

GLADSTONE GALLERY

— ESSAY —

BOTH AND NEITHER:

ON MATTHEW BARNEY, DEBBIE HARRY AND THE UNCANNY



ROSS SIMONINI

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— ARTAND —

MATTHEW'S GENERAL COMMITMENT TO BOTH-AND-NEITHERNESS OFTEN TRANSLATES AS A FORM OF ARTISTIC GENEROSITY. HIS NARRATIVES ARE POROUS IN THEIR SPECIFICS, RECEPTIVE TO A BROAD INTERPRETATION OF NARRATIVE THAT THE TYPICAL HOLLYWOOD FEATURE DOESN'T ALWAYS ENCOURAGE. SOMETHING ABOUT THE PARTICULAR WAY THEY CONVEY INFORMATION GIVES YOU THE SENSE THAT YOU'VE ARRIVED AT THE IDEA ON YOUR OWN.

Next to Matthew Barney's warehouse, where a replica of Norman Mailer's three-story Brooklyn apartment is currently being constructed, Jonathan Bepler has set up a temporary recording studio in the back of what appears to be an old thrift shop's storeroom. The studio itself is a defunct clerical space, fusty and dark. The windows are masked with packing blankets to muffle the constant chop of helicopters over the East River and the din of an ongoing fiesta that occupies the riverside 'sailing bar and grill' next door. Inside, it's quiet enough to hear stomachs moan with hunger. A few instruments are strewn about: a cheap acoustic guitar, a regal white keyboard, sundry percussion instruments. 'Singing Nook' is written on a door. A small audience that includes Matthew, his producers, his assistant director, and me sit in the back of the room, on deflated love seats from a bygone era.

Debbie Harry is at the microphone. Her haircut looks as iconic as it did twenty-five years ago, but her famous youthful blond has faded to a distinguished grey and the style has settled into a windblown avian form. Within arm's reach of her, Jonathan sits at his computer, playing the role of engineer, producer, composer and conductor.

When Debbie sings, her notes are smooth and emotive, flexible and vulnerable, diaphanous in the high register. She stops mid-take and asks about altering the pronunciation of a word that she says seems a little forced. Jonathan puts on glasses to peruse the libretto, and decides he's fine with the change.

Jonathan: Maybe try it like this ...

Debbie: I don't know. It's an odd harmony.

Jonathan: Well ...

Debbie: It doesn't sound right.

Jonathan: Yes, that's why I like it.

Debbie: Or it sounds too jazzy, that line.

She suggests a different lyric.

Debbie: Or maybe that's too Grecian? She pauses, realising her mistake: the film is based in Egyptian, not Greek, mythology.

Debbie: Oh well, the Egyptians got everything from the Greeks anyway ... Or was it the other way around?

Jonathan asks her for a few throaty drones and growls, and she delivers.

In this way, each phrase is mulled, attempted in varying inflections, and then recorded. The aria is composed gradually, incrementally, over several hours: a stop-start manner of working that builds a song as a patchwork of musical ideas.

In *River of Fundament* (2014), musical collage is the form. Sometimes the collage is linear, like Debbie's aria, in which each phrase is disjunct from its neighbour. Other times it's horizontal, an approach that recalls the American composer Charles Ives, with one genre laid atop another. For Bepler, Matthew Barney's long-time collaborator, genre is a costume to be removed and exchanged as it suits the characters, locations, story and concept. If a scene occurs in Los Angeles, the music is, at least in part, Mexican in origin. If the scene involves children, then the children themselves are the musicians, wailing on toy instruments with abandon. When Norman Mailer is evoked, then the music becomes a salad of forms and colours that collectively paint a sonic portrait of his life: a step dance team from Brooklyn, a chanting chorus of Ernest Hemingway impersonators, a Native American drum circle, and a free jazz drummer all playing simultaneously, each one voicing an aspect of Mailer's biography.

Throughout the film, Bepler's score winds through bittersweet arias, pop, hip-hop, jazz. In many scenes, music emerges from literal noise – a crowd's chatter, a pig's squeal – and several non-tonal instruments are constructed right on screen, including one built from a tube inserted in a man's throat and anus. It's a fascinating way to *see* music, allowing Bepler to marry sound and image in unexpected ways – an approach ideally suited to his collaboration with Matthew: music and images can coexist alongside each other, in concert or, more often, in a dissonance so discomfiting it sometimes becomes comedy.

As she's singing, Debbie asks some questions of Matthew to understand her role in the film: What kind of character is it? What's going on during the song? What kind of song is it?

In response, Matthew says, 'It's somewhere between a conversation and a narration. It's both, and it's neither.'

If there were a guiding philosophy for Matthew Barney's work – and there isn't – 'both and neither' might be it. Surely, it's an opaque philosophy, and if you're not a person who wilfully dives into abstract art-think, you could dismiss it as nonsense and Matthew's response as high-minded prevaricating. His actor asks the 'what's my motivation?' question of her director and he replies with something that resembles a Zen koan: What was your face before your parents were born? Does a dog have Buddha nature? Unanswerable questions to disarm the mind.

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RIGHT
Matthew Barney and Jonathan Bepler,
RIVER OF FUNDAMENT (2014)
Production Still
© Matthew Barney, courtesy Gladstone Gallery,
New York and Brussels
Image courtesy the artist, Gladstone Gallery, New York
and Brussels, and Museum of Old and New Art, Hobart

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Matthew Barney and Jonathan Bepler,
RIVER OF FUNDAMENT (2014)
Production still
© Matthew Barney, courtesy Gladstone Gallery,
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Photograph Peter Strietmann

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Matthew Barney and Jonathan Bepler,
RIVER OF FUNDAMENT: KHU (2014)
Production Still
© Matthew Barney, courtesy Gladstone Gallery,
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Matthew Barney and Jonathan Bepler,
RIVER OF FUNDAMENT: RA (2014)
Production Still
© Matthew Barney, courtesy Gladstone Gallery,
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Photograph Hugo Glendinning

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Coffin, probably of a woman, 1250-1069 BCE
Wood, gesso, pigment, with resinous finish
Museum of Old and New Art (MONA), Hobart, collection
Photograph MONA/Peter Whyte
Image courtesy MONA

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Matthew Barney, *Bast of Ra*, 2014, detail
Wood, resin-bonded sand, steel, furniture, cast bronze
and gold-plated bronze, 385.3 x 1984 x 731.5 cm
Image courtesy the artist, Gladstone Gallery, New York
and Brussels, and Museum of Old and New Art, Hobart

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Matthew Barney and Jonathan Bepko,
RIVER OF FUNDAMENT: REV (2014)
Production Still
© Matthew Barney, courtesy Gladstone Gallery,
New York and Brussels
Photograph Chris Winget

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Matthew's general commitment to both-and-neitherness often translates as a form of artistic generosity. His narratives are porous in their specifics, receptive to a broad interpretation of narrative that the typical Hollywood feature doesn't always encourage. Something about the particular way they convey information gives you the sense that you've arrived at the idea on your own. It's a little like how certain types of writers – and nimble, eloquent conversationalists – give you the sense of being more intelligent than you are. Barney does that, but not with words, with images and objects, by continually refusing to answer Debbie's question.

'My first and probably most significant memory is – I was probably in third grade and it was the first year I played football', Matthew says.

We were doing this drill: you'd divide the team in half, on opposite ends of a line five yards apart. Then you would square off one against another, and run at each other and hit heads. And everybody would sort of circle around and watch. I remember doing it the very first time and it ringing my bell, and being so turned on by it. In an instant I was hooked. I don't think it was necessarily as much about the trauma or the violence of it as much as it was about the letting go. And I certainly get that now as an artist. But I think it gets harder, the more agile I become as an artist. And that's one of the reasons why the scale tends to increase every time – through complexity I'm able to have that feeling of getting lost and letting go.

Like 'getting lost' and 'letting go', 'both and neither' points to a non-verbal experience, an experience of disorientation and abstraction that can't be dealt with through the discursive mind. It's indicative of Matthew's general suspicion of language. With a few momentary exceptions, all his work before *River of Fundament* is language-free. He likes comedy, but only the physical kind, not puns. He enjoys sports, but he won't watch/listen to televised/broadcast coverage because the words get in the way. Likewise, he isn't a reader.¹ Even Mailer's book, *Ancient Evenings*, of which *River of Fundament* is a purported adaptation, didn't prompt him to read it in full until well into the project's development.

After Debbie's recording is finished, some of the grips prepare the next scene, one of the many that involves Norman Mailer's fictional wake, of which she is an attendee. Matthew tells me Debbie doesn't have any direct, real-life connection to Mailer but that her 'New York-ness' is what warrants her appearance.

'At the same time', he says, 'Harry's New York wasn't Mailer's New York.'

What he means is that Mailer and Debbie existed at the same time and the same place, but Debbie wasn't culturally connected to Mailer. Her Manhattan is forever intertwined with Andy Warhol, whom she met on a happenstance walk in 1980, when he asked her to pose for him. He shot Polaroids of her and, later, silk-screened her image in bubblegum pink, lipstick red and school-bus yellow. The image is now among Warhol's best known – perhaps more so than Debbie's music.

Mailer, on the other hand was 'non-Warholian', as Barney puts it. He was working class. He embraced living in Brooklyn when the borough was still thoroughly rough. The idea of having a Warhol-esque art factory, and removing his hands from the work would be antithetical to Mailer's American manual work ethos. Nevertheless, Debbie and Mailer were alive and thriving at the same moment. 'Heart of Glass' was playing on the radio while Mailer wrote *Ancient Evenings*, and by the time the book was published, Blondie had disbanded. Surely, Mailer took no notice.²

Matthew doesn't say so, but the connection between them, for him, is probably also somewhat autobiographical.³ It was around the late 1970s–1980s when he was in his early teens, visiting his mother who lived in New York. At his ripest, most receptive, most targeted age of influence, when Warhol and Harry and Mailer were starring players, Matthew was dropped into the centre of human culture; he had no choice but to be aware of them.

When Debbie appears on screen, she is a dark angel, leaning into the hand railing of Mailer's balcony, gazing lasciviously into the night. This is Debbie playing the role 'as herself'.

The film is filled with such as-yourself roles, and includes cultural figures who have some tenuous, intuitive connection with the deceased: boxer Larry Holmes; writer Salman Rushdie; actress Elaine Strich; musician David Amram; writer Jeffrey Eugenides; writer Fran Lebowitz; artist Lawrence Weiner; director James Toback. The situation creates an air of authenticity, realism.

The as-yourself role has become a (sometimes obnoxious) trope in Hollywood. Faux-documentaries and reality shows are filled with them. Usually actors play themselves, but the self-awareness is often linked with some parodic, clownish distortion of their identity. When it works, the scenario depends on the act of recognition. But the viewer also has to be able to turn that recognition off – to suspend disbelief – or the actors can't properly act. Matthew Barney is asking us to suspend disbelief and to recognise, simultaneously. He wants us to experience the uncanny sensation when a person simultaneously plays themselves and not-themselves.

Debbie Harry is playing Debbie-as-herself. She's attending Mailer's wake – which she wouldn't do in real-life – speaking rehearsed lines with an Egyptian god, singing spontaneously, and wearing an outfit that seems a bit maudlin, even for the mournful occasion. In life, that's not what Debbie does. Perhaps if she had been given a character name, the transformation to non-Debbie would be complete, but Matthew didn't give her a name. He wants to preserve all her associational, referential weight. He wants her to be 'both and neither', and he'll do it without having to utter a single word of direction.

River of Fundament: Matthew Barney. Museum of Old and New Art, Hobart, 22 November 2014 – 13 April 2015.

- 1 An extreme form of this kind of disjointed collaboration can be traced back to those perfectly confounding works by John Cage and Merce Cunningham, who wrote music and choreography, respectively, without any knowledge of the other's contribution until the performance was put into play.
- 2 Matthew Barney attended Yale University as an undergraduate, and it's doubtful he did it without reading. So he's certainly literate and, in fact, the hunt-and-peck way he describes extracting his research from text might owe some debt to the collegiate skim that students tend to develop in the face of the over-assigned reading: glance at the first sentence of each paragraph, highlight proper names and dates, summarise in the margins.
- 3 It's been said that Mailer 'didn't know his ass from his elbow about music', a notable point about a man who now has an opera written about his most treasured book.
- 4 Barney's casting has been influenced by his life before: in *Cremaster 3* (2000), Richard Serra played the role of a patriarch/architect because Matthew felt that Serra had, for him, as a sculptor, served as an indirect mentor, a predecessor he wanted to acknowledge.

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