

Stuart Morgan. Of Goats and Men, Frieze,  
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Contrary to popular belief, performance art never died. First it expanded and merged with theatre, then it took place behind locked doors, without an audience. Silent and serious, Matthew Barney's early actions seemed to happen in a new space he had invented. Objects made by the artist to be manipulated in videos were defined by the moment of their use. (Instead of 'sculptures', he called them 'docufragments'.) Above all, the artist's employment of more than one video monitor gave his recorded movements a sepulchral quality, tacitly showing actions which continued to exclude the viewer. In 1989, the year Matthew Barney graduated, he made the video *Field Dressing (orfill)*. A figure in a white wedding dress descended two flights of stairs. It was the artist himself, using cross-dressing less as a mode of liberation than a call to order. (One critic even remarked that watching the figure descending was 'like trying to reconstruct a memory from long ago.') *Field Dressing...* was shown alongside a related installation in a sports centre at Yale. Props for the video were displayed as sculptural objects in their own right. More importantly, the space of video and the space of the building were matched, compared, made strange. Looking from one to the other made both seem odder than ever and while the objects, now relics, evoked time past, the video repeated a succession of activities in which sport and performance merged.

The *Drawing Restraint* series had begun a year earlier. Described by Barney as 'facilities to defeat the facility of drawing,' these were experiments in prohibition or hindrance, turning mark-making into a physical trial. His role models were Harry Houdini, who regularly cheated death by means of physical and mental feats, often involving literal restraint, and Jim Otto, the 'Mean Machine', one

of Al Davis's Oakland Raiders, famous because he continued playing even with an artificial knee. In an interview from 1991, Barney explained his favourite moment in a football game: 'the delay of game penalty where there is kind of a suspension of play, a refusal to accept the ball and walk into the arena of competition. This brings up the idea of someone who is able to capture creative potential through some sort of withholding or self-imposed restraint mechanism.'

Clad only in a rubber bathing cap, his head and feet bandaged, laden with what resembled the kind of equipment a fetishistic scaffolder might carry – 'internally lubricated self-threading flight blocks, titanium ice screws' – Barney used these instruments to dangle from walls or move across them like a mountaineer. As a graduate in art and sport with experience of modelling, he already seemed to have perfected his dual role as sportsman/supermodel, as well as deciding on his own particular materials, like refrigerated petroleum jelly. It was as if he had decided to evade definitions. Indeed, if Barney had a genealogy, the most important family member would not have been a performance artist at all. For the complex mythic substratum of his work most nearly approached that of Marcel Duchamp. Didn't the spiral descent recall the slow motion of *Nude Descending the Staircase*, itself inspired by Mallarmé's aesthete hero who decides at last to relinquish his ivory tower and join the rest of the world? As in Duchamp, the self-sufficiency of the artist's fictive universe was paraded, changes of state were proposed and sexual definitions were blurred. (Barney has described the ideal of a 'roving rectum'.) And like that of Duchamp, Barney's sustaining myth involved sexuality, or the differences between male and female. The novel part of his particular use of the myth was his

ability to conjure both sexes at once and hold both at a distance while continuing to maintain the impression of sexual interplay. (The work with the climbing nude of 1991 was christened *MILE HIGH Threshold: FLIGHT with the ANAL SADISTIC WARRIOR*.)

An iconography was developing. By 1991, when Barney's 'New Work' exhibition was presented at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, titles were turgid and drawings were obscure, but the sense of an evolving private language was unmistakable. Titling had become poetry, cross-referencing had lurched out of control until every work seemed part of every other, the tone was humourous, and the joke was a smutty one. Penetration, masturbation, constipation and lubrication featured in the terminology, as well as obscure puns. (It is relatively easy to guess what a 'mile-high threshold' might be, but what is a 'hemorrhoidal distractor' or a 'blind perineum?') And if the regalia of the male figure in Barney's performances was sportsmanlike and heroic, with swimming, baseball, rock-climbing and gymnastics merging into one activity, his female counterpart, played by Barney posing in a white robe, toque and 50s swimsuit, seemed the epitome of nimbleness and grace. Not even her white gloves and dark glasses could prevent her bouncing a pearl into an elaborately stretched hole designed to receive it by cutting through a skin-like fabric and holding the incision open with a clamp. Shifts between conventional sexual roles, between states and conditions (hard and soft, frozen and liquid, captivity and freedom); the references to protection by coated surfaces (Pyrex, Teflon, Silicon); above all the use of materials such as 'human chorionic gonadotropin', relate to the sex act. But *which* sex act, exactly? As in Duchamp's work – if the works in drag and the halving of the *Large Glass* are taken into account – the theme was gender itself, the test of gender being desire. For perhaps only desire can resolve the whole idea of sexing and of what 'masculine' or 'feminine' could mean.

What Barney meant by anal sadism was 'the impulse to undifferentiate the sexuality' of a human being. To him, the OO sign (based on Jim Otto's shirt) which he had elaborated to make an insignia for the poster for his *Ottoshaft* video shown at the 1992 Documenta, proposed (for Otto) a 'twin rectum' which became 'more of a roving orifice'. Its extension into drawing in 1991, presented as usual in a frame 'internally lubricated' with petroleum jelly, showed that symbol as a pair of gonads and the Otto 'shaft' – part of the building in which the action was recorded – as the cross-section of a penis, in this case putatively extended to form what could be vestigial ovaries. The videos would elaborate on sexing, from images like the sewing together of two kilts with the occupants still inside them, in the *Ottoshaft* video, or the appearance of the artist's mother in the same work, playing Al Davis, coach of the Oakland Raiders, to the equivalent of male rape in *Drawing Restraint 7* (1993), when one satyr pulls another's horns off after a struggle. Despite the apparent obviousness of its elaborate costumes, high colour and ludicrous games, *Drawing Restraint 7* contains one puzzle: as the satyrs battle inside a moving limousine, a strange goo seems to be forming on its glass roof, and what resembles a string of pearls can be seen vaguely from inside. Could these relate to a puzzling sequence in Barney's new video, the most elaborate yet?

A drum roll introduces a view of an impossibly long, Victorian pier jutting from a rocky, green landscape. To the drone of a bagpipe, the familiar *CREMASTER* logo is seen at speed, before Barney himself appears in a white performance space, his face more animal than human, the bright red hair offsetting the whiteness of the room, his suit and the white mistletoe in his buttonhole. As he combs his hair over them, we cannot help but notice the two strange holes in his head where his horns once were. The room is a pavilion at the very end of a mile-long pier, leading to a beach and a road. For the setting is the Isle of Man, a place where it comes as no surprise to encounter mutations. For man, on Man, may have become as much of a hybrid as the elaborately horned goats to be seen there or the rambling route of the Tourist Trophy motorcycle races. In this white room in the white pavilion, near the end of the long pier, three naked, muscled, red-haired, epicene figures pander to their master's every need. By the insertion of a large pin, they give his hooves new resonance, for example. And as he starts to tap-dance in front of a mirror, they cluster in anticipation. Meanwhile, on the island, two teams of two men in blue or yellow leather start up their motorcycles and sidecars. Side by side and facing in opposite directions, they wait for the flag to drop. Just before it does, the camera rises above

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them to show that their conjunction forms the outline of the *CREMASTER* logo, with its vertical capsule intersected midway by a narrow horizontal. And, in an unexpected piece of animation, the logo is surmounted by the three legged symbol representing the Isle of Man. As we watch, the symbol revolves to indicate the start of the race.

The three attendants – described in the credits as 'faeries' – wait for something to happen. As their master dances, they creep over and slip something in his pockets. Meanwhile, inside the yellow and blue leather suits of the duelling teams, strange things are happening. As their vehicles pick up speed and tension rises, slithery forms emerge from pockets in their jackets and move in one case up, in the other down. When the camera shifts back to the pier, we notice a feature that was not previously visible: two curved, empty ramps on the other side of the rehearsal space. On the racetrack, the yellow team is in trouble: unable to negotiate a large puddle, they are forced to change direction. Meanwhile, on a lonely stretch of road, a pitstop person who looks suspiciously like one of the 'faeries' waits to change tyres. All is still, when suddenly a spectacular, if predictable event occurs: the tap-dancing goat plummets through a hole he has danced in the floor of the rehearsal room, drops into the sea and continues his activities by walking on the sea bed between the end of the pier and the beach in the distance. On the lonely road where a car has stopped for refuelling, the pit stop person muses for a moment and, instead of changing the tyre immediately, replaces it with a skin-coloured version for a moment or two before reverting to the normal black one. The strange thing about the temporary skin-coloured alternative is that it has two nipple-shaped attachments hanging below it, which ruin its symmetry – and which, of course, would prevent it from running. The elated expression on the face of the pit stop person as the bike roars off after its strange baptism leaves little doubt that a major event has taken place. Meanwhile, the yellow team encounters more problems. The vehicle crashes into a cliff. Well, not 'crashes', exactly; the driver is held in a state of suspended animation only inches from the cliff. Ice on his visor has frozen him to the spot.

Wearing billowing skirts, like a cross between Tenniel's Alice and a pantomime dame, the three faeries have left the pier to take their ease on the cliffs nearby and await the goat's return. Yet their vigil is disturbed when something is thrown into their midst. Underwater, their master seems to be searching. Finally, he finds an escape route, but a perilous one. Manoeuvring his body through different spaces, in the course of which his direction and orientation are muddled, he wrenches himself through white globules which

melt and impede his progress; climbs through tight spaces shaped like one cookie-cutter after another; tunnels his way across the beach, which registers his burrowing as a continuous mole cast; and finally escapes. As he climbs to freedom, the three attendants in their yellow dresses ring tiny bells to encourage him, and the unpleasant, mobile pink objects in his pocket begin to move about. Suddenly he is free. Through a crack he spies a road and on it a goat, dyed red, festooned with tartan ribbons and looking like a regimental mascot. On the pier, the motorbikes have been put on display on the two white ramps. A pause. An empty road. A drum roll, bagpipe music and what looks like the entrance to a tent, its canvas lashed with thread which is pulled steadily to reveal... Well, what exactly? A haggis? A goitrous growth waiting to be lanced? A mound of engorged flesh meets our gaze, its colour almost purple, the skin tightly tied. And finally, when a second shot through a pair of open male legs reveals bagpipe drones attached to and dangling from puckered skin, the experience proves too quick for immediate recognition. Nevertheless, we are convinced that we have seen something like this before.

The Isle of Man is an obvious place to make a film about masculinity. Or is it? Inbreeding produces freakish anomalies. Where did the idea of that three-legged man come from? Could it be a sign of rampant masculinity? (Do Manxmen have members the same length as their legs?) Or its opposite? (Three legs leave no room for genitalia.) Or some third alternative? In *Drawing Restraint 7*, flirtation or sport leads to the removal of the satyr's horns, which must be restored, for what would a satyr be without horns? That the creature Barney plays is not a goat is crucial, since the sign that he has successfully achieved his aim is his confrontation with a real regimental goat in tartan, the first thing to be seen as he emerges from his undersea journey. Perhaps a goat is to a satyr what a woman is to a drag queen: an object of envy and pity in equal quantities. For sexually, it is

a primitive version of Barney's satyr: suave, fashionable, but lacking animal attraction. You are not born a woman; you become one, Simone de Beauvoir argued. That also applies to heroes. The undersea journey is paralleled in every mythology in the world. And, like this particular baptism, it takes place in tight spots. Crawling with difficulty up a symbolic sphincter is the last stage of the rebirthing process. Or is it a ritual of definition? (Hence the sequence of luminous cookie-cutters.) As the action draws to a close, two separate objects, both elliptical like the two zeroes of the Jim Otto motif, appear and reappear: on the strange, symbolic tyre; on the ramps built to display the motorcycles after the race; above all, in the disturbing, mobile objects placed in the drivers' pockets, organs which take on a life of their own and crawl up the bodies of the duelling drivers.

'My heart is in my mouth,' we say when we are frightened. Barney's references to heat and cold result in a different metaphor: of the retraction of the testicles, a sign of fear. And the final shots, in which it seems that two pairs of real testicles are displayed (one tied, bulbous and purple with strain, the others nipped, wrinkled and retracted) not only resolves the question of the relevance of bagpipes – played not on Man but in Scotland by men in skirts – but also of the strange, slippery good luck tokens by which faeries set such store. What they are giving the drivers is 'balls' – in other words, bravery, guts, manhood in its traditional sense. Balls are no more than symbolic, of course. And at the end of the century they are under a lot of strain. But when the artist is Matthew Barney, neither discovery comes as a surprise.