and halting viewers with an inscrutability that defies hasty or shallow visual consumption. I argue that these mechanisms of resistance, which extend from Barney’s face into the broader visual terrain of his art, are deadpan.

Chapter 3, “Entr’Act,” brings into close focus the concept of deadpan, which literally means “dead face.” The term describes a detached, unemotional, expressionless face that is often used as a rhetorical mode of delivery in performance or speech. Some of the most beloved comedians were and are masters of it, and many scripted performances depend on it.51 In academic contexts, deadpan has been used to characterize the

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51 The Oxford English Dictionary Online indicates two alternate spellings of deadpan as two words, “dead pan,” and as a hyphenated contraction “dead-pan.” Deadpan is a portmanteau, and its etymology indicates that a key aspect of deadpan resides both in the slang use of the noun “pan” to mean “face,” and its primary definition: “a shallow vessel, and related senses.” Coupled with the lifelessness associated with the word
literature of Mark Twain and Nathanael West;\footnote{52} meanwhile, art historian Aron Vinegar has offered a compelling theorization of deadpan as it appears in Denise Scott Brown & Robert Venturi’s seminal text \textit{Learning from Las Vegas} (1977), and also in a separate essay on the “post-conceptual” photography of Ed Ruscha.\footnote{53} Drawing on Vinegar’s analysis of conceptual artists in the 1970s, I argue that deadpan operates critically within Barney’s work and the broader artistic and cultural milieu of the 1990s and 2000s. This chapter adapts and departs from Vinegar’s theorization, placing it in conversation with Barney’s work, while also expanding and developing a theory of deadpan that addresses its convergence with visual presentations of trauma, and its conceptual intimations of hybridity, alterity, and otherness.

Chapter 4, “Sculpture’s Loss of Face,” considers Barney’s work as an expanded intermedia practice, and locates it within a rich and varied history and theory of modern and contemporary sculpture. Picking up where Chapter 2 left off, I move from an analysis of the “man of many faces” to a consideration of the art of many forms, namely sculpture, which Baudelaire once denounced for “exhibit[ing] too many surfaces at once.”\footnote{54} These

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physical and metaphorical surfaces, I argue, represent one origin of sculpture’s otherness within a history of art that privileged painting and prided itself on an elevation of two-dimensional vision as a specific condition of enlightenment civilization and modernist innovation. Accused of being unruly, uncivilized and vague, sculpture was dismissed by Baudelaire and others for its perceived coupling with nature and an overdependence on the visual tricks of mimesis. Such criticisms of sculpture continued well into the twentieth century, albeit translated and re-realized, when modernist critics, suspicious of realism and the totalitarian implications of figuration, bristled at new artistic practices in the 1960s that resisted the parameters of genre and their limitations of form. This led to a reassertion of corporeality in the emergence of intermedia, situational and ephemeral art actions, including action painting, happenings, fluxus, and performance, and “sculpture in an expanded field,” as well as “expanded cinema.”55 This chapter considers Barney’s relationship to this history, having come of age during the renaissance of sculpture in the 1960s and 70s. I theorize the artist’s specific contribution to these “many surfaces” of sculpture—from minimalism, process art and installation, and the reassertion of narrative, myth, metaphysics, transcendental religions, and arcane materials in Joseph Beuys, to feminist performances and videos that explore constructions of gender and the concept of “the personal is political.” Here I attend to the interconnectedness of sculpture, performance, and moving images as a phenomenological rubric through which Barney explores processes of transformation and the related narrative and experiential conditions brought to bear on the artistic subject and object. In particular, I consider the narrative,

temporal, and poetic dimensions of Barney’s work, probing the artist’s investment in nature and its forms, processes, cycles, and events. This chapter closes with Barney’s carnival performance De Lama Lâmina to complete the discussion of expanded sculpture.

In my conclusion, I comment on the contributions of my dissertation before coming back full circle to the significant role that animals, animal visuality, and concepts of animality play in Barney’s work. Throughout his career, the artist has utilized animal themes, mythologies, and bodies as conceptual frameworks and aesthetic models for his intermedial artistic practice. Barney’s visual animal kingdom appears in the form of images, objects, metaphors, hybrid characters, and live animal performers, making him one of the leading contemporary artists working in the visual terrain of animals. I draw together the trope of animality that appears in earlier chapters in my conclusion, focusing on how his work highlights the problems and powers of visual images of non-human animals. Here I discuss Barney’s live performance, Guardian of the Veil—which I attended in his Long Island City studio in 2007—to explore how the conditions and contexts within which non-human animals have been framed, capture and represent or narrativize the artist’s concepts and presentations of the other, and shrewdly confound the very boundaries of human subjectivity, animality, and sexuality that define and support dominant ideologies and practices. I consider Guardian of the Veil in the context of his extensive collection of animal images (his “animalia”), and evaluate his provocative coupling of ancient discourses and images of animal life with those firmly entrenched in a contemporary, speculative, and post-biological age.

The four chapters of this dissertation approach Matthew Barney through a range of different aesthetic themes and discourses that have emerged over the many years that I
have spent looking at and thinking about his challenging and important work. For the purposes of this dissertation, I have focused on the aspects of Barney’s art that are distinct within critical discourses of art history, and theorize his most significant contributions to a history of contemporary art that is only just beginning to realize the significance of his work. Just as this dissertation does not attempt a comprehensive overview, it also resists an exhaustive account of all my thinking and research on the artist. Key discourses and aspects of Barney’s work that I touch upon but do not develop nevertheless remain significant areas for my future work. My conclusion, for example, remarks upon areas of research that I have already begun to pursue pertinent to animals in his art, but could not develop and expand upon in the context of this dissertation.

A final note to readers must address the obvious absence of any commentary gathered via personal interviews with the artist. My decision not to interview Matthew Barney came at a critical moment in the development of the dissertation when I attended his performance *Guardian of the Veil*. This performance represented a turning point, both in my particular interests in Barney’s work, and in my methodology, as I concluded that maintaining a critical distance from the artist for the duration of my dissertation research and writing would preserve the authenticity of my vision and I could better remain uninhibited in its exposition.
Ch. 1: Cremaster Panic

The fascination of what's difficult
Has dried the sap out of my veins, and rent
Spontaneous joy and natural content
Out of my heart.
[…]

--W.B. Yeats, The Fascination of What’s Difficult

I. The Fascination of What’s Difficult

As I took up the mantel of doing research on Barney and his work, the divergent reactions to the artist, and the increasing frequency and fervor of their appearance in critical and academic texts, as well as mainstream discussions, became impossible to ignore over time. After clashing with Barney “haters” on a few occasions, I decided to investigate Barney’s reception, primarily focusing on how it unfolded following the Guggenheim show. This research, presented here as a time capsule of work written ten years ago, reveals the varied investments and interests held by Barney’s audience, as well as the instability of Barney’s popularity. This chapter begins with an overview of the basic structure and themes of The Cremaster Cycle and relevant details about the exhibition and the artist’s biography. From there, I move into a discussion of Barney’s “fan culture,” mainly as it was developed and sustained by the artist Eric Doeringer, the creator of the Barney fan website, “Cremaster Fanatic.” Next, I delve into Barney’s reception on the

2 http://www.cremasterfanatic.com
internet, especially on forums and message boards for websites such as IMDB (International Movie Data Base), among others. A fourth and final section considers the social and art historical valences of gender and sexuality in Barney’s reception, and proposes how the material and conceptual dimensions of the *Cremaster Cycle* dovetail with phenomenological experience of the body and the psychodrama that ensued for some viewers. The complexities in tone and emotion in responses to Barney’s work, sometimes presenting as both willfully obsessed and frustratedly consumed, have always struck me as something akin to “the fascination of what’s difficult,” to borrow a phrase the famous Yeats poem. For Yeats, fascination is likened to a fastening, an obsessive orientation toward something that fixes one’s being to an exhaustive regress of the natural pulse and delight of human experience. This chapter peels away at Barney’s reception to highlight key sources of difficulty and fascination located in the work, which, in hindsight, attest to the artist’s enormous artistic and cultural impact at a particular moment in history.

II. Cremaster

Matthew Barney’s project, *The Cremaster Cycle*, is a conceptual self-portrait that unfolds within a tightly woven visual narrative across five films and a multitude of sculptures. Eight years in the making, the project’s popular allure can be attributed in part to its serial form, and an intricate visual and conceptual structure that is fantastical, allegorical, and deeply personal. It draws on an array of sources ranging from Barney’s biography to mythic figures in American popular culture; from biological systems to chimeras; from Celtic folklore to sports culture; from horror film kitsch and urban myth
to the history of modern art in the west. Meanwhile, the films execute a Hollywood-style production that make *The Cremaster Cycle* a seductive body of work. Barney completed each installment of *The Cremaster Cycle* non-sequentially: *Cremaster 4* (1994), *Cremaster 1* (1995), *Cremaster 5* (1997) *Cremaster 2* (1999), and *Cremaster 3* (2002), with each subsequent film release offering a different entry point for the same narrative matrix. In its completed stage, *The Cremaster Cycle* could finally be viewed in numerical order. Thus, the project has at least two narrative trajectories: a historical trajectory of artistic production and a numerical trajectory of the stages of sexual development upon which the entire project is based. By creating multiple trajectories, Barney effectively disallows a linear or hierarchical organization of the films, leaving viewers to develop their own systems of interpretation. As a deeply interconnected set of signs, appropriated, re-appropriated and fed back into each other like a video on infinite loop, *The Cremaster Cycle* offers to each his or her own understandings and subject formations.

*The Cremaster Cycle* is series of films that explores the significance of, and connections between, systems of biological development and survival, mythic genealogies, and social struggles. The logic of *The Cremaster Cycle* is built on embryonic development, the transformative process through which humans gain sexual differentiation. Barney imagined the bypassing of the process so that the trajectory of embryonic development becomes circulatory rather than progressive, vacillating

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4 Matthew Barney has likened the beginnings of *The Cremaster Cycle* to his early works, specifically to his sculptural installations and his single channel video installations.
“between desire and discipline, in a never-ending, self referential, autoerotic cycle.”

Barney conceives of this process as a cycle between “ascension” and “descension,” or “undifferentiated” and “differentiated” states of being. He maps the concepts behind each film in the cycle onto this process, so that “Cremaster 1,” for example, “represents the most ‘ascended’ state, [and] Cremaster 5, the most ‘descended’.” The body and its geographical territories are mapped out through this cycle in system of characters, symbols, and processes. (Figure 1.2)

Important to this multilayered body-geography is Barney’s portrayal of many different characters within a visually fantastic film narrative based, in addition to sexual development, on patriarchal lineages within art and American culture. Barney’s appearance as such characters as the serial murderer Gary Gilmore in Cremaster 2, The Architect’s Apprentice in Cremaster 3, a character who undergoes many transformations in the film, the mythological and androgynous Satyr in Cremaster 4, and three different characters – Her Diva, Her Giant, and Her Magician—in Cremaster 5 suggest his identification with each character, whether fictional or fictionalized. (Figure 1.3) (Figure 1.4) (Figure 1.5) (Figure 1.6) (Figure 1.7) (Figure 1.8) Barney admits this self-identification, explaining:

I think that The Cremaster Cycle definitely belongs to the tradition of self-portraiture. It begins in Idaho on the field where I grew up playing, and as it moves eastward, it carries an autobiographical thread that I think, at a certain point, trades places with a mythological thread. And it ends in Houdini’s birthplace [Budapest, in Cremaster 5]. Like a snowball, it starts to gather myth as it moves on, but I think

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6 Spector, 31.
the core of it is still my own story.\(^7\)

The combination of lush visuals, historical material, and several interpenetrating narratives captured in *The Cremaster Cycle* contributed to the flurry of excitement around the project.\(^8\) (Figure 1.9) The quixotic narrative and conceptual dimensions of the work meanwhile served to strengthen Barney’s growing crossover appeal in popular culture, for which the artist seemed perfectly primed to achieve. Indeed the cult of Matthew Barney had erupted long before he began work on *Cremaster*. By the time Barney delivered his B.A. thesis performance at Yale in 1989, he had already attracted the attention of critics and galleries in Connecticut and New York City. (Figure 1.10) (Figure 1.11) (Figure 1.12) Within six months of graduating, the ivy-league pre-med student, and freelance model (for J-Crew, Macy’s and Guy Laroche, among others) gained a key supporter in the gallerist Barbara Gladstone, who had agreed to visit his studio as a favor to a young curator and friend, and offered Barney immediate representation and a solo exhibition of his work.\(^9\) (Figure 1.13) (Figure 1.14) (Figure 1.15) After Gladstone asked him in 1991 what he imagined he would be working on in five years, Barney replied something akin to a “visual opera in five acts.” Gladstone was intrigued by his youthful vision and began to pursue sources of financial support for what would become *The Cremaster Cycle*.\(^10\) Two years later, in 1993, Barney began shooting *Cremaster 4* on the Isle of Man off the coast of Ireland. Three films later, in 2000, Barney’s popularity spilled into the world of celebrity, after he met his partner, the musician and icon Björk,\(^11\)


\(^8\) See the trailer for all five films here: [http://www.cremaster.net/crem3.htm](http://www.cremaster.net/crem3.htm)


\(^10\) Ibid.

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who later gave birth to his daughter in 2002. From his middle class childhood in Boise, Idaho, Barney’s swift rise to artistic fame and global celebrity had all the trappings of a contemporary rendering of an American dream, a story that would later serve the artist’s mythos.

Contributing to Barney’s popularity (or perhaps because of it), *The Cremaster Cycle* emerged as a massive money making enterprise that capitalized on the richness of the visual project by expanding its forms of consumption. As expected, the artworks from the exhibition were sold through the Gladstone gallery and at auction. These included drawings and photographs framed in Barney’s “self-lubricating frames” made from petroleum jelly (Barney’s signature material) and polycarbon plastic, as well as narrative sculptures and installations from the films that were largely made of the same materials. In a bid toward the “auratic” power of artworks, Barney limited the distribution of the *Cremaster* films; he produced only ten copies of each film, which were sold as laserdiscs to museums and private collectors. (Figure 1.16) When not being screened by their home institutions, the discs are stored in their own sculptural encasements and many are displayed in museum vitrines. In addition to these artworks, Barney created artist’s books for each of the five films, which were published in limited editions. Meanwhile, the Guggenheim capitalized on the popularity of the retrospective with a spectacular catalogue and an array of limited edition consumer items that were sold through the museum store; these included limited edition posters, t-shirts, and even sew-on arm patches of *The Cremaster Cycle’s* “field emblems,” which were symbols that branded each film. (Figure 1.17) The museum store ephemera, including the *Cremaster* catalogue
and the artist’s books, sold out rapidly; they can however, with varying degrees of frequency, be found for sale on eBay with a significant mark-up. The precise mechanisms of Barney’s promotion and circulation, through his artworks and Cremaster branded items, supported his growing celebrity and iconic status within the art world; however as Barney’s recognition expanded and his work reached broader audiences in the public sphere, his artistic significance became increasingly problematic for critics, who began to contest the validity of his work.

The high demand for and rapid sell out of Matthew Barney commodity goods mirrored the stir of response to the Cremaster Cycle in the public sphere, especially on internet forums, websites, and blogs. The most important among these, the fan website known as “Cremaster Fanatic,” was created by the conceptual artist Eric Doeringer (USA b. 1974). I interviewed Doeringer in April 2005 about the website to begin gathering information about the fan culture that had begun to emerge around Matthew Barney shortly after The Cremaster Cycle exhibition. CremasterFanatic.com is an unofficial fan site for information on Matthew Barney and his work (Figure 1.18). This includes frequently asked questions about The Cremaster Cycle and other activities; synopses of the films; news updates and gossip; extensive photographs with subjects ranging from film production to Barney’s personal life; as well as fan-created art, videos, music, fiction, and poetry. CremasterFanatic.com also features its own brand merchandise, items generated through cafepress.com, which provide Doeringer with only a modest income (Figure 1.19). All of Doeringer’s activities associated with CremasterFanatic.com are sanctioned by Matthew Barney, seven years his elder, who has supported the artistic endeavor of the younger artist. Doeringer’s vigilant attendance to the site, which he
regularly updates with new material, is a common approach for owners of fan sites that thrive on their ability to remain current with the latest news and findings related to their topic. Yet unlike typical fan sites, CremasterFanatic.com does not include a discussion board. When asked about the obvious omission, Doeringer explained that the website is actually “a fake,” or more precisely, what Doeringer has conceived of as a conceptual art work deployed to explore the tropes of fandom through Barney:

I created the site as a conceptual art project, but to the casual web surfer it appears to be a legitimate fan site….Although I appreciate the ambition of Barney’s work and the craftsmanship of his sculpture, I wouldn’t really consider myself a fan [as] his films are a bit too serious and romantic for my taste. However, I was interested in using Barney as a way to explore fandom and its place in the world of contemporary art.11

Doeringer noted that he “could have chosen another art star,” but that The Cremaster Cycle, “has more in common with [serial] fan favorites like Star Wars and Lord of the Rings than, say, a painting by Damien Hirst or John Currin…”12 In order to generate content for the website, and presumably to bolster its credibility as a fan site and source for information related to Barney, Doeringer states that he did much of the initial “fan” legwork himself, which included creating “much of the fan art and fan fiction under a variety of pseudonyms,” while also “actively soliciting submissions for the site.”13 Two years after the site’s creation in 2005, Doeringer added that despite the work required in the early days of the project, “[a]t this point, it’s pretty much impossible to tell which

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12 Ibid.
13 Ibid.
items I made and which are submissions from real fans. The site is an ongoing project. I like the organic nature of the project: it grows steadily as I find more information.”\textsuperscript{14}

In some ways, Doeringer’s active production of Barney “fandom” situates him firmly within Henry Jenkins’ concept of “text-poaching” fans, that is, subjects who are eagerly engaged with their objects as “active producers and manipulators of meanings.”\textsuperscript{15} Like Jenkins’ textual poachers, Doeringer utilizes Barney’s texts and textual identity to generate his own art, including what he calls “Barney bootlegs,” objects which are not actually bootlegged copies of Barney’s films, but videos that contain no pictures but do include bits and pieces of the films’ scores. Along with the other artists, writers, and musicians featured on CremasterFanatic.com, Doeringer’s bootleg approach draws just enough from the original work as to suggest the impression of a connection that is both seamless, that is, in its conceptual relation, and seamed in its imperfect material reproduction, both of which, in the unique case of a “fake” fan site, blur the boundaries between fact and fiction. Indeed as CremasterFanatic.com continues to grow “organically,” the consumer-producers featured there have long since “ceas[ed] to be simply an audience for popular texts” by Barney.\textsuperscript{16} Rather they have become “active participants in the construction and circulation of textual meanings.”\textsuperscript{17} Moreover, CremasterFanatic.com participants engage in the kinds of fan activities that, as Jenkins argues, “pose important questions about the ability of media producers to constrain the

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{15} Henry Jenkins, \textit{Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture} (New York: Routledge, 1992), 23.
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid, 24.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid.
creation and circulation of meanings.””18 They therefore articulate responses that suggest “not simply fascination or adoration but also frustration and antagonism…the combination of the two responses,” raising the specter of the Yeats poem I mentioned above. Here it may be argued that, “the fascination of what’s difficult” reveals itself as that “which motivates their active engagement with the media.”19

Still the ambivalent status of that fascination, and its production of an even more dubious formulation of fandom on CremasterFanatic.com, has further implications for Barney’s reception. Frequently the commentary about Barney on blogs and message boards range from intense hatred, irritation, and frustration with his works and celebrity to only a mild appreciation of his art (often described as “beautiful”) and restrained fascination. Many viewers find it difficult to resist the allure of Barney’s work; yet at the same time, they are frequently reluctant to admit that they find his art pleasurable, at the risk of exposing aspects of their own unorthodox, related imaginings, specifically in relation to anti-normative representations of gender and sexuality.

My own experience as a scholar of Matthew Barney’s work has proven instructive in this case. Well before I had the opportunity to see The Cremaster Cycle, I had already encountered debates about his identity as an artist and about the commodity status of his works. Artist-friends with whom I would eventually see all five Cremaster films, had warned me of his frequent nakedness, and overssexualized presentation of heteronormative masculinity. In point of fact, however, Barney’s characters rarely conform to heteronormative constructions of maleness, let alone masculinity. I was also

18 Ibid, 23.
19 Ibid.
availed of Barney’s alleged exploitation of women through equally sexualized representations of the female body, a claim that held up better under the weight of Barney’s films, but which failed to account for the ways in which these female bodies functioned narratively, and could therefore be seen to disrupt the scopic regimes of the all-encompassing gaze. Then there were the critics who seemed to wring their hands at the opportunity to call Barney “pretentious” or label him a “huckster” who was artistically disingenuous. Although I would experience The Cremaster Cycle entirely different from these friends and critics, my views did not discredit their reactions in my mind. Rather I was flummoxed as well as intrigued by the conflicting accounts of Barney’s work.

Only many months later did I begin to conduct research on Barney’s art, which led to writing that I eventually presented in a paper at Duke University. Mid-way through the question and answer period that followed my presentation, the discussion had taken an emphatic turn toward everything but Barney’s work or the issues raised in my analysis of it. Instead, the audience participants were deadset on debating his problematic status as a celebrity artist, with a couple of scholars insisting that Barney’s significance could be reduced to an art world conspiracy, that is, that Barney is a fake, propped up by corporate sponsorship, art critics, and a New York cultural elite wearing rose-colored glasses. Participants in the discussion insisted on the definitive truth of their assessments; and some of them spoke with an air of pure disgust. I remember feeling embarrassed for most of us and our respective oversights and missteps. For just as swiftly as those respondents arrived at their judgments, as collapsed as they were in an emotionally charged tunnel vision, I had myself been stuck in a kind of self-righteous quicksand, eagerly attempting
to dismiss their reactions as “missing the point.” It was then that I recognized that Barney’s identity is as much a part of the content of the work as the work itself. That neither his identity nor his work can be separated from each other is true both at the level of the artist’s intention (*The Cremaster Cycle* is quasi-biographical), and at the level of his reception. This entanglement is one of its sources of power and vulnerability.

As I have noted, Matthew Barney’s reception in the public sphere and the art world has been nothing if not complex, as evinced by the reception of the Guggenheim’s *The Cremaster Cycle* exhibition. For the purposes of this discussion, let us consider the “public sphere” as those who are not employed in either the art establishment (museums, galleries, and other mainstream or alternative cultural institutions) or by the media associated with cultural production. Those belonging to the “art world” might be considered participants in any of the above categories and those who consider themselves associated with the art, insofar as they are personally invested in its events, exhibitions, and social circles, and who regularly attend museums and galleries or follow cultural media, gossip, and journalism. These definitions automatically presume that an overlap occurs between these two groups, and with good reason. Most people associated with the art world have an opinion of Barney and his work, but not everyone in the public sphere will. That said, there are those such as academics and especially art historians, who are located in the public sphere, yet share a once-removed affiliation with the art world and thus blur the boundaries between the two.

Eric Doeringer is a figure who inhabits both spheres, and thus it is worth delving deeper into CremasterFanatic.com. The website is comprised of four sections: Fan Art, Fan Fiction/Poetry, Fan Video, and Fan Music. The works, particularly in the Fan Art
section, vary in their execution, style, and level of creativity, sophistication and tone. As I have already mentioned, some of these works are genuine responses to Doeringer’s call for fan works, but still many of them were created by Doeringer and labeled with a pseudonym. Some comments that the artist has made suggest that the cartoon or comic-book-style drawings, such as “Matthew X” by Odey Curbelo Urquijo and “Gary Gilmore’s Execution” by Harry Smythe are, in fact, images produced by Doeringer.

(Figure 1.20) (Figure 1.21) Steven Lauf’s “Cremaster Repro” series underscores the frequently cited critique of Barney and his work as mere consumer-commodities.20 (Figure 1.22) Meanwhile, the electronic pop group Basement Jaxx put out a video for their song “Cish Cash,” that appropriates the visual program of Cremaster 1 (1995), which left Doeringer questioning whether it was an homage or a critique of Barney’s larger than life aesthetic. (Figure 1.23) Finally, where one fan saw fit to memorialize Barney with a oil on canvas painting, in a bid to the truly absurd, another turned to candy making, recreating Barney’s field emblem in a three-dimensional confection of white and dark chocolate. (Figure 1.24) (Figure 1.25)

Whether created by actual fans or Doeringer himself, the range of media, styles, techniques, and subjects evoke the familiar characteristics and sensations of fandom. This resonance is strategic on Doeringer’s part, and conveys his perspicuous understanding and distillation of the visual language of The Cremaster Cycle, while still maintaining the integrity of fan culture and its own particular aesthetic. “I looked at a lot of fan sites when

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20 On CremasterFanatic.com, the Cremaster Repro series are dubbed “Lauf’s Forbidden Cremaster Collection” and the following story is recounted: “‘Stephen Lauf’‘s ‘Cremaster Repro’ series was first ‘displayed’ as items on eBay. Within a day or two of the auction period, Barbara Gladstone Gallery requested that eBay remove the items, citing copyright infringement; hence the ‘forbidden collection.’” http://www.cremasterfanatic.com/Art/art010.html
designing CremasterFanatic.com,” Doeringer has commented, adding, “It had to reflect the Cremaster aesthetic to a certain degree, but I didn’t want it to look too slick.”

Further, despite the inclusion of fabricated work, he maintains that the website is meant as a collaborative project. The multiplicity of featured works is intended to reflect the personalities, particularities, and idiosyncrasies of its consumer-producers.

Doeringer’s creation of a faux Matthew Barney fan site combines his personal interest in fandom, and his own artistic pursuits. When asked, ‘Why develop a fan site?’ Doeringer responded:

I have always been interested in ‘Trekkie’ culture and other fan subcultures…. For me, one the best parts of a fan site is the ‘fan art’ section, which is invariably full of naïve copies of movie characters, band members, superheroes, etc. I worked for a number of years as an admissions counselor for art schools, and in that line of work you see a lot of these drawings in applicants’ portfolios. For a long time I tried to think of a way to incorporate ‘fan art’ into my own artistic practice….I also have a friend who was into ‘slash’ fiction….Eventually these interests congealed into the idea of creating my own fan site.

Here, Doeringer expresses an abiding respect for fan art and its producers. Yet it is worth considering further how he situates his identity in relation to fans, or more specifically, to fan artists, for he makes a sharp distinction between himself, the artist, and fan-art that have inspired the project. I will return to this point.

Expanding the analysis of CremasterFanatic.com further, however, the amalgamation of works and their diverse characteristics, as well as the questionable “authenticity” of their production, may be seen to disrupt entangled paradigms of both modern, or “high” art, and popular culture, or “low” art. With CremasterFanatic.com,

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21 Doeringer/Routh.
22 Doeringer/Routh.
these two seemingly distinct spheres of cultural production are forced into a dialogue, reconciling their perceived oppositionality, a framework which endures despite the tendency of postmodern artists to appropriate and recode cultural signs in their works. Even after Andy Warhol’s influential provocation of both elite and mass culture, what Walter Benjamin described as the “aura” of the individual work of art persists in contemporary attitudes. Reclaiming or animating an artwork’s aura also inculcates an instantiation of taste, which, as Henry Jenkins has explained, “becomes one of the important means by which social distinctions are maintained and class identities are forged.”

All of this pertains to CremasterFanatic.com, which must be read as an object always in a state of transformation, both conceptual and collaborative. Moreover, its relevance within a discourse of art must also be evaluated through its a culturally coded language that attends to a particular levels of sophistication, creativity and legibility and the dominant discourses of taste. In Jenkins’ poachers model, CremasterFanatic.com may be read as a discursive interplay between the “original” text and its consumer-producers,

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23 Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” in Illuminations, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1969). While Benjamin specifically addresses the reproduction of works of art vis-à-vis the collapse of history, the concept of the aura still holds special prominence in contemporary views on the value of a work of art. Benjamin argues: “Even the most perfect reproduction of is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be. (…) The authenticity of a thing is the essence of all that is transmissable from its beginning, ranging from its substantive duration to its testimony to the history which it has experienced…And what is really jeopardized in when the historical testimony is affected is the authority of the object. One might subsume the eliminated element in the term ‘aura’ and go on to say: that which whithers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work of art. This is a symptomatic process whose significance points beyond the realm of art” (220-221).

24 Jenkins, Textual Poachers., 17. Pierre Bourdieu has observed that the tension between ‘high’ and ‘low’ culture is reaffirmed in articulations of taste that reflect social and class consciousness and the their built-in hierarchies. “The most intolerable thing for those who regard themselves as the possessors of legitimate culture is the sacrilegious reuniting of tastes which taste dictates shall be separated.” Pierre Bourdieu, “The Aristocracy of Culture,” Media, Culture, and Society 2 (1980): 253.
amounting to what he calls “participatory culture.” Alternatively, the website might be appropriately characterized as a site for cultural praxis and discourse that consciously and ambivalently resist dominant culture. That is to say, the fan art/fiction/poetry/video contributions are partially conscious critical responses to Barney’s works, ranging from “serious” fan works and those that are tongue-and-cheek, to critical works and those that intentionally border on the absurd. Yet the intertextual dialogue between the works, and the interactive encounter among Doeringer, fans, non-fans, and Barney’s critics, still becomes organically, functioning as a culture of participatory/collaborative production that maintains its relevance to studying the artist in an authentic, if not entirely serious, manner.

What is ostensibly missing from the CremasterFanatic.com site, however, is the emotional fervor that underscores much of the interactivity and creative “poaching” of fan cultures. The tone is subdued for a fan site, lacking the emotional charge that comes with the voracious and competitive drive for collection and compilation that is so common to fan culture. Fans typically want to see everything, read everything, and know everything; they rarely discriminate between source types or worry where they come from (especially if such questions might be worthy of debate), and they tend not to edit or “curate” their materials. Cremaster Fanatic’s diluted experience of fandom is further accentuated by the sterile whiteness of the site’s visual presentation. This uninspired visual format is due, in part, to Doeringer’s editorial control, which he extends broadly:

> I created the foundation of the site and planted the seeds for it to grow, but I always envisioned it as a project that would take on a life of its own through submissions from outside collaborators. However, as

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editor, I do have a lot of control over the content. For example, I am not interested in publishing theory and criticism about Barney’s work. Because it is a fan site, I try to keep the tone non-academic. When I wrote the “Synopsis” section, I tried to stick to the narrative [of the Cremaster films] rather than get too deep into the meaning (although I do explain some of the symbolism).26

It is notable that Doeringer’s commitment to maintaining a pretext of fandom that distinguishes itself within the public sphere, depends also on its location outside the spheres of the academy or the art world. Yet distancing himself and the project from institutional contexts, allows him to confirm Barney’s relevance and importance and confer the respect of a fellow artist. As such confirmation cannot help but fall shy of the passionate regard of fan cultures, however, it still aligns more comfortably with the supposed objectivity and feigned disinterest that is characteristic of academic thinking in the art world. But Doeringer’s resistance to identify himself as a legitimate fan is understandable. As a working artist, Doeringer functions as a bricoleur of Barney and fan culture who maintains a distance from both, and from the type of investment associated fandom in order to sustain the site’s authenticity as a work of art. Such distance maintains the line of demarcation, however vague or seemingly unclear to outside viewers, between what he is doing and the “real” work of fan culture. So for example, Doeringer noted how gathering information about Barney, including such discretionary personal details as his studio address and phone number is “a little like being a stalker.”27 Not posting such potentially disruptive details exhibits Doeringer’s restraint and the conscious reigning in of Barney’s fans. Thus Doeringer resists engaging in behaviors that correspond to Jenkins’ discussion of the negative stereotypes of fans, fan behavior, and fan cultures,

26 Doeringer/Routh.
27 Ibid.
which supports the ongoing growth of the CremasterFanatic.com as a conceptual artwork, rather than an unwieldy liability.\textsuperscript{28} Doeringer’s discretion also serves to uphold a professional orientation toward Barney, the artist, and toward the performative procedures of the CremasterFanatic.com. The obsessive exhilaration of fan culture may be filtered from Doeringer’s experience, but performing typical fan activities in order to maintain the site’s ambiguity situates the artist on the edge of fandom’s affective experience: “One of the funny things about working on CremasterFanatic.com,” Doeringer explains, “is that it gives me the experience of being a fan without actually being one. I do get excited when I come across a new tidbit about Barney somewhere, but I think it’s more the excitement of a collector than a fan.”\textsuperscript{29}

Doeringer’s identification with collecting, rather than fandom, demands interpretation. Let me begin by exploring the broader implications of Doeringer’s activities that enable him to perform the postures of fandom nominally, without its deeper emotional investments. By creating the conceptual “fake,” CremasterFanatic.com website, which is accessible and collaborative for both fans and non-fans, Doeringer carves out a liminal space in which he participates in a performative affiliation with fandom, while remaining invested in and focused on the demands of so-called “high art.” The duality of his position situates his artistic praxis in the fluctuating borderlands between a dominant art world and the public sphere—cultures and practices that fold into one another through various types of appropriation. Doeringer’s use of Barney’s work falls squarely within an art historical definition of “art appropriation;” yet by creating

\textsuperscript{28} Jenkins, \textit{Textual Poachers}. See chapter 1 “Get A Life,” and especially pages 9-13 for Jenkins’ discussion of fan stereotypes.
\textsuperscript{29} Doeringer/Routh.
work that intentionally reproduces the aesthetics of fan art, Doeringer effectively engages in a secondary act of appropriation, one that disguises the primary artistic appropriation of Barney and its own symbolic investments. This subversive doubling of appropriation suggests an artistic entanglement shaped by both aesthetic and ideological valences. Here Doeringer’s commentary on the visual affects and procedures of fan culture are instructive, as they suggest a clash of values, which can be observed in his affective oscillation between delight or mild fascination and formal critique:

[Fan cultures] have these conventions where people dress up in costume like characters from the movies—I’ve even seen pictures of Star Wars weddings! (…) These people [fans] have total passion but haven’t learned about shading, anatomy, etc. because they just copy from comic books or film stills.30

Here, Doeringer distances himself not only the passionate regard of fans, but also from their play, which is equally a form of serious identification with their subject matter and its production,” re-capitulating the dichotomy between high art (what he does) and popular culture (what fans do). Moreover, as Doeringer situates himself artistically and culturally outside fan practices and behaviors, he affirms what Jenkins has observed about the way non-fans conceive of fans and their practices: “[the] cultural preferences and interpretive practices [of fans] seem so antithetical to dominant aesthetic logic, [that they] must be represented as ‘other’ and must be held at a distance so that fannish taste does not pollute sanctioned culture.”31 In part, then, Cremasterfanatic.com engages in a subtle ridicule of fan culture that encompasses both its aesthetic discourse and its social manifestations. Doeringer’s orientation aligns, on the one hand, with Jenkins’ observation

30 Ibid.
31 Ibid.
that, “from the perspective of dominant taste...[fan culture] appears to be out of control, undisciplined and unrepentant,”\(^{32}\) while nevertheless affirming, on the other hand, that fandom is a viable, and even interesting, set of cultural practices and affects worthy of poaching.

Yet Doeringer’s performative role as Barney’s most dedicated fan allows him to adopt the critical behaviors and attitudes toward high art and culture exhibited in fans’ resistance to and subversion of dominant culture narratives and practices. Indeed, “unimpressed by institutional authority and expertise” (Barney and the art establishment that promote him), Doeringer joins fans “who assert their own right to form interpretations, to offer evaluations, and to construct cultural canons.”\(^{33}\) He emerges as “undaunted by traditional conceptions of literary or intellectual property,” and primed to gain symbolic possession over Barney’s *The Cremaster Cycle*, “claiming its materials for [his and his collaborators] own use, reworking [it] as the basis for [his] own cultural creations and social interactions.”\(^{34}\) As a pilferer of texts, attitudes, behaviors, and practices, Doeringer perpetuates the oppositionality between fans’ resistance to the cultural hierarchies, and the dominant aesthetic logic, which, in terms of media exposure and economic value, Barney represents. In other words, Doeringer reasserts the conflict between the two spheres of social, cultural, and artistic production, in order to function as its critical intermediary. By “making art that violates the conventions of what art is supposed to be,” Doeringer reproduces the conflict between high art and low art, to explore the territory and tensions between their two spheres, explaining further:

\(^{33}\) Ibid.
\(^{34}\) Ibid.
I think fandom has informed a lot of my artwork. The artists I choose to copy for my ‘Bootlegs’ are not my favorite artists, they’re artists I think are ‘hot’ [and thus] will [cause me to] sell a lot of paintings. That’s another way of saying they’re artists who have fans. Taken together, the ‘Bootlegs’ are kind of an ‘America’s Top 40’ of the art world. In graduate school, my thesis was a series of sculptures that were sort of about turning myself into a celebrity. I made plush DisneyWorld-style costumes of myself, Eric Doeringer trading cards, a toy replica of my car, etc. The idea of investing so much of your life into something or someone you’ll never really connect with is very strange to me….There is this idea of the ‘art star’, but you’re really talking about being a big fish in a very small pond. Andy Warhol was able to become a real celebrity, but few Americans have heard of John Currin or even Matthew Barney or could even name a living artist). Also, the art world is supposed to be ‘highbrow’ and above gushing fandom, but I would argue that much of the market is driven by hype. After all, the value of an artwork is almost completely created by the laws of supply and demand rather than any intrinsic value.35

Doeringer’s probes the complicated tension between the art world and mass culture in the public sphere through a playful interrogation of popular “king-making” (America’s Top 40) and the distribution and consumption of celebrity through commodity markets. (Figure 1.27) CremasterFanatic.com is the culmination of this approach, a site in which the artwork itself no longer exists as a material object, but rather as a communicative vehicle for the exchange of the artist-commodity. Its credibility as a fansite that doubles as artistic commentary and response to Barney’s work depends on Barney’s status as a celebrity art star. As critical intermediary, Doeringer’s various artistic approaches speak in part to the “expressive forms” of so-called “subcultures,” theorized by anthropologist Dick Hebdige in the late 1970s. According to Hebdige, subcultures express “a fundamental tension between those in power and those

35 Doeringer/Routh.
condemned to subordinate positions.” Borrowing from Althusser, Hebdige argues that subcultures operate in a “teeth-gritting harmony,” alongside dominant culture, whereby the “ruling ideology,” is reproduced “obliquely” as a function of subcultural resistance and its unique style. Although artistic appropriation does not inherently subvert the dominant aesthetic logic, Doeringer’s double-appropriation signifies an oblique and unstable relationship to symbolic power vis-à-vis Barney. Seemingly resistant to the pretentions of high art, while seizing upon fan art style as a functional mask for appropriation, Doeringer forces a double-fisted subversion of Barney’s work, engaging in a critical practice that expresses the dialectical tensions between the public sphere and the art world. (Figure 1.28)

Doeringer’s work belongs to a long tradition of commentary in the art world on the art market by artists who have appropriated the moniker of other artists (e.g. [Elaine] Sturtevant of Warhol and Duchamp in the 1960s and 1970s; Mike Bidlo on everyone from Picasso to Pollock in the 1980s and 1990s; and Doeringer on Barney, Gilbert and George, and others in the 2000s). (Figure 1.29) (Figure 1.30) (Figure 1.31) His resistance to the procedures of “gushing fandom,” namely how the public becomes invested in figures from whom they are invariably removed, is a precipitating factor for his commodifying approach, a process that he extended to Barney and other artists in his bootlegging practice. As Doeringer notes, he chose to bootleg artists that already had fans. But by turning himself into an object that could be bought, sold and traded, ahead of any art world recognition, Doeringer reversed the process by which celebrities, and their consumer markets, capture the imagination of the public. This is Doeringer’s most

pronounced artistic mantel, which, following the ultimate inspiration of Warhol, reconceives the artist and the artistic process as a market-driven commodity supply that precedes celebrity hype and popular demand. The success of such a reversal relies on the viability of the claim being made for an artist, and speaks to an issue I raised in the introduction regarding Kimmelman’s risky declaration about Barney’s importance to contemporary art. How much supply is needed to game the art market to create demand? To what extent did the critic consciously gamble on Barney’s rising star in an effort to prepare the contemporary art world for a radical cultural shift, and one of its biggest crossover stars since Andy Warhol?

III. Matthew Barney on the Internet

Eric Doeringer’s critical interrogation of both Matthew Barney’s art celebrity and the affective investments of fandom and fan cultures are crucial to evaluating the artist’s controversial status and the historical significance of his identity to the contemporary art world in the 2000s. What CremasterFanatic.com lacks, in terms energy and passion for Matthew Barney, can be found readily in other contexts on the Internet, where people respond to The Cremaster Cycle films, discussing and debating with an enlivened creativity that corresponds to the vivid visual and narrative dimensions of the work. These commentaries often include complex reactions to Barney’s work that are both polemical and inspired. Consider, for example, the following statement by a blogger, who goes by the name of Zak:

In the catalog, Spector describes the Cremaster films as ‘a self-enclosed aesthetic system’ when in reality it’s closer to a hermetically sealed, vaccum-packed, self-lubricating, impenetrable narrative system. The films and sculptures are amazing
and impressive—as is the sheer megalomania of creating these grand, obscure films.…I like the megalomaniac element and the precision of this insane, and mostly perfectly executed vision.\textsuperscript{37}

Posted in March 2003, during The Cremaster Cycle’s culminating exhibition at the Guggenheim, “Zak” voices one of the many middle-of-the road responses to Barney’s work. Yet, what is striking about his response, in particular, is the conflicting valences of his critique. For example, his move to “correct” Guggenheim curator Nancy Spector’s description of The Cremaster Cycle seems doubly harsh in its accusation that the work suffers from having an “impenetrable narrative system” that is “hermetically sealed.” These terms imply that the work is incomprehensible, while “self-lubricating,” a term which Zak borrows from Barney, confers a self-absorbed, masturbatory narcissism upon the work. While the film impresses Zak, he quickly states that the scale of Barney’s work reflects “megalomania,” which Zak, paradoxically, appreciates and perhaps even envies.\textsuperscript{38} Contradicting himself, Zak responds positively to “megalomania” and labels Barney’s artistic “vision” simultaneously “insane” and “perfectly executed.” Zak’s conflictual response speaks to the confounding nature of Barney’s art, and has much in common with critical reviews of The Cremaster Cycle in everything from The Guardian, The New Yorker, and Time Magazine, to Artforum, Flash Art, and Frieze.

Zak’s review reiterates the most popular theme in responses to Barney in both the public sphere and the art world: that is, the perception that The Cremaster Cycle is hermetic and inaccessible. Arguments abound on both sides, a point that Doeringer


\textsuperscript{38} Nearly every critique that refers to the scale of Barney’s work usually implies or is followed by a statement on the project as over-produced, over-funded and over-hyped.
emphasized when he remarked that although he maintained a deep admiration for Barney’s “craftsmanship, attention to detail, and ambition,” as well as his “strong visual sense,” he identified “a major fault of his work [in] its hermeticism,” adding that Barney “shouldn’t expect his viewers to be experts on Gary Gilmore or Masonic ritual.” Zak imagines, like most of the public, that what he imagines is what Barney imagines or even intends.\(^39\) Another blogger comments: “It annoyed me that I couldn’t ‘get it unless I read’ the catalogue…I’ll give Matthew an ‘A’ for ambition but an ‘F’ for being so Goddamn pretentious.”\(^40\) Even members of *The Cremaster Cycle*’s most likely audience, “an artsy, college-educated crowd,” find themselves “mesmerized by the visuals but utterly confused about the content.” The fact that Barney is generally seen to speak to an elite constituency, an educated, white middle-to-upper class, who perhaps consider themselves “intellectual” and are familiar and interested in culture and the arts, disturbs many audience members, who thus reflexively, describe him and his work as “pretentious.” Even Roz Chast, the cartoonist for *The New Yorker*, published a *Cremaster Cycle* cartoon that was featured on the Back Page, poking fun at this very issue (Figure 1.32).\(^41\) I return to Chast’s cartoon representation of the commonly held view that Barney’s work is too complicated, esoteric, and confusing to be understood later in this chapter. However for the moment, it is worth exploring the valences and investments that some of the impressions and emotional reactions to *The Cremaster Cycle* incited. On the popular

\(^{39}\) I extend thanks to Kristine Stiles for pointing out this aspect of Zak’s and others’ reactions to Barney.  
\(^{41}\) A recent cursory Internet search of major contemporary artists with fansites revealed that few artists have an internet following in the form of fansites devoted their work. Yoko Ono and Andy Warhol were the most notable, but other famous artists lack this popular crossover. Additionally, the popular criticism, including various expressions of disgust are still common among new viewers of Barney’s work.
movie review website IMDB, one reviewer comments on the apparent frivolity of the work: “I rate this one [Cremaster 3] as another artsy, pretentious flick that really has no purpose or meaning. Looks good visually but, like cheetos, full of empty calories.” Such commentary implies not only that the film is vacuous, but that it is overindulgent, superfluous, and perhaps even dangerous insofar as it is addictive, as junk food is commonly understood to be. But for this reviewer the idea of pretention against a work that is complex, reflects the internal pretention of his or her own superior knowledge. It also engages with the profound superficiality in the public’s view that anyone can be a critic and that anyone can say anything. Other reviews are often equally expressive summations of this conflict: “Visually Amazing, But What is the Point?”; “Artist Matthew Barney’s Cremaster 3 is a frustrating anti-cinematic experience”; “Can’t say I understood, but it’s been haunting me”; “An elitist ‘Art’ film”; “Beauty and Ugliness”; “Actually Brilliant”; “dreamlike—hypnotic, and it works”; “The Unending Ordeal”; and “Brilliant and Incomprehensible.” While these mixed reviews evince a range of attitudes toward Barney’s work, including at times confusion or ambivalence, they are often overshadowed by extremes of positive and negative response. For instance, one reviewer swiftly dismisses *The Cremaster Cycle* with the following: “Matthew Barney’s art is dumb…..His work is most likely drug induced and is certainly self-indulgent. Nothing interesting here.” While another reviewer named *Cremaster 3* “A miracle of cinema magnificence,” to which he added, “[t]he feat undertaken by Barney…keeps the viewer,

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43 Randy, “His work is most likely drug induced…” in "Matthew Barney vs. Donkey kong: Cremaster deconstructed,” on *Quick Topic* (July, 19, 2003 Accessed at: http://www.quicktopic.com/22/H/LdbvSDaswihPE
at all times, on the edge of their seat and occasionally watching through slightly opened fingers …. *Cremaster 3* is simply a marvel that leaves one wishing it would never end.”

One wonders if all these reviewers saw the same film. Of course, the fact that they did, and that it generated this wide spectrum of responses is a tribute to Barney that needs further consideration.

I want to return to the prevailing attitude that Barney’s work is “pretentious,” for this word signals a collective acknowledgment that Barney has attained and expressed something in his work that is beyond many viewer’s comprehension, and that this insight is a source of their perturbed, defensive responses. That the charge of pompous is brought to what Barney does, what he has been permitted to do, and what he has brought to art visually and conceptually only confirms his unique ability to express insight into complex, imbricated phenomena inaccessible intellectually to many, especially as he expresses this content in hybrid formations of mythological, historical, and contemporary forms. Moreover, the frustration that many feel about not understanding his art speaks to a broader issue of intellectual entitlement afflicting American culture in particular that everything must be accessible, known, understood, and easily absorbed. To create work that is challenging, that requires contemplation, or that disrupts the limits of visuality and conceptual engagement with ideas, frustrates those who invested in a leveling of consciousness associated with the culture industry theorized by Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno in 1944. Critics of Barney and his popularity often accuse the artist of being part of the culture industry, and yet, ironically that his art is described as

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inaccessible, yet still worthy of attention, paradoxically demonstrates how the artist disrupts the leveling of culture industry. Barney has said that part of him wants to maintain distance from knowing everything about his own work, that is, the mystery of his work for him is what sustains his interest and engagement. This orientation suggests that not only will he continue to do work that probes areas that even he cannot fully fathom, but that he will continue to confound the public with that work as well.

While I have been discussing Barney’s reception in the public sphere, let me now turn to the art world where other reviewers elevated their commentary for the “artsy, college-educated crowd,” and specifically for avant-garde film buffs. “Matthew Barney…has a more expansive vision for the possibility of cinema than any new director since [Jean-Luc] Godard grabbed the audience by the hair and pulled us behind the camera with him.”

Reviews such as these reveal that for a particular type of viewer Barney’s project is visually and intellectually worthy, especially as Barney owes much to artists who came before him: “Barney [is] no more self-enclosed than Baudelaire or Godard. He’s got a real handle on color, design and probably like Mike Kelly understands Bataille. There are endless references to Dali, ENDLESS!...and that’s a good thing, but he is far from hermetic as are those other dudes!”

Another reviewer, who revealed himself to be the artist Nayland Blake, and whose work has itself been described as “disturbing, provocative, elusive, tormented, sinister, hysterical, brutal, and tender,” wrote: “It is more comforting for people to believe [Barney] IS a huckster, [which] means

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45 1.85, Matthew Barney Kicks Narrative to the Curb (International Movie Database, 21 May 2003 [cited 25 March 2005]).
46 Stanley Boydston, M. Barney's Work Is Anything but Difficult... (2003 [cited 25 March 2005]).
47 Sarah Valdez, “Nayland Blake at Matthew Marks,” Art in America 103, No. 8 (September 2004), 124.
you don’t have to think about the work for one thing and reinforces the cozy idea that contemporary art is always for someone else, not for us and is a scam.”

Blake closed by observing: “It seems that the role of [the] artist, whose success we are suspicious of, predates the particular person filling it….I think that all of this is emblematic of the conflicted, muddled place of visual art in contemporary society.”

These Internet dialogues, together with Doeringer’s assymetrical recapitulation of art and culture hierarchies attest to the broad impact of Barney’s work. They undercut the cultural elitism that the artist represents to some viewers, while simultaneously providing a venue for fan cultures, avant-garde artists, and intellectuals alike. Provoking arguments from both sides, Barney’s work suggests its own ability to sustain an impassioned fan base while affirming those who, like Doeringer, cling to so-called distinterested positions vis-à-vis high art and culture. Meanwhile, the emergence of such varied responses both among internet reviewers and the press have surely contributed to Barney’s ongoing popularity. Which brings me to a series of questions. Given the relative anonymity of many of those participating in the Internet site, how are we to consider Matthew Barney’s fans? How is it possible to measure the scope of his audience if Barney’s work is thought to speak only to the cultural elite? Who would admit to being a Matthew Barney fan, and how might that challenge their identity either in the public sphere or the art world?

Moreover, are legitimate fans of Barney “duped” by The Cremaster Cycle’s “commodified sheen,” namely that which aligns the work with the investments and proclivities of “mass culture,” as Adorno and Horkheimer argued? For many intellectuals

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49 Ibid.
and other critical observers of market forces in the art world and its star-making apparatus, *The Cremaster Cycle’s* broad appeal automatically signifies the machinations of its own design, and its status as problematic, if not unintelligable work. Ironically, such judgments situate *The Cremaster Cycle* within the realm of an always-already inferior popular culture. That is, they represent the telos of an art world consciousness that doubts and disbelieves high art’s potential to resonate in the public sphere. This sad, if not shameful, assessment of the cultural work of artists serves to the undermine the revolutionary hopes once held for modernism, which gave rise to such as ideas as, “the cause of art is the cause of the people.”

But the stakes for purveyors and custodians of high art within a multibillion dollar globalized contemporary art market naturally require its ineluctable separation from the lives and causes of the people. And for those casting a critical eye at Barney’s work, the artist’s popular appeal seems to confirm their suspicion of its massive trickery. Paradoxically, the public sphere’s embrace of the work, even as an object of negative or disgusted fascination, supports the contrarian cause of critics and academics who seek to maintain, however unwittingly, their culturally elite status, and to remain “above the

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50 This phrase comes from a statement on “Art and Socialism” that the British artist William Morris delivered as a lecture in Leicester, England in January 1884, and which was later published as a pamphlet. It is carved on the façade of the Cass Gilbert designed building that houses the Allen Memorial Art Museum at Oberlin College, which is where I first encountered it. Morris’ statement encourages “the people,” a mass comprised of workers and others outside the cultural elite to fight to reclaim art as a source of hope, pleasure, and pride in their lives. He writes: “[O]ne day we shall win back Art, that is to say the pleasure of life; win back Art again to our daily labour. Where is the hope then, you may say; Show it us. There lies the hope, where hope of old deceived us. We gave up Art for what we thought was light and freedom, but it was less than light and freedom which we bought….If the bargain had been really fair, complete all round, then were there naught else to do but to bury Art, and forget the beauty of life: but now the cause of Art has something else to appeal to: no less than the hope of the people for the happy life which has not yet been granted to them. There is our hope: the cause of Art is the cause of the people.” William Morris, “Art and Socialism.” Accessed at: https://www.marxists.org/archive/morris/works/1884/as/as.htm
fray” of the popular culture. These complex orientations toward Barney’s work presents challenges for fans and potential fans, for as Henry Jenkins has explained:

Public attacks on media fans keep other [television] viewers in line, making it uncomfortable for readers to adopt such ‘inappropriate’ strategies of making sense of popular texts or to embrace so passionately materials of such dubious aesthetic merit. Such representations isolate potential fans from others who share common interests and reading practices, [and] marginalize fan activities as beyond the mainstream. These representations make it highly uncomfortable to speak publicly as a fan or to identify yourself even privately with fan cultural practices.51

With regard to Barney, such discomforting circumstances extend beyond the increasingly hazy borders of fandom and into the halls of academia and other critical discursive. Thus although Barney’s work may be located within the dominant framework of high art culture, the artist’s success and broad appeal have paradoxically landed his work at the margins of a contemporary art market that is still grappling with the threat of Barney’s popular culture influence.

IV. The Persistence of Goo

In June 2003, just days before the The Cremaster Cycle exhibition at the Guggenheim was to close, the New Yorker published a full page cartoon called “The Cremaster Cycle,” by staff cartoonist, Roz Chast. (See Figure 1.32) Echoing the spiraling rotunda of the Guggenheim, the cartoon is a circular picture wheel. It is divided into six pie slices, each of which appear to narrate and visualize six hypothetical (also to be read as typical) moments in a protagonist’s experience of attending the exhibition. In the first

51 Jenkins, Textual Poachers, 19.
stage, the woman, overwhelmed with images from *Cremaster 3* and *Cremaster 4*, admits, “I do not understand this at all”; in the second stage, she follows a pack of viewers who move through the gallery space undeterred, including one who wears a t-shirt that says “I <3 Art,” and thinks to herself, “I must be a complete idiot”; in the third stage, she comes upon wall text surrounded by a rapt gaggle of viewers, and concludes, “Maybe I should reread this explanation.” Three more stages into the “cycle” follow as the woman realizes there will be “no help” in deciphering the exhibition, whereby she finally decides that she’ll “just stare at the art until something comes through.” The wall text, which might have changed the woman’s fate in stage three, proposes the folly of the visit may be attributed first and foremost to the exhibition’s absurd impenetrability: “Matthew Barney blah blah blah blah blah Cremaster blah blah blah blah referencing blah bah blah metaphor blah blah narrator blah blah blah differentiate blah blah blah…” and so on, a visual and conceptual affect that recalls the incomprehensible speech of the teacher overheard in animated television episodes of the classic comic strip by Charles Schulz, “Peanuts.” Barney, like the teacher, speaks a garbled language that the protagonist, who stands in for the polis, can’t quite follow. The cartoon’s conceit, however, that a process of osmosis, or waiting for “something to come through,” may be the viewer’s last resort, has the peculiar effect of both tapping into what seems like a problematic anxiety of museum goers (that exhibition that is beyond the scope of comprehension), and raising the historical specter of conceptual art, of which Barney’s work is a legacy. As Jack Burnham, the sculptor, art historian, and pioneer of systems aesthetics, once remarked, “[c]onceptual art’s ideal medium is telepathy.”^52 Thus stage six also serves to zing

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readers who might be laughing along, identifying with the protagonist’s confusion; after all, one wonders, where is the line between “staring at the art” and looking at art (the reason for attending art exhibitions) and why isn’t looking at art already understood as a process of engaging the mind visually “until something comes through” or not.

The cartoon captures key elements of The Cremaster Cycle’s reception in the public sphere, as it crossed over from the rarefied spaces and discussions among those affiliated with the art world. Its casual treatment on the back-page of the New Yorker, indicates its broad social impact; yet as the cartoon suggests, reactions to the exhibition were frustrated and perplexed. Its esoteric themes and narratives left viewers exasperated or bored, or both; and its dense five-part structure required endurance on the part of viewers to sustain their attention. Yet neither the exhibition’s purported visual and conceptual opacity, nor the corporate-sponsorship of its spectacle seemed to deter viewers; if anything it galvanized a broader attendance of viewers who came to see what the trouble was all about.

What comes through Chast’s cartoon, then, besides that Barney’s work is deemed cryptic, inaccessible, and exhausting for average museumgoers (these being New Yorkers, who already imagine themselves above-average in terms of their education, awareness, and sophistication), is the unrelenting persistence of goo. As in The Cremaster Cycle, there is goo, which stands in for Barney’s extensive use of vaseline, and “more goo” in nearly every scene. Here, the goo is the humiliating effluvia of an experience that is uncomfortable and irredeemable. It signifies the problematic excess of a society that

inures itself to thinking about work like *The Cremaster Cycle*. It is gross and it is everywhere. Puddles of goo menace viewers’ sensibilities just as piles of poo on city sidewalks threaten their sensible shoes. Thus, in stage five, as the protagonist, looking ill and unmoored in a sea of Barney’s images, stands over a puddle of “yet even more goo,” the threat of vomit in the woman’s eyes comes into view. This goo activates the interface of human experience, evincing the facticity of bodies in *The Cremaster Cycle*, and our own. As with the protagonist who appears overwhelmed in the condensed and collapsing space of Chast’s cartoon, many experience the suffocation of the whole affair in the substrate of goo as it congeals, and threatens to subsume viewers in its looming array of images, bodies, and objects.

As the cartoon subtly argues, the seeming impenetrability of Barney’s work stems from the convergence of esoteric and arcane visual and conceptual discourses and narratives with a base materiality (Barney’s Vaseline), which threatens debasement. The “formless,” ambiguous, and residual materiality of petroleum jelly confers on the psyche revelations of its tendency to remain, to stick to everything it touches with persistence, and to lubricate contact. As Jean-Paul Sartre argues in *Being and Nothingness*, material viscosity, or the physical condition of being “slimy,” as it is translated, converges with the psychic dimensions of being through the body: “[t]he original bond between the slimy and myself,” Sartre writes, “is that I form the project of being the foundation of its being, inasmuch as it is myself ideally….this sliminess is already a response to a demand, a *bestowal of the self*; the slimy appears as already the outline of a fusion of the world with
myself.” For Sartre, the interface between the self (as mind/body) and the perception of material sliminess maintains a symbolic value for the phenomenological condition of “being-in-itself.” For, “the apprehension of the slimy,” Sartre observes, “symbolizes its own being; that is, so long as the contact with the slimy endures, everything takes place us as if sliminess were the meaning of the entire world or the unique mode of being of being-in-itself.” Sartre goes on to explain that the tactile qualities of the slimy substance, how its soft materiality yields to external pressures, suggest a “being which can be possessed.” But this consent to possession is temporary and paradoxical, as the slimy belies its own docility: “Only at the very moment when I possess it, behold by a curious reversal, it possesses me.” The slimy, therefore, threatens the annihilation of being. For Sartre, “To touch the slimy is to risk being dissolved into sliminess,” a “horrible image” that terrorizes the sovereignty of the individual. This is a haunting; and one that necessarily extends Sartre’s mistrust of the slimy’s material influence to its psychical dimensions, in that “a consciousness which be[comes] slimy would be transformed by the thick stickiness of its ideas.” Returning to the cartoon compression of Barney’s work, we can observe how the repetition of Barneys “goo,” which stands in for the impenetrability of his conceptual language, appears alongside an increasing range of emotional reactions that move from the self-aware and the self-critical to frustrated

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54 Ibid, 607.
55 Ibid, 608.
56 Ibid.
57 Ibid.
58 Ibid.
efforts to make sense, and eventually exhausted resignation, in what might be called a passive yielding to the “stickiness” of *The Cremaster Cycle*’s ideas.

Visceral reactions to Barney’s use of Vaseline and prosthetics often reveal reviewers deeply held anxieties about bodies and sexualities. “The books are just gross,” writes blogger, referring to Barney’s exhibition catalogues; “I am (was) a fan of Barney’s, but the books just gross me out. I feel like I am looking a pornography.”59 Another blogger echos, “I can’t imagine the books and the other merchandise being of interest to anyone unless they possessed some kind of prosthesis fetish.”60 Meanwhile one blogger’s reaction to Barney’s work spoke of stunned revulsion: “*The Cremaster Cycle*… is painted all shades of fucked up…. stirs my stomach…. is some fucked-up shit.”61

Such loaded responses find significant resonance in psychoanalytic approaches to materiality in Julia Kristeva’s theorization of the “abject,” and, before her, Mary Douglas’ identification of the psychic disturbance of bodily fluids in her groundbreaking book, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (1966); and in Yves Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss’ development of Georges Bataille’s concept of “L’informe” or formless.62 The “aberrant fluidity” of Barney’s goo is visual rejoinder of our dissolvable convergence with bodily fluids, as a condition of being that both

possesses and is possessed. In other words, as viewers we are both captivated by and held captive by the proximity of abjection, expressed in the material conflation of Vaseline with both its corporeal connotations (as pus or semen), and its culturally-coded associations with sexuality, especially homosexuality, as a personal lubricant.

The menacing stickiness and humiliating excess of Vaseline are rigorously visualized in *Cremaster 4*, when Barney’s character, “The Loughton Candidate,” forces himself through a narrow tunnel from the bottom of the ocean to the open air race track of the Isle of Man. Petroleum jelly coats the interior walls of the tunnel, increasing in thickness and quantity with each minute that passes during his ascending passage. By the time he nears the end of the journey, he is covered head to toe in petroleum jelly, as it has all but consumed him. (Figure 1.33) (Figure 1.34) This crossing is a rite of passage for the character, as it marks his biological metamorphosis, connecting the narrative transition metonymically to Barney’s conceptual framing of embryonic development and sexual differentiation. The conflation of petroleum jelly with bodily fluids is extended further as it performs as a birthing lubricant, albeit a frustrating one, for the island’s symbolic vagina.63 The conceptual convergences of these images with the visual and material metaphors of transformation speak to Elizabeth Grosz’s identification of the “volatility” of bodies and their materiality manifestations, following on Douglas and Kristeva, in constructions of the gender and sexuality.64 Where Sartre developed slime’s

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63 As the vaseline seems to increase it operates to obstruct the smooth passage of the Loughton Candidate, which connects to the psychosexual frustration of the birth and the separation of the infant from the mother, and the stages of individuation in psychoanalysis, for example the Mirror-Stage, theorized by Jaque Lacan. The congestion of the tunnel, which impedes the progress of Barney’s character, raises the question of biological imperative, the anxieties of childbirth, and the resistances to separation.

psychic dimensions in a phenomenology of being, these scholars advanced the
conceptual, materialist, cultural implications of fluidity that underscore constructions and
experiences of the body as sexed and gendered.

Through Barney’s petroleum jelly, it is possible to trace how the psychic valences
of bodies, and their cultural inscriptions through visual or conceptual representations of
hybrid gender and fluid sexuality, played a role in critical reactions to its esoteric themes
and so-called hermeticism. Echoing Sartre, Grosz has argued, “[b]ody fluids attest to the
permeability of the body…They affront a subject’s aspiration toward autonomy and self-
identity.”

In their resistance to containment, bodily fluids “assert the priority of the
body over subjectivity…refusing consciousness its supremacy.” The psychic impact of
the body’s control over subjectivity through the material reality of bodily fluids cannot be
underestimated, for it remains an uncompromising feature of the human condition.
Bodily fluids, “level differences while also specifying them,” representing the
inescapable facticity “of being of being-in-itself” as a functional modulation of base
materialism. “Necessary but embarrassing,” bodily fluids “are undignified, nonpoetic,
daily attributes of existence…that all must, in different ways, face, live with, [and]
reconcile themselves to.” Such reconciliation is impeded by Barney’s work, as it
imposes a cinematic, performative, and sculptural reminder of the body’s material
vulnerabilities, in the specter of the flowing excess of Vaseline, and its contact with
bodies. Moreover, Vaseline’s conditional states of being, namely its material “docility”

65 Grosz, 194.
66 Ibid.
67 Ibid.
68 Ibid.
(to use Sartre’s term) in fluctuations between solid and liquid, stand in for the body’s (and therefore subjectivity’s and identity’s) mutabile interface. In *The Cremaster Cycle*, the formlessness of the body instantiates the instability of identity, and contests the certainty of subject formations vis-à-vis gender and sexual orientation. These disturbances, which also present as visual and conceptual contrasts to romantic narrative and heroic beauty, resemble and bear witness to the psychosocial impacts of everything from the literary grotesque to the “hallucinations” of Surrealism.69 To borrow phrases from scholars Sidra Stich, and Henry Jenkins, Barney’s images are “anxious visions” of “monstrous beauty.”70

A dimension of this psychic conflict is the illegibility of *The Cremaster Cycle*’s conceptual force as a function of its visual surface. As Jenkins has observed, the *Cremaster* films “do not tell us what we should think or feel about them,” and thus awkwardly misalign with the emotional imperatives of genre, such as the horror films the artist grew up watching. Therefore, despite sharing certain visual strategies of contemporary horror, namely what Linda Williams has argued about the films of Cronenberg and others, which “specialize in making the inside visible, opening it up and bringing it out and pushing the spectacle of interiority to the limit to find out what that limit is,”71 Barney’s films resist conforming to the desire of a social order that demands affective resolution. Such may be the realization of the undercurrents of an anxious

69 In his definition of collage, Max Ernst called it “simple hallucination.”
grotesque in conceptual art. As artist Robert Barry has proposed, “modern art was going out on a limb and then cutting off the limb to see what would happen.”72 For Barry, this horror fantasy of modern art culminated in conceptual art, which interrogated art’s “entire system” and pushed hard against “the limits of one’s perception,” stampeding its weakening borders, “to the point of invisibility.” Conceptual art’s perceptual atomization has significant post-nuclear age, post-biological implications for Barney’s work, wherein the body and its residues lay waste to what we know (through consciousness, through knowledge) and what we feel (through affective procedures of empathy). As Jack Halberstam has argued, “the body that scares and appalls changes over time, as do the individual characteristics that add up to monstrosity, as do the preferred interpretations of that monstrosity.”74 As work that fails to police the material perimeters of the body, evading the tidiness of socially accepted representations of identity, and thwarting the potential for affective clarity among its viewers, The Cremaster Cycle’s anatomic dispersal may be conceived as a multilayered assault on the expectations of an audience that seeks facile confirmations of objective truth in legible formations of subjectivity.

Here, Barney’s conceptual framework based on the fluctuating spectrum of “undifferentiated” to “differentiated” sexuality emerges as a key factor in the “crisis” of the artist’s reception in the public sphere, for the slimy, disturbance of corporeality calls into question the very foundations of representation itself as a function of identity, and

73 Ibid., 426.
especially of gender identity. *Cremaster 5*, which marks the most “descended” or “differentiated” manifestation of biological sex in Barney’s system, emphasizes that the culmination of a biological process does not presume a binary construction of gender as masculine or feminine. The narrative centers on the “Queen of Chain” (played by Ursula Andress) and three male protagonists, the “Diva,” “Giant,” and “Magician” (all played by Barney) who disrupts historical tropes of masculinity in culture. In her Lacanian reading of *The Cremaster Cycle*, Nancy Spector argues that these three male characters represent the unconscious projections of the Queen’s desires, and a reflection of herself.75

In contrast to male characters portrayed by Barney in earlier films in the cycle, such as the convicted murderer Gary Gilmore in *Cremaster 2* and the “Entered Apprentice” in *Cremaster 3*, the male protagonists in *Cremaster 5* are feminized. Even among the three characters in *Cremaster 5*, a range in male representations, from the moderately masculine Magician to the hyper-feminized Giant, can be detected. Meanwhile, all are subjected to varying degrees and qualities of eroticization. For example, the Diva, who is more androgynous than the Giant, despite the Giant’s ambiguous genitalia, is eroticized as the object of the Queen’s gaze during her lament on her loss of love. Meanwhile the Magician poses a complex convergence of masculinity and desire. Throughout the film the Magician exudes a dark and brooding energy, as he is shown riding a large black stallion, eventually crossing Budapest’s equally monumental Chain Bridge. (See Figure 1.8) The scenes are filmed in high-contrast black and white, and the Magician’s omnipotent solitude conjures the lone protagonist of a film Western.

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75 Spector, "Only the Perverse Fantasy Can Still Save Us."
Near the end of the film, the Magician is shown standing on the edge of the bridge, naked and chained in shackles. The contours of his body delineate a well-defined muscul arity, which in an American context, corresponds to images of the ideal male body, represented by athletes and movie stars, and connotes a viril heterosexual masculinity. (See Figure 1.38) The Queen’s overt lust for the Magician and their eventual kiss emphasize the heterosexual eroticization of both the character and the artist Barney. (Figure 1.39) This is the figure of Harry Houdini, imprisoned by the isolation of heroic masculinity and restrained by the temporality of life and its cycles. The Queen’s kiss comes too late, as the their procreative windows are asymmetrically aligned. When the magician throws himself from the bridge, his wrists still chained to his ankles, we never see him struggle against the lock. He submits to the fate of his condition, and to that of his role. As idealized masculinity falters under the pressure of its own problematic all-encompassing vision, the seeming coherence of its unity is recognized as a projection of a collective failure to see and understand the nature of its chains.

Writing in the mid-1990s, Abigail Solomon-Godeau’s insights about the constructions of masculinity in ancien-régime France find historiographical resonance in Barney’s work, at a moment when, as she argues, re-examinations of eighteenth century masculinities represented “the direct consequence of the new visibility of contemporary masculinity.”76 In her book, Male Trouble: A Crisis in Representation, Solomon-Godeau explores paradigms of masculinity in Neoclassical painting and their re-articulation in the visual culture of 1980s and 1990s. These “beaux idéals” of

Neoclassicism generally fall within two models: “an active and virile warrior type” and “the graceful and more or less feminized ephebe.” The repetition of these two types in art of the revolutionary period in France, often stand in for eroticized images of the female nude body; the “ephebe,” Solomon-Godeau argues, comes to signify the anxieties that surround sexual difference. She continues:

Given the nature of class and gender conflicts in the revolutionary period, there is reason to think that the beautiful ephebe is a kind of imaginary resolution of intractable contradictions, its pathos and grace a respite from the cataclysms of revolutionary change, its corporeal ambivalence and sensual appeal an escape from the misogyny (and homophobia) of republican discourse. As an idealized male figure, it is charged with all the exalted and ‘public’ values traditionally incarnated in the image of masculine beauty, yet its androgyny or effeminacy permits it to function as a surrogate for sexual difference.

_Cremaster 5_ aligns with Solomon-Godeau’s investigation, reaching back to claim historical variations of masculinity for its three male protagonists, while also disrupting contemporary visual paradigms; in this, the film also speaks to work by cultural theorists in the 1980s and 1990s, such as Michel Foucault, Judith Butler, Eve Sedgwick, and aforementioned Elizabeth Grosz, who argued for renewed understandings of gender as conceptual, visual, and political constructions that are fluctuating, historically determined, and culturally specific.

To be sure, many of Barney’s harshest critiques have expressed revulsion toward gender’s disruptive presentation or potential in _The Cremaster Cycle_. Critic Eric Gould criticized Barney’s perturbation of male-bodies and masculinity as indicative of the artist’s self-absorption, charging that the films represent a mere compilation of “a set of

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77 Ibid.  
78 Ibid, 38.
visual metaphors meant to suggest an obsessive emphasis on male sexuality.” For Gould, Barney’s obsession with male sexuality situates female bodies and sexualities as “subservient to this overriding theme.” Such a view fails to understand Barney’s exploration of polarized conceptions of bodies and sexualities through the disruption of such neatly framed binaries as male and female. Moreover, Barney presents a thematized spectrum of bodies that is far more ambiguous, or androgynous than expressive of a glorification and power of the male body over the female body. Later in the same review, Gould complains that while *The Cremaster Cycle* is visually pleasing, he is nevertheless “left wondering what all this big-budget puppetry of the penis is about.” Clearly for Gould, Barney’s sexualized male body is nothing more than commodity spectacle, without conceptual or artistic merit.

The puppetry Gould alleges, seizes upon Barney’s identity as a male artist without going deeper into the visual hybridization of gender and sexuality that is a hallmark of *The Cremaster Cycle’s* cast of characters. Most of the artist’s characters feature his body transformed through stage make-up and prosthetics, including eradicating and/or altering his genitalia into unrecognizable forms driven by the composite human/animal figures his narrative often presents. Thus for Barney, the implications of gender as a construction extend beyond the contrivances of “human” nature, and intersect with representations of post-biological, cyborg, and interspecies characters, bodies, and sexualities. The character of the Giant in *Cremaster 5*, for example, presents not only as an ambiguously sexed human-fish chimera, but one who must rely on on the labor of passenger doves for the

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80 Ibid.
81 Ibid.
functional mechanization of his genitalia in order to sexually reproduce. (Figure 1.40) On the one hand, the doves elevation of the Giant’s genitalia is merely the visual metaphor for the “descended” sexually differentiated state; on the other hand, however, it offers a visual preparation for a future of mutated, hybrid, animal/human interspecied bodies and sexualities that are invariably entangled with non-human beings and processes.

Thus as Barney’s presentation of hybrid bodies refuse neat categorization of gender, let alone species, they threaten the notion of stable “body images” for viewers. In *Volatile Bodies*, Elizabeth Grosz argues that “extreme [biological] pliability” of bodies undermine the polarization of gender binaries and their libidinal drives.82 The “body image,” Grosz writes, “does not map a biological body onto a psychosocial domain….rather it attests to the necessary interconstituency of each for the other, the radical inseparability of biological from psychical elements…[and] the intimate connection between the question of sexual specificity (biological sexual differences) and psychical identity.”83 Barney’s work demands viewers to re-examine and reconsider their conceptions of gender and masculinity, and their alignment with sexuality. As the artist often performs at the center of his work, viewers must also contend with their reductive impressions of the Barney’s own gender identity. Regarded as extremely handsome, Barney represents the dominant paradigm of male beauty for both hetero- and homosexual appetites, albeit one that he consistently challenges at its corporeal roots.

A postscript to this discussion might be an answer Barney gave in an interview nearly ten years after *The Cremaster Cycle* exhibition. When asked whether a part of him

82 Grosz, 83-85.
83 Ibid., 85.
could conceive of himself as a girl, Barney answered “Yes.” His answer is not surprising since he at times performed in drag, a performative crossing that he has attributed not only to biological sex and gender presentation, but also to the ontology of sculptural material in his and other artists’ work. Such a presentation is both perturbing and thrilling for viewers, fans, non-fans, and even detractors, who try with fascination to make sense of Matthew Barney, one of the most debated crossover artists to emerge in the past twenty years, and who remains at the center of a problematic romantic ideal of artists, what kind of work they do, what their creative motives are or “should” be, and to and for whom they speak.

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84Hans Ulrich Olbrist, The Conversations Series 27: Matthew Barney (Cologne: Walther König), 2013. In an interview with curator Hans Ulrich Obrist, Barney made the following comment about the artist James Lee Byars, and his sculpture: “I think Byars was always very important for me in the way that his performance was very much about the object, but at the same time the object was often in drag….These platonic forms gilded in thin gold foil, or simply painted gold…I think this [represents an] uncertain relationship to the divine…” (138-39).
Ch. 2: Deadpan Conceptualism

In 2005 Matthew Barney appeared on the cover of *In My Stairwell*, photographer Mark Seliger’s book of black and white celebrity portraits shot in a narrow brick and concrete corridor behind his Brooklyn studio.1 (Figure 2.1) Bare-shouldered with tufts of curly hair tied back in small knots, Barney steadfastly meets the gaze of the viewer; his face is split down the middle from his forehead to chin. The right side of Barney’s face is bare, and rugged with several days of stubbly greying beard. On the left side, a gangly prosthetic sheep’s ear projects from the artist’s head, and his skin is molded smooth with what was, by then, Barney’s familiar and infamous prosthetic makeup, used for “The Loughton Candidate,” the part-sheep, part-human dandy character he portrayed in *Cremaster 4* (1994) (Figure 2.2). The magical, weird, interspecies face of the dandy “Loughton Candidate” became instantly iconic after Barney appeared as the character on the cover of several major art news publications, including *Flash Art International* in 1994, *Frieze* (January/February 1995), *Art in America* (October 1996), *Christies Contemporary Art* sale catalogue (May 2000), *Beaux Arts* (October 2002), *Elegy* (December 2002), and *ARTNews* (June 2006). (Figure 2.3) (Figure 2.4) Though production images from *Cremaster 4* emphasize performance, color, and movement, Seliger’s high contrast close-up of the artist is a startling and haunting portrait, a shuddering disruption of the visages of both Barney and of his filmic character, which show the artist to have mastered the image of deadpan. This chapter represents an

uncoiling of my thoughts on Barney’s deadpan, and its relationship to other artists. I probe the visual constituencies of the face, theories of deadpan, and, in a section titled “Human Nature,” I bring Barney’s deadpan into conversation with one of his contemporaries: the musical icon Michael Jackson.

I. Metapictures

However commanding the representation and the photograph, Seliger’s unsettling image could be considered as akin to, if not an example of, what the literary scholar W.J.T. Mitchell has described as a “metapicture,” namely “pictures that refer to themselves or other pictures, [or] pictures that are used to show what a picture is.”

Mitchell further describes the “wildness of the metapicture” as “its resistance to domestication, and its associations with primitivism, savagery, and animal behavior.” As a “metapicture,” Seliger’s photograph of Barney depicts him at the imaginative threshold between his historical performance as the “Loughton Candidate” and the representation of his mythic artist-identity. The portrait reveals him as an inscrutable composite being, who could be said to represent the visual play of Wittgenstein’s infamous Duck-Rabbit “a curious hybrid that looks like nothing else but itself”. In this regard, Barney self-consciously represents his own imagined “wildness,” a key aspect of Mitchell’s concept of metapictures. Since the “Loughton Candidate” character was already conceived and performed as a human/sheep chimera, the redoubling of Barney, the artist, adds an

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3 Ibid., 57.
4 Ibid., 53. Mitchell further connects to the concept of the curious hybrid to the historical representation of the mulatto.
additional layer of hybridity to the photographic portrait. This is the functional “meta” of this meta-picture and what prepares it to be “used to reflect on the nature of pictures.”

Seliger’s portrait refers to itself and to other pictures, unlocking aspects of Barney’s work and laying bare its visual and conceptual imbrications across art and culture. As a picture that shows what a picture is, this chapter also considers and expands upon the breakdown of the portrait’s visual information, which may be described as a two-fold process whereby its pretense to convey knowledge about the sitter, in the first moment, is swiftly eclipsed by its own resistance to legibility, in the second. This accumulation, I propose, proceeds through the visual and conceptual mode of “deadpan,” which I theorize as a temporal performative mechanism of resistance that deploys through the face and reverberates like a pulse through the material body of Barney’s work. Furthermore, deadpan will be used here as a theory to place Barney’s work in conversation with artistic and performative antecedents and contemporaries, including Buster Keaton, Ed Ruscha, Adrian Piper, and Michael Jackson.

Deadpan means, “dead face.” Deadpan characterizes both a lack of expressivity and its rhetorical delivery. Beginning with the silent face, most notably, that of Buster Keaton, who asserted a self-conscious resistance to expression, the actor utilized this powerful visual technique throughout his film career. Keaton stylized his deadpan with the static pacing of his gaze that cut through brisk narrative and hurried cinematic movement. Although Barney’s work slows time (an aspect to which I shall return), the contrast felt in Keaton resonates in Barney’s work, if not as direct quotation then as a re-collection of its orientation to its visual context and the external gaze. Meanwhile, the

5 Ibid., 57.
emergence of deadpan in Barney’s work of the 1990s represents the legacy of conceptual and postconceptual art of the 1960s and 70s by Ed Ruscha and others, who deploy deadpan rigorously in their work. Departing from the primarily linguistic and non-figurative representations associated with these conceptual artists, Barney revives deadpan through a radical re-assertion of figuration, focusing on the face, as a locus of expression for ideas that culminate visibly and experientially. Here I am particularly interested in the relationship between Barney’s deadpan and the critical visual discourses of the artist Adrian Piper, where deadpan functions as a protective interface between the absurd cruelties of her social and cultural context and her rigorous performative interventions into their racist and misogynistic underpinnings.

But what most critics have failed to recognize is that Barney, who is widely recognized for the ways his work explores, deconstructs, and reconfigures representations of the body, is an artist who relies unassailably on the visual impact of his face. Indeed, Seliger’s portrait of a split and composite Barney, performing one of his many performative “others,” conveys a visual folding of a face within a face. This doubling of the artist and his image reverberates in a continuously growing visual archive of the artist’s face, ranging from production images, culled from his various films and performances and ancillary photographs, to press features and other media coverage that have accumulated since the late 1980s right up to the present.

Seliger’s portrait serves as a reminder that Barney is an artist who understands the power of a face, and the impact of his face in particular. What this portrait proves, I would like to suggest, is how Barney, a white male occupying the unmarked naturalized space of American culture, astutely exploits the fact that he is free to inhabit any
representation he likes and takes full advantage of this malleability, given him by his culturally privileged position. I propose that Barney is fully aware of his privilege and transposes it with critical self-awareness, offering his body as a functional tabula rasa, easily adaptable to a seemingly endless range of identities, with and without prosthetic makeup, in a manner not unlike that of the artist Cindy Sherman, thirteen years his senior. But different from Sherman, Barney’s performative images, in or out of costume, absorb and become different characters, especially in his films. What I am underscoring is how Barney relies on the flexibility of his own face and body to enact the characters at the center of his complex narratives, characters that, as I shall show, are also metaphorical representations of aspects of himself and his biography.

In this way, Barney utilizes his face as sculptural material to be transformed like clay that can be reworked again and again in varying dimensions and representations. In his hands, the face becomes an artistic material through which he threads entire narratives and stories to create an image and vice-versa: to be an image. Barney creates images from which he develops stories and narrative sequences, films, photographs, performances, and sculptures. In this way, his use of the face represents a contemporary manifestation of the converging aims and investments of self-portraiture associated with performance art that is a presentation of the self re-presented: the being of an image. Moreover, his work speaks to the ways in which the specific conceptual and material imbrications of a face interface with the aims of sculpture, especially the complicated relationship of sculpture

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to figuration. When asked why he cast such famed figures in American culture as Norman Mailer, as Harry Houdini, in *Cremaster 2* (1999), the sculptor Richard Serra, as himself and “The Architect,” in *Cremaster 3* (2002), and the actress Ursula Andres, as “The Queen of Chain,” in *Cremaster 5* (1997), Barney responded that these people and their enactments of his characters seemed to convey “violence, sublimated into form.”

(Figure 2.5) (Figure 2.6) (Figure 2.7)

This concept brings both constructive and destructive elements to bear upon the face, as well as their itinerant art historical valences. They also bring to mind the conflict between the creative and the destructive principles of art in the post-WWII figural sculpture and painting of Jean Fautrier, Alberto Giacometti, and others, in which the face figures as a formal valence of the trauma and violence therein.

(Figure 2.8) (Figure 2.9) (Figure 2.10) Barney’s notion of “violence sublimated into form” is relevant to the use of his own face, but before that practice can be clearly articulated, something more must be said about Barney’s selection of Andress.

When Barney cast Andress, she was in her late sixties. Although she remained recognizable as the once glamorous James Bond girl from the 1970s, a beauty that Barney has noted “redefined the feminine sex-symbol,” her visual aesthetic no longer conformed either to her youthful face or to the standards by which her career was established and judged.

(Figure 2.11) In short, life had cut into her, enabling her transformation into the aged opera prima donna that Barney cast to play in *Cremaster 5.*

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For Barney, the face is the canvas where the notion of an ideal form or beauty is transformed into art as a matter of time passed through lived experience, and Andress’ face represented an archive of visual continuity from youthful beauty to maturity and wisdom. Whereas visual representations of a star typically idealize the subject’s physical beauty, often relying on technological gloss and post-production effects rendered in Photoshop or other imaging programs to achieve the fantasy of visual perfection, Barney sought to create authentic images that celebrated Andress’ face as material. He never shied away from intimate photographic and filmic investigations of her face in her performance in order to illuminate its specificity, understood to be a multidimensional source of unique and transformed beauty. Although wary of being seen in such intimate close-ups, Andress recounts how Barney talked her through his artistic process and vision in order to mediate her anxiety about his visual investigation of the topography of her face. As a public figure and former model himself, Barney knew well her suffering under the intrusive visual scrutiny of the lens. But what his empathic approach to working with the actress reveals is a different valuation of the images of Andress that the lens would be deployed to produce.

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10 Kant’s comments in the Critique of Judgment about the relationship between nature, beauty, and art are relevant here, especially insofar as it pertains to Barney’s investment in negotiating of all three through the material potential of the face for art: “Nature proved beautiful when it wore the appearance of art; and art can only be beautiful, where we are conscious of its being art, while yet it has the appearance of nature” (section 45). Whereas Andress’ aged “nature” detracts from the idealized subjectivity of Hollywood cinema (which may itself may “wear the appearance of art”), it also permits her to be re-presented as an artistic object, as though the effects of time upon her nature could be re-framed as though it had been rendered for the purposes of art. See, Immanuel Kant, Critique of Judgment, ed. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1987; first published as Kritik der Urteilskraft in Germany in 1790.

Barney’s exploration of Andress’ facial particularity elucidates the sculptural implications of time upon the organic material of the body. Such a distillation of beauty into knowing is directly relevant to Barney’s dependence on his own face. Indeed, I would propose that the artist could be said to locate his sense of security in his own face, a visage that is also his source of self-knowledge of a life lived and worked. Thus, the marks of his experience became potent artistic material not only for himself but for those he cast in his films. This seeming trust in his countenance enables a kind of artistic courage to place himself at the center of his work and to perform characters and situations in which he risks, but equally relies upon, his own body, a confidence no doubt learned as an accomplished former athlete. Barney understands how to use his body physically and creatively, and is well aware of its limitations and how to overcome them. Moreover, from an aesthetic standpoint, modeling taught him how to pose and move to produce visual presentations with the power to persuade. Barney transposes and mobilizes such bodily knowledge in his art to make connections between it and life experience in order to follow, as I noted above, his “Path,” a term that might be understood not only as a route but also a direction. In these many ways, Barney’s

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12 This aspect of Barney’s approach to Andress, and of his art in general, converges with Marcel Proust’s astonishing revelation about time’s transformative effects on Albertine in volume 7, *Time Regained*, of his monumental *In Search of Lost Time* [*À la recherche du temps perdu*] (1871–1922). Proust writes: “It was difficult to find a link between the two figures, past and present, to think of the two individuals as possessing the same name… one has difficulty… in conceiving that she who was once a girl is now an old woman when the juxtaposition of the two appearances, the old and the young, seems so totally to exclude the possibility of their belonging to the same person … so that one might well refuse to believe that this can ever have been that, that the material of that has not taken refuge elsewhere but has itself, thanks to the subtle manipulations of Time, turned into this, that it is the same matter incorporated in the same body… to which an appearance of verisimilitude is given only by the pink upon the cheeks, once a small patch surrounded by the golden corn of fair hair, now a broad expanse beneath the snow.” See, Proust’s *Time Regained*, 367. Barney’s work reveals an interest in the continuum between “this” and “that,” a preoccupation that emerges particularly in his sculpture and the conditions of temporality that transform them visually in his films.
aesthetic confirms the crucial valence of what W.J.T. Mitchell holds to be metapictures: images that “show themselves in order to know themselves” and, in so doing, “stage the ‘self-knowledge’ of pictures.”

All of this showing and knowing revolves ultimately, I propose, around Barney’s face. As Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari have written in another context: “All faces envelop an unknown, unexplored landscape; all landscapes are populated by a loved or dreamed-of face, develop a face to come or already past.” This important observation is worthy of placing in conversation with Barney’s art for how he both utilizes the face as a site and a physical material for narrative development, deploying cultural references, especially nostalgic imagery, in order to build layers of the meaning and significance of his tales, both in and out of character, the very intersection of the artist’s art and being that Seliger captured in his portrait.

By re-presenting the artist as a hybrid of the person Matthew Barney and his character in Cremaster 4, Seliger’s portrait conflates the artist with his work. What is fascinating about this photograph, then, is how the image curiously muddles in the territory of self-portraiture, a phenomena that might be read as an ironic reassertion of Julian Stallabrass’s question: “What’s in a face?” Stallabrass poses this question to examine a style of contemporary photographic portraiture that casts a “quasi-ethnographic” gaze upon its subjects, and repurposes what he argues is already a condition of traditional ethnographic photography, namely the erasure of both the

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13 Mitchell, Picture Theory, 48.
photographer’s construction of a subject (in a plausible framing of an objective Other), and a subject’s self-presentation or conscious participation in the construction of his or her own image. Where Stallabrass wonders what can be learned about someone from a photographic portrait, where the stability of the visual surface depends on the invisibility of its structuring principles and aims — i.e., what was at stake for the photographer, and to what extent the subject exercised agency — Seliger’s portrait of Barney may be seen to break open the relationship between the ethnographic claims of photographic portraiture and the authorial frame within, manifested in a dramatic visual cut.17

The cut is the visual seam that physically bifurcates the face, and it functions as a violent break, as well as its aspirational reparation. Here, Barney, the artist, and the “Loughton Candidate” character are quilted together awkwardly in a multivalent visual and conceptual composition that speaks to a number of issues at stake in photography: the performativity of portraiture and self-portraiture, the instability of authorship, as well as themes that run throughout art history, legacies that Barney plumbs the depths of in concepts of metamorphosis, animality as a condition of alterity, and failure. The facial split proposes not only a visual break with the notion of a coherent and “seamless” figural representation, but also of identity itself, which must be immediately understood as an

16 Stallabrass calls this style “a false science of the other,” for the ways in which photographers such as Richard Avedon and Irving Penn, among others, sought to hide the interface between photographer and subject, and especially the “silent theater” (quoting Avedon) of control wielded by the photographer in the production of portraits which were thought to “yield knowledge of the subject.” Ethnographically-styled images are usually regarded as visual sites for excavating knowledge about the subject; but they also encourage imaginative self-identifications (or self-differentiations) on the part of viewers who subsequently confer evaluations of identity and character upon the photographed subject (Citing Martha Rosler’s observation of the “physiognomic fallacy”). Seliger’s portrait of Barney seems to collapse the possibility of either, as if the artist has already done the excavating and disrupted the surface for either self-identification or differentiation.

17 Writing about Diane Arbus’ portraits, Stallabrass observes “that ‘freaks’ can be found as much among the ‘normal’ as the marginal, or that it is hard to tell where the border lies, and that any subject could be made strange by the camera, particularly in Arbus’s hands.” Stallabrass, 75.
ongoing composition of breaks and sutures that bind together emotional, social, physical, geographical, temporal, and philosophical experiences and so on. Thus Seliger’s fractured portrait casts additional doubt on the trustworthiness of visual expressions of identity and on a dependable logic for evaluative discourse. Seamed or seamless, broken or whole, a portrait is already an assemblage of values and aesthetic aims that cannot be articulated by surface or grasped by the vision that grazes upon it.18 Indeed, the visual cut has further implications for the self-fashioning of identity in portraiture, which art historian Richard J. Powell theorizes in black portraiture and self-portraiture through the expression, “cutting a figure,” a concept he argues operates “as leitmotif, artistic blueprint, and theoretical stratagem, [that] works toward addressing the notion of a catalytic, racialized subject in art and visual culture.”19 For example, Adrian Piper’s embrace of a black male alter-ego, which she developed visually and performatively over time, and referred to as “The Mythic Being,” demonstrates the fluctuating interface of self-portraiture and embodiment as a visual suturing of identity, and the complex “locus of consciousness,” that figures into strategies of and resistances to the gaze. As Piper has written of this series of self-fashioned presentations: “The dispersion of my own past will occur via the reproduced and disseminated image and utterances of the Mythic Being, whose experiences are inextricably tied to my own history, as recorded in my journal

18 The visual and conceptual break of the face in the cut points to what Mitchell calls the “multistability” of metapictures. For Mitchell, “multistable images” allow for “the co-existence of contrary or simply different readings in the single image” (45). Further, he argues that they “are also a staple feature of anthropological studies of so-called ‘primitive art,’” such as “[m]asks, shields, architectural ornaments, and ritual objects [that] often display visual paradoxes, conjoining human and animal forms, profiles and frontal views, or faces and genitals” (45-46). Mitchell
19 Richard J. Powell, Cutting A Figure: Fashioning Black Portraiture (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 12.
between 9/61 and 12/72.”

II. Funny Face

Where the “quasi-ethnographic style” of photography appears to reinvigorate the notion that “photographs furnish evidence,” to quote Susan Sontag, Seliger’s portrait of Barney appears to excavate and procure advanced knowledge. That is to say, if a portrait aims to strip bare the surface of a subject, curiously, the resurfacing of the “Loughton Candidate,” seems to suggest that a hypothetical revelation of the artist’s depths, emerged as a function of the photographic process itself—and importantly ahead of scrutiny by the gaze. Here I am thinking of something along the lines of a famous scene from the Fred Astaire/Audrey Hepburn film, *Funny Face* (1957), in which Astaire “discovers” the strange beauty and expressive potency of Hepburn’s “funny face” precisely as it begins to chemically materialize in a photographic print developing before his very eyes in his darkroom. Although, for the audience, it seems highly improbable that the physical entity known as Audrey Hepburn could move about the world as an undiscovered beauty, the film offers a surprising twist, by reversing that narrative internally. That is, where Hepburn’s character is made-up to affect the notion of unremarkable plainness, the audience already sees and recognizes her as

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21 Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1977), 5. “The picture may distort; but there is always a presumption that something exists, or did exist, which is like what’s in the picture.”
22 Incidentally, Astaire plays a fashion photographer, based on Richard Avedon. At the beginning of the film, Astaire shows up for a photo shoot with a model and his magazine colleague at a dusty and dark used bookstore in Manhattan where Hepburn works as the sales clerk. Hepburn plays a mousy, tomboyish young bookworm and budding intellectual who is as obsessed with the philosophy and as she is derisive about fashion. Although she is flummoxed by Astaire and co. seizing control of the store for the photo shoot, she permits herself to be photographed in a couple of test shots before the crew pushes her meddling presence out the door.
beautiful (because she is “Audrey Hepburn”) and not a “funny face.” As Astaire’s character begins to recognize the significant potential of Hepburn’s face, singing to himself in the darkroom about her “sunny, funny face,” the audience observes her emerging face along with him. The resulting image is a hyperreal abstraction of Hepburn, a close-up cropped so tightly that it extracts the surface of her face from the context of her being. Lacking depth, her facial features appear to morph into mere structural lines and “black holes.” Meanwhile, Hepburn’s unique beauty, the contours of which suddenly appear odd, appear to dissolve strangely into a haunting figure that seems more alien than human, and even, therefore, alienating. Astaire’s revelation of the portrait renders daunting the task of making sense of Hepburn’s face.

Thus, as the film “furnishes evidence” of her funny face, the audience, surprised to discover this new image of the actress, may be said to be seeing her face for the first time. There is far more that could be said about this pivotal moment in the film and its broader relevance to visual culture, but the point is that when Hepburn’s face materializes as “funny” during the photochemical process, photography itself emerges as both a transmuting spirit and chemically transformative technology. That is, the “funny” face appears to be materially imprinted by the technology, as though the developing chemicals were not merely image-forming, but also skin-molding, the likes of which have been

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23 Deleuze and Guattari writing about “faciality” in *A Thousand Plateaus* describe the face as a system of white walls and black holes. This system may be brought to bear both on the visual affect of Hepburn’s *Funny Face* portrait and Seliger’s portrait of Barney: “Subjectification is never without a black hole in which it lodges its consciousness, passion, and redundancies. Since all semiotics are mixed and strata come at least in twos, it should come as no surprise that a very special mechanism is situated at their intersection. Oddly enough, it is a face: the white wall/black hole system. A broad face with white cheeks, a chalk face with eyes cut in for a black hole.” Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, 2nd edition, translated by Brian Massumi (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 167.
imagined in comics and other stories where characters morph into other physical and visual manifestations of themselves, either as temporary transformations or as irreversibly metamorphosed beings following a major, usually catastrophic, event.

Seliger’s portrait affects a similarly transmogrifying feat, whereby the reappearance of the “Loughton Candidate” seems to hint at the revelatory technology of photography to bring forward the funny, alien dimensions within. It is as though a normative Matthew Barney sat for his portrait, but photography instantiated a rupture of his exterior being, bringing the face of his internal Other to the surface. One key aspect of Seliger’s portrait differentiates it from a straight comparison to Hepburn’s funny face. Whereas Hepburn appears unaware, her gaze cast away from the camera’s eye and perhaps deep in thought, Barney returns the viewer’s gaze directly, but with a darkness that matches his radically altered presence and self-awareness. Hepburn’s visage is lyrically expressive and operates as the romantic hinge of the film’s narrative, which finds the newly discovered model becoming fashion’s next star and Astaire’s deliriously delightful and incorruptible muse (even as we already know that Hepburn’s innocence will be transformed). Barney, in contrast, appears fulminating in self-actualized embodiment, coyly aware of his own provocation. Here the artist looks back at viewers,

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24 In a discussion of Avedon’s photographic investigation of rural and working class Americans in western states, Stallabrass quotes John Rohrbach (the commissioner of the Avedon’s project) in the preface to the resulting book, *In the American West*. Reaffirming cultural difference’s inscription on the visual, Rohrbach prepares readers to feast their eyes on visual subjects whom he casually refers to as “people whom many of us would prefer to step quietly around if encountered in life” (Stallabrass, 77-78). John Rohrbach, “Preface,” in Richard Avedon, *In the American West* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2005), n.p. The first edition was published by Harry N. Abrams in 1985.). This comment caught my attention as it recalls a similar description of Barney by someone who saw one of his portraits, saying that he “wouldn’t want to encounter ‘that guy’ [meaning Barney] in a back alley.”

25 Viewers know this because Hepburn has already sacrificed some of her sanctimonious criticism of the fashion industry’s superficiality, which only serves to further compromise her values and focus when she uses her “discovery” as a way to get herself to Paris. Hepburn’s character is naïve, but she’s preternaturally aware of her sacrifice, which is a key narrative conflict of the film.
long absolved of his youthful disregard, as the arbiter of so-called genius and its conceptual artistic rendering; and as a beauty and the manifestations of both his inner and outer freak.26 Barney is, in a sense, unfazed by the photographic impulse to expose, and at ease in inhabiting himself, summoning Barthes’s notion that the subject experiences the self as a “measure of photographic ‘knowledge’.”27

Yet if the aim of ethnographic or quasi-ethnographic photography is to create an image that not only appears to produce knowledge of the Other, but proposes the possibility for self-identification or related emotional investments such as empathy, by illuminating in manifest detail the surface textures and idiosyncrasies of being, and the familiar expressivity of humanity across planes of cultural, ethnic, race, or class difference, Seliger’s portrait proposes the alternative. That is, it probes and dramatizes Barney’s face as a disruptive visual surface, reifying difference in order to deflect, primarily, the investigative and assimilative dimension of the ethnographic impulse, which seeks, secondarily, to mediate relationships between the viewer and the Other. One aspect of the ethnographic approach to photographic portraiture, of course, is an attempt to ameliorate fault lines of difference by framing the Other in such a way that will encourage viewers to sympathize and self-identify with the experience of being Other, by recognizing their own flawed humanity reflected back at them.

But the potential for self-identification is obviously strained by both the art historical and the morphological specificity of the “Loughton Candidate” in Seliger’s

portrait. Which is to say, although the character derives from the familiar renderings of mythological Satyrs, the “Loughton Candidate” is unlike any other representation of a Satyr. First, Barney’s transformation could not be mistaken for anyone else’s image of a Satyr; and secondly, because the “Loughton Candidate” is a prosthetic transformation of Barney’s face that is built on the artist’s bodily bone structure. It is that form, namely Barney’s body, that enables his character to look the way that it does, which makes it impossible to imitate despite donning the costume of “Loughton Candidate.” Seliger’s portrait drives this point home by being bifurcated between Barney and the “Laughton Candidate,” and revealing the physical imposition of the prosthetic. Recalling W.J.T. Mitchell’s comment about metapictures, quoted above, Barney’s curious hybrid representation could be said to also “looks like nothing else.” This specificity removes the image from facile ethnographic types of viewer self-identification, even as it continues to allow for a conceptual alignment or sympathy with Barney’s self-constructed alterity. Moreover, as the artist’s face resists emotional expressivity, it

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28 I see this aspect of the unique dependence of the “Loughton Candidate” on his “mask,” as distinct from other characters, for example, Lynn Hershman Leeson’s Robert Breitmore multiples in which different women were often dressed and made up to inhabit the identity of Hershman Leeson’s fictional character, which the artist also inhabited at various times. Hershman Leeson’s Roberta Breitmore multiples did not require the symmetry of perfect resemblance, but rather the presentational suggestion of a look-alike. Nevertheless, in certain images of Roberta Breitmore, the uncanniness of the look-alike can be detected, as one photograph currently held by the Museum of Modern Art in New York’s collection, reveals. In this photograph, MoMA attributes the role of Robert Breitmore to Hershman Leeson (Lynn turning into Roberta, 1978); yet the character bears a striking resemblance to other images of Breitmore in which art historian Kristine Stiles, who once in 1976 inhabited the character, appeared. Photographs of Stiles as Roberta are also in MoMA’s collection, and they serve as uncanny comparisons. An additional point I want to make here is simply that whereas Barney as the Loughton Candidate, looks “like nothing else” and like no one else because of the nature of prosthesis, the slippery visual impersonations of Roberta Breitmore indicate how nothing (and no one) else looks exactly like Roberta Breitmore, though Roberta Breitmore often looks like something (and someone) else. See especially Stiles as Roberta here: http://www.moma.org/collection/works/147315?locale=en; Stiles being made-up by Hershman-Leeson as Roberta Breitmore: http://www.moma.org/collection/works/147318?locale=en; appearing as Roberta here: http://www.moma.org/collection/works/147317?locale=en; and Hershman-Leeson looking like Stiles here: http://www.moma.org/collection/works/159759?locale=en
delimits legibility and the potential for empathic experiences produced through functional mirroring or mimicry. Moreover, it matters here that Barney is shown as not entirely human, and that his nonhuman rendering is also indisputably non-organic, or “man-made,” placing additional strain on anthropomorphic sympathies while opening up additional potential for the performative ones.

Thus the visual and conceptual splintering of Barney’s hybrid face opens up discursive questions about self-presentation and the function of performativity as a quotidian dimension of knowledge within the photographic image. Namely, if in attempting to “furnish evidence,” portrait photography also aims to gain representation control over the subject (which as Stallabrass demonstrates is a key dimension of the artistic impulse of the ethnographic and quasi-ethnographic style), it is worth asking with regard to Seliger’s portrait, what power to possess does the camera, the photographer, or the viewer have in an encounter with a face that has been “transformed…in advance of the image”? In other words, to what extent does the performative re-presentation of the “Loughton Candidate,” a prosthetic design already composed for the visual image, complicate the visual or technological imperatives of both photography and the subgenre of portrait photography?

More to the point: to what extent has Barney already stolen the thunder and absconded from the photograph imposed upon him? Barney’s direct address to the gaze,

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29 If we conceptually imagine the camera as an extension of the eye that seizes upon the face of an exposed subject in order to possess and present the discoveries of vision, to what extent may the Loughton Candidate be possessed by a gaze, as it was prepared for the gaze...namely how can it be penetrated. This seems to be a question for Piper and Jackson too.

30 In Camera Lucida, Roland Barthes discusses the experience of posing for a photograph as a conscious self-presentational process that is nevertheless associated with an anxiety of existential possession: “Now, once I feel myself observed by the lens, everything changes: I constitute myself in the process of “posing,” I instantaneously make another body for myself, I transform myself in advance into an image.” Barthes, 10.
coupled with his own disaffected resistance to its investigation, is one source of the image’s “wildness.” Meanwhile, this unsettled exchange, which seems to hinge on the presence of Barney’s long-lost character, implies a renunciation of control (on the part of Seliger), which produces not only a reversal of authorship, but also its attendant haunting. In a sense, Barney the artist seems to have reclaimed possession of the image for the “Loughton Candidate,” who has been unearthed from Barney’s visual archive as an image of the walking dead. This is not a simple spookiness, but a strangeness that arrests the heartbeat of visuality. The black and white portrait sucks all of the blood out of the colorful, expressive being of the “Loughton Candidate” in *Cremaster 4*, a fundamental disparity that raises doubts about what is seen. Seliger’s portrait may thus transform into an abstract undead monster that shows Barney as a transmogrified beast who does not so much as wear a mask, but has suddenly been stripped of it.

Such visual sorcery may find its origins in the photograph of Barney that appeared alongside Kimmelman’s 1999 essay. In that portrait, Barney’s disturbed, off-kilter gaze gives the artist an otherworldly energy that reveals a subtle, barely perceptible pained expression, as though Barney were trapped in a discomfiting embodiment, straining against the material containment of his soul in flesh and bone. Now, as then, it is hard not to see the visual comparison between the artist’s raised eyebrow and the sculpted brow of the “Loughton Candidate.” For both Barney and his

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31 This affect corresponds to Benjamin’s claim in *Reflections* regarding the role of ambiguity in dialectics, namely that “[a]mbiguity is the pictorial image of dialectics, the law of dialectics at a standstill.” Mitchell offers this quote at the beginning of his discussion of the multistability of metapictures, a section titled “Dialectical Images” in *Picture Theory*, 45. The “standstill” produced in ambiguity corresponds to my theorization of deadpan as an arrest of the visual, but also as a temporal pause similar to a hiccup or nervous tick.

32 Such visual arguments for the liminal inhabitation of the artist Barney have hauntological implications in comparative representations by Keaton, Piper, and Jackson.
character, the eyebrow proposes an interrogation between the photographic subject and the viewer. In Seliger’s portrait, however, Barney lifts the visual cipher of the question, in the form of the “Loughton Candidate’s” raised eyebrow, and repositions it against the cut in the face, thereby once again imposing a form of interrogation on the whole enterprise of visuality, and suddenly also the nature of being itself. In other words, the sculpted eyebrow wields a question about what is at stake in the gaze of photographic portraiture, ethnographic or otherwise: what is the nature of being? of being human? of being nature? Or, what is human nature? Such questions belong to a critical framing for Barney’s work that intersects with key discourses in critical theory and cultural studies regarding the conditions of alterity and otherness across various manifestations of difference. Going further, this line of questioning is problematized by the fact that the “Loughton Candidate” is a prosthesis, not organic matter; is sculpture; is, therefore, posthuman, and proposes the intrusions of the inhuman into the image. Deleuze and Guattari would also explore such conditions in A Thousand Plateaus: “The inhuman in human beings: that is what the face is from the start. It is by nature a close-up, with its inanimate white surfaces, its shining black holes, its emptiness and boredom. Bunker-face.”

Seliger’s portrait probes this dialectics of Barney’s bunker-face, which I am theorizing through the visual and conceptual framework of “deadpan.” I will argue that deadpan speaks to the performative valence, style, and mood that permeates all aspects of Barney’s work. The artist’s face recalls another figure, who not only understood the

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33 This, I propose, is a underlying question that haunts Barney’s work, that traverses the morphological implications of hybridity (posthuman, as well as the interpenetration of humanity and animality), and the hauntological liminality of the undead.

34 Deleuze and Guattari, A Thousand Plateaus, 171.
power of his face, but whose creative output and livelihood depended upon it almost exclusively: American silent-film star Buster Keaton (1895-1966), who came to be known and widely admired for his iconic, and irreducible “deadpan.” (Figure 2.18) Keaton’s greatest mastery over the tectonics of the enveloping landscape face came in his ability to deflect facial “expression” as a function of emotion and, therefore, as a source for the discovery of meaning. (Figure 2.20) Keaton’s characters, though consistent in their inexpressive haplessness were sometimes conflated with Keaton the performer, whose talent resided in his ability to render characters that consistently probed spectrums of emotion in viewers while simultaneously offering no expressive content of their own. Barney’s work achieves a similar mastery over expression in his films and photographic work, but departs significantly in its strategic blurring of fictional narrative and autobiographical truth vis-à-vis the artist’s identity. Viewed alongside each other, Keaton and, after him Barney, effect a kind of haunted reckoning in which deadpan continues to circulate in culture, and may be found both in the vibrational impassivity of the face and its structure of communication. Impassive, and declarative of that impassivity, deadpan occupies an interrogative discursive space that raises questions and affects rupture.

III. A Story of Dead Pans

A popular actor and director in Hollywood during the 1920s, Keaton was celebrated for the raw physicality of his performances, which literary and film critic
Stanley Cavell attributed to the “Olympian resourcefulness of his body,” and his ‘dead-pan’— an “undashable,” resolute lack of expressed emotion in the face of a ceaseless barrage of mishaps, mix-ups, and other silent cinema plot twists. The spectacular contrast between these narrative feats of physical endurance and his resolute inexpressive face earned Keaton the nickname “The Great Stone Face.” Although Keaton had a consistent following in Europe throughout the twentieth century, the actor faded from view in the United States, where Charlie Chaplin’s more expressive and openly polemical cinematic style was preferred. Following Keaton’s death in 1966, however, his films slowly began to recapture the attention of American critics and historians, and eventually led to his revival in art and popular culture during the 1980s and 1990s.

During the formative years of Barney’s career, the Keaton-revolution hit a fever pitch with a flurry of books on the star. Keaton’s work was also featured in major independent film venues. The renewed interest in Keaton, and subsequent publications of the 1990s, may have been inspired initially by the large format coffee table book, *The Look of Buster Keaton*, which was translated into English for the first time since the publication of Robert Benayoun’s original French volume in 1983. A collection of his

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films was first released on video in the late 1980s. Then, in the winter of 1991-92, the New York Film Forum hosted a Keaton film series, which they did again in 1995. Adding to the revived interest in his films, a new and controversial biography of Keaton appeared in 1995 that argued that Keaton was traumatized as a result of childhood physical abuse. This generated significant response among fans and followers of Keaton’s work and landed the actor at the center of public discussions. For example, when the review of the biography in the *The New York Times* did not rigorously challenge Meade’s thesis, the newspaper received a flurry of letters to the editor disputing her claim.\(^{39}\)

During this period several New York artists began incorporating Keaton into their work as an ironic cipher of art history. Keaton’s visual and conceptual significance had already been absorbed into the avant-garde during his own time via the Surrealists, who celebrated Keaton’s cinematic performances as virtuoso expressions of key Surrealist concepts and preoccupations. A still from Keaton’s film, “One Week” (1920), was featured in the first issue of *La Révolution Surréaliste* in 1924. (Figure 2.21) Meanwhile, Spanish poet Federico Garcia Lorca wrote a macabre poem-play featuring Keaton as the titular character, *El paseo de Buster Keaton*, 1925.\(^{40}\) Luis Buñuel lavished praise on the actor in a short review of Keaton’s film *College* (1925) that was published in the *Cahiers d’Art* in 1927, in which Buñuel went to rapturous heights about the star’s cinematic candor, which he held above that of Charlie Chaplin. Calling Keaton “the great specialist

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against all sentimental infection,” Bunuel muses that “the film is as beautiful as a bathroom, vital as an Hispano.” Drawing together notions of purity (asepsia) and virile Spanish masculinity, Bunuel articulates a rapturous image consistent with Surrealist preoccupations of the period.

Meanwhile, during the early years of Barney’s career, contemporary artists such as Richard Serra and German sculptor and filmmaker Rebecca Horn were returning to Keaton as a thematic and topical subject matter. Serra, renowned for his large-scale sculpture and contributions to process art and intermedia sculpture-film projects, mounted an installation at the Gagosian Gallery in 1991 that included Keaton’s work, *Two Forged Rounds for Buster Keaton*, for which Serra also created innovating sketches and gouache paintings. For her part, Horn created no less than two projects inspired by Keaton: a feature-length German-language independent comedy film called “Buster’s Bedroom” (1990), about a woman who loves Buster Keaton and ends up being treated psychiatrically for her obsession at the same villa where Buster Keaton once recouped for alcohol abuse. The film debuted at the legendary Cannes Film Festival in May 1990. It was later shown in conjunction with an exhibition of sculpture and props at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles, which included *Time Goes By* (1990-91), an installation that visually recalls a photograph from Keaton’s 1928 film, *The Cameraman*, featuring reels of camera

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41 Hammon, 64.
42 Ibid.
film piled along the perimeter of a gallery space and a vintage binoculars on stands in the center the space and a pair of Buster Keaton’s shoes—at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles in 1991.\(^{44}\) (Figure 2.26) (Figure 2.27)

Jeff Koons, an artist known for excavating popular and commercial trends as sources for his work, was ahead of the Keaton mania, exhibiting an ironic, polychrome wood sculpture of Keaton, *Buster Keaton* (1988), riding a donkey. (Figure 2.28) This exhibition took place at the Barbara Gladstone Gallery in 1995, the same New York gallery that has represented Barney since 1991. The sculpture, which was purportedly sold in 2006 for $2.7 million dollars,\(^{45}\) can be seen on the artist’s website as part of his “Banality” series, a grouping that also includes such iconic works as *Michael Jackson and Bubbles* (1988) and *Pink Panther* (1988).\(^{46}\) Rendering the energetic Keaton in color and frozen in time, Koons’ sculpture is deliberately oppositional to the flow that characterizes the narrative of the film, on the one hand, and, on the other, the paradoxical bloodlessness of black and white film.\(^{47}\) In this regard, Koons’ characteristically irreverent kitsch style draws attention to an essential condition of Keaton’s deadpan, namely that it expresses a state of being that is a rupture. This break functions in opposition to the narrative and material urgency of Keaton’s films. In action-sequences that proceed swiftly, Keaton’s face stops the narrative dead in its tracks. Like a deer in the headlights, Keaton’s deadpan intervenes in the fast-paced, unconscious procession of

\(^{45}\) Carol Vogel, “A $29.5 Million Dollar Finale for Contemporary Art,” May 12, 2006. http://www.nytimes.com/2006/05/12/arts/design/12auction.html?_r=0
\(^{46}\) http://www.jeffkoons.com/artwork/banality/buster-keaton
\(^{47}\) Moreover, with Keaton seated atop the donkey from his film *Go West* (1925), gestures toward the reputation of the animal itself as one that is constantly used for transportation, but which stops and starts in protest of that continual moving forward.
the modern world, in which his characters attempt, but often fail, to become full or successful participants.  

Another artist that took up the theme of Keaton-like deadpan was British artist and filmmaker Steve McQueen, who made and starred in a short-film installation called “Deadpan,” which re-created scenes from Keaton’s *Steamboat Bill Jr.* (1928), in an exploration on the limits of the human body and an intertextual meditation on questions of race and slavery.  

Race and the face became very important for black artists in the 1990s, who take up the historical discourse on physiognomy as a critique of colonialism, social hierarchies, and cultural categorizations. McQueen highlights the significance of Keaton’s deployment of the face in order to discuss how the face is used in race discourse in society. Not unlike McQueen, Barney draws on the physical dimensions of Keaton’s deadpan to transpose its signifying impact into the performative conditions of the body. In his *Drawing Restraint* performances, Barney addresses the body in action as the site through which all art concepts must move.  

In this way, the content of deadpan is communicated through its difficult interface with the social conditions of the body, such as race, sex, gender, and class, and the limited capacity of the face to contain, let alone convey, reliable or even identifiable information about subjective experience or the social, historical, and even biological

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48 Buster’s repeated failures in the form of mishaps, etc. etc. are drawn into the realm of comedy by way of Bergson’s theory of laughter.  
locations of the body to which the face is asked to comment. In other words, deadpan works when it proposes the impossibility of knowing what it sets out to conceal.

Returning to Seliger’s portrait, I would be remiss, as others have been, were I to overlook a second dead Pan, who may be brought to bear on Barney’s mute self-presentation of interpenetrating faces and his own quiet, private, introverted contemplative personality. I am thinking here of the mythological hybrid goat-god Pan, whose iconography and legendary persona speak to visual and conceptual aspects of Barney’s performative hybridity, which ranges from human-animal chimeras to ambivalently sexed characters and gender transgressions or drag performances. Indeed, it is hard not to look upon Barney’s portrayal of the young sheep-boy “Loughton Candidate’s” character without being reminded of the interspecies Pan, a subject of numerous depictions in western art and literature throughout history. While this chapter focuses primarily on considering and developing the conceptual dimensions of “deadpan,” Seliger’s doubling of Barney and his spectral other, points again to the significance of hybridity in Barney’s work, not only as a visual or narrative condition of biological or physical manifestation, but also as a functional mechanism of the artist’s work. That is, hybridity is the operational condition for Barney’s intermedial approach, which traverses multiple media and genres of art; moreover, it could also be said to describe the metonymic surfaces between the artist and his oeuvre, for which, especially while performing in character, he often signifies. Pan is another axis point to this visual

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51 Pan is missing from the glossary of The Cremaster Cycle Guggenheim catalogue where such terms as “Satyr” do appear.

and conceptual discourse, possessing not only the essential aspects of physical hybridity, but also comparative associations to themes in Barney’s work (i.e. animality, sexuality, spectacle).

As an imaginative vessel, Pan has been taken up time and again by artists and writers, especially from the sixteenth century onward, who explored the goat god as a “protector of animals,” known also for his deviant or boisterous sexuality and brazen pursuit of young nymphs. Pan was also a figure of interest due to his connection with the arts (he played a reed pipe-flute); and his magical ability to invoke chaos and anxious stirs of action and communication among other beings, or “pan-ic,” in otherwise quiet, pastoral settings. Many writers and artists have associated Pan with the dawning of a new age when, according to Plutarch,\(^{53}\) a sea-captain sailing to Italy by way of the island Paxi, proclaimed “The Great God Pan is Dead,” to which many island voices could be heard responding with shock and dismay.\(^{54}\) Pan’s death was seen to signal the end of the pagan era and the beginning of Christianity, while the etymology of the word pan- meaning all-encompassing, has been used to denote religious inclusiveness and overlaps in the word “pantheism.” During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, in particular, repetitions and reinterpretations of the Pan myth frequently appeared in various visual and literary contexts. And thus the goat-god gained popular momentum as a symbolic image for all things good and evil. In recent decades, the goat-


\(^{54}\) Many writers and artists have understood Pan’s death to signal the end of the Pagan era and the beginning of the Christian age. See Merivale and Boardman.
god has been studied extensively within the humanities, and has appeared in psychological literature as a lens for analyzing conditions of anxiety (panic attacks).

Like Keaton, Pan persisted as an image and metaphor during the 1980s and 1990s, the formative years of Barney’s artistic education and career. For example, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York holds over two hundred artworks that draw on Pan imagery, and in 1990, a special exhibition of eighteenth century Italian drawings was on display, which included sketches of Pan. Robert Mapplethorpe five years earlier in his Self-Portrait (1985) presents himself as a Pan-like figure. (Figure 2.37) Even earlier in the 1980s, sculptor Alice Aycock created a series of drawings and sculptures inspired by Pan that were included in her 1983 retrospective Complex Visions. (Figure 2.38) Of equal importance, between 1988 and 1992 Aycock taught at the Yale School of Art from which Barney graduated in 1989.55

In Barney’s work, Pan takes shape in themes and images of play, companionship, struggle, sexuality, hybrid bodies, and animals. At the Whitney Biennial in 1993, many saw Matthew Barney for the first time in his multichannel video performance Drawing Restraint 7 (1993) portraying “The Kid,” an exuberant, impish Pan-like figure who oversees two old Satyrs engaged in an ambiguous homoerotic wrestling match. (Figure 2.39) (Figure 2.40) As the name “The Kid” implies, Barney portrays a physically immature satyr, but his underdeveloped form leaves opens the question of his true being, a point that is emphasized by the fact that viewers never witness “The Kid’s” maturation.

Indeed, the formal aspects of the video endlessly loop “The Kid” that, in its
immortalization of his not-yet-fully realized form, mark a kind of death of his
hypothetical becoming.

Thus Barney seems to take up the issue of transformation and its resolution in his
next film, *Cremaster 4* (1994). There the artist’s Pan figure is reincarnated as the tap-
dancing, dandy “Loughton Candidate” on the Isle of Man. Though still playful, the
“Loughton Candidate” carries a far more subdued disposition than “The Kid.” In place of
the latter’s effervescence and clownishness, a more, measured curiosity emerges. The
“Loughton Candidate” apprehends the world around him with a kind of careful sense of
wonder. Within the first few minutes of the film, viewers witness the “Loughton
Candidate’s” own discovery of the peculiarity of his hybrid body as he combs through his
hair to inspect the crater-like indentations on either side of his scalp. (Figure 2.41) These
horn sockets have an ambiguous temporality, as they suggest either a past or future
animality for both the “Loughton Candidate” and his viewers. The “Loughton Candidate”
seems surprised to see the sockets and is unclear what they are for, how they got there, or
what to do about them. Meanwhile viewers are likely to apprehend the sockets as
something from the past—the residual physical impressions from Barney’s prior
performance as “The Kid.” That the “Loughton Candidate” seems more man than animal
suggests that perhaps Barney’s character is evolving toward a state of being fully human.

The immanent potential to realize human aspirations may perhaps be seen in the
character’s ritualized dance sequence. He repeats the series of steps over and over in the
same spot inside the building at end of the island’s pier, eroding a crater into the floor
compulsively with the taps on the bottom of his shoes, until a hole is formed and he
plunges through the floor into the ocean below. But such reasoning is dramatically overturned when, after navigating to an escape route and climbing through the Vaseline-coated tunnel, the “Loughton Candidate” is transmuted into a fully matured “Loughton Ram”.56 (Figure 2.42)

The metaphor of Pan is now dead. By the time Cremaster 1 arrived in 1995, the visual iconography of Pan had disappeared completely, along with the performative presence of Barney. Left in their wake was only the etymological pan-, meaning “all,” personified by the ambiguously gendered actor/actress, Marti Domintrix, who plays the omnipotent God-like power represented in Cremaster 1 by Goodyear Blimps that direct the legions of “Goodyear Girls,” who are Busby Berkeley-style dancers on the Bronco football Stadium.57 (Figure 2.43) Barney reappears at the center of Cremaster 5 (1997) and all subsequent films, including in Cremaster 2 (1999), transformed into the cold-blooded killer Gary Gilmore from Barney’s meditation on Norman Mailer’s The Executioner’s Song, and in his last film, Cremaster 3, where he again personifies hybrid characters.

Both Keaton and Pan reverberate in Barney’s work as metapictures. Thus, the significance of the two dead-pans is not only iconographical or topical, but also ontological. That is, they facilitate categories and strategies of being, which structure narratives and determine relationships among concepts, images, characters, sites, and objects. Surprisingly, ten years after the disappearance of Pan in 1995, the character

56 From The Kid to the Loughton Ram, Barney’s performed physical transformations in Drawing Restraint 7 and Cremaster 4, offer a striking iconographic parallel to the detail of Pan and Diana (Luna) from Annibale Carracci’s ceiling frescoes painted in the Palazzo Farnese, where Pan (depicted here as a grown satyr) is mirrored by a mature goat with curving horns as he hands a white fleece to Diana.
reemerged unexpectedly in Seliger’s 2005 portrait as a long abandoned hybrid, animal performance. Especially as the black and white deadpan portrait, Barney resurrected the character of the “Loughton Candidate,” whose strange effect is of resembling still photographs of Buster Keaton coupled with the intrusion of the second Pan in the Pan-like character of the other half of the bifurcated photographic image. Thus, the visual and verbal collapse between Keaton’s style of deadpan and the idea that the great God Pan is dead occurs, I believe, in order for Barney to show himself to know himself.
In 2010, art historian Aron Vinegar offered a theory of deadpan developed in a compelling analysis of Ed Ruscha’s topical photographic series and artist’s books, and in a separate text, on the postmodern architecture of Robert Venturi & Denise Scott Brown.¹ Vinegar is informed by Heidegger’s existential phenomenology, especially as it is developed in *Being and Time* (1927), and explored the concept of deadpan in order to analyze the philosophical depth of Ruscha’s work. A secondary purpose of his essay is to lay out a philosophical concept for theorizing photography.

Vinegar arrives at what might be called a phenomenology of deadpan, theorized through Ruscha, whose work he identifies as exemplary of “deadpan.” The key argument of Vinegar’s theory is his idea that “deadpan” be understood not in its “traditional sense” as a mode of rhetorical delivery but rather as the expression of Heidegger’s concept of the everyday “grey” “mood” or attunement to the world that is the starting point for experience and perception of “being-in-the-world,” or “being thrown.”² Vinegar proposes a reflexive relationship between the “deadpan” photograph and the deadpan indifferent “mood” of the viewer whose face is rendered “dead” as it scans across the photograph unaffected by emotion.³ Here he argues “indifferent attunement” is the primary mode or mood by which one can fully realize and experience “being-in-the-world,” as opposed to

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³ Ibid., 43.
a mood dramatically affected by emotions, which will necessarily cloud perception.

Quoting Heidegger, Vinegar writes:

“[A]ttunements are never simply a consequence of our thinking, doing, and acting, but rather the presupposition for such things, the ‘medium’ within which they appear…. we are always ‘in’ a mood; it is never ‘in’ us, nor do we simply ‘possess’ such and such a mood. In sum, moods are world disclosing.”

For Vinegar, Heidegger’s notion of “everyday mood” is characterized by a flattening out of emotion in attunement with the world that also resists affect or emotion. In this regard, Ruscha’s photographs are deadpan in their delivery, but also in their mood. Ruscha’s photographs may even demand the mood of indifference on the part of viewers because, according to Vinegar, they will not experience shifts in emotion as they view them. Meanwhile, deadpan’s affective potential may be realized not in understanding the concept as a perfunctory expression of closure, but rather as a detached, yet receptive opening to experience and perception as an essential aspect of Being.

Vinegar makes two additional points that are necessary to point out here. First, he proposes that because Heidegger correlates “medium” with mood, that a “deadpan mood” may be understood as a medium for photography, “if we are willing to consider a medium as a way in which we relate to a particular practice and not just its material constituents.” Second, Vinegar theorizes that deadpan may also be understood as a non-judgmental “mood of awareness, readiness, openness” and that in photography these orientations may be the expression of “wonder” in our day. For Vinegar, the deadpan

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5 Ibid., 45.
6 Ibid., 40.
mood receives “wonder” but does not project anything beyond that of simply being in-the-world. Thus, Heidegger’s notion of wonder’s “resolute raptness” may be understood not “as an interruption of the ordinary experience of everyday life, but rather the ability to remain open to the ordinary as a site of the disclosure of wonder.”

I. Deadpan Pools

For Heidegger, the mood of indifference opens us up to the “nothingness,” “abyss” or “void” of Being, which Vinegar argues may be brought to bear on Ruscha’s photographic books. *Nine Swimming Pools (...and a Broken Glass)* (1968) is a small artist’s book consisting of ten color photographs and fifty-four blank pages. (Figure 3.1) (Figure 3.2) According to Vinegar, Ruscha’s inclusion of blank pages were a “performative” decision, made in order to adhere to the original idea of nine swimming pools and one broken glass, while also lending weight to the object so it could be handled comfortably as a book.8 Vinegar prefers to call the pages “blank” rather than “empty,” arguing that “the blankness of these pages does not appear ‘tragic’ or ‘catastrophic’ in the way that Heidegger’s existential language of ‘nothingness,’ ‘abyss,’ and ‘void’ might suggest.”9 Since for Vinegar, the tonality of deadpan is hardly tragic or catastrophic, he observes that “one does not know when or where open possibility might present”; therefore, that opening is not something a viewer falls into but rather that s/he confronts in the ordinary task of turning the pages. If there is any “danger” in the Heideggerian sense of the abyss, it is “not one of ‘plunging’ down to the leveling off of the fallen

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7 Ibid., 45.
8 Ibid., 43.
9 Ibid., 42.
everyday and mere indifference, but rather that we might want to rise above this ordinary condition, and thus fail to acknowledge the everyday world—blanks and all—is our world.”

Vinegar’s theorization of deadpan through Heidegger goes far in establishing deadpan as a reflexive visual analytics. In developing this concept, I want to reestablish some of its rhetorical and performative valence, while building upon the philosophical import Vinegar illuminates. First I propose that *Nine Swimming Pools* be read through the valences the art historian sets out to contest. Not merely to negate Vinegar’s project, but to develop the theoretical status of deadpan dialectically. His insistence, for example, on the absence of a referential abyss is ironic since it may be argued that the experience of flipping through the book suggests just that, and such a motion is a movement between to poles. The intervening pages may be “blank,” but the pools are decidedly empty, in the sense that these are scenes without figures. These absences confound meaning, and suggest the impotency of viewing. Rather than feeling indifferent, a viewer could be on edge with anticipation of what’s to come in an “empty” pool or its blank, bunker-faced other. The repetition of these empty pools itself may equally resonate with a sense of “emptiness” – of nothingness, that something is missing—an experience that may build into a confrontation with what looks like an erasure or atomization of life. For these pool snapshots might even seem boring, but their inexplicable vacancy may nevertheless encourage another look; and on a second flip through the book, the dissonance of seeing one deserted suburban swimming pool after another might instead point to a kind of ominous void, one that evokes an anxiety or

10 Ibid.
pathos and leads to a line of questioning that ranges from “Where did they all go?” to “Are they all dead?” (Figure 3.7)

Ruscha’s seemingly even repetition of blank pages and empty pools may not stream horizontally through the mind’s eye, but rather accrete vertically with the mounting anticipation of various absences. (Figure 3.8) This conceptual accumulation might take the form of a stack of pools; for when Nine Swimming Pools book is unopened, the successive pools and intervening blank pages remain concealed and enclosed upon one another. The book, now a plain, unassuming deadpan object, accentuates the gulf between what is seen and what is known. (Figure 3.9) In this regard, deadpan suspends and probes the expressive tension that lies between a surface and its depths, and the deadpan book of a concatenation of swimming pools and blank pages may be re-conceived as a functional abyss, an expressive quagmire rather than passive wonder and indifference. An additional node of irony emerges in the image of a swimming pool and the clarity of the ground held by the water within. In thinking about the “abyss,” one could argue that an unbroken surface of a pool already conceals its unknown depths. However, that surface belies this unknown, as vision claims its agency through one’s ability to see the bottom of the pool basin. (Figure 3.10) The clearer the water, the more one believes that what is contained within it can be known, because suddenly one conceives that he or she is actually seeing.\footnote{Here I am thinking about Merleau-Ponty’s rapturous encounter with the swimming pool in Eye and Mind, in which he describes how the swimming pool is a functional apparatus for seeing and gathering visual information within: “When through the water’s thickness I see the tiled bottom of the pool, I do not see it \textit{despite} the water and the reflections; I see it through them and because of them. If there were no distortions, no ripples of sunlight, if I saw without this flesh, the geometry of the tiles, then I would stop seeing the tiled bottom as it is, where it is, namely farther away than any identical place. I cannot say that the water itself—the aqueous power, the syrupy and shimmering element—is \textit{in} space; all this is not}
as it obscures the fact of its own concealing. Visual clarity confers protection against the inferred risks of plunging in (that one will hit the bottom and not resurface, etc), and may, thus, provoke a conceptual break, or an actual one in the form of a dive and its reactive splash.

The immanence of that rupture is already contained in Ruscha’s book. Where Vinegar argues for a numbing process associated with viewing *Nine Swimming Pools*, he fails to address the broken glass. Even if we follow Vinegar’s assertion that viewing the pools and blank pages leads to an indifferent mood, the broken glass literally shatters that evenness of temperament. It breaks the surface of the still visually repetitive surface of the swimming pools images and the blank interludes rather abruptly. (Figure 3.11) A clue to this visual and experiential break might be located in the cover of the book, which only says “NINE SWIMMING POOLS” (See Figure 44). That the viewer is given the punch line ahead of time—“…and a broken glass”—in the frontispiece that appears five blank pages in seems to fade from consciousness as the visual mood of the images coheres in the repetition and blank pages and the occasional pool.

Here it is worth exploring the unsettling nature of the proposed conceptual relationship between swimming pools and broken glass: glassware and pool patios, where people often walk barefoot, do not mix. In this regard, the subtitle “and a broken glass” acts like a public service announcement for an anticipated “punctum,” the “prick” of a photograph that may, as Barthes imagined, “be revealed only after the fact, when the

somewhere else either, but it is not in the pool. It dwells in it, its materialized there, yet it is not contained there; and if I lift my eyes toward the screen of cypresses where the web of reflections plays, I must recognize that the water visits it as well, or at least sends out to it its active and living essence.” Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “Eye and Mind,” reprinted in *The Merleau-Ponty Reader*, edited by Leonard Lawlor and Ted Toadvine (Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 2007), 371.
photograph is no longer in front of me.”\textsuperscript{12} Here Ruscha seems to be taunting viewers with the promise of a subtle detail, and thus a viewer may search for the broken glass in each of the swimming pool photographs—a visual treasure hunt that is something like a “Where’s Waldo?” for postconceptual art. For Barthes, the “punctum” is a subtler endeavor, though its visual imprint on the mind will be captured in the memory. The broken glass is therefore not the punctum in Ruscha’s swimming pools. When, finally, the broken glass appears, it departs both visually and contextually from the previous pages, provoking a visual and experiential rupture that summons the uncanny: the engulfing surface of the metal table seems to have become a hardened, resistant visual body that reflects the inversion of another pool into which the glass seems to spill. The broken glass is not the punctum in Ruscha’s swimming pools, but other details that imprint on the mind as one is searching for the broken glass, materialize in memory in the wavering shadow on the table. Meanwhile, the shock of that break, followed by even more blank pages, encourages another pass through and the cycle repeats. \textit{(Figure 3.12)}

In this way, deadpan may be conceived of as a spectrum of contrasts and the resolution of difference. Again, as Stanley Cavell observed, Buster Keaton’s deadpan impresses in the spectacular discontinuity between the actor’s physical performance (“the Olympian resourcefulness of his body”) and the plastic resistance to emotional expression in his face (“the philosophical mood of his countenance”).\textsuperscript{13} Keaton’s unwavering ability to maintain the structure of that contrast within and across his performances, that is, his refusal to unravel into expressive emotion in the face of

\textsuperscript{12} Barthes, \textit{Camera Lucida}, 53.
\textsuperscript{13} Stanley Cavell, \textit{The World Viewed}, 37.
variations in narrative sequence and consequence, presents a consistency that Cavell reads as an “ontological equanimity” between the actor and the world. Paradoxically, the persistence of that contrast is also its collapse into a resilience of form and image that “absorbs skepticism.” As Aron Vinegar argues, Cavell’s observation that “[Keaton’s] refinement is to know everything that skepticism can think of” confers a “peculiar receptiveness” to being in the world.\(^\text{14}\) For Vinegar, the philosophical orientation of wonder corresponds to a correlative expression of mood in deadpan as “evenness and readiness,” which Keaton appears to confirm when he said that in his performances, “it is not a matter of knowing but [of] accepting the world.”\(^\text{15}\) Vinegar proposes therefore that Cavell’s ontological equanimity, whereby Keaton appears “to be of a piece with objects in the world,” incurs deadpan as a functional “delay in judgment.”\(^\text{16}\) However, “to be of a piece with objects in the world does not necessarily mean to be at peace with them,” Vinegar writes.\(^\text{17}\) Thus Keaton’s deadpan represents a sharpening of perceptual sensitivity that coheres with a resilience to sustain variable outcomes.\(^\text{18}\) That is, deadpan reserves the right to be at peace or not, but abstains from internal or external pressures to occupy one or the other positions and to offer clarity of expression as evidence. This is perhaps what is meant when Cavell says that Keaton’s work proposes to redeem the “ugliness of laughter,” that deadpan acts as a kind of neutralizing force, leveling off the

\(^\text{14}\) Vinegar, \textit{I AM A MONUMENT}, 78.
\(^\text{15}\) Ibid.
\(^\text{16}\) Ibid., 81. (emphasis in original)
\(^\text{17}\) Ibid., 81.
\(^\text{18}\) Vinegar suggests that Venturi & Brown’s architecture corresponds to the latter’s belief in “judgment with a sigh” and represents major shift in architectural production as a form of research. This connection between deadpan, the delay in judgment and research, speaks to what I will later argue about Barney’s work, namely that it maintains a pedagogical orientation to the artwork by opening up meaning and refusing easy summary. This permits variable impressions to take hold, teaching viewers how to look and to seek meaning.
dysfunctional expression of contrasting elements in a visual or linguistic narrative that has been identified as a motivating force in laughter. (Figure 3.13)

Rather than experience “indifferent attunement,” viewers of Keaton’s films are more likely to become animated with laughter, as the dizzying procession of sequences and the jovial, theatrical music provide the essential, humorous antagonists to Keaton’s own neutral and seemingly indifferent reactions. It is important to emphasize that like Barney, Keaton understood the power of his face, and the contrast between it and his narrative action very well. Similar to Ruscha’s pools, there are accumulative valences in images of Keaton. In contrast to pace of his films, in still photographs, Keaton comes across as anything but indifferent: physically and temporally static, and abstracted from his film narratives, “The Great Stone Face” simultaneously becomes more expressive and, crucially, more distant. In other words, there is no evidentiary lack of emotion in Keaton’s face, but rather a revelation that his emotions are obscured, and ultimately out of our grasp of knowing. From his deep probing eyes to the striking topography of the actor’s face, Keaton’s deadpan, as in Seliger’s portrait of Barney, may be said to invite questions about what is concealed therein. Further, when still images of the star are grouped together, they express the weight of that disguising gaze, as his face begins to appear more tragically resistant than indifferently comic. Pathos is written all over Keaton’s face, but from what or where that bleakness emerges is unknown. (Figure 3.14)

In the absence of knowing what is concealed within his depths, Keaton’s visage is made strange, mechanical, and unfamiliar to an almost Cyborgian degree, as though his face were being projected from the seat of absolute alterity, an aspect that is also captured by Barney’s visual personae. (Figure 3.15) (Figure 3.16)
Thus, Barney could be said to have recovered a crucial, intangible essence of Keaton’s cinematic and photographic impact. (Figure 3.17) In the last three installments of the *Cremaster Cycle*, 5, 2, & 3, Barney’s characters are strikingly Keatonian: impassive, inscrutable, and stone-faced. (Figure 3.18) Yet there is at least one crucial difference. Where Keaton’s films proceed swiftly, with the star’s deadpan functioning in opposition to the urgency of the narrative, The *Cremaster Cycle* moves slowly, with each film decelerating from the prior installment. Together with Barney’s deadpan performances, the slackening pace intensifies the immersive quality of the films by reducing ontological differences within the image. Barney’s characters, rather than standing apart as driving forces of the narrative, affect a kind of visual and material equanimity with settings, sculptures, concepts, and even music, similar to how Stanley Cavell framed the impact of Buster Keaton. Barney’s bodies become sculptures, become images, become architecture, become sound, become movement, become metaphor. (Figure 3.19) This is not the “grey mood” that Vinegar theorizes, but something functionally temporal, and therefore heightened in dramatic immanence with the potential but not the promise of resolution. This affect may be observed in the poignant, if subdued, drama of the glaciers that appear at the beginning and the end of *Cremaster 2*, in which the implied variability of freezing and melting, and their temporality, become the resolving metaphors of the narrative ruptures thematized in Barney’s imagined biography of Gary Gilmore. (Figure 3.20)
As ontological difference resolves in the equanimity of forms, draw out time and lowering one’s heart rate,\textsuperscript{19} the potential humor of deadpan tends to fall flat in Barney’s work. So in \textit{Cremaster 5}, scenes that make a pass at the absurd frequently fail to elicit amused responses. For example, when Barney’s character “Her Diva” falls to the stage and his head hits the floor, flattening and unfolding into a sticky, gelatinous amorphous form, the scene quickly goes from being one primed for humor to one that seems unnaturally absorbed in the visual residues of violence, and a preoccupation with the materiality of death. (Figure 3.21) In another scene, in the Budapest bathhouse, Jacobin pigeons carrying ribbons attached to Barney’s body elevate the “Her Giant’s” hybrid fish-man testicles by taking flight stunning viewers into a wonder-like submission to such an unforeseen narrative event. (Figure 3.22) This scene in particular speaks better to Vinegar’s theorization of deadpan as expression of wonder than Ruscha’s pools do, though the significance of bodies of water in each case, are worth noting. Water is both a generative and occlusive material imaginary: it is the source of all life and it possesses the unassailable power to relinquish it. Where Ruscha’s pools propose the irony of descent into the abyss, the Budapest bath appears as the “liquid ground,” a source and spring for an ascent toward the divine.\textsuperscript{20} (Figure 3.23) In each case, water resonates with the ameliorating potential of deadpan as image, material, and metaphor.

\textsuperscript{19} When asked whether he had ever watched \textit{The Cremaster Cycle} in numerical order, Barney replied that he had not, but “I’ve talked to a number of people who have done it and it seems that one of the stronger feelings one gets from watching all five is that there’s a kind of lowering of the heart rate, which sounds like it could be pleasurable if it happens.” Tappenheinger and Barney, \textit{The Body as Matrix}, 2004.

\textsuperscript{20} Luce Irigaray, \textit{Marine Lover of Friedrich Nietzsche}, translated by Gillian C. Gill (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 37. Both Ruscha and Barney attend to what might also be called the “erotics” of deadpan, but this is topic for the future, as I cannot address it sufficiently here.
In Barney’s work, such scenes distill layers of conceptual and visual content that yield not only multiple interpretations but defy affective clarity. Despite having all the contextual makings of a tragic opera, gestures towards humor in *Cremaster 5* subtly undermine the emotional tenor of tragedy. Deadpan emerges as the sum of those differences. Degree Zero. The suffusion of deadpan in Barney’s work, as spectrum of contrasts awaiting resolution, is a dissipative and diffusive force. And with neither the comedic accoutrements of silent cinema, nor a sharp contrast drawn between his characters’ disposition and the narrative thrust of the film, Barney’s deadpan complicates and confounds affective experience in viewers; and may be seen as a sleight of hand that leaves audiences feeling swindled.\(^{21}\)

**II. Deadpan Bodies**

Just as Keaton engages in narrative “pursuit[s] of happiness,”\(^{22}\) Barney’s conceit appears as an investment in a resilience and willingness to “wait for the future to show.”\(^{23}\)

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\(^{21}\) This, and Barney’s modest personal demeanor, I observe sometimes translates into a perceived inauthenticity, coldness, or dissociative emptiness residing within the artist himself, which coupled with his monumental success, have led some critics to assess his artistic practice as a form of hucksterism, enveloped in elitism, heralded as a puppet of the art world power brokers, and driven by hubris, a favorite word among critics.

\(^{22}\) Stanley Cavell on Buster Keaton, see Aron Vinegar. *I AM A MONUMENT*, 81.

\(^{23}\) This line comes from Virginia Woolf’s astounding and temporally dislocating novel, *To The Lighthouse*, during a scene in which a storm has lowered visibility and the characters must wait it out. This is the beginning of the section of book called “Time Passes,” which crucially connects vision to the experience of time, for the delineations of landscape are obscured, creating an equanimity of forms that extends into the characters sense of reality:

“‘Well, we must wait for the future to show,’ said Mr. Bankes, coming in from the terrace.

‘It’s almost too dark to see, said Andrew, coming up from the beach.

‘One can hardly tell which is the sea and which is the land,’ said Prue.”

[…]"

“Nothing, it seemed, could survive the flood, the profusion of darkness which, creeping in at keyholes and crevices, stole round window blinds, came into bedrooms, swallowed up here a jug and basin, there a bowl of red and yellow dahlias, there the sharp edges and firm bulk of a chest of drawers. Not only was furniture confounded; there was scarcely anything left of body or mind by which one could say, ‘This is he’ or ‘This
Here I am interested in the way that “pursuit” proposes an arrow of time as a function of the receptiveness that Vinegar identifies. To pursue is to seek a particular thing while remaining open to its opposite and its others. To pursue one’s dreams is to recognize the possibility both that one’s dreams may not be realized, either as they are formed in the mind (or at all), and the possibility that an outcome may arrive not as a simple negation of the dream but rather its displacement by a dream that could not be imagined. That is, the pursuit of a dream may be replaced by another outcome, namely, a form that is “like a dream come true,” but that was previously unknown, or beyond the imagination (one’s “wildest dreams”) and therefore could not be anticipated in a dream as such. In a “pursuit of happiness,” where the mood of deadpan marks a “delay in judgment,” which is ironically oriented toward the realization of feeling and affective clarity, receptiveness prepares the ground for the ontological variability of happiness. Indeed, what might be known as happiness might not look or feel like what it was presumed, suspected, or hoped to be.

In Seliger’s portrait, Barney’s assured self-awareness, coupled with the dramatic inquisitive eyebrow, turns the table on viewers. Viewers must suddenly ask themselves, not only what am I looking at, but what is being asked of me in this encounter, an encounter that hinges on a dissolution of affective certainty into the futurity of chance, and a resolution and realization of a hypothetical experience that holds within it the immanent plasticity of emotion itself, and how it comes to be named as such. Such an interpellation of a thing contains within it already the possibility of the thing’s resistance

is she.”
to its naming. Althusser’s concept of interpellation of the Other, his or her look-back, is not a submission to the name but its disclosure of a readiness to, or recognition of, naming as a functional conversation that might yet prove an alternative to the original interpellation. The interpellated figure does not submit gently to the otherness being claimed for him or her, and merely enters into a relational status, whereby it may reveal itself to be something altogether different. Such an action may suggest the recognition of history, but not its reconciliation with the present. And this look makes no concessions to a future in which narrative cohesion, like time, is erroneously believed to proceed linearly.

In a sense, this interrogation levels the playing field of vision. In Seliger’s portrait, Barney throws the first pitch, hurling himself through the questioning eyebrow as an illegible surface physicality and expression; and a viewer must decide to catch him or not. If caught, confrontation ensues with his mute witness before the gaze, as he suddenly appears to be looking at the viewer, observing his or her surprise and hesitation, and waiting for the next move. Perhaps caught off guard, one may not be able to throw it back, or at least to do so with an equivalent confidence. This visual confrontation is a challenge to viewers’ ability to see and understand not only what they are looking at (and to arrive at a satisfactory conclusion of that looking), but also to the ability to gauge what is possible to know from the act of looking itself: at Barney the artist and his artwork.

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24 Thus if you say my name and I look up, it is not a submission to be known by my name, but rather an acknowledgment of the delimiting space of desire for my conformity ideas and forms already brought into and upon my being. It might be a confrontation with a conversation that already took place in which some formation of my perceived identity was pre-conceived.
At times I have imagined this process as a kind of artistic “pump fake,” borrowing the term from a commonly used move in basketball. A “pump fake” is a strategy the ball-handler deploys, usually in preparation to shoot while being guarded by one or more players from the other team. The move is called a “pump fake” for the way that the shooter holds the ball and “pumps” it in one direction; fakes a jump shot; pauses for a fraction of a second; and abruptly moves in the other direction, stepping into a new shooting position where he or she can take his or her jump shot without the obstruction of a guarding opponent. The pump fake relies on the believability of the shooter’s initial move and a quick switch that puts the shooter out of range of the defending players. One variation of this move is called a “pump fake-step back,” where the shooter takes a larger step back, often putting him or herself in position to take a shot from or behind the three-point line, resulting in more points for the play.

Aside from the choreographic beauty of the “pump-fake,” it is the temporality of the move and its double-consciousness, as both presentational and protective, and a hiccup between the overt expression and its covert meaning, that I find relevant to Barney’s work and the function of deadpan. The pump-fake forces a delay in judgment on the part of defending players and, at times, can look like a delay already in the judgment of the shooter, who appears to suddenly change his or her mind. Such a situation is akin to the question of intention at the heart of a deadpan joke or performance, where an audience pauses before reacting to a punch line. In basketball as well as other sports, strategy is often dependent on both fakery and temporal stoppages that draw out the game ending and the arrival of a final score; these are broadly known as
“delay(s) of game.”25 Anything that slows the progress of play, and extends a game, puts pressure on the endurance of players to last through ever more rounds (innings, quarters, halves or sets, etc.), and places added responsibility on coaches and team leaders to refine strategy to outsmart and outlast their opponent. As I have noted, Barney, the former football player and wrestler, has drawn extensively on his sports background in his performances, most notably in his Drawing Restraint series, situating himself in various forms of physical restraint, while he attempts to make drawings on surfaces such as walls, ceilings and, in one notable example, on the side of a boat. These movements range from attaching himself, restraining himself with Bungee cords, and adding weights, which he must physically overcome in order to reach the drawing surface. It is worth noting that Barney’s attempt to draw on a too-high ceiling by jumping from a mini-trampoline and making individual marks with each jump also represent a nod to Houdini’s attempts to “overcome the lock.” These restraints delay Barney’s primary purpose to make a drawing and force him to succumb to the variability of chance, wherein he risks failure. The double-consciousness of the pump-fake and temporal delays of deadpan in both sports and performance are intimated in the artist’s 1991 performance, Delay of Game. (Figure 3.24) (Figure 3.25) In this work, Barney goes through a series of athletic trials, performing in drag as the “Character of Positive Restraint,” who wears, in different acts, an evening gown or a pin-up style bathing suit, both by the designer Norma Kamali. Here Barney maps gender performance against the delays of game that speak to the immanence of difference, especially sexual or gender differentiation, which is the theme

25 “Delay(s) of game” are often considered violations of game rules, and result in penalties. See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Delay_of_game
he takes up again in *The Cremaster Cycle*. Moreover, the performance utilizes an itinerant variability of signs to explore the problematic assumption of truth based on their codification as evidence; the idea being that the very same signs may actually be strategic forms of performative fakery, which, one could argue, “deadpan” is, always to some extent.

An added dimension of this discussion is a world with which Barney is well-acquainted: American football. Barney played the sport from elementary school to college, and mastered the game’s dependence on various strategic forms of faking. Many American football plays are built entirely around feigned moves and strategies in an attempt to distract and confuse opponents.\(^{26}\) Crucially, unlike basketball, whose players must become masters of their own poker face, modern American football is for all intents and purposes “faceless,” in the sense that, players’ expressions are almost entirely shielded by their protective helmet. It could be said that football’s fakery is buttressed by faceless encounters among players, where the inability to see, let alone read a face prevents anticipation of their next move. As Levinas, Deleuze, and other theorists have argued, encounters with the Other are fundamentally “facialized” due to the significance of faces in determining predatory or sexual relations, and especially the biological transferences of experience through mimicry and empathy.\(^ {27}\)

It must then be said that Barney’s deadpan finds roots in the delays and forms of visual and conceptual deflection through the face and body, which are both at the core of

\(^{26}\) I am grateful to Ken Maffitt for educating me on these aspects about football.  
his athletic training. What is not in question, however, is that his athletic training also informs his deadpan reckoning of the world, one equally derived from embodying a privileged masculinity that he enacts corporeally in metaphors of physical endurance and restraint, but is undermined in gender play and hybrid animality. All this offered with the stoic force of deadpan that is permitted men, while stereotypes of women are relegated to expressive displays of emotion associated with the feminine and its putative closeness to nature. Barney points to the imposition of patriarchal masculinity in his decision to cast both Richard Serra as the formidable “The Architect” of Cremaster 3 and Norman Mailer as Harry Houdini in Cremaster 2. (Figure 3.26) (Figure 3.27) Yet, Barney deliberately disrupts the paradigm of the male artist-genius-hero narrative, by subverting normative gender, sexuality, and species representations in these very characters, especially through the various physical transformations to which he submits them. I maintain that Barney’s configurations of the body as human-animal/non-animal hybrids actually distance him further from the realm of not only masculine identity, but also human and even earthly experiences. Barney has referred to this distancing in the documentary, The Body as Matrix, explaining that his characters are designed to remove them from the normal realm of character-driven film and to give them a quality of being that is outside the paradigms of human identity.28 In other words, although Barney and his work are often accused of being “hyper-masculine,” and to a large degree they are, ironically, the artist’s surreal, and animalizing, shape-shifting contributes to undoing this very persona for how he equally inhabits a feminized register. Such a mixture has often earned him and his work a hostile reception.

For instance, Barney’s deadpan portrayal of Gary Gilmore goes beyond the performance of a cold-hearted murderer to explore conditions of inhumanity through expressions of violent masculinity and cruelty, qualities that were not only associated with Gilmore but also attributed to Mailer and, by extension, to Barney. (Figure 3.28) Meanwhile, in Cremaster 3, the artist’s visual surrender to the violent physical torture of his own body, laying bare twisted, unrecognizable, and emasculated genitalia, transports Barney’s deadpan performances into the realm of the Other, absolute alien. (Figure 3.29) (Figure 3.30) Barney further emphasizes this otherworldly condition of deadpan in the display of his character, “The Entered Apprentice,” Cremaster 3, who stands on a pedestal, or in his character, “The Loughton Candidate” in Cremaster 4, who is subsumed in a suffocating cavern of Vaseline. (Figure 3.31) Both figures evoke a mystifying terror or panic, the source of which is ultimately unknowable. (Figure 3.32) (Figure 3.33)

The expression of panic through this unknowable otherness recalls the hybrid human-goat God Pan, protector of animals. This aspect of deadpan is crucial to understanding another dimension of how animality figures into Barney’s work. With the discursive terrain of animality already foregrounded in the interpenetrating hybrid of “The Loughton Candidate,” animality and human nature collide at the interface of the function of deadpan. For the convergence of live animals, faux animals, and animal prosthetics in Barney’s work all draw attention to conditions of human animality, but also to the humanness of animals. Thus does Barney attend to qualities that depart from the anthropomorphizing tendencies of American culture, gesturing instead to the very slow growing recognition of animal sentience. And while the basis of non-human animal
subjugation has for centuries been the belief that animals do not feel or experience emotions, it is increasingly confirmed that they in fact do, and greatly.

That Barney repeatedly incorporates and identifies himself with animals is telling. For, as the renowned professor of animal science, Temple Grandin, who is also a high-functioning autistic, has shown so remarkably, to identify with an animal is often to recognize something within oneself that resists human social forms of communication. Developmental differences or traumatic experiences are often at the root of such communicative challenges, both of which have been shown to respond well to therapeutic models involving animals. Animal therapy has shown to be indispensable to those who have suffered traumatic experiences as they begin the process of psychic healing: animals provide non-judgmental companionship based on physical touch and non-verbal communication, all of which help trauma survivors be and feel safe the present moment, and for acute cases, allowing them the space to not speak of their experiences.

Barney’s hybrid bodies might therefore be interpreted as dissociated actions that disclose the artist’s own sense of alterity. Further, his identification with different conditions of otherness (animal, female, differently-abled) suggests the marks of personal trauma, the evidence of which has been extensively explored in Barney’s work by art historian Lynn Brunet. Brunet’s research on Barney has indicated the signs and symbols of Masonic ritual abuse in The Cremaster Cycle. Cremaster 3, for example, specifically

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30 Kristine Stiles’ ground-breaking research on art and trauma played a key role in the development of art historian Lynn Brunet’s dissertation and subsequent research, which has explored the evidence of traumatic experience(s) in Barney’s work. Barney’s identification with different conditions of otherness (animal, female, differently-abled) may be associated with personal trauma. See Kristine Stiles, *Concerning Consequences: Studies in Art, Destruction, and Trauma* & Lynn Brunet (dissertation, etc.).]
approaches the capacity of sculpture and performance to narrate Masonic ritual, and
features an hour long endurance performance called “The Order.” This performative
action maps the five levels of Masonic initiation onto five floors of the winding circular
Apprentice,” must successfully complete tasks on each other five levels to become fully
initiated. These are conceived as obstacles meant to test his limits of knowledge and
experience, and ultimately, for Barney’s character to overcome the imperfections of the
self, to gain mastery over his immediate and extensive surroundings, and finally, to
overthrow the elder “master” mason of the Order, in this case the architect of the
Guggenheim museum, who is Richard Serra playing himself.  
Yet in order
to assume the role of the master, Barney’s character (“The Entered Apprentice”) must
defeat his lower self, meaning all aspects of his identity that lack the refinement of the
patriarchal order.

Barney conceives of his lower self as animalistic, feminized, and abled by his
hybrid condition, which is metonymically illuminated by having cast Paralympic athlete
Aimee Mullins in the role of “The Entered Novitiate.” “The Entered Novitiate” mirrors
“The Entered Apprentice,” just as Mullins has been identified by Barney as his “alter
ego” in real-life. As they embrace, her character is suddenly
transformed into a cheetah who attacks him and who he must ultimately fight to the
death. In a quiet moment with a stuffed animal in the form of a lamb held

32 Lynn Brunet, “Homage to Freemasonry or Indictment? The Cremaster Cycle,” *PAJ: A Journal of
against his chest, Barney’s character snaps out of a dissociated state, leading him to kill his animal alter-ego, transforming her back to her own hybrid-human form and the faux lambs into live animals. (Figure 3.38) (Figure 3.39) Killing the animal self is not to extinguish her entirely, for Mullins is memorialized in a post-script scene, where she appears damaged with tentacle-like legs. (Figure 3.40) All of the above takes place in Cremaster 3, a convoluted film that also has “The Entered Apprentice” appear in a dramatic scene that has been frequently reproduced as a still from the film. Barney initially appears in Cremaster 3, as a strapping young builder, who still resembles Barney himself. At the beginning of the scene of “The Order,” he transforms into a monstrous version of a masonic initiate, wearing a traditional Scottish headdress and kilt in flaming orange and pink, and in his mouth, which had been brutalized by a horse bit, a bright orange cloth protrudes from his bloody orifice.

This extraordinary image of the artist is unique in the history of art, save for how he compelling appropriated a still from Adrian Piper’s Catalysis IV, 1971, in which she travelled around New York City, walking and riding on buses with a cloth napkin stuffed in her mouth. Piper, unlike any other female performance artist, did so resolutely in deadpan in order to alienate others and thereby reinforce her own alienated condition. (Figure 3.41) Piper’s Catalysis series involved an exploration of physicality and its intersections with identity across race and gender, but also probed the philosophical, material, and transactional status of the body as an art object, and represents her experimental interventions into both the discrete ontology of the art object and the atomizing social isolation of human experience exacerbated by racism and misogyny. (Figure 3.42) Piper’s emphasis on the confrontational and corporeal dimensions of these
actions demonstrates the functional hybridity of her socially engaged artistic practice, and exemplifies her investment in the critical stakes of action art, which Stiles has argued “makes evident the all-too-often forgotten interdependence of human subjects.”

Barney’s appropriation of Piper’s stuffed-mouth image might be assessed as a crude reductionism of a visual trope in her performance. But he visualizes his interdependence as an artist with the artistry of Piper, translating her dramatic image into another artistic context in order to redeploy the traumatic valences of otherness.

It is necessary here to turn to Piper’s work in more depth in order to demonstrate relationship between the two artists. In a collection of texts that she titled “Talking to Myself: The Ongoing Autobiography of the Art Object,” Piper’s working notes from the Catalysis series offer insight into the interconnected social and artistic experimentation of this body of work:

I can no longer see discrete forms or objects in art as viable reflections or expressions…They refer back to conditions of separateness, order, exclusivity, and the stability of easily accepted functional identities that no longer exist….Ideally the work has no meaning or independent existence outside of its function as a medium of change. It exists only as a catalytic agent between myself and the viewer….Making artificial and nonfunctional plastic alterations in my own bodily presence of the same kind as those I formerly made on inanimate or nonart materials….This process/product is in a sense internalized in me, because I exist as the artist and the work….The strongest, most complex, and most aesthetically interesting catalysis is the one that occurs in uncategorized, undefined, nonpragmatic human confrontation.

Although Barney departs significantly from the social aims outlined in Piper’s text, several aspects of her commentary still resonate with his work in important ways.

First, like Piper, Barney’s work persistently disrupts “the stability of easily accepted functional identities,” both through hybrid characters and bodies, which require “artificial and nonfunctional plastic alterations.” In this regard, he casts figures in roles that rattle the chains of culturally reified, predetermined identities and images. For example, as a double-amputee with a functionally hybrid body, Aimee Mullins already unsettles the normative frameworks of human embodiment and experience. Poring into her cultural identity as a Paralympic athlete, Barney was inspired to have her character transform into a cheetah after discovering that the prosthetic legs she wore for racing were designed to approximate the biomechanical movement of a cheetah. Secondly, Barney’s transposition of Piper’s image and his mapping frameworks that rely on the those of organic bodily systems (e.g. digestion) correspond to Piper’s conceptual orientation and her “process/product,” which she describes as “internalized.” In such ways, Barney’s digestive, or distilling enterprise, converges with Piper’s catalytic aims. His appropriation of her iconic image may be understood now as a revival or re-invigoration of Piper’s discourse. Rather than exploiting her historically-located performance and discharging its art historical relevance or conceptual meaning, Barney stuffs his broken mouth with a cloth in a way that can be read as an emphasis on the symbolic power of her image within visual culture to express those experiences that cannot be said. (Figure 3.44)

III. Caesura

With the addition of Piper to the discourse of deadpan in Barney’s work, deadpan may be now understood as an affective caesura in the entanglement of surface and voice.
Deadpan slices and dices expressive continuity and reassembles it hastily, resulting in a disjunction of both narrative coherence and implication. Like a rhythmic buzz of telephonic interference, and a wavering image on the screen, this is the interpenetration of the inhuman in the human and its resolution. Where clarity and fluency of communication may be inferred, encounter stutters. Where objective truth is presumed immanent, a disturbance of reality occurs in a rupture of ideas. Where the expectation of visual cohesion is manifest, the punctum may trail off the page. A deadpan “delay of judgment” must therefore be understood to dispense both with certainty and the flow of time that would permit the arrival of its own impossible future. That is, the confirmation of a judgment that was delayed.

Deadpan seldom transposes into expressive affect, for its purpose is to amputate narrative resolution and shut down the desire for emotional coherence. Vinegar speaks only to the philosophical implication of a delay, not the precise mechanism of its action. In this way, deadpan apparently accedes to an immediate disclosure, as though the revelation of a deadpan mood aligns synchronically with the deadpan images it analyzes. Vinegar does not account for how a mood would act upon an image or how an image would produce a mood. Like resistance to an interpellation that makes a bid to confirm relational certainty, deadpan’s flattening of surface expression disperses an image of truth, as if in a dust cloud of incoherent and dysfunctional particles, wherein no possibility remains for truth that could be recognized or named as such in the first place. Perhaps the resistance of deadpan to be named may be understood as the resolution of
cognitive dissonance across conceptual surfaces. Its ability to “absorb skepticism,”
arrives in its refusal to conform to choose sides, so to speak.  

Deadpan’s dissonance shares in the imperfect and disjunctive visual alchemy of
the Surrealist’s collage. It depends on the variability of mood and perception that arises
from the awkward reconfiguration of an image from particles of matter thrown up that
disturb linear time. To experience deadpan’s potential humor, one must rely on internal
sources of comedy in order to recognize the rhetorical gag; for, comedic fulfillment
depends on the ability to perceive, read, decipher, and interpret layers of meaning. The
familiar in the unfamiliar precedes a “double-take” and a repetition unfolds, leading
perception into hazy territories of temporal dissonance. Like tiny rays of hallucinatory
light that pour through the cuts in a composite image, deadpan oozes forth in a flirtation
with the uncanny. Similar to the pivotal moment in the 1999 film, The Matrix, in what
Keanu Reeves’ character “Neo” describes as “déjà vu,” deadpan arrives like a black cat
swiftly followed by its clone. As contrast, break, variable mood and perceptivity,
dissonant time, the familiar in the unfamiliar, and the punctual arrival of its double,
deadpan proposes a “glitch in the matrix” that perturbs the ground of the real and
subjectivity’s cohering self. The temporal dissonance of the déjà vu has been imagined in

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35 The problem with Vinegar’s use of the “delay of judgment” and Cavell’s submersion of pursuit into
“ontological equality” is that both have the curious affect of collapsing the concept of time into its
linguistic shorthand, without interrogating the precise implications of the disruptive interface of these
frameworks. This conceptual process is akin to the thermodynamic principle of entropy, whereby two
disparate material temperatures are resolved in their interface.

36 Here I am thinking of Max Ernst’s definition of collage reprinted in Lucy Lippard’s collection of
Surrealist writings: “What is collage? Simple hallucination, in the words of Rimbaud, Setting under
Whiskey-Marine, in those of Max Ernst. It is something like visual alchemy.
THE MIRACLE OF TOTAL TRANSFIGURATION OF BEINGS AND OBJECTS WITH OR WITHOUT
MODIFICATION OF THEIR PHYSICAL OR ANATOMICAL ASPECTS.”
contemporary discourse as the material manifestation of time travel in consciousness, whereby a moment in time (and all its precise characteristics) are experienced as a memory of perception, suggesting something like the tachyon particle’s potential for time to flash ahead of its own unfolding, in a phenomenological slipstream of consciousness.

Similarly, deadpan collapses the continuity of perception, contrasting expressive forms that speak to the dislocation of time. Like an apparition of perception in the material world, deadpan perturbs a spatiotemporal order of expressions, images, ideas, and forms; this suggests a conceptual sympathy with “spooky-action-at-a-distance.” This is how Einstein, in his famous dismissal of the theory’s disputative claims against his theory of relativity, described the peculiarity of the then-unproven theory of quantum entanglement, in which particles of matter were observed to experience effects from changes occurring across light-years of space and time in the universe. The metaphor of spookiness could be used to describe the unnerving, mysterious, and disturbing temporal rumblings in Barney’s nuanced hybridized deadpan. For in his work, instances in which images from art history reverberate as afterimages, just as in Piper’s Catalysis IV, or in Joseph Beuys’ drawings and sculptural aesthetic. It could be said, in this regard, that Barney’s art arrived ahead of its time, while anchored in its past.

Deadpan connects to the dislocation of the experience of déjà vu on another level. Déjà vu, which erodes the linear complacency of narrative and thought, also confounds the communicative interface of language. Deadpan is also an affective break that emerges from disjunctions in temporality, memory, and expression. The “delay in judgment” that

Vinegar describes in deadpan must be held to a temporal component that can be located in the disputation of speech, either as arrest of speech such as in the punchline of joke, or as interpellation wherein the orientation of deadpan toward silence, or mute expression and witness, prevails. The delay in perception suggests a relationship to the double-take of the uncanny, where one is forced to look, and look again, at the familiar shuddering through the unfamiliar. Furthermore, where trauma results in a “radical discontinuity” of the psyche, and its dissociative effects dislocate the spatiotemporal procedures of the so-called unified subject, deadpan arrives at the disjunction of the visual and the verbal as a break and its entropic resolution, leveling expression, and calming the nervous system. In other words, deadpan might be said to be both the cut and its dressing. Here it is worth thinking again about Barney’s “self-lubricating” picture frames that absorb the performative gesture of the cut, where the cut is a visceral penetration of an image that needs a means of facilitation. I return to these points in the next chapter. (Figure 3.45)

(Figure 3.46)

The “lubricating” or entropic dimensions that I attribute to deadpan, in such examples as Barney’s Vaseline, Ruscha’s blank pages, and Piper’s stuffed mouth, speak to the slipperiness of the meaning and usage of the word and its concept. Indeed, the description “deadpan” is often used as shorthand for a whole range of expressive connotations and interfaces that go unexamined, while it functions as a linguistic black hole for information, swallowing the broader affective implications or practical dimensions of deadpan in the process. Take, for example, the curator Henry Geldzahler’s 1964 description of Andy Warhol cited by Stiles in her essay on trauma in Warhol’s work. Geldzahler opined: “The dead-pan, sweet, know-nothing quality of Andy Warhol’s
personality is continuous with his paintings. He plays dumb just as his paintings do, but neither deceives us.”38 Here deadpan operates as the performative muscle for Warhol’s social deception, which as Stiles notes, was not lost on Geldzahler, who “was not tricked by Warhol’s feigned and misleading naiveté.” At the same time, “dead-pan” also signifies a conceptual collapse of the dual meanings of the word “dumb,” which may refer to Warhol’s supposed intellectual deficiency or verbal one. Stiles points out that the evacuation of speech is Warhol’s deception, his mode of evasion, which further articulates, among other things, the “know-nothing quality” of his performative façade.

Warhol’s pretense to “know-nothing” connects to qualities expressed across deadpan more generally, though not always as mischief. That is, Warhol’s ability to “absorb skepticism,” and the way he used deadpan to disperse expressive clarity and fundamentally alter frameworks for “knowing” and for identifying “meaning.” In this way, deadpan may be conceived to “lubricate” relations, to build a visual and conceptual field around artistic expression that defends against skeptics on the one hand, while preparing a subterranean dimension of persona (an abyss) that piques curiosity and encourages critical exploration. It may be said, then, that deadpan functions as a matter of personal or artistic comportment that cloaks what it knows but begs to be questioned.

And this bid for subjective response and its simultaneous resistance circulates between

passive receptiveness and provocative offense in a conceptual tag-team that enhances its own illegibility and curiosity.39

The functionality of deadpan in these, and many other cases in Barney’s work, is to announce in a rhetorical performative mechanism, the problematic or taboo nature of images that complicate narrative or emotional resolution. As I have been arguing throughout, deadpan breaks the narrative, visual, and conceptual continuities of form and idea and prepares its resolution in a performative resistance to be read. It holds up discrepancies and deflects scrutiny by turning the tables on the gaze, and interrogating its visual and conceptual limits. Indeed, deadpan disturbs and pre-views the conversation into which it might be thrown and probed for meaning, disturbing the temporal order of communication and of experience, in a spooky action that not only anticipates the “why?” but proffers its answer, “why not?”40

39 This dissonant expressive space is highly productive for experimental practices in art and performance. As J.L. Austin’s work groundbreaking research on linguistics has shown, subjectivity is primarily accrued—formed, expressed, and felt—through speech acts, which are both constitutive and performative. Drawing on Austin, art historian Kristine Stiles has argued, that performance art’s radical repositioning of the artist as both subject and object of the artwork, represented an ontological collapse that transformed the meaning of art and its function. As presentation and re-presentation, performance fundamentally altered the ground between artwork (object) and its viewer, instantiating intersubjectivity between the artist (subject) and his or her audience. The history of performance art is wrought with examples of artistic deadpan as a slippery affect between the artist and viewer that Stiles theorizes. Once again, because deadpan refuses expressive coherence, the materiality of deadpan mood functions to protect artists from facile scrutiny. Just as trauma survivors experience a range of conditions from dissociation to depersonalization and derealization as psychic protection from world, deadpan, particularly its mute or aphasic qualities, may be a key aspect of trauma’s expressive material due to its resistance to be read for deeper expressions of emotion or meaning. See J.L. Austin, How to Do Things With Words (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962); and Stiles, “Performance,” 2003.

40 Richard Powell identifies the fissure of “why not” in his essay, “Sartor Africanus” in which he analyzes “black male sartorial expressivity,” and the figure of the black dandy in Barkley Hendricks’ paintings. Powell notes that the artist replied “why not?” when he was “questioned [about] his fascination with [his] subjects and the significance of their style of dress”(235). Hendricks further elaborated that, like European masters such as Van Dyke and Rembrandt, he was drawn to figures whose “wrapped is interesting.” Powell argues that Hendricks comments indicate the intriguing implications that follow in identifying conceptual break between the surface “wrapper” and “what is inside,” which may also be considered “interesting.” Powell explores this composite fascination between what is above and what is below from a discussion of Hendrick’s painting, Sir Charles, which the art historian proposes is indicative of the artist’s “successful
IV. Deadpan Postscript

If they say, why, why?
Tell ‘em that it’s Human Nature -
Why, why -
Does he do me that way?
-Michael Jackson, “Human Nature”

During the formative years of Matthew Barney’s career and his rise to prominence in the contemporary art world, another shape-shifting multi-talented and intermedial artist was at a critical highpoint of a long and massively successful career. (Figure 3.47) Michael Joseph Jackson (1958-2009), former child star musician and performer for The Jackson 5, came to be known around the world as “The King of Pop” during the 1980s, following three successive, groundbreaking, and record-smashing albums (Off the Wall, 1979; Thriller, 1982; Bad, 1987). No celebrity’s star was bigger than that of Jackson in the 1980s, and not only because of his wildly popular music, genre-defining videos, and exhilarating dance performances. Michael Jackson lived his life in a blinding public spotlight, under the scrutiny of a harsh and sensationalist media, which often focused on his massive wealth, his eccentricities, and his seemingly ever-changing appearance. The King of Pop was untouchable when it came to his music. But his identity outside of his music, and an increasing reclusiveness over time, became

rendering of things felt…but [also] things unspoken, and even, at times, unspeakable” (234). Powell’s discussion of the returned question lands upon a key aspect of deadpan that I have tried to elucidate so far, namely the “pitch” of language, look, and idea from the subject being looked at (or in Hendricks’ case, interrogated for explanation), and the examiner’s interpellative gaze. Richard J. Powell, “Sartor Africanus,” in Dandies: Fashion and Finesse in Art and Culture, edited by Susan Fillin-Yeh (New York: NYU Press, 2001), 217-242.

fodder for tabloids and major print publications, television news stories, and fans who consumed every detail of Michael Jackson’s life. Long before he was accused of sexually molesting young boys at his Neverland Ranch, Michael Jackson endured long and agonizing years of publicity that dubbed him “Wacko Jacko,” and other attempts to humiliate and undermine the star. Thus, it was hard not to be reminded of Michael Jackson, when ARTNews featured Matthew Barney as “The Loughton Candidate,” calling him “The Wizard of Odd” in 1999, and “The Wizard of Weird” in 2006.

Jackson’s numerous personal transformations, including myriad plastic surgeries and an increasingly “white” complexion resulting from the skin-discoloring condition known as “Vitiligo” along with his attempts to cover his dissipating melanin with make-up, found the singer visibly altered with each and every new album he released from the late 1970s until his death in 2009. From his relationships with other famous and infamous people and the exotic pets that he adopted, to the Neverland Ranch estate he built to support his inner child, and the many wild rumors of his bizarre behaviors and proclivities, Jackson’s growing freakishness became a central aspect of the star’s identity that the world delighted in consuming. Meanwhile, the singer’s visual perspicacity, which derived from his deep admiration and interest in cinema and its histories,

42 Powell, 186-89.
44 The National Institute of Arthritis and Musculoskeletal and Skin Diseases (NIAMS) offers the following definition of vitiligo: “Vitiligo (vit-ill-EYE-go) is a disorder in which white patches of skin appear on different parts of the body. This happens because the cells that make pigment (color) in the skin are destroyed. These cells are called melanocytes. Vitiligo can also affect the mucous membranes (such as the tissue inside the mouth and nose) and the eye.” http://www.niams.nih.gov/Health_Info/Vitiligo/vitiligo_ff.asp
magnified his many music endeavors with dazzling long-form narrative music videos, a genre of interdependent visual music-making that the star is credited with revolutionizing, first with the historic music video for the song “Thriller” in 1982, and again with the video for “Black or White” in 1991. These videos, along with Jackson’s portrayal of “The Wiz” in 1978, and the short-film for the song “Ghosts” in 1997, serve as critical examples of Jackson’s transforming visual impact on American pop music and culture, and convey themes and images that resonate with transmogrifying and hybrid visual and conceptual dimensions of Barney’s work. (Figure 3.48) (Figure 3.49) (Figure 3.50) (Figure 3.51)

I propose that Michael Jackson’s visual transformations, his body of work (musical and visual), and the volatility of his reception (as the beloved former child star, musical icon and genius, and mentally unstable man) offer a key cultural counterpoint to Barney in the 1980s and 1990s. Similar to Barney’s significant impact on both the art world and the public sphere, though on a much larger scale, Jackson’s complicated status in a racially divisive American culture stemmed in part from conflicts associated with his self-styling hybrid transformations and their disruption of normative identity, especially notions of black masculinity, within and without his visionary work.  

Meanwhile, Jackson’s ability to weather (for most of his career, at least) a never-ending avalanche of personal criticism, racialized attacks, and public humiliation, were supported, at least in part, by his excessive wealth. Just as Barney made significant partnerships with important artworld powers and benefactors early in his professional career (who continue to support and sustain his large-scale, artistic practice), Jackson’s financial successes derived not

46 Powell, Cutting a Figure, 188.
only from his record-breaking album sales, but also from the singer’s shrewd business acumen, which included purchasing the copyrighted music catalogue of The Beatles, and signing multimillion dollar endorsement agreements with corporations such as Pepsi, Co., and others. Jackson’s peerless status may be said to compare, if asymmetrically, to Barney’s art star status, a.k.a. “most important artist of his generation.” Both artists represent lightning rods in American culture, where conflict emerged at the intersections of their identity, from the singularity of their art, their complicated renderings of identity and the body, their cultural contributions, and their resilience to criticism. In the previous sections of this chapter, I organized the discussion of Barney’s work around a multifaceted definition and performative mechanisms of deadpan, developed and thematized in Barney’s face, as a means to explore the intricacy of metapictures, the self-representation and performativity of photographic portraiture, and the visual and conceptual ruptures through physical transformation and hybridity. I turn my attention now to Michael Jackson to explore how his self-presentation in and out of performance converge with these ideas developed through Barney.

In September 2012, the estate of Michael Jackson released the full performance footage from a famed concert that he gave during the “Bad” tour on July 16, 1988.47 Live at Wembley, released on DVD, captures a stunning performance by Jackson at the Wembley stadium in London, during the height of his career to an audience of 72,000 people, a sold-out crowd that included Diana and Charles, the Princess and Prince of Wales. This long-lost performance had been in Jackson’s personal VHS library since it

was shot in 1988. His personal tape of the footage was the only known copy at the time.\footnote{Statement from the Estate of Michael Jackson on the release of Wembley concert, June 1 2012: http://mjstar.co.uk/index.php/2012/06/statement-from-the-estate-wembley-concert-reassurance/}

In Jackson’s performance at this venue, he sang and danced to the song “Human Nature,” the sixth single released from Thriller. This performance, captured on video, is arguably the most significant performance of this song. Seeing it for the first time, as many people did, on Youtube in September 2012, had immeasurable impact on the public.\footnote{The song had an impact on my thinking about Jackson, whose music had been in my life since 1983 when my parents gave me Thriller for Christmas. Thriller was my introduction to pop music, and I listened, sang, and danced to it for years, always staying awake for “Human Nature.” See “Michael Jackson – Human Nature” at https://youtu.be/kql0ld02SS4?list=PLMEBv6dPeH_aTPBtcCK8FOtjBLq7H7vi (via michaeljacksonVEVO) }

The Wembley performance of “Human Nature,” also fundamentally transformed my thinking about “deadpan” and, crucially, about Matthew Barney. By that point I had already begun exploring the visual and conceptual dimensions of deadpan in of Barney’s work, but certain aspects would only develop after seeing this video.

Edited from footage from several different cameras, the video opens visually with long-range shot of the fully darkened stage coupled with the sound of the song’s electronic synthesizer introduction and Jackson’s non-linguistic verbal effects (a “che-che-che-che-” sound) laid over top. A few counts in, a single spotlight lands on the singer from above. Jackson stands with his back to the audience at center stage, where he begins to move in place, striking a choreographed series of poses and gestures, until, as the bars of the introduction resolve into the first verse, the camera shifts to a close-up shot from close-range that moves between a frontal shot to three-quarters view that is shot from angle just below and to Jackson’s left side. Though Jackson covers little physical distance across the stage during the course of the performance, he continues to move in various
beat-punctuated gestures and poses that encompass his entire body. (Figure 3.52) (Figure 3.53) (Figure 3.54) The close-ups which often show only Jackson’s head and torso reveal a number of aspects of Jackson’s embodied lyricism: the singer uses his hands and arms extensively, but also exploits an extensive range of control over his head, neck, and shoulders, which he moves both subtly and dramatically in physical isolations that only a talented and well-trained and rehearsed dancer could perform.50 These isolated movements and sharp mime-like poses, which structure shifting and interpenetrating visual frames around Jackson, anticipate the “vogue” era in American pop culture, two years ahead of Madonna’s wildly popularly music video in 1990, which Madonna had appropriated from the vogue style of dance that emerged in black dancehalls during the 1980s, especially among Harlem’s ballroom scene.51

Jackson’s performance suggests that he is in a state of “flow,” an absorptive, confluence of consciousness and peak physical performance that dancers and athletes train to achieve and perfect. By far the most astonishing revelations to emerge from the video of the Wembley performance is the singer’s incredible sense of his own visuality, including a heightened proprioceptive sense of his spatial relationship to the cameras, and especially of the visual angles of his face in relationship to the image. (Figure 3.55) (Figure 3.56) (Figure 3.57) Jackson’s use of his face and body reveal not only a masterful sense of the choreography of visual performance but also of the affective structure and

50 Jackson was well-known for his unique abilities as a dancer, which he began cultivating as the lead singer and performer for the Jackson 5 in the 1960s and 70s. During those years, he demonstrated, among other things, rhythmic intuition and imitative capacities, which included mastering some of James Brown’s difficult moves and style as early as 1968, when the singer was captured on video performing Brown’s high energy funk classic “I Got The Feelin’,” with his brothers at ten years old. See Michael Jackson performing “I Got The Feelin’” in 1968 here: https://youtu.be/Ux3joe0GdTA

51 For a recent discussion on vogue-ing see: Carolyn Trench and Rashaad Newsome, “Conductor, Choreographer, King of Arms,” Transition 109, Persona, 2012: 85-96
movement of his corporeal being. By 1988, Jackson had already undergone numerous plastic surgeries, and this performance shows him inhabiting his *Bad* era face, which most of the world saw for the first time on the cover of the titular album in 1987, and in the video for the “Bad” single which followed. The physical structure of his face, especially his nose, appeared radically transformed from his *Thriller* days, not to mention how different he looked compared to images from the late 1970s, including his obviously lighter, or whitened, skin. (Figure 3.57) (Figure 3.58)

At Wembley, the anatomy of Jackson’s plastically transformed face, and the plasticity of his shifting subjectivity, is fully exposed, revealing the visionary irony of the song “Human Nature,” as a provocative interrogation of coherent concepts or representations of either “human” or “nature.” Jackson’s performance of the song, with his smooth, triumphant performativity, dissolves his “freakish” appearance in a “self-lubricating” gloss, as the star delights in his exuberant experience and expression of being. Jackson’s command over this powerful image is emphasized during several suspense-filled moments when he “stops” the song with a pose, suspending the music in time as a metonymic extension of his body, which sometimes is sustained for several bars of concert silence.⁵³ He strikes a deadpan pose—resembling Buster Keaton’s dramatic movements captured in film stills—breathes and counts along in silence, soaking in the atmosphere of this stop on the concert tour that affirmed his world domination. These moments hang in the air, inflating a magical affect of the historic significance of

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⁵² Stiles, “The Misfit.”
⁵³ Jackson’s performative style and dance choreographer is indebted to various genres of black dance music. These breaks in the flow of his performance recall Richard J. Powell’s theorization of “cutting in a figure” in black self-fashioning and portraiture. Powell, *Cutting a Figure*, 2005.
Jackson’s concert, which is bolstered by the increasing sounds of the audience elation. These valences are visually accentuated by the occasional shots that turn the camera out onto the sea of 72,000 people, glimpses that serve as reminders that Jackson’s micro-expressive visual and physical performance spoke a language larger than life.

Key among these micro-expressions is the subtle yet amplifying movement of Jackson’s neck in what became a signature move in the star’s personal dance style and aesthetic, consisting of a staccato double- or sometimes triple-shift of his head, a puncturing and punctuated motion that appeared to be led from his chin or from his ear, and sometimes involved a reactive motion with his shoulders. This sharp affected movement can appear at times like an unconscious bodily tick, a shuddering or pulsating that seems innate, and therefore intrinsically bound to Jackson’s physical being. With this subtle, consistent, yet variable move, Jackson cuts through space like knife, communicating as if in a corporeal Morse code that functions as a pulsing cipher of the blood coursing through his veins, reverberating in a body that seems to resist and discipline its own physicality. A feature of his dancing and overall performances from Thriller onward, Jackson’s “pulse,” shakes the visual energy field of his structural aura like a stone skipping across a pond, the dissipating splash on the surface of a swimming pool, or an insistently inquisitive raised eyebrow.

Memorable examples include the videos for “The Way You Make Me Feel” (1988) and “Remember the Time” (1992), but can be observed in just about all of Jackson’s videos in some variation. The most important example appears in the video for Thriller, which featured the artist physically transmogrified into a walking-dancing zombie during a haunted dance number, in what is arguably the most famous ensemble
dance choreography in American pop music history. Jackson’s pulse surfaces in an expression of his life force, and serves as the both disruptive interface of his shifting visual and physical being and the resolving correction of his discontinuous identity and corporeality. The pulse visually surfaces to provide evidence that the zombie-Jackson is “undead,” and not fully released from his human nature. Shrouded in deadpan, it conveys, while it protects a conflicted embodiment. This shield hides and upholds the deep structure of Jackson’s unique identity, which “look[ed] like nothing else.”

“Human Nature,” both the song and the performance at Wembley, conveyed the star’s ludic embrace of his inner conflict, a bodily wink at his disputative claims about “nature” and “the human,” which included what Richard Powell has described as the various racial and “species transgressions” at the heart of Jackson’s public persona.

Jackson’s pulse, this flash of uncanny reckoning, is the physical containment of deadpan reflexivity. In this regard, Jackson’s interrogative positioning of “human nature,” that is, in the double-taking/double-consciousness, verbalized through the repetition of the song’s refrain, “why, why,” operates in much the way that Barney operationalizes a conceptual “pump-fake,” which reverses the encounter with the other and refuses the narrative closure of a definitive or coherent answer. Moreover, the double-“why” at the heart of “Human Nature” may be taken either as a plea to be heard, understood, and recognized in an exaggerating coupling of expression (“why, why?”) or as a resistance to unwanted intrusion (“why – why?”).

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54 Mitchell, Picture Theory, 53.
55 Powell, 188.
Jackson answers his own question proclaiming defiantly: “I like livin’ this way. I like lovin’ this way.” This is the answer Jackson provided for all of his behavior, from a sense of being that existed somewhere between alive and dead in *Ghosts* (1997) and in *Thriller*, both of which visually and conceptually upend “human nature.” In the latter, Jackson transforms into not only an “undead” character, in the famous zombie dance scene, but also a werewolf at the beginning of the video, and again at the end of the song, in a covert demonstration of his ontological secret, as he looks back at the audience over his shoulder to reveal rabid canine yellow eyes. (Figure 3.60) This glance is a stolen look, delivering him as a metapicture, who shows himself to know himself. Similar to Barney’s image in Seliger’s portrait, which turns the interrogative encounter back to the viewer with his penetrating black holes that subvert his blue eyes, Jackson’s is a shimmering flash of the ruse of knowing, as if to acknowledge that in seeing Jackson’s own complicated “human nature,” viewers must also come face-to-face with their own dark and hidden being. Finally, Jackson’s and Barney’s direct, captivating looks seem to suggest an embrace of the impossibility of knowing, or the “unknowability” at center of deadpan. Such visual exchanges of the gaze presume knowledge and understanding, and rely heavily on a non-verbal communicative visual interface that seems to say, “You already know. And so do I.” Unspoken recognition demands instinct, intuition, and above all, trust—yet allows a permissive ambiguity that places enormous responsibility on the interpretative acumen of intersubjective experience. This, I suggest, is the look of deadpan conceptualism, which conceals as much as it conveys, while it explores, exploits, and dismantles covertly in silence, secrecy, and mystery.
Though as brutal and positive as nature herself, [sculpture] has at the same time a certain vagueness and ambiguity, because it exhibits too many surfaces at once. It is in vain that the sculptor forces himself to take up a unique point of view, for the spectator who moves around the figure can choose a hundred different points of view, except for the right one…and it often happens that a chance trick of the light, an effect of the lamp, may discover a beauty which is not at all the one the artist had in mind—and this is a humiliating thing for him.

-Charles Baudelaire, “Why Sculpture is Tiresome”

In a short piece titled “Why Sculpture is Tiresome,” included in “The Salon of 1846,” Baudelaire offers a critique of sculpture as a fine art. For Baudelaire, sculpture suffers from what is, in his view, an innate tolerance and embrace of mimesis. His critique locates sculpture’s mimetic underpinnings and its relationship to the social as inferior to painting and architecture, to which sculpture is seen to serve as merely “complementary.” Specifically, the critic is concerned with sculpture’s ineluctable, and ultimately inexcusable, mimetic rendering of nature; and he attributes a kind of corporeal fetishizing and predetermined utility to sculpture. Baudelaire conceives of sculpture as a dazzling interface for those he accuses of lacking the “profound thought” associated with evolutionary or intellectual sophistication, and the “particular initiation” of modern, educated, and presumably white or sufficiently colonized viewers. Whereas painting requires the attention of the intellect, sculpture’s aesthetic value, he argues, “comes much

56 Charles Baudelaire, “Why Sculpture is Tiresome,” 120.
closer to nature.” Sculpture thereby speaks a special language to those Baudelaire considers a lower echelon of viewers (“primitives and “peasants”), who are “enchanted” by a sculptural object fashioned from natural materials, but who “remain unmoved” by the illusionistic surface of painting. In Baudelaire’s view, this quandary represents “a singular mystery which is quite beyond human solving.” Sculpture confuses and confounds as it “exhibits too many surfaces at once,” and can neither derive from ideas, nor be absorbed by thought.

Crucially, it must be pointed out that Baudelaire begins his essay with the following statement: “The origin of sculpture is lost in the mists of time; thus it is a Carib art [Baudelaire’s emphasis].” In other words, sculpture for Baudelaire is Caribbean, or simply, black. A contemporary reading might say that based on Baudelaire’s statement, “blackness” could be read as a condition of sculpture and vice versa. Baudelaire appears

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57 Ibid., 119.
58 Ibid., 120.
59 Ibid., 120.
60 Ibid., 119.

Sculpture’s “blackness” is not something I am able to address in this dissertation, however, in a future project, I will explore this dimension of sculpture’s alterity within the history of art. Specifically, I am interested in how the spurious language and conceptual framing of sculpture converges with colonizing and racist discourses historically, the implications of which continue to be upheld in the present, even if only insofar as an ongoing failure on the part of contemporary critics of sculpture to consider these discursive implications. For example, how sculpture functions with both “the help” in the sense of being “complementary” painting and architecture, as Baudelaire and other critics asserted, but also the problematic illegibility attributed to sculpture by postmodern critics as, “not painting, not architecture (Krauss), and for its status as intercorporeal and “theatrical” (Fried), and its “infinite malleability” (Krauss). The disdain for sculpture, as much as its frank devaluation, may be found in numerous texts ranging from Ad Rheinhardt’s quip that sculpture is “something your bump into when you back up to look at a painting” to Frank O’Hara’s comment to the sculptor David Smith that “It is the nature of sculpture to be there. If you don’t like it, you wish it would get out of the way, because it occupies space which your body could occupy.”(Quoted by David Getsy in his essay “Acts of Stillness,” 3). In the critical literature on sculpture, there have been studies of the black body or slave body in sculpture, and artists who were influenced by African art forms in the modernism, and also the collectors of African sculpture. But I am interested in prying open the history of sculpture and its criticism for the ways it continues to subsume racialized discourse within its foundations. For example, David Getsy, who has recently written about statues and their corporeal status, missed an opportunity to discuss Baudelaire’s comment, referring to a collection of corporeal sculptures as a “race of statues.” (Baudelaire, 121). Consider too that art historian Alex Potts does
to be suggesting that sculpture’s “origins” are not unlike the lost ancestry of African peoples displaced in the transatlantic slave trade, and thus the genre lacks legibility or historical roots, which is, of course, is an ahistorical view of one of the most ancient of arts. In Baudelaire’s regard, sculpture is creolized, dragged and washed up from the depths, irretrievable and irreconcilable to its own purpose, foreign in any context of modern culture, and incomprehensible even to those who claim to know.  

I. Surfaces

This aspect of sculpture’s critical history is of irrefutable significance to considering the development of the medium in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. First, because Baudelaire’s primitivized alterity offers new insight into the consistent devaluation and philosophical disposability of the genre and medium of sculpture in centuries of art historical writing, of which such twentieth century formalist critics like Clement Greenberg, Michael Fried, and Rosalind Krauss carried the mantel in their celebration of modernist abstraction. That sculpture might be understood or otherwise perceived outside of time, and therefore space, suggests a condition of liminality that has both frustrated and liberated sculpture from narrow material and conceptual forms.


Baudelaire argues that the lack of perspectival unity—which is a feature of painting because, as he observes, “[p]ainting has but one point of view—delimits its communicative force as a vehicle for aesthetic knowledge. He remarks: “I have head the sculptor Préault say, ‘I am a connoisseur of Michelangelo [and others]…but of sculpture [Baudelaire’s emphasis], I am a complete ignoramus.’” (Baudelaire, “Why Sculpture is Tiresome, 120).
Ironically, then, even as Baudelaire situates sculpture outside “profound thought,” its own incomprehensibility, alterity, and fringe spatiality, are precisely what enabled it to be re-conceptualized again and again. The refutation of sculpture on the part of critics, and its lack of clear and certain boundaries, is what permitted its own redefinitions and expanded fields and forms, as well as the introduction of non-traditional materials, and processes. Just as displaced peoples and diasporic cultures have challenged, puzzled, and resisted white culture and the conformity and invisibility it demands, at the peril of sculpture’s own coherence, artists have utilized the medium to push back against traditional frameworks of genre and form, transposing its own liminal and degraded value into future territories of thought and concept. Baudelaire’s primary assault against sculpture—that it is closer to nature and therefore unimaginative, or “tiresome”—may also be considered the huge blind spot in his criticism. For nature is a condition of possibility and plasticity; its materiality and forms are in a constant state of change, transformation and renewal.

Baudelaire’s notion of sculpture’s lost origins intersects with artistic explorations of identity and corporeal manifestations and renderings of the human and its “nature.” As the history and criticism of art has shown time and again, sculpture communicates about bodies, about mimesis and its negation, about transformations and resistances within and without conditions of materiality. If sculpture is closer to nature, is “nature” then perhaps closer to sculpture? It is precisely at this intersection that I will eventually arrive with a discussion of Matthew Barney’s *De Lámina* (2004). But for now, no doubt, when it comes to the human body, at least, life is currently conducted in a thoroughly plastic
Given his interest in prosthesis and the plasticity of bodies, the revelation that Barney once planned to become a plastic surgeon comes without surprise. For in Barney’s work, the body functions as an expanded field of sculpture, on the one hand, and a site for querying and confounding nature and its transformations, missteps, conformities and deformities, on the other.

Returning to Baudelaire, the critic proposes that sculpture contains a “vagueness and ambiguity” resulting from the fact that it “exhibits too many surfaces at once,” identifying corporeal valences in sculpture as fundamentally theatrical. These surfaces become apparent from the mobility of viewers, who in “moving around the figure,” suffer from sculpture’s lack of a single, unified artistic perspective, and who must depend therefore, on “a chance trick of the light,” to experience beauty in the artwork. This, Baudelaire argues, is a “humiliating thing” for the sculptor, who loses artistic control over the work’s visual communication and meaning. Later he will denounce sculptors as primitive “sculpturizers,” and “vaudevillistes.”

The previous chapter ended with a discussion of Michael Jackson’s deadpan performativity as a “pulse” of nature, and the existential alterity contained within. Here I return to images of the singer briefly to put them in conversation with foundational issues

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63 For celebrities, undergoing plastic surgery is almost a given, while millions of others also submit to surgeries and injections to improve, perfect, or dramatically transform their appearance. Meanwhile, thousands of people around the world, among them include many war veterans and survivors, are being fitted for state of the art prosthetics. And each year, as has been the case at least since the 1980s, thousands of people undergo organ transplantation procedures to preserve their lives. We are all becoming, and many of us still in possession of all our “natural” forms and parts will eventually be included among these transformed bodies.


65 Baudelaire, 120-121.
in the history of sculpture and its criticism via Baudelaire and others, which I will further explore to discuss Barney’s sculptural practice.

In the video stills from Jackson’s performance of “Human Nature” in 1988, which it could be argued that the power of Jackson’s interrogation of “human nature”—the double-cutting linguistic formulation of “why, why?”—reveals the quixotic hubris of too many surfaces. The profound impact of Jackson’s shifting visual identity becomes the driving expression of the performance, where highlights and shadows reveal in “tricks” of the light, and develop the surfaces of Jackson’s sculptured, plastic face. (See Figures 3.55 and 3.56)

Yet these surfaces bear the immanence of brutality in Jackson’s “nature,” as the plasticity of his body and image fueled critics who were confounded by his mutable identity. Like the proverbial train wreck from which one cannot look away, Jackson activated collective schadenfreude, probing cultural fears and anxieties, and stimulating complex affective reactions (ranging from troubled empathy to disgust and mockery) that distracted from the quotidian personal struggles and insecurities of daily life. Like many controversial public figures, Jackson’s humiliation and “exposure” was a source of painful interest for the public. Many of these reactions were fueled by the growing racialized discourse that developed around the star throughout the 1980s and 1990s, which intersected with, as art historian Richard Powell points out, Jackson’s “social erasure of species distinctions and caste taboos.” 66 In a discussion of Jeff Koons’ infamous sculpture, Michael Jackson and Bubbles (1988), Powell observes how Koons’ deliberate “blurring of man and ape” converged with Jackson’s own “representational

66 Powell, Cutting a Figure, 188.
violations,” as they came to be viewed within an hostile cultural environment of “unremitting racialist theories and questions surrounding the attributes and indicators of black authenticity.”\textsuperscript{67} (Figure 4.1) “Jackson’s figural parallelism with Bubbles, masquerading as decorative documenta” Powell argues, “discharges a scathing equation that questions not only Jackson’s blackness but his humanity as well.”\textsuperscript{68} (Figure 4.2)

The impact of this persistent and often vicious interrogation of Jackson’s “human nature,” was powerfully underscored in 1993 when, in an appeal to the masses, Jackson went on television in a videotaped recording transmitted via satellite to proclaim his innocence in the face of sexual molestation allegations, and to excoriate both the justice system and the mass media for participating in his private and public disgrace.\textsuperscript{69} During this event on December 22 1993, the world watched as the King of Pop communicated in distressing detail the violating experience of being subjected to a naked examination of his body to provide evidence for the criminal and legal proceedings against him:

\[ T \]he media has dissected and manipulated these allegations to reach their own conclusion. I ask all of you to wait to hear the truth before you label or condemn me. Don't treat me like a criminal because I am innocent. I have been forced to submit to a dehumanizing and humiliating examination….It was the most humiliating ordeal of my life, one that no person should ever have to suffer….\textsuperscript{70}

Jackson’s expressive body language and speech were visibly unnerved as he spoke of the traumatic objectification of his many surfaces, which were laid bare visually:

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{67} Ibid.
  \item \textsuperscript{68} Ibid.
  \item \textsuperscript{69} See Wikipedia’s regularly edited and updated article on the sexual molestation charges brought against Jackson by Evan Chandler, the father of Jordon Chandler (age 13), one of the children that spent time with Jackson at his Neverland Ranch in 1993: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1993_child_sexual_abuse_accusations_against_Michael_Jackson
  \item \textsuperscript{70} The full transcription of Jackson’s statement: http://www.statementanalysis.com/jackson/ See Jackson’s video at: https://youtu.be/w270PK4o2_c
\end{itemize}
and physically, and condemned along with his personhood and personal dignity, like a
digual monument toppled. (Figure 4.3) Jackson experienced this probe as dehumanizing
to his “nature” and humilitating to his entire being. And the star’s desperation and
vulnerability speak to the shame of being taken down, a “dissected” icon shattering into
pieces. Jackson’s statement is crucially a desperate plea for a deadpan “delay of
judgment,” but in this historic moment of American cultural theater, this desperation
precisely overturned his performative deadpan. Jackson had been so obviously
dismantled, emotionally rattled and psychically degraded, the very humiliation of which
came at the expense his control of the narrative of his identity and, critically, of his
image.

As Jackson’s adversaries seized upon him like prey, Koons’ excruciating
sculptural portrayal of the star as a “false icon” now served as ironic “proof” of Jackson’s
disturbed and absurd “nature.” For Baudelaire, sculpture’s complementary status conveys
its inherent didacticism, and its reliance on vaudevillian displays of emotion and
childishness. “A picture,” Baudelaire writes, “is only what it wants to be,” thus sculpture,
like Jackson, is degraded by its lack of control. Its mimetic enterprise is a function also
of its inferior status as primitive and animalistic, which can only mimic, but not innovate.
Thus, Jackson, like sculpture, which Baudelaire decides is “a singular mystery beyond
human solving,” was a “humiliated…sculpturizer” of his own image. These issues
converge in Koons’ prescient and deconstructive sculpture of Jackson.

71 See Chapter 3, where I analyze Vinegar’s notion of deadpan’s “delay of judgment.”
72 And ironic rejoinder that precedes Mitchell’s question “what do pictures want?” though, to my
knowledge, he does not cite Baudelaire in this formulation. W.J.T. Mitchell, What Do Pictures Do Want?:
When an event or experience is humiliating, it indicates a psychic undoing equivalent to “losing face” or being shamed. Humiliation is linked to other concepts that have material implications for both sculpture and an affective deconstruction of the “face” of deadpan: to be “mortified”; to receive a “slap in the face”; to experience an “abasement of pride.” Thus to humiliate is both to de-face and to seize control of another person’s expression, ossifying what may be perceived as unruly or vague. The “humiliating” condition of a sculptor, for Baudelaire, is one of the self’s debasement as a metonymic extension of the artistic disarray that is sculpture. Sculpture, like its maker, is degraded. Baudelaire’s comment that sculpture “exhibits too many surfaces” is not only an attack on its problematic “literal” or theatrical relationship to the viewer, to draw on Fried, but also its liminality and, what Krauss has referred to as its status as “infinitely malleable.” Here the idea of “too many surfaces,” begins to sound a lot like “being too much,” as in excess, as in, an excretory residue that is poisonous, taboo, and impure. The excessive quality of sculpture corresponds to Bataille’s notion of “formless,” not simply as a condition of form itself, but also of its “nature,” which is seen as both conceptually and materially superfluous, as lacking ontological sovereignty, and aesthetically degenerate before, after, and throughout its transformation under duress: “What [formless] designates has no rights in any sense and gets itself squashed everywhere, like a spider or an earthworm.” Sculpture is therefore not only primitive and raced, according to Baudelaire, but is also at its very core a vestigial “effluvia” of art, and a

73 This correlates to my exploration in Chapter 2 of the valences of the phrase, “why why, does he do me this way?”
visual and material expression of abject subjectivity. This conceptualization of sculpture mingles in territories of “base matter,” which Bataille argues, “is external and foreign to human aspirations.”\textsuperscript{76} Sculpture, operating on the order of nature, is somehow already a “slimy” endeavor to return to Sartre’s term.

Few have captured the degradation, dehumanization of the figure, and the infinite malleability and slimy, base materialism of sculpture than Matthew Barney, whose work with Vaseline instantiates its secreted discharges, as a conceptual, material, and performative fluidity at the center of his art historical influences. Meanwhile Barney’s work has specifically dealt with the implications of sculpture as external and internal excess, probing the degraded status of sculpture vis-à-vis corporeality and the brutality of nature, through narratives that trace materiality through the body in experiences associated with metamorphosis and death. Thus, where Barney’s images are often focused on the face, he consciously attends to the ways in which sculpture affects a “loss of face” in its corporeal contingency to the body and its physical or biological conditions.

II. Sculpture Enlivened

Barney’s conflation of effluvia, Vaseline and narrative film, forms an elastic continuity that binds visuality to the body in sculpture and performance. As neither independent nor dependent entities, he unites these mediums and concepts through narrative transformations that are visually or conceptually correlated with the

material transformation of Vaseline, or other materials, across different states of being, and equilibrium. The conceptual force of Vaseline emerges in its thermodynamic potential as a “semi-solid” hydrocarbon material that responds physically to variations in temperature: when it is cooled to room temperature or lower, it maintains physical form as a sculpted object. (Figure 4.4) When it is warmed to its melting point or above, however, its form begins to break down, and it has the potential to behave as a liquid. (Figure 4.5) Barney has explored these dimensions of Vaseline’s materiality extensively throughout his work, and thus it is important to note an additional corporeal valence of this material. That is, the melting point of petroleum jelly is within a few degrees of the temperature of the human body (37 centigrade or 99 degrees F). 77 Thus Vaseline already contains within its physical properties a material contingency to the human body, which Barney develops conceptually in his sculpture.

The artist has also explained that the characters in his films are

more like physical states rather than developed narrative characters….These cultural figures that I gravitate toward tend to have a significant physicality….which has become an effective way [of] keeping the character more in the physical sphere, rather than purely a dramatic sphere. 78

As manifestations of “physical states,” Barney’s characters become containers of materiality, process, and meaning. The interface among characters and their intersubjective performances with one another and objects may be perceived as a reflexive process that enlivens sculpture. Yet in this formulation, Barney may be said to

78 Matthew Barney in Obrist, 22.
reduce their corporeality to a functional purpose as sculpture, in a conceptual reversal of sculpture’s historical theatrical “enlivening,” in everything from Pygmalion’s dream to contemporary criticism of sculpture’s instantiation performative encounters. Commenting on the relationship between film and his artistic practice, Barney has said:

I’m an object maker, that’s what I am interested in. The same goes for my interest in performance. Performance for me has been about the object, it’s never been about theater. The program with *Cremaster*…was about creating a story, out of which I could make narrative sculpture.79

Thus sculpture’s seemingly inescapable relationship to the body may be said to achieve equilibrium with performance, a point Barney emphasizes in his discussion of the “significant physicality” of his characters, and which hinges upon the figurative underpinnings of his filmic narratives. This is not sculpture that transforms into a Pygmalion human nature, but rather a Barney-like-Michael-Jacksonian human nature that modulates the “temperature” and temperament of performance as a sculptural affect that is temporally constitutive as both narrative process and material object.

This idea may be related back to Ursula Andress, who I introduced in Chapter 2 as an example of Barney’s notion of “violence sublimated into form.” Of the actress’ visual impact, Barney has further commented—in a curious echo of Baudelaire’s comment that sculpture is as “brutal and positive as nature herself,”—that there was “a certain brutality to her.”80 Barney locates this brutality in the physical structure of Andress’ body, which he observes as a redefining moment: “Her shoulders were bigger than her hips,” he observes, noting that, in her portrayal of Bond-girl “Honey Ryder” in

80 Obrist, 22.
Dr. No (1962), Andress demonstrated a dramatic visual reversal of the physicality typically associated with female bodies (in which hips are broader than the upper body or shoulders). (Figure 4.6) The actress’ form was especially distinctive in 1962, following the 1950s visual emphasis in modern fashion and Hollywood, on the dramatic relationship between large breasts, tiny waists, and broad hips. This visual upending of femininity opposes traditional idealized constructions of female corporeality, and their related conceptual collapse into notions about female sexuality. Here Andress’ body exemplifies the many surfaces of sculpture with a notoriously eroticized representation of femininity that also displays contrasting masculine traits in her broad shoulder and narrow hips. The image of Andress which Barney refers, may then also be said to contain ironic valences of emasculating violence: “She emerged from the sea carrying a knife,” Barney remarks; “[t]hat had not been seen before.”

Barney’s observation about the knife connects to his sculptural process, in which the body is a primary site for the deconstructive and creative liberation of materiality. In the narrative of Drawing Restraint 9, which takes place aboard a whaling ship in Japan, to which I referred in the introduction, the flensing knife, used to pair flesh and fat from the body of whale, takes on destructive and constructive principles; the former in its dissective use on Barney’s Vaseline sculptures, which stand in for whales being poached for material resources, and the latter in the erotic encounter of the film’s human characters. (Figure 4.7) Near the end the film, Barney and Björk, who play a pair of lovers aboard the whaling ship, sever each other’s legs with flensing knives during a sexual encounter in a bath. They grow tails in their place, transforming into hybrid

81 Ibid.
human-whales that swim out to sea near the end of the film. (Figure 4.8) (Figure 4.9)

Once again, Vaseline serves as both process and sculptural body, which metonymically connects to the ancestry of whales, whose oil was once distilled for fuel before the discovery of fossil fuels.82 (Figure 4.10) The aesthetic purposiveness of the knife finds functional connections to artistic methods associated with sculpture, such as carving, and to other sculptural tools. Notably, Barney and Björk, who both endure dramatic transformations to their visual appearance during the film, are not identified as characters by name. They are simply known as the “Occidental Guests,” occupants and narrative vehicles within the physical narrative container known as the “Host.”83 Here, Barney dehumanizes his characters for the purpose of sculpturing them as anonymous hybrid beings that connect to sculpture’s loss of face. Moreover, in this instance, the trope of “hypertrophy,” a key concept within Barney’s oeuvre, emerges in the severing of legs to grow the body as a transformed tool. Like a plant pruned to stimulate new growth, the flensing knife compels the destructive and creative modulation of bodily form as sculpture.

In this scene, a parallel may be drawn between the demands of physicality and the demands of sculpture on the body. Barney frequently compares his artistic process to his experiences as an athlete, and in 2004 he noted that, “in an athletic practice, you tend to

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82 The discovery of “rod wax” or undistilled petroleum residue in 1859, which led to its refinement into petroleum jelly, eventually altered the use of whale oil, which had been used extensively up until that point: “Spermaceti obtained primarily from the spermaceti organ, and sperm oil obtained primarily from the blubber in the body, were much sought after by eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth century whalers. These substances found a variety of commercial applications, such as candles, soaps, cosmetics, machine oil, other specialized lubricants, lamp oil, pencils, crayons, leather waterproofing, rust-proofing materials and many pharmaceutical compounds.” See “Sperm Whale,” Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sperm_whale (last updated November 10, 2015) See also “Petroleum Jelly.”

think of your body as a tool.” Here, Barney calls to mind the artist Willoughby Sharp’s famous 1970 essay, “Body Works: A Pre-critical, Non-definitive Survey of Very Recent Works Using the Human Body or Parts Thereof,” in which Sharp first introduced the concept of the “body as a tool,” published in the first issue of the equally renowned avant-garde magazine *Avalanche*, co-founded and co-edited by Sharp and the filmmaker Liza Béar. Barney draws on this history, identifying the body as a sculptural tool and, crucially, as the creative axis of his work, which he further develops in moving images in either video or film.

### III. Transforming the Object

Beginning with a destructive/creative sculptural imperative, Barney proceeds by generating actions and narrative performances that come out of and circle around the original sculptural objects. He videotapes or films these performances as they take place in and around his sculptures, so that his sculptures, performances, and moving images, not to mention his drawings and still photographs, operate interdependently, as structural parts of the artistic narrative. These intermedial works are typically—and for Barney, preferably—installed together as multidimensional distillates of the same narrative idea.

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85. Sharp later curated the exhibition, *Body Works: An exhibition in coordination with Willoughby Sharp* (1970), at the Museum of Conceptual Art, an alternative art space created and curated by the artist Tom Marioni in San Francisco. Sharp included in the show six pioneers of body art: Vito Acconci, Terry Fox, Keith Sonnier, Bruce Nauman, Dennis Oppenheim, and William Wegman. *Avalanche was the journal* that launched body art. Anyone interested in the origins of the body art medium, which expanded the concept of happenings and Fluxus by isolating action to a focus on the body that, like minimalism and process art, attended to the thing in itself, read *Avalanche*, generation after generation. Willoughby Sharp, “Body Works: A Pre-critical, Non-definitive Survey of Very Recent Works Using the Human Body or Parts Thereof,” *Avalanche Magazine* 1 (Fall 1970): 14-17. See also Sharp’s *Body Works: An exhibition in coordination with Willoughby Sharp* (San Francisco: Museum of Conceptual Art, 1970).
(Figure 4.11) In this regard, each media component engages one another in a visual and conceptual mirroring of narrative and process, examples of which could be observed both in *The Cremaster Cycle* exhibition at the Guggenheim, and his major *Drawing Restraint* retrospective in Kanazawa, Japan. *Hologaphic Entry Point*, a sculptural installation I discussed in this dissertation’s introduction (see “Introduction” Figure 2), demonstrates the conceptual relay among sculptural forms, visual images, narratives, and experiential temporalities of process mapped through performance that form the interpenetrative structure of Barney’s intermedial work. Such installations underscore how his sculpture coexists with its performative and cinematic extensions and how he uses it interactively with other mediums and media. (Figure 4.12)

Barney has played with the relationship of his cinematic renderings of sculpture and their functional extension as sculptural objects. Thus for all its complexity, the entire five-part structure of *The Cremaster Cycle*, signifying nearly a decade of Barney’s work, may be located in a few seemingly innocuous sculptural objects. At the Guggenheim, the objects were contained in five vitrines, each representative of the five *Cremaster* films. In these Barney selected and arranged only two objects next to each other. (Figure 4.13) (Figure 4.14) (Figure 4.15) For each episode, the pair of objects signified the sculptural beginnings of the film’s narrative and its material exponent, a laserdisc copy of the film. Forever bound to each other within each vitrine, each of the five pairs of objects exist together in a dialogic tension, compounding each other’s meanings and emblematizing the material and conceptual importance of contiguity and contingency in Barney’s work. Each vitrine sculpture gains narrative and visual significance beyond its material form for its role in having generated a corresponding film. The laserdisc, which represents the film...
image condensed into material form, now exists as an addendum to the originary sculpture beside it. Here the sculpture signifies the material extraction of Barney’s initiating concept, while the film embodies its reverberating image. In this regard, Barney’s films materialize as extensions of this sculptural vision, which takes shape in the distilling exponent of performative action. Further, Barney’s films function discursively as appendages, inhabiting conditions of visual and conceptual prosthesis to and with Barney’s sculptures, which themselves are also conceived as contingent manifestations of his performative “body as a tool.”

Yet contingency and prosthesis are not merely functions of the interaction among his sculptures, performances, and films: they are conceptual relationships that Barney has consistently developed as a meditation on his experiences as athlete. In an interview with the German critic Hans Ulrich Obrist, Barney once explained:

> I think that a strong similarity [with Joseph Beuys’ use of materials] would be that in [each of our] cases the range of material comes from a kind of critical autobiographical moment. For me I think it has to do with the locker room. It has to do with the apparatus that one surrounded by in the athletic world, of being armored in plastic. From the age of ten to the age of nineteen I was covered in plastic all the time. I’m talking about football padding, the shoulder pads and the thigh pads and hip pads and knee pads and the athletic tape, the extra foam pieces that you stuff into a place that hurts, the vinyl tape you put over the cuts so you can put your helmet back on without it hurting like hell, all of these things that really become prosthetic. They become extensions of your body.  

Here Barney makes a specific connection between his work and that of Joseph Beuys whose use of the slimy substance of fat was implicative of the body. Referring to Beuys 1968 *Fat corner with bicycle pumps*, Barney further commented about Beuys’ work:

86 Matthew Barney in Obrist, 79.
You may be left with a rod, but the rod has passed through such an explicit narrative that it’s truly transformed. I think the thing I find most useful is the way that [Beuys’] narratives are distilled to quite simple forms that are much more specific than minimalism. It’s about distillation.  

The concept of “distillation” appears in the work of another patriarch of sculpture, Richard Serra, who in 1968 famously threw molten lead against the baseboards of his studio to create *Splash Pieces*. (Figure 4.17) When the substance cooled, he pulled each unit away from the wall to create a serial minimalist sculpture. (Figure 4.18) As a major influence on Barney’s work, the artist cast Serra in *Cremaster 3* as the architect of the Chrysler building, in which he also reenacted the *Splash Pieces* with Barney’s signature Vaseline. (Figure 4.19) This particular action by Serra collapsed Barney’s interest in his work into that of Beuys, who also used “distillation” as an artistic method and principle, into an action that symbolically “belongs to the family of prosthetics,” Barney explained.  

Meanwhile contingency emerges as the conceptual force in the *Drawing Restraint* series, in the artist’s use of resistance against the body to create form, which he described in 2006:

I think instinctually I looked at those experiences [playing football] and tried to draw them into what I was making in the studio, and started using my body that way, and creating situations that put some sort of a resistance against my body. I think, as an athlete, you understand that your body requires resistance in order to grow. It’s something you take for granted. The whole training process is built upon that understanding. So, I think that when I was confronted with this idea of being in a studio and generating form, it was a way in

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which I could understand form being developed – with a self-imposed resistance placed upon it, as it does in the body.\textsuperscript{89}

The training that Barney describes is a model that involves both resistance and rest and which is derived from a bodily process called “hypertrophy.” Hypertrophy is defined as the “enlargement of a part or organ of an animal or plant, produced by excessive nutrition; excessive growth or development. The opposite of atrophy.”\textsuperscript{90} Barney offers the example of weight training to illustrate this process in real life. When lifting weights, the goal is to push one’s muscles to their limit, to make them work hard, either by lifting heavier weights, performing more repetitions, or a combination of both. When muscles are fatigued, small tears form in the tissue. These tiny fissures break down and release lactic acid built up in the tissues. The lactic acid constitutes the strong burning feeling and the muscle tears lead to soreness. If one does not “feel the burn,” one’s muscles were not worked hard enough, and little to no improvement in shape, strength or stamina of the specific muscle groups will be observed. In other words, sculpting the body is a process that is both deconstructive and creative. In order for the latter to take place, one must also rest the body, which takes at least twenty-four hours, whereby one’s muscles are prepared to undergo the process again. During the rest phase, the muscles recover and grow stronger, and the cycle may continue.

This process is called “hypertrophy,” which Barney explored in notes from his sketchbook titled, “Notes on Athleticism,” from 1990. (Figure 4.20) (Figure 4.21) (Figure 4.22) On page one of the notes, Barney equates the process to an alchemical one, calling

\textsuperscript{89} SFMoMA Drawing Restraint retrospective exhibition website (Accessed in 2006).
\textsuperscript{90} OED online, September 2008.
hypertrophy “the alchemy of the body,” and ultimately concluding: “THE ATHLETE IS THE ALCHEMIST.” A precursor to modern chemistry, alchemy is set practices seeking to transform typical and readily available metals into the more rare and valuable gold. The comparison Barney makes to alchemy proposes that the conversion of energy to body mass and strength is akin to the transformation of one substance (with all of its chemical and physical properties) into another, with different, superior properties and qualities. The triangular relationship that Barney sets up in his hypertrophy notes may be situated in art history through comparative examples of artists who have likened their methods or process to alchemy, such as Max Ernst, who called collage “visual alchemy,” and Joseph Beuys, who conceived of his work in relation to alchemical practices and ideas.

Taking this concept a step further, Barney explores two subjects that come up in his work, Houdini and wrestling, to conclude that, “THE ARTIST IS THE ATHLETE.” Harry Houdini’s feats of escape illustrate a mastery over the restrained body that derives from rigorous experimentation and practice, an idea that led Barney to the following proposal: “The exploitation of discipline (+/-) trained contortion, a willed disfigurement, a customized physicality → A BODY INTELLIGENCE.” The notion of “a body intelligence” elaborates the athletes/ALCHEMY model in which simple steps lead to transformation. For Barney, one cannot simply engage a physical mastery over the body to affect change. One must exercise “discipline” and “will” it to do so. In other words, sculpturing the body requires a kind of mental and psychical determination, a kind of 

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92 Ibid.
93 Ibid.
directive and motivational supervision of the body. To master the body is to know the body. A body intelligence enlivens his sculpture. Moreover, Barney’s short description of a series of moves between two wrestlers illustrates how body intelligence clears the path toward higher levels of physical and mental experience. Body intelligence enables a wrestler to “see” the match several moves ahead, allowing him to consider different options, and ultimately map out a precise strategy for victory over his opponent. In other words, the match is choreographed in the mind like a combination of dance steps. Thus with body intelligence comes the capacity for creativity, and the appreciation of movement and form of the body. Hence, the athlete becomes an artist, or in Barney’s words: the artist is the athlete.

In many ways, Barney’s logic could be described as a composite rendering of Kristine Stiles’ theory of performance as both a presentational and representational art form, namely as corporeal action and sculpture: the artist is both the actor and the thing acted upon. Yet Barney’s preoccupation with the formal transformation of the body put the emphasis on the artistic process as a set of actions performed upon materials to create art forms. In other words, whether visible or not, in performance, the Barney’s body is similarly transformed through the physical resistances placed upon it within his artistic process, making the artist both a stronger force against future resistance, but also the object of an ongoing sculptural process. The artist’s commitment to sculpture that expands and transcends its autonomous state, further compares to the implementation by body artists, and before them happenings and Fluxus artists, of transactional objects, in which,”subject and object create a changing and interrelated perceptual field for the

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94 To this Barney has noted that as he’s aged, these performances have become more challenging.
investigation of the interchange between actions, language, objects, and sound,” to quote Stiles. His premise, including his actions and his attempts to draw freely, immediately recall Carolee Schneemann’s *Up To And Including Her Limits* (1975) in which she hung from a harness swinging throughout the installation space to draw and write momentarily on a wall for as long as the motion of the swinging apparatus would permit. (Figure 4.23) (Figure 4.24) Similarly, Barney could not anticipate success or failure or how long he would be able to sustain his drawing. This variability suggests correlations with Surrealist automatic writing, Abstract Expressionist automatism, and Fluxus artist George Brecht’s text, “Chance-Imagery,” which offers a theorization of the role of contingent actions and results.  

Further, Barney’s integration of video both intensified the element of variability in these performances, and raised questions about the nature of truth in performance. Typically, *Drawing Restraint* performances took place in one gallery while the live audience was situated in another gallery. (Figure 4.25) For example, in his senior thesis performance at Yale, *Field Dressing: Orifill*, 1989, viewers could only witness Barney’s actions through a single-channel video stream, thus creating a threshold between his live climbing action and viewers’ ability to experience the performance intersubjectively. Barney required audiences to watch the condensed video image without having access to the “live situation.” Standing in for the live-action, the video was meant to act as a proposal for, as Barney puts it, “what may or may not have happened” in the performance.

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space. Since viewers were removed from Barney’s actions, the video image functions as the official version of what transpired during the performance. In other words, Barney required video to straddle the divide between what may or may not have occurred, ironically, by not being able to fill in the gaps of time, space, and experience both unavailable to viewers, who did not watch the entire performance, and also lost to himself. By attempting to provide information about the spaces in between media, and simultaneously show how the whole is never recuperated, Barney emphasized the material interconnectivity of his work. Here, the proposed contiguity between performance and video suggests a seamlessness sculptural enlivenment, but one that also only offered access to an imperfect hypothetical image of truth.

Barney’s exploration of truth reflects an interest in the metaphysics and phenomenology of experience and their relationship to representation in performance insofar as both seek to inhabit or know objects and the self through imagination. In Henri Bergson’s words, such a process requires that,

I insert myself in [objects] by an effort of imagination…
I shall no longer grasp the movement from without, remaining where I am, but from where it is, from within, as it is in itself.  

Barney quoted in Spector, *The Cremaster Cycle*, 2002. Clearly in this strategy and structure for the performance, Barney drew upon Chris Burden’s division of the audience from his action of drinking water and nearly drowning in *Velvet Water* (1974), where the audience viewed the performance on a video separated from the artist by a wall, over and around which they could hear Burden chocking. Burden’s aim was deeply social, posing the questions as to whether or not anyone among the spectators would intervene to “save” him from harming himself. This was a device Burden often repeated in his performances. As Kristine Stiles has written, Burden “trusted the public not to electrocute him (“Prelude to 220 or 110” and “220”), not to shoot to kill him (“Shoot”), not to starve him (“Bed Piece” and “Doomed”), not to abandon him (“Deadman”), not to permit him to be severely burned (“Icarus”) or drown (“Velvet Water”), not to permanently damage his body (“Trans-Fixed” and “Back to You”), not to destroy buildings (“Samson”), and not to forget its international and interpersonal transgressions (“The Other Vietnam Memorial” and “LAPD”), among a host of other trusts. See, Stiles’ “Burden of Light,” in Fred Hoffman, John Berger, Kristine Stiles, and Paul Schimmel’s *Chris Burden* (Newcastle England: Merrell and Locus Plus), 23.

The attempt to view the work from within coincides with Barney’s description of athletic training as a process that “turns the body inside out” in order to view and evaluate it.\textsuperscript{100} Drawing on artistic motivations derived from Futurism to Fluxus, Barney extends his plastic means beyond their physical limits, objectifying himself in order to challenge his own existential boundaries. By placing himself inside the object (the film camera) as both the image and the viewer, the camera becomes another prosthetic for his body, just as his body is the prosthetic for sculpture. The filmic image projects his vision, and therefore operates as a prosthetic extension of the self; while Barney’s sculptures, too, may be conceived as extensions of his own body. Thus when Barney uses his body as a tool to enliven sculpture, his body functions as both the vehicle and the material of his art, whereby he “present[s] and represent[s]” himself in the “process of being and doing.”\textsuperscript{101} Finally, prosthesis itself must be understood as a function and apparatus of the variability of truth; for its additive imperative, enables or otherwise enhances where deficiencies, deficits or, defeat are imagined.

Barney arrived at the symbolic representation of artist/ alchemist/athlete and, in turn, the relationship between prosthesis and his emergent artistic identity in comments on the ubiquitous presence of Vaseline during his youth:

[The locker room] was at the center of my life, that relationship to athletics and to the training room and to the weight room and to all those things. I think when it started to feel like the only thing I could onto as an artist: the only way that I could begin to visualize making something was using this range of material, this box of tools that I already had. Those


were the materials that came forward: these plastics that were used methodically and those plastics belonging to the same family of prosthetics and that sort of need for lubrication. An interest in resistance or friction, in the way you start building an apparatus around the body. Petroleum jelly was always around the training room; it was always put in a place where something is rubbing, to take the chafe away. I think quite quickly it became formalized and that interest in materials expanded into a broader range of plastics and different ways of manipulating the plastic. Let’s say my interest grew away from referring to its source or its nature form and learning more about how that technology had developed and continuing to look for other plastics that could be used in other ways. So my dialogue with the material grew away from that.\textsuperscript{102}

Here, where the body is a tool for action, it also becomes an object that requires physical care, either functionally to perform, or reparatively following action. Translated into artistic practice, sculpture is already mobilized in process, one that accedes to various types of lubrication. As Klaus Kertess observed with regard to Barney’s \textit{Drawing Restraint} series: “The essence of the act of drawing is friction—between the drawing tool and the surface to be drawn upon, between the conception and the physical realization, between the maker and the making.”\textsuperscript{103} Barney transported this lubricating and prosthetic creative process to other visual media, for example, in his “self-lubricating” frames, which Barney sculpts in Vaseline, which I introduced as an a deadpan interface that ameliorates visual images, either photographs or drawings, in their presentational metonymy of the body in performance. Barney’s photographs and drawings are “lubricated” for visual consumption on the part of viewers, mitigating the “chafe” of their frictional becomings. (Figure 4.26)

\textsuperscript{102} Matthew Barney in Obrist, 81.
IV. De Lama Lâmina: Sculpturing Performance

I try to recognize myself in trees, but this green
aches and wails and unheard-of-song.
I know there is a word for this in my body
or built into the ship I have become,
but I’m leaving it all: the hand for searching, feet
for when I get there, eyes for knowing which
dark island is my own.\textsuperscript{104}


Barney extended this frictional ontology of sculpture dramatically in \textit{De Lama Lâmina [From Mud A Blade]} (2004), a collaborative performance-installation created with American-Brazilian musician Arto Lindsay and the \textit{Cortejo Afro} bloco for Carnival in Salvador de Bahia, Brazil. Born out of Barney’s stated confusion over current global politics, this multi-narrative and multi-national performance reflected widely upon traditional and contemporary practices and discourses concerning nature, technology, myth, performance, and ritual in Afro-Brazilian and North American culture.\textsuperscript{105} This event was recorded for a hybrid film project of the same name, and was excerpted as “Hoist” (2004) for a collection of short films on sex, called “Destricted” in 2006.\textsuperscript{106} In this performance, the central character, played by a black male porn actor, presents Barney’s most extreme visualization of sculpture’s “loss of face,” through the central

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\textsuperscript{106} In an interview with Obrist, Barney refers to \textit{De Lama Lâmina} as an antecedent “hybrid film,” to \textit{River of Fundament}, both of which had live performance aspects that included an audience. Obrist, \textit{The Conversation Series: Matthew Barney}, 150.
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character’s physical manipulation of Vaseline with his penis upon the rotating drive train of a monster truck, in a frictional process of masturbation that mimics sculpting on a potter’s wheel. In the film De Lama Lâmina, the camera offers a close focus on this process, while the hybrid, part-man, part plant, character’s face is obscured with foliage and a small stuffed monkey carried on his shoulders, the presence of which recalls the image of Michael Jackson and his pet monkey, Bubbles, and Koons’ sculpture. (Figure 4.27)

These hybrid forms, and the sexualized portrayal of the “body as a tool” in the service of creating sculpture, instantiate the most extreme representation of the various themes I have laid out in this chapter: the question of sculpture’s relationship to nature; the degraded status of sculpture as slimy, figuratively and literally, and its conceptual connection to humiliation and de-basement, and Bataille’s “base materialism”; the cross-cultural and “representational violations” of identity and black masculinity described by Powell; the destructive/constructive principles of Barney’s artistic process, especially in the visual and representational power of the metaphoric knife, which takes the form of the emasculated male phallus; and the complicated, and even controversial, relationship between the body and sculpture, its processes, and its visual capture on film as a prosthetic of artistic truth.

De Lama Lâmina consisted of a parade float and expanded sculptural performance installation, which was dubbed a “trio-installation” in the popular press. (Figure 4.28) (Figure 4.29) The float was in the form of a muddied monster truck carrying a giant-size sculpture of an uprooted tree in its grips. (Figure 4.30) The limbs of the tree were topped with white wax candelabra-like forms, which were echoed in the
tree’s white-wax covered roots. (Figure 4.31) Two performers were at the center of the float: a woman with long tresses dressed in plain clothes (a loosely styled white button down shirt and blue jeans), who climbed around ambiguously in the tree’s limbs and represented eco-activist Julia Butterfly Hill, and central character known as the hybrid, “Greenman,” contained within the power train of the massive truck, who was only barely visible to the surrounding public. Following the truck-tree float was another platform where Lindsay and the Cortejo Afro musicians performed. The whole float was surrounded and followed by technicians and dancers. The relationship among sculpture, performance, artistic collaboration, and intercultural discourses represent a multidimensional embodiment of sculpturing through the visual, conceptual and political themes are central in De Lama Lâmina. “Greenman,” reduced to his black sexualized male body, and configured as a functional prosthetic of both the machinery and the machinations of deforestation, may be said to “recognize himself in trees,” dehumanized as a coincident casualty of global capitalism’s ongoing plunder of natural resources in the so-called “postcolonial” era.

The aims of De Lama Lâmina were established early on in the project’s conception as a self-consciously “intercultural” artwork that sought to unite Barney’s interest in the question of artistic and, specifically, sculptural truth.107 The initial plans for

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107 Barney, quoted in Obrist, conveys his interest in the question of sculptural truth in his discussion of conceptual drag across literary and sculptural form in the work of Norman Mailer and artist James Lee Byars: “I think Byars was always important for me in the way that his performance was very much about the object, but at the same time the object was often in drag, in the sense that it’s trying to be something that it’s not….I also think his place in American art-history is sort of similar to Mailer’s Ancient Evenings in some way. Both are fundamentally American, but wrapped in a thin layer of gold from another culture.” (139).
the 2004 performance began in 1998 when Arto Lindsay approached his friend and fellow artist Matthew Barney to collaborate on a music-performance project. Although Barney was still deep into the production of *The Cremaster Cycle*, the artist was beginning to think about future projects. After attending Carnival in 1999 by invitation from Lindsay and *Cortejo Afro*, Barney began to develop *De Lama Lâmina*’s narrative and visual themes; he was the director on site of the performance, which was filmed, although he did not take part in it; and was in conversation with Lindsay as he composed the music for the performance.

The visual and symbolic foundation of the piece is structured on Candomblé, the prominent religion and centerpiece of Afro-Brazilian culture in the Bahian region.108 Exploring Candomblé’s narrative possibilities, Barney strategically utilized the religion’s ritual practice and spiritual belief in the forces of nature as a language through which to speak about intersections—or cross-pollinations—of global discourses. In each interpenetrating branch of the performance, Candomblé’s cosmological symbolism merged with discourses of contemporary identity politics and the transformation of nature and humanity through technology. “Greenman,” represents a symbolic/literal hybrid of two Candomblé deities known as “orishas”: Ogun, associated with iron and war, and Ossain, the god of plants, herbs, and medicine. Here, Ogun and Ossain symbolize the opposing forces of destruction and cultivation, aligning with Barney’s hypertrophic sculptural process. (Figure 4.32) (Figure 4.33) Greenman is attached, or rather entangled within the power train of a monster logging truck, while his orifices protrude mud-

covered bulbs and roots. Human, machine, and nature transmute into one character, one transorganic being. Metaphors of hybridity, structured around Candomblé myths, transfer to a literal, metonymic embodiment. Greenman’s fluid, undifferentiated form, and his intimate association with Candomblé orishas, including their sexualized valences, impart a discursive fluidity to the project as a whole and indicate a fluctuating and de-essentialized notion of nature.

To situate De Lama Lâmina in a history of art and nature, performance and political discourses, German artist Gustav Metzger’s writings on the destruction of nature in the service of global capitalism come to mind. His essay “nature demised resurrects as environment” (1992) is a protest piece and it laments the destruction of nature, asserting that it “was something people turned to for reassurance, that life would continue. This inherited reaction to nature is no longer open to us.”109 (Figure 4. These are critical issues for Barney, who, in discussing Joseph Beuys’ Green Party politics and its impact on the artist’s work, Barney commented that De Lama Lâmina was born out of a moment in his development as an artist in which he realized that no one has “any choice but to react to the political condition we live in” and that his artistic “language seeks new environments and asks them to function like vessels that [his] language can pass through and transform.”110 (Figure 4.34)

De Lama Lâmina marked Barney’s return to “live art” after taking twelve years off from his performance practice, including his ongoing Drawing Restraint series, in

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order to focus on production and filming for *The Cremaster Cycle*. In 2004, while filming his next feature length project *Drawing Restrain 9* in Japan, Barney discussed *De Lama Lâmina* with the multimedia artist Doug Aitken, and remarked that the experience that the incredible challenge of working in the unstructured environment of carnival, and in a large scale collaborative performance “didn’t feel very good while I was doing it.”\(^{111}\) It “was like being flushed down the toilet for a week.”\(^{112}\) This negative experience stemmed in large measure from the enormous responsibilities of presenting his ideas about the global ecological crisis in the violent context of Brazil’s historical and cultural politics from colonialism and the transatlantic slave trade.

The recurrent visual and conceptual theme of the destruction of nature is a vital counterpoint to Barney’s Carnival performance, in which the artist speaks to “nature’s demise” through a symbolic and ritualized discourse on the deforestation of Brazil’s rainforests. Barney’s visual recreation of Julia Butterfly Hill’s heroic two-year occupation of a California redwood, during which time she lived in the tree to save it from being cut down and to protest deforestation, in *De Lama Lâmina* fuses Hill’s protest against debates regarding the clear-cutting of the Amazon. While the destruction of nature is a global issue, transcending national and cultural borders, Barney explores alternatives to nature’s immanent “death” and visualizing a transmutative nature or ecology of the future, where nature, art and humanity are constructively and destructively intertwined, articulating a transnational eco-politics delicately woven into an expanded artistic practice.

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\(^{111}\) Ibid., 63.
\(^{112}\) Obrist, 85-87.
As a performance, *De Lama Lâmina* represented a radical departure from Barney’s prior closed-system work to explore pre-existing discourses on embodiment and being in nature and in art for the purpose of creating a different kind of political agency linked to ideas about various ecological futures. In this regard, *De Lama Lâmina* may be understood as a continued interrogation of liminality that is always explored and identified in Barney’s sculptural and performative practice, but realized in the world as a provocative, yet purposive project in the spirit of what Joanne Rappaport has called “intercultural utopian” politics.\(^\text{113}\) The performance was also conceived with the aim of creating an intercultural exchange of artistic and cultural discourses, the possibility of which was made through the spaces of collaborative and multi-disciplinary performance. The idealistic project conceives of a utopian ecology with all its associations: balance, risk, possibility, chance and vulnerability. Moreover, this multi-narrative and multi-national sculptural performance reflects widely upon traditional and contemporary practices and discourses on nature, technology, myth, performance, and ritual in a specifically Afro-Brazilian context. *De Lama Lâmina* may be seen to complicate visual, conceptual, and material discourses on nature and sculpture, in a multivalent and multi-narrative interconstructive vision of performance.

Crucially, Barney’s *De Lama Lâmina* represents an encapsulation of sculpture as an intersectional process of sculpturing that encompasses “sculpture’s loss of face.” Through the body of the “Greenman” character, whose face is lost inside of the Carnival float, as he engages in a simultaneously destructive and creative masturbatory process, *De Lama Lâmina* speaks to a meditation on the fluid boundaries of sculpture, materially

and conceptually. Thus, the project coheres as a metaphorical manifestation of
deconstructions of “human nature” and the critical debasement of sculpture, expanded
and transformed into an artistic practice. This artwork, as film and performance, also
extends into the controversial representational territories in its cross- or intercultural
presentation of sculpture as the prosthesis of blackness, which Baudelaire had proposed.
Here Barney visualizes one of his most challenging “meditations” on the creative
process, one that deterritorializes, as Koons’ sculpture did, the terrains of visual
representation and taboo, while also exploiting the problematic tropes contained within;
namely, the visual and material collapses of the black male body, into sexualized nature,
and machinic “labor,” trapped within the oppressive framework of a white colonial
history of destruction against places and people through industry and slavery. This is
risky cultural work for sculptural practice, but important given the under-theorized
relationship of sculpture to the oppressive western discourses that subsume the language
of racism within their theoretical and epistemological structures of thought. De Lama
Lâmina suggests how explorations of sculpture, sculptural praxis, and their relationship
to “human” cultures, might yet be appropriately if uncomfortably explored through the
imperfect and often vulnerable “transpersonal visual aesthetic” of performance—and in
the “innocent dream” of a humiliated, dehumanized sculptor, who is also an animalized
being, taken down with the trees.
Conclusion

I. Contributions

In this dissertation I have presented only some of my research and writing on Matthew Barney as it has developed over time. This dissertation represents an original examination of the artist through different conceptual lenses that have been largely ignored or unexplored by other scholars.

In my introduction, I focused on Barney’s rise to prominence in contemporary art world, nationally and internationally, and I developed a literature review that is more than an inventory of texts: it is a contextualization of the interpretation of Barney in pivotal texts. In Chapter 1, I developed my discussion of Barney’s context further, offering a close reading of his reception in the public sphere and the art world at a particularly critical moment in his career, following the The Cremaster Cycle exhibition at the Guggenheim in 2003. Such an investigation of Barney’s reception has never been attempted before this dissertation, and neither have any scholars undertaken an analysis of specific valences within Barney’s criticism or explored them in relation to themes in his work. I further developed a theoretical and materialist analysis that links the reactions to the artist’s work to discomforting themes around sexuality, and crucially, to materiality through anxieties expressed by critics and the public alike in relation to Barney’s use of Vaseline.

Chapter 2 offers perhaps the most original investigation of Barney’s work. In it, I isolate and theorize the critical importance of the face, which I draw out from Mark
Seliger’s remarkable 2005 portrait of the artist, placing it in conversation with W.J.T. Mitchell’s discussion of his concept of “metapictures” in order further to introduce the concept of deadpan. Chapter 3, which I have titled “Entr’acte,” examines and then builds upon art historian Aron Vinegar’s phenomenological consideration of deadpan, which he articulated in an article on Ed Ruscha’s postconceptual photography, and on the silent film actor Buster Keaton. I encountered Vinegar’s work on deadpan during a seminar on conceptual in 2011, and his essay on Ruscha was catalyzing to my research at a critical moment during the development of my dissertation. Thus Chapter 3 develops this discussion further, exploring the theoretical valences of deadpan in Barney’s work and comparing it to specific artists including Ruscha, through his *Nine Swimming Pools and a Broken Glass*, and to Adrian Piper’s critical performative interventions into the transformative potential of action art as artistic practice in her *Catalysis* series. In addition, I describe the relationship between Barney’s narrative transformation of his character, “The Entered Apprentice” in *Cremaster 3*, considering his appropriation of Piper’s cloth-stuffed-mouth images in *Catalysis IV*, as a key visual motif in the destruction of Barney’s face observed near the end of his film.

Finally, in Chapter 3, I introduce W.J.T. Mitchell’s concept of the “multistable image” to describe the as-yet unacknowledged, or unrecognized, historical parallel between Michael Jackson and Matthew Barney in order to suggest that the former was an inspiration to the latter, and that influence is manifest in Barney’s work. Chapter 3 does not attempt to offer an exhaustive consideration of the influence of other artists on Barney’s work, most notably, the significance of Joseph Beuys, whose impact was addressed extensively by curator Nancy Spector in her exhibition, *All on the Present Must*
be Transformed: Matthew Barney and Joseph Beuys at the Deutsche Guggenheim in Berlin in 2006.

Chapter 4 shifts away from Barney’s work to selected modernist and postmodernist critical debates on sculpture in the history of art, and the relationship of sculpture to embodiment especially as it was eventually theorized as part of the sculptural extension of art into intermedia. I begin this examination by tracing the problematic history of sculpture as it emerged in Baudelaire’s controversial criticism of the medium, titled “Why Sculpture is Tiresome,” his response to the French Salon of 1846. I introduce critical views on sculpture that address the philosophical importance of the phenomenon of experiencing sculpture, and I propose a theory of sculpture that endeavors to bring forward conditions of its fluidity in order to support key themes in Barney’s own conceptualization of his work. In this way, I focus on those transformative underpinnings of sculpture, which emphasize artistic practices that have introduced the body and reintroduced figuration into sculpture, in an effort to wrest the notion of an expanded field from Rosalind E. Krauss’ structuralist theory of “sculpture in the expanded field.” My effort to reinstate corporeality as a critical condition of sculpture is critical to understand the contributions and enormous significance of Barney’s sculptural practice and its extensive extension into film and performance.

I offer in this conclusion a final example of my effort to reinstate corporeality in the expanded field of sculpture in order to also reinforce my commentary throughout this dissertation on the role animals and hybrid formations in Barney’s work, and to signal the future of my scholarship.
II. Guarding of the Veil: Matthew Barney’s Animalia

Throughout his work, Barney has utilized animal themes, mythologies, and bodies as conceptual frameworks and aesthetic models, creating a veritable visual animal kingdom in the form of images, objects, metaphors, live animal performers, and his own hybrid characters, making him the leading contemporary artist working in the visual terrain of animals today. As a reminder, key examples of animals in Barney’s work include: satyrs in Drawing Restraint 7 (1993); “The Loughton Ram” (and Barney’s portrayal of “The Loughton Candidate,” a hybrid man/sheep) in Cremaster 4 (1993); passenger doves and a horse in Cremaster 5 (1997); a rodeo bull, a swarming hive of bees, and buffalos in Cremaster 2 (1999); a hybrid woman-cheetah and Rockettes dressed up in Playboy bunny-style lamb costumes in Cremaster 3 (2002); and whaling imagery in Drawing Restraint 9 (2004). ([Figure 5.1] [Figure 5.2])

I argue that Barney’s work interrogates the visuality of animals at the center of his work, shrewdly probing and confounding the very boundaries between human subjectivity and animality. Visual images of non-human animals and the contexts within which they have been framed, captured, or otherwise visually represented, have played a significant historical role in establishing and maintaining the structures and processes of Empire. From renderings in the Paleolithic Caves at Lascaux to Audubon’s Birds of America and from televisual representations appearing in programs such as PBS’s “Nature” to the channel known as “Animal Planet,” harnessing visual images of non-human animals is endemic to cultural efforts to capture, displace, and control. ([Figure 5.3]) Such images (and their narration) are intoxicating reminders of human primacy over
the original Other that was us, that is, the unfathomable “wildness” of animal nature, or our uncanny resemblance to it. “Drawn and quartered” into material resources, constructs, or resemblances of nature’s ideal, Western civilization has marched in lock step with how the Bible’s Old Testament shaped animals into spectral hauntings of their own being. They appear to be the undead, or, as yet to be dead, standing before us.

Such visual framing attempts to hold off provocative hauntings of animality, encompassed in the harrowing self-disemboweling fox in the Danish filmmaker Lars Von Trier’s film Antichrist (2009). (Figure 5.4) Yet Von Trier’s warning that “chaos reigns,” symbolized in the image of a fox self-cannibalizing and disemboweling itself, inscribes mechanisms of resistance, which Nicholas Mirzoeff has argued may be located within the concept of visuality. Mirzoeff theorized “visuality” as “both a mode of representing Empire and a means of resisting it by reverse appropriation.” Similar themes are at work in Barney’s most recent work, River of Fundament (2014), a six-hour visual operatic meditation on Norman Mailer’s novel Ancient Evenings (1983), a novel often referred to as the “Egyptian novel.” (Figure 5.5) (Figure 5.6) In 2007, I had the

118 Norman Mailer, Ancient Evenings (Boston; Toronto: Little, Brown & Co., 1983). Popularly known as his “Egyptian novel,” Mailer’s Ancient Evenings is a tome over 700 pages long that narrates imagined events and relationships among historical figures and ancient circa 1200 BC.
opportunity to see an installment of the *River of Fundament* story as it was developed in a single, private performance that Barney titled *Guardian of the Veil*.

*Guardian of the Veil* featured the actions of two live animals—a terrier and a Highland bull—and Barney along with a large cast and dozens musicians, who were directed by Jonathan Betler, Barney’s longtime musical collaborator. The event took place in April of 2007 in his Long Island City studio located in an enormous old warehouse on the docks of the East River, a building that Barney used for working on and housing large-scale sculptural projects. In the performance, Barney staged encounters between humans and animals that palpated viewer’s conscious and unconscious feelings about ethics and the use of animals, the unpredictability of nature, and notions of “human animality.” By asking viewers to see and encounter live animals, especially in *Guardian of the Veil*, Barney’s performance raised questions that complicate understanding of how non-human animals “perform” in other visual media, exposing and upending pervasive visual constructions of animal subjectivities. (Figure 5.7)

Upon entering the space viewers were greeted with a familiar object: a smashed-up vintage Chrysler, a signature sculpture and emblem from *The Cremaster Cycle*. (Figure 5.8) Billed as a “work in progress,” *New York Magazine* art critic Jerry Saltz noted that the performance was a rare opportunity to witness the artist working out a complicated event that involved many elements, including over two dozen performers and musicians, sculptures, and performed actions.119 *Guardian of the Veil* was also a meditative performance that expanded concepts and images from the *Cremaster Cycle*

into a dramatic, highly charged burial rite.\footnote{This was not the first time that Barney incorporated Norman Mailer in his work: In \textit{Cremaster 2}, Barney merged Mailer’s retelling of the life and death of Gary Gilmore (from \textit{The Executioner’s Song}, 1979) with the life of Erich Weiss, a.k.a. Harry Houdini. \textit{Guardian of the Veil} was the first of seven events Barney devoted to his \textit{Ancient Evenings} project, later to be named \textit{River of Fundament}. Whereas the \textit{Cremaster Cycle} represented a meditation on the creative process through metaphors of becoming, Barney’s \textit{River of Fundament} project reverses the process to explore seven stages of death in ancient Egyptian cosmology.} (Figure 5.9) This is not the first time that Barney incorporated Norman Mailer in his work. In \textit{Cremaster 2}, he merged Mailer’s retelling of the life and death of Gary Gilmore (from \textit{The Executioner’s Song}, 1979) with the life of Erich Weiss, a.k.a. Harry Houdini. But \textit{Guardian of the Veil} was the first of seven events Barney devoted to his \textit{Ancient Evenings} project, later to be named \textit{River of Fundament}. Whereas the \textit{Cremaster Cycle} represented a meditation on the creative process through metaphors of becoming, Barney’s \textit{River of Fundament} project reverses the process to explore seven stages of death in ancient Egyptian cosmology.

\textit{Guardian of the Veil}, a roughly hour and a half long performance, featured dozens of musicians, who entered the warehouse in a procession in order of appearance: wind and percussive instrument musicians, who wore camouflage-green military-inspired outfits, kilts, and black ski-masks; a group of performers acting as “New York Department of Sanitation” workers; and Aimee Mullins, the Paralympic athlete and model, featured in, \textit{Cremaster 3}. Mullins was carried into the warehouse on a stretcher, paraded around in ritual display, and then deposited on top of the Chrysler that now functioned as a funerary bed. (Figure 5.10) (Figure 5.11) (Figure 5.12) The cognoscenti, who were present during the performance, knew that it is a funerary bed because Mullins’s character was dressed in the same disco-ball cocktail dress she wore prior to her character’s death at the end of the \textit{Cremaster Cycle}. (Figure 5.13)
Barney entered the warehouse wearing all black, save for the brown leather freemason-apron (a costume from *Cremaster 3*). A black harness attached to his shoulders held a small dog perched on top of his head, which indicated that Barney was enacting “Anubis,” the Egyptian God of the Dead. (Figure 5.14) (Figure 5.15) After Mullins was deposited on the car, the artist walked over to the Chrysler and began removing engine “body” parts such as the carburetor, spark plugs, and piston, placing them one by one into ancient Egyptian canopic jars sculpted in Barney’s signature Vaseline. (Figure 5.16) Next, he oversaw the sanitation workers as they built a sculptural installation from two large panels (one black, one white) stacked on the floor with coordinating rods. The men lifted the panels and forced them into a hardened slab of Vaseline so that they stood upright. (Figure 5.17) (Figure 5.18)

When the warehouse doors opened again the event became more dramatic. “Whatever [the performance] was,” Saltz wrote, “it freaked a lot of people out.”¹²¹ Two female performers, covered from head to waist and naked from the waist down, led the procession. Next, two handlers led an enormous bull into the space, draped in a magnificent garland of flowers with its horns painted gold. The animal, most likely representing the ancient Egyptian “Apis” bull, weighed over 1000 pounds. (Figure 5.19) The Apis Bull was a sacred bull of ancient Egyptians that acted as an intermediary between humans and Ptah, the Egyptian creator-god and the deity patron of artisans. (Figure 5.20) As the bull entered, his handlers gestured and shouted for the audience to back away quickly en masse, causing people to trip and stumble into one another. This led to a general sense of panic, emphasized by the sheer size and strength of the animal in

¹²¹ Saltz, “Jerry Saltz on a rare performance by Matthew Barney.”
relation to his handlers. (Figure 5.21) After processing around the Chrysler installation a few times, the female performers arched into synchronized backbends over the two panels. Their long draping tops flipped inside out and fell away from their heads and faces, dramatically exposing not only their naked bodies and shaved genitals but also their identities. They then began to urinate, first one, then the other all over the floor. The smell of fresh urine added to a general state of sensory overload. (Figure 5.22)

Next the bull handlers led the animal over to the tail end of the Chrysler, which had been fitted with a white plastic sculptural prosthetic resembling a stylized cow’s hind quarters. (Figure 5.23) (Figure 5.24) With great effort they pushed the bull toward the cow prosthetic, which had been lubricated with the vaginal fluid of a cow in an attempt to get the animal to mount and copulate with it. The assistants tried three or four times to get the bull to cooperate, but he refused, backing away each time, overpowering his handlers in the process. A collective sigh of relief echoed in the warehouse when the handlers finally gave up and the bull was led out of the space. The performance ended shortly thereafter.

Considering how often they appear in his films, drawings, sculptures, and photographs, it was not surprising to see animals in Barney’s performance that night. Yet it was unlike any other experience of the artist’s work because of the life-force emanating from the animals was unassailable. That Guardian of the Veil presented the living presence of the animals in the artwork made the event an ideal site to explore questions of animal visuality in Barney’s art. How, for example, does his extensive work with animals

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122 Jerry Saltz remembers this scene differently. In his review, he states that only one of the models urinated, speculating that it may have been too cold for her to do so. From my perspective I saw both models did urinate, one more productively than the other.

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probe hegemonic structures of visual experience? To what extent can his oeuvre be understood to both reproduce and disrupt the conceptual demarcations between human and non-human/animal emphasized in practices of appropriation and control of nature? How does the inclusion of animals relate to sculpture’s “loss of face?”

In analyzing Barney’s use of animals as aesthetic media, John Berger’s important essay, “Why Look At Animals?” (1980), is useful. Berger describes how modern Western society, in the throes of industrialization and eventually post-industrialization, displaced animals from their environments to exploit them as laborers and commodities, ultimately withdrawing them physically and visually from everyday experiences. At the same time, Western culture created new ways of viewing animals in zoos, natural history museums, stuffed animals, and the concept of family “pets.” Such animal spectacles were and remain part of the ongoing marginalization of non-human species that disembodies animals from their own embodiment. As Berger states near the end of his essay, “Everywhere animals disappear.”

Following Berger, on the one hand, an important and valuable ethical critique can be made about using live animals as aesthetic media in visual art, including performance art, which one might argue represents just another exploitative spectacle for viewing “disappeared” animals. On the other hand, if only momentarily the performance might

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124 Berger argues that “[h]owever you look at these animals, even if the animal is up against the bar, less than a foot from you, you are looking at something that has been been rendered absolutely marginal.” [emphasis in original] Berger, “Why Look At Animals?,” 24.
125 Berger writes: “The reproduction of animals in images—as their biological reproduction in birth becomes a rarer and rarer sight—was competitively forced to make animals ever more exotic and remote.” Berger, “Why Look At Animals?,” 26.
function to protect animals against animal “disappearances.” For, unlike circuses, zoos, and bull-fighting arenas, which for the most part enforce a controlled environment for viewing animals in action, performance art, as a medium that emphasizes intersubjectivity, weakens and often breaks down the physical separation between performer and viewer, and therefore does not promise protection from chance encounters, unscripted actions or unexpected outcomes. Without barriers to “contain” the bull and insure the safety of viewers, the psychological distance from the whims of animal nature that physical separation would have afforded, quickly dissipated. Thus the unpredictability of the bull’s actions—Would he, or wouldn't he overpower his handlers and rush into the crowd?—cast a shadow over the performance, throwing into relief a conundrum of western society: the encounter with the wildness of animals, outside controlled environments, effectively highlights, while also negating, Berger’s argument that “everywhere animals disappear.”

In addition to expressing an ethical ambiguity and evoking the prospect of physical danger, Guardian of the Veil visually and conceptually challenged certain

128 Berger notes that “[w]ithin [the] limits [of zoo enclosures], animals are free, but both they themselves, and their spectators, presume on their close confinement. The visibility through the glass, the spaces between the bars, or the empty air above the moat, are not what they seem—if they were, then everything would be changed.” Berger, “Why Look At Animals?,” 25. Giorgio Agamben expresses a related idea, drawing on Heidegger’s philosophical treatment of animals: “The ontological status of the animal environment can at this point be defined: as offen (open) but not offenbar (disconcealed; lit., openable)….This openness without disconcealment distinguishes the animal’s poverty in the world from the world-forming which characterizes man. The animal is not simply without world, for insofar as it is open in captivation, it must…do without world, lack it (entberhen).” [emphasis in original] Giorgio Agamben, The Open: Man and Animal, trans. Kevin Attell (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 55.

129 Collapsing the separation between performer and viewer is a hallmark of Happenings, but often occurs in more structured performances as well. As Stiles puts it, “[p]erformance…modifies the fixed relation between subjects and object and between exhibition and reception by interjecting into an aesthetic frame performing and viewing subjects capable of both fluid action and interaction.” See Kristine Stiles, “Performance,” in Robert S. Nelson and Richard Schiff, Critical Terms for Art History, 2nd edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 75.
aspects of mainstream American culture through its portrayals of ancient Egyptian animal deities. It is known that in life and in death, animals permeated all aspects of ancient Egyptian culture. (Figure 5.26) Yet, while ancient Egyptians connected with animals on multiple experiential and spiritual planes, contemporary American culture is as physically and conceptually separated from animal species as it is from ancient Egypt itself. The animals in Barney’s performance do not simply portray important figures from an ancestral non-western Other, they also perform their animality, circumscribing their own “Otherness” as members of non-human species held captive by human technological and territorial dominance, or as W.J.T. Mitchell has proposed: “Animals stand for all forms of social otherness: race, class, and gender are frequently figured in images of subhuman brutishness, bestial appetite, and mechanic servility.” However, Mitchell does not draw out the point enough that “animal,” as a category of being, is itself a symbol for bodily otherness; the bodily otherness of animals is what stands in for all the ways in which human “Others” are delineated as such by bodily difference from the status quo. For example, although the animals of Guardian of the Veil were laborers, within the uncertain space of Barney’s performance, they nevertheless exerted their own signifying power, and in some ways overturned the specific meanings and purposes imposed on them by the artist and the aesthetic framework he articulated.

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130 Here, the encounter between two cultures separated by not only vast distances of time and space but also disparate belief systems triggers a kind of reflexive-reflection that the late Victor Turner ascribed to “cultural performance.” He wrote that cultural performance is not a positive expression of culture “in the sense that that the performathe genre merely ‘reflects’ or ‘expresses’ the social system or the cultural configuration…but that it is reciprocal and reflexive—in the sense that performance is often a critique, direct or veiled, of the social life it grows out of, an evaluation (with lively possibilities of rejection) of the way society handles history.” Victor Turner, The Anthropology of Performance (New York: PAJ publications, 1987), 22.

The dog on Barney’s head, for example, should not be seen as a mere solution to the visual problem of how to portray Anubis, but a literal physical inversion of the power relationship between humans and dogs. (Figure 5.27) By elevating the dog above his head, Barney conceded sacredness to the animal, relegating his own body to physical support. The positional contrast draws attention to how dogs, who are always physically and psychologically considered inferior to humans, are valued for their obedience, docility, and how they “worship” their human “masters.”¹³² In this way, Guardian of the Veil articulates the process of “ritual” as Victor Turner defines it: “[T]he whole ritual process constitutes a threshold between secular living and sacred living.”¹³³ By physically manifesting “Anubis” not through a prosthetic costume, but rather in a body-to-body engagement with an animal Other, Barney accentuated a visual and conceptual identification with his own animal-body, gesturing toward the fact that all humans are also animals endowed with animal-bodies. This idea—that an animal can call into being the animality of humans—derives from Derrida’s description of his experience of being naked in front of, and being looked at by, his cat. Derrida’s essay focuses on the “rupture of the abyss” that separates humans from animals via linguistic conventions, which position all species as one singular category of Other. The rupture occurs when Derrida recognizes how, when stripped of his clothing naked before his cat, who is also naked but

¹³² In this way, Guardian of the Veil articulates the process of “ritual” as Victor Turner defines it: “[T]he whole ritual process constitutes a threshold between secular living and sacred living.” [original emphasis] Turner, The Anthropology of Performance, 25.
¹³³ Ibid.
unaware of her nakedness, he is also stripped of the language that predicates and reinforces the separation of their animal beings.\textsuperscript{134}

Meanwhile the bull’s performance in \textit{Guardian of the Veil}, radically probed the visual structure that interpellate cows as infinitely reproducible objects of technologized desire. Whereas cattle were sacred symbols and were worshipped in their own right in ancient Egypt and in other non-western cultures, today they are regarded in most countries as little more than pre-slaughtered food, the un/as-yet to be dead among us, as a 2010 \textit{New York Times} magazine article unwittingly spotlighted.\textsuperscript{135} (Figure 5.28) Moreover, that the bull in \textit{Guardian of the Veil} was coaxed to perform an aspect of its animality, its powerful sexuality, upon an inanimate object near the display of exposed naked women, may be read in at least two ways. First, the action creatively mimics the cattle industry in the relentless, shameful intrusion on these un/as-yet-to-be dead animal-body-commodities through technologies of artificial reproduction, exploring to what extent this bull has been disciplined to arouse and copulate on demand. Second, the action expresses a visual comparison between animal nature and the clearest expression of human animality: sex. Thus, an analogy may be drawn between the cow prosthetic (as the bull’s supposed object of desire) and the female performers who, faceless and nameless, as in traditional heteronormative pornography,\textsuperscript{136} became objects, not subjects,

\textsuperscript{136} For extensive critical discourse on the visuality of pornography, see \textit{More Dirty Looks: Gender, Pornography and Power} (2\textsuperscript{nd} edition), ed. Pamela Church Gibson (London: BFI Publishing, 2004).
under the consuming gaze of viewers. If the female performers as sexual objects can be seen to stand in for the cow prosthetic, so the viewers metaphorically become the bull, encountering but not consummating the idea of a sexual act. (Figure 5.29) In this way, the performance probed audience members “viewing” experiences through a reflexive coupling of bodies and sexualities vis-à-vis concepts of animality. Nevertheless, the bull’s refusal to perform a sexual act on the cow prosthetic illustrates how the animal exerted his own being, intelligence, and desires. The power of animal visuality in *Guardian of the Veil* stemmed from the fact that although the non-human animals in the performance were still what might be called “disenfranchised,” they did not appear as disembodied images to be looked at passively from afar. Rather they were in-the-flesh affirmations of their own beings, which came into contact with viewers’ own lived experiences, probing physical and psychological boundaries as they relate to a mythic past.

It must be said here, too, that although the relationship remains unremarked in the literature on Barney, *Guardian of the Veil* might be said to demonstrate how performance art brings both action in art and live animals into conversation with Jackson Pollock’s *Guardians of the Secret* (1943), which is itself riddled with animalistic images. (Figure 5.30) Barney has not suggested that his title is an homage to the painting or to Pollock, but as *Guardians of the Secret* is one of a number of paintings on the theme of animals

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137 On the one hand, viewers stand in for the bull. It could be argued that what kept the bull from copulating with the cow prosthetic is similar to the mechanism by which the sexual fantasies generated by pornographic images go unconsummated: both are merely representations of an inaccessible, theoretical “real.” On the other hand: although Barney is not usually known a feminist politics, there is a feminist point to be made here that hinges on Berger’s concept of disappearances. For we can see how women, like animals, have experienced “disappearances” in various ways historically, yet have also been relegated to visual spectacles for “safe” looking experiences, such as soft and hardcore pornography.

138 I would like to thank Kristine Stiles for this insight.
that he painted, such as *Wounded Animal* (1943), *The She-Wolf* (1943), *Bird Effort* 1946), and even *Male and Female* (1942), in which the figures could be as much animal as human, it is not too far to conjecture that Barney had Pollock in mind not only in the title but also in the action, as if he wanted to bring *Guardians of the Secret* to life. As Stiles has argued, “performance tells the truth about art,” a truth that emphasizes “the body at the center of the production of art.” If Barney’s performance encourages consideration of the truth about animals/animal bodies at the center of *Guardian of the Veil*, then it may also offer insights into the truth about animals at the center of other artistic works, and may lead to an inquiry and critical analysis of how animals have been collapsed into, un/as-yet-to-be dead images in the first place.

Barney’s performance of Anubis in *Guardian of the Veil* speaks to the visual textures, sensations, and affects, of Barney’s work theorized in this dissertation, and proposes directions for the future of my research, especially when his portrayal is further contextualized by staged photographs of the artist and the dog published in *L’Uomo Vogue* in 2007. (Figure 5.31) (Figure 5.32) In these images, Barney and his canine companion are shown variously from a silhouette-framing side-view, in a style that is reminiscent of images of Anubis in Ancient Egyptian tomb drawings, on the front of magazine; and in a three-quarter frontal portrait on the verso side of the cover. In the

139 Quoting Elaine Scarry, Stiles has argued that performance “draws viewers closer to the fact that it is the body itself that produces objects and that such an art is a unique vehicle enabling perception and contemplation of the truth that the ‘made object [is] a projection of the of the human body.’” For me, this raises the question: Is it ever possible to regard living animals, in performance or time-based media, as co-producers of their own image? I don’t have an answer; but I also don’t think it is out of the question to imagine a theory of animal performativity that would argue “yes.” See Stiles’ “Uncorrupted Joy: International Art Actions,” in *Out of Actions: between Performance and the object*, 1949-1979, ed. Paul Schimmel, 227-329 (Los Angeles: Los Angeles Museum of Art, 1998), 227. See also Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 281.
latter portrait, the dog looks off to into the distance, toward the edge of the frame, lending a stillness to his presence within the portrait, and a timelessness to the dog’s image that converges with the reverberating spirit and body of Anubis, as an image and symbolic vessel for history and meaning. Barney, in his characteristic stone-face, arrests the gaze with his deep penetrating eyes, which are partially obscured by the straps of the black leather harness, which he uses to support the animal on his head. His stare is direct, controlled, yet vaguely turbulent, revealing a tension in the creases formed on his forehead. His brow is raised in what I identified above as what can be understood as a signature facial expression that both punctuates the photograph as a probing anticipation of the visual encounter, but also functions to prop up the harness and physically releases his vision from beneath weight of his own eyelids. Dressed in a black hooded sweatshirt, plain clothes that match the dog, Barney departs from deadpan, and the repercussive representation in Seliger’s portrait that I analyzed in depth in Chapter 2. Here the artist approximates rather something more serious, and perhaps closer to the notion of a dead Pan, a hybrid experience of being in which time collapses under the visual traces of life’s temporality, and the heaviness of its affective burdens.

In other words, a potential panic may be observed in these dour images of Barney, now many years on from his young success, shirking the performative delight of the Loughton Candidate, in favor of funerary practices and the colors of mourning. Anubis, is the Egyptian God of the Dead who is known, after all, for guiding spirits through the seven stages of death, and as the “embalmer,” the figure responsible for their material preparation for entrance into the afterlife. He, like the jackals that aid Isis in Mailer’s *Ancient Evenings* novel, from which *Guardian of the Veil* is based, guard the territories of
the gods, and round up the deceased for their transitions into the spirit world. This is what Aimee Mullins undergoes during the course of the performance, collapsed into the figure of Barney’s smashed up Chrysler, from which he gingerly removed and replaced “body” parts. (Figure 5.33) Embalming, in this case, with Barney’s Vaseline, becomes part of his sculptural practice of the body that aligns once again with the loss of face that proceeds as a function of death. Death, even memorialized, dissolves one into dis-identification from life and from lightness. One becomes gravity, if only temporarily, ahead of the material dissolve and the release of the soul into the infinite.

Nowhere is the gravity of Barney’s exploration of death more apparent than in a sculpture from that followed Guardian of the Veil, as part of the River of Fundament film opera. In 2011, the Barbara Gladstone gallery exhibited a series of Barney’s sculptures from Barney’s film under the title Djed. One sculpture takes the form of Barney’s familiar pill-shaped “field emblem,” but is cast in lead, plastic, copper, and zinc, a heavy-metal, but disintegrating metonymy of Barney’s identity and body, known as The Secret Name. (Figure 5.34) This haunting work reckons with Barney’s identification with the body of sculpture and with his own identity, and suggests the ephemeral nature of both, as his own work grows more serious in its exploration of the life of his Path.

Beyond himself and his path, his vision encompasses a search for the artist at the center of the work, and an exposure of his absorption of art history, literature, contemporary events, and material processes, confounding new paradigms of being in a post-human, transgendered world, all of which he performs and embodies. Barney brings to the fore the power of style and masquerade in simultaneously hiding and conveying conditions of identity. Further, he confronts skeptics of his work with sculpture that
complicates conventional views of objects and art, and provokes questions regarding the status of spectacle in a rampant neo-liberal economy without control or oversight, appearing to be its manifestation and embodiment, even though a more perspicacious investigation proves just the opposite. Finally, Barney foments his visual investigations in materiality and identity to narrative and poetics, elaborate concepts and stories that appeal to other artists, poets, writers, and musicians.

On an even more profound level, his work in its material manifestations, but even more so in its performative aspects, distends time in the way that dissociation veils access to traumatic experience. This condition of his art is simultaneously the most illusive and pervasive. It is particularly accessible in the way that he manipulates time in his films by extending scenes in which it seems as if very little happens, and in the way the storylines, aims, and narratives become obscure. In these ways Matthew Barney’s work is hypnotic, reaching out to viewers in an increasingly traumatized world. Mailer wrote in *Ancient Evenings* about “a Secret Name in fire,” of which the character, Ra says was given to him by his father. “They hid my name when I was born. No word can have power over Me so long as My Name remains unknown.” Barney’s work speaks to the duality of the “secret name,” as that which is hidden, yet must be told.

The significance of this duality may be located in the themes of Barney’s art that I’ve analyzed here, between in his deadpan refusals to be read, on the one hand, and his distinct, conspicuous homages and appropriations of artistic antecedents, on the other. From Serra and Piper, to his contemporaries in the 1980s who challenged the limits of

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140 I have not dealt with trauma except in Lynn Brunet’s work in this dissertation, but that will be a future project.

probity and taboo in representations of identity during the Culture Wars, Barney’s multivalent explorations of art, that proceed through the face, and pierce the body in sculpture, and performance, situate him at the center of an evolving and ever re-focusing attention to humanity, and its confounding confrontations with animality, as a function of the creative process he pursues. His continued significance in contemporary art, in the present, and in his historic rise in the 1990s, may be located in his relationship to conceptual art, performance, and process art of the 1960s, which following the 1980s, was steeped in the visuality of a globalized and increasingly sensationalized art world. At the center of debates regarding his importance, the artist maintains a commitment to his conceptual frameworks that motivate his explorations of various discursive cultural and artistic threads with sculpture as a vessel to contain his fluid explorations. Barney’s work is significant to art history and to anyone interested in the convergence of contemporary art and visual culture, for it illustrates broadly how art happens. Across genres and media, and ideas, Barney’s work demonstrates how thought is threaded through materiality in art; and may thus be said to offer a pedagogy of looking and thinking about art. Like the bifurcations of his own image, in various instances from Seliger’s portrait to *The Secret Name*, more questions than answers emerge from the fault lines within Barney’s work, as the artist continues to pry open liminal spaces between what is above and what is below, between flesh and its mirror, and their generative, transmuting images. More will come from this artist as he continues his Path; and from that there will be more to learn.
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“Things People Pretend to Like but Really Hate.” Esquire 140, no. 3 (September 2003): 74.


Biography

Mitali Jones Routh was born in Princeton, New Jersey in 1979, and was raised in the farmlands of Ringoes, New Jersey. She graduated from Princeton Day School (1997), where she immersed herself in music and theatre and studied literature, poetry, and photography. Simultaneously, Mitali attended the Princeton Ballet School, where she began taking classes at age 4, and performed as a member of the school’s pre-professional company, known as PB II, until the age of 17. After studying fashion photography at the Fashion Institute of Technology, she attended Oberlin College, where she earned a B.A. with Honors in Art History and a minor in Gender and Women’s Studies in 2003. Mitali completed her doctorate in Art History from Duke University in 2015 with full funding support from the Department of Art, Art History, and Visual Studies, and with additional research and teaching fellowships from Duke’s John Hope Franklin Humanities Institute and the university’s Bass Advanced Instructorship Program. Mitali worked in various capacities in the curatorial, visitor’s services, and events departments at the Nasher Museum of Art from 2009-11, and is a member of the Manic Caravan Poetry Working Group, sponsored by Duke’s Department of English. In art history, Mitali’s areas of specialization are contemporary art and critical theory in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, with a special emphasis on sculpture, performance, and film. Additionally, her research and teaching interests include new media and visual studies, cultural studies, gender studies, animal studies, poetry and poetics, and water.
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Houdini thoroughly researched the body—the physical forces of exercise, gymnastics, and the like, to constrain Houdini—hence he practiced any lifting and manipulation that can produce to incapacitate him.

The exploitation of discipline (+) & commitment, a willed disfigurement, a customized physically → A BODY INTELLIGENCE.

THECAST

og. 2

A worlter in the season position, arms perpendicular,
the posterior segment of the opponent’s elbow
extending down to the hand, reaching over the
opponent’s right upper body, simultaneously shifting
the opponent’s balance in contact with his inner
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