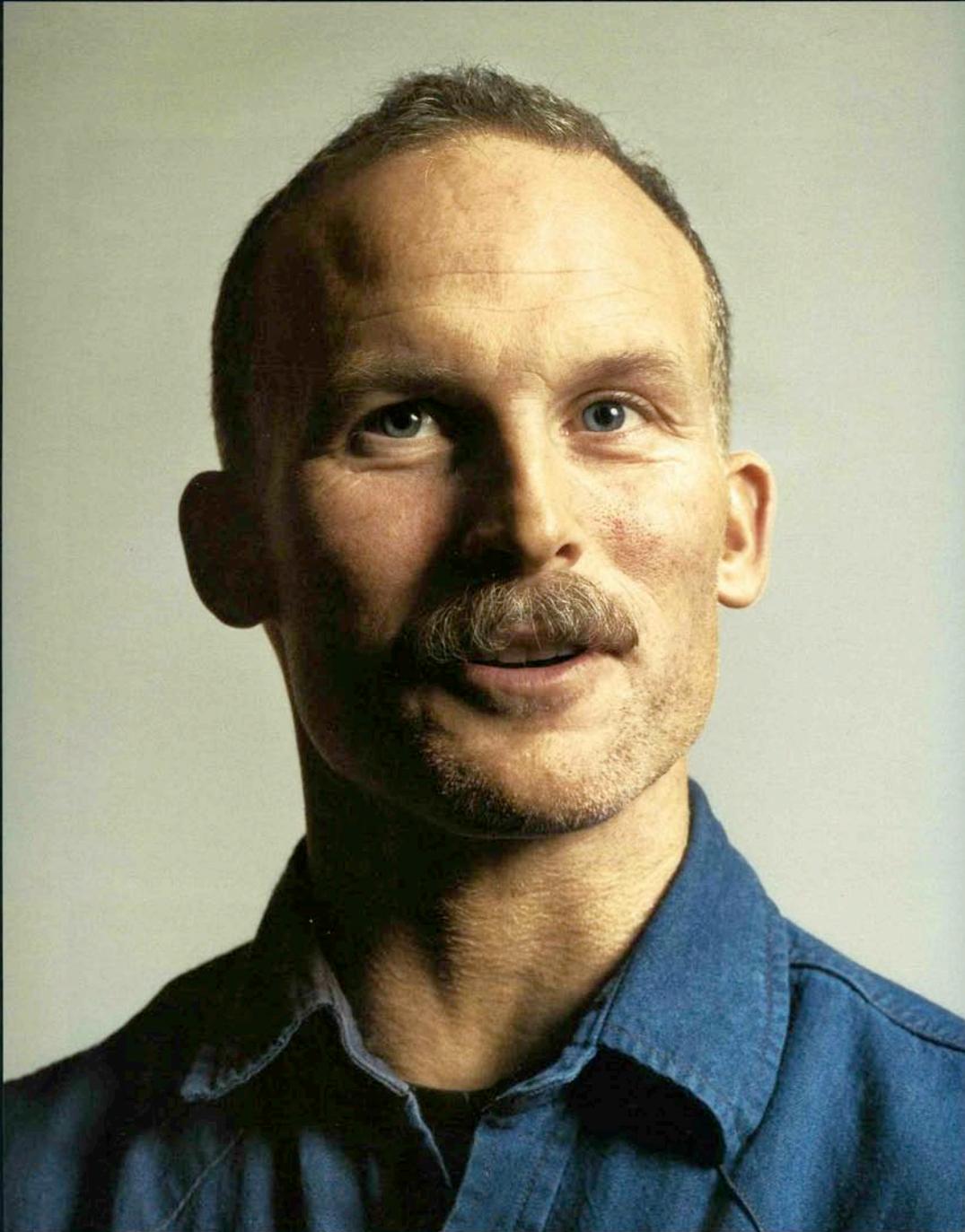


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"Matthew Barney/David Cronenberg," TAR Magazine, Fall 2008

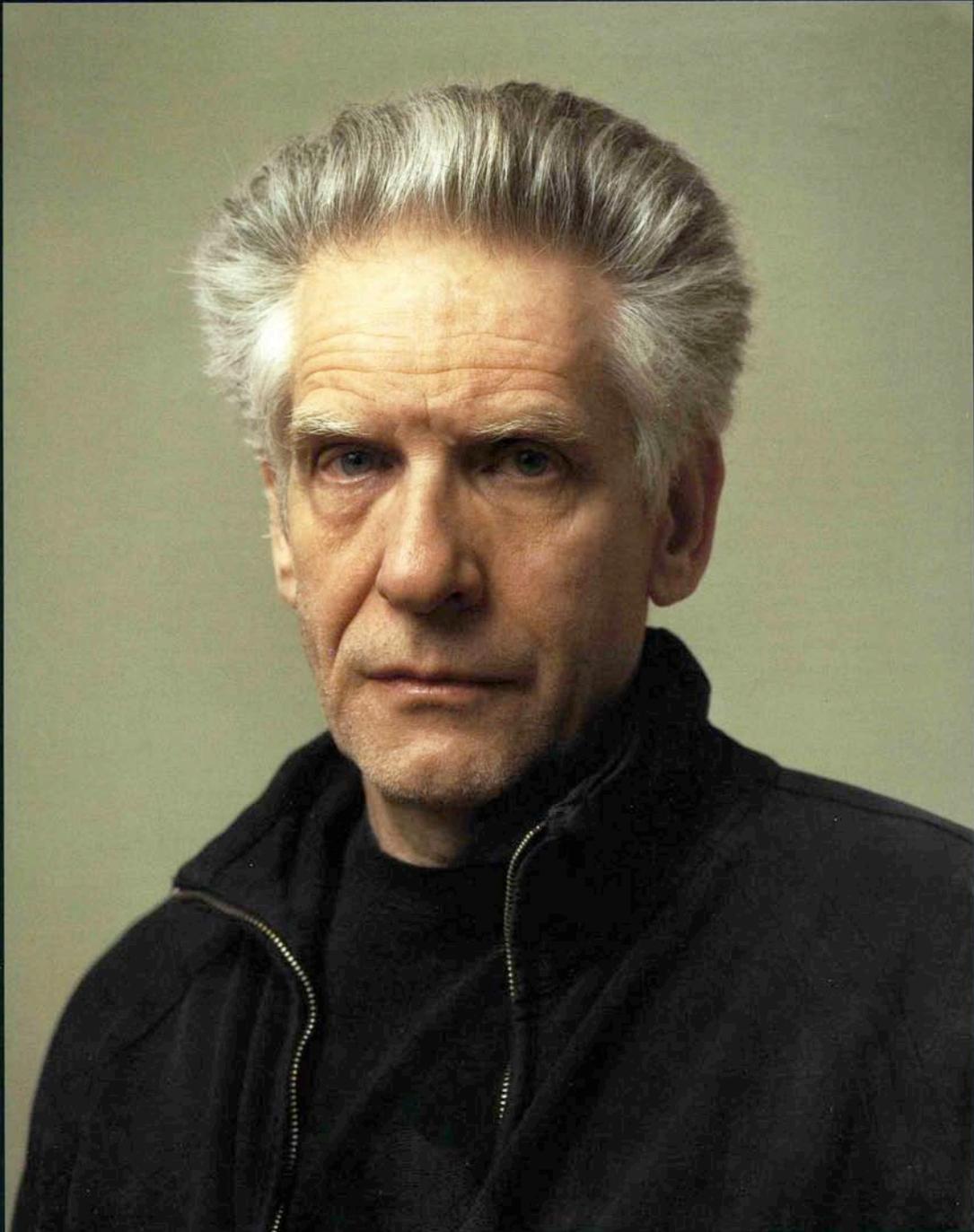


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**II Operas / I Ancient / I Fly** Matthew Barney, artist of the director of *M. Butterfly*, *Naked Lunch* and *Eastern Promises*, inter-translation of Norman Mailer's novel *Ancient Evenings* and

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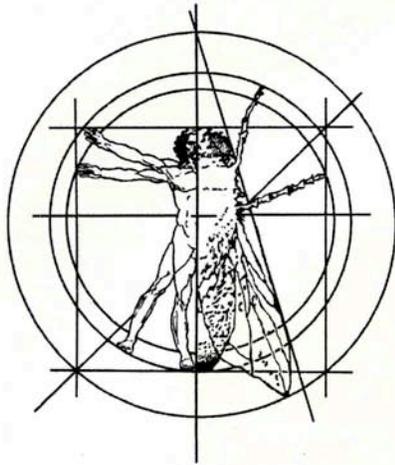


*Drawing Restraint and Cremaster series, and David Cronenberg, face about their anatomically obsessed new operas: Barney's Cronenberg's symphonic staging of *The Fly*.*

PHOTOGRAPHS BY ROE ETHRIDGE

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## Originator of the body horror

genre, Cronenberg has produced a filmography that reads as an X-ray of the physical and moral orders of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. In films like *Rabid*, *The Brood*, *Scanners* and *Videodrome*, the human form is subjected to the violent urges of an unrestrained id. In *The Fly*, Cronenberg's first major Hollywood foray, the DNA of eccentric scientist Seth Brundle gets mixed with that of a housefly, and the genetic accident births a monster. After exploring ethical perversions in his more recent films, *A History of Violence* and *Eastern Promises*, Cronenberg has undertaken a quasi-resurrection with an opera adaptation of *The Fly*. Conceived in 1958, the original film went through Cronenberg's own 1986 remake before hatching into its recent incarnation, in collaboration with composer Howard Shore. The shock and gore of Brundlefly's transformations amid elaborate sets spent five nights at the Theatre du Chatelet in Paris this past July, followed by six in September at the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion in L.A.

Like Cronenberg, Barney constructs bodies of work based on transfigurations of the flesh. Taking Freud's dictum that biology is destiny to harrowing extremes, the artist's *Cremaster* cycle of five films drew its title from the muscles that control the elevation of the testicles. Barney's current endeavor, a collaboration with composer Jonathan Bepler, is loosely based on Norman Mailer's *Ancient Evenings*, a controversial account of the spiritual and material death rites of ancient Egypt. The project is an operatic opus in seven parts, each of which will be enacted live over the next few years in locations around the world. The first installment, *REN*, unfolded in a used-car dealership in L.A. this past May. Staged around the surviving Chrysler Imperial from the *Cremaster* series, the performance detailed a funerary procession that escorted the defunct vehicle through its sadistic destruction, lament and passage into the spirit world. *REN* fused the death rites of the pharaohs with the last gasps of fossil-fuel technologies. But as with most things that arise from the minds of Barney and Cronenberg, the end undoubtedly heralds another unimaginable beginning.

## I. Throat chambers, close-ups

DAVID CRONENBERG It's kind of ironic that two such body-conscious artists should meet in such a disembodied way [Laughs].

MATTHEW BARNEY [Laughs] Yeah, right. I'm sorry I wasn't able to come up to Toronto.

CRONENBERG I'm sorry I wasn't able to come to New York.... So, we're apparently talking about opera.

BARNEY Which should be interesting, right?

CRONENBERG You've been quoted as saying the opera is maybe the most perfect form of musical theater. I wonder, from what I can gather from *Guardian of the Veil* and your other work, are you really plugging into the traditional form of opera, or are you subverting it?

BARNEY There was a moment when I thought I wanted to make an opera, and I don't think I knew what that meant. What I learned by actually staging something on an opera-house stage is that I'm not interested in it at all. I'm not interested in working within that tradition. You know better than I do at this point, after *The Fly* I'm sure, that if you don't embrace that form, it doesn't work. Is that not true?

CRONENBERG I think so, yeah. It's odd, because the reason that I did the opera primarily is Howard Shore, who composed the music for most of my movies. When we did the music for *The Fly*, which was 1986, at one point Mel Brooks said to me—he was producing it, Mel—he said, "You know, this is a guy walking down the street, and the music is so significant and so profound." And I said, "Well no, it's not a guy walking down the street, it's a guy meeting his destiny." At that point I realized that my approach to the movie was kind of operatic, although I too could not necessarily tell you what that meant. I guess it meant intense—emotionally very extreme.

BARNEY Mmm-hmm.

CRONENBERG I didn't really have huge exposure to opera as a kid. My mother was a pianist, my father was a writer, and there was always music in the house, and also singers and violinists and so on because my mother would play accompaniment to them. And so I heard opera singing, but there weren't that many opportunities in Toronto to see operas. I grew up with a kind of concept of opera, not necessarily what opera really is.

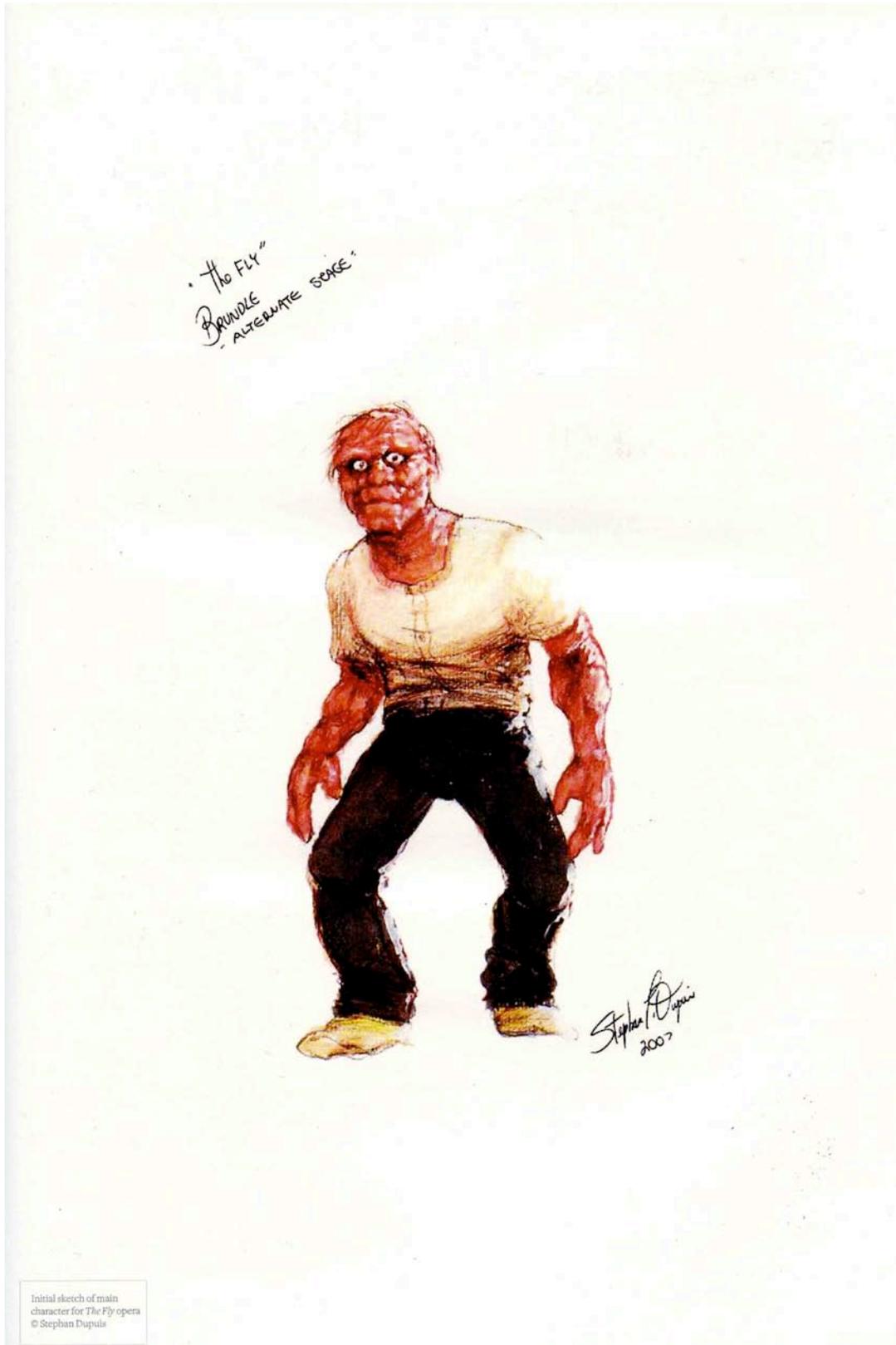
BARNEY Yeah, yeah, I can see.

CRONENBERG You've said that you were fairly disappointed by most of the operas that you've seen, and I can understand that. Most of them make no sense emotionally, or visually, or they only make some sense musically. But *The Fly* is an attempt to embrace tradition up to a point. It has a narrative, it has characters, they sing their dialogue, there are scene changes and act changes. I suppose *The Fly* is a much more conventional opera than what you seem to be constructing.

BARNEY Yeah, what I've done is abandoned the proscenium stage. Jonathan Bepler, the composer I'm working with, and I thought we wanted to make a proper opera. But at a certain point I couldn't give up the possibility of moving around the object. My discipline stems from an interest in sculpture, and it was so frustrating for me, in sculptural terms, not to have that kind of cinematic experience around the object. And it's fair to say one of Jonathan's primary interests is writing for musicians who are surrounding

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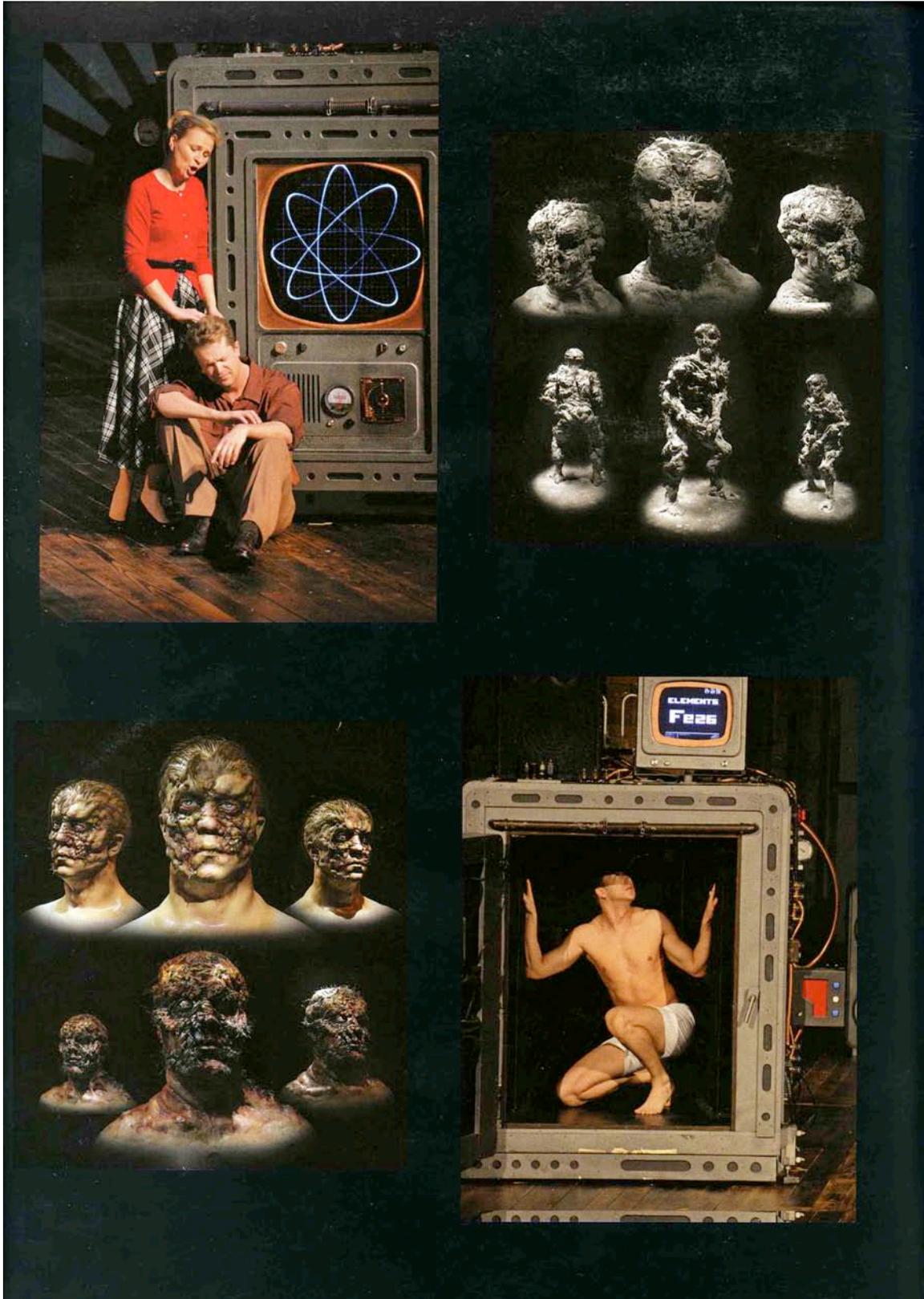
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Initial sketch of main character for The Fly opera © Stephan Dupuis

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Photo stills of stage rehearsal for *The Fly*, Marie-Noëlle Robert, 2008

Brundle Images, Mark Rappaport, Creative Effects Inc.

an action in space, or moving through spaces to create a surround effect. What we decided to do was make a series of smaller works that can be experienced in the round but will be performed in real time.

**CRONENBERG** Now, is that because of your staging the *Guardian of the Veil* in Manchester, in an opera house, on a proscenium stage?

**BARNEY** That's really my only experience, although I did make a film in an opera house, which was pretty exciting. I think my attraction to opera has largely to do with opera houses. It's the architecture. I was thinking about some of the architecture you used in your early films, these kinds of brutal cast-concrete structures, some of which have an organic quality. I'm very interested in stadiums and fascist architecture, where you start to feel like you actually are inside a body. I felt my interests in creating internal narratives, which have certainly been influenced by your work, could be satisfied inside an opera house, in the way that it feels like you're inside some sort of throat chamber. Somehow that's why an opera house has the acoustic qualities it does, because it mimics the body cavity.

**CRONENBERG** As I understand it, you used a car dealership to stage your first opera?

**BARNEY** That's right.

**CRONENBERG** In which case you have the residences of a car dealership, which are considerable to play with but are not at all like the traditional opera ones, obviously.

**BARNEY** The text I'm working with is a Norman Mailer book called *Ancient Evenings*. It's essentially the story of a man dying and losing the different layers of his soul as they correspond to Egyptian mythology. And I felt it was important at a certain point to replace the body of the man with an object. I made this decision when I was still intending to make the piece on stage, for fear that I would lose the possibility of a close-up or creating a visceral moment on a proscenium stage. My instinct was to scale everything up, and to replace the man with a car, for starters. As the project developed and I fractured the acts into separate performances in specific sites, the automobile dealership became a natural setting for the opening act with this car. How do you feel about this problem, the lack of close-ups and the difficulty of creating a visceral situation on stage?

**CRONENBERG** Well, I took the complete opposite approach. I thought, If I'm going to do stage, and I've never directed stage, why don't I just do it—embrace the theatrical experience for all its limitations and see what happens, and thereby connect with hundreds of years of theater in a contemporary way. Howard suggested there are many ways you can use screens and scrims and video and video close-ups. I was actually appalled at the idea. I said, I've done that movie already, and of course it's a strange circumstance because I am doing a remake of a movie, something I would never want to do—a remake of my own movie, which already is a remake of someone else's movie. But the idea of suddenly having to shoot those close-ups again and light them and edit them was boring. So I'm deliberately giving up all the technology available for people to stage operas in. I went so far as to say to Dante Ferretti—a wonderful, famous movie designer who has done many

operas—"I want to set this in the '50s, when the original movie of *The Fly* came out," and so the technology will be retro technology. It won't even be the technology of 20 years ago when I made the movie, but of 50 years ago. Nobody will be shooting video on stage. Events are recorded on video, and then I'll have them being recorded on 16mm film. There will be no instant playback or any of those things—so I've regressed even further psychologically [Laughs].

**BARNEY** If I understand it, it seems like the interest in doing this is really in the trespassing, for lack of a better word, into this form for a moment. Is that true?

**CRONENBERG** Yes, and I'm aware I could get slaughtered. Because unlike what you're doing, which is almost creating the form each time you create the work, in this case there is an audience with a lot of expectations, for example at Le Chatelet, the theater in Paris that premiered it. They have seen many operas and have something to judge it by, whereas what you're doing is very hard to compare with anything other than things that you've already done. That has its own risks, of course.

**BARNEY** Sure. Although I would say it does fall pretty directly into the tradition of performance art and brings up a whole other set of hurdles.

**CRONENBERG** And expectations.

**BARNEY** Exactly, and I'm more comfortable with that set of expectations, I have to say.

## II. Bootlegs, tattoos

**CRONENBERG** Your moviemaking has gotten very sophisticated. I saw number three in the *Cremaster* cycle at the Toronto Film Festival. I'm sure you could segue gracefully into doing Hollywood epics if you wanted to [Laughs].

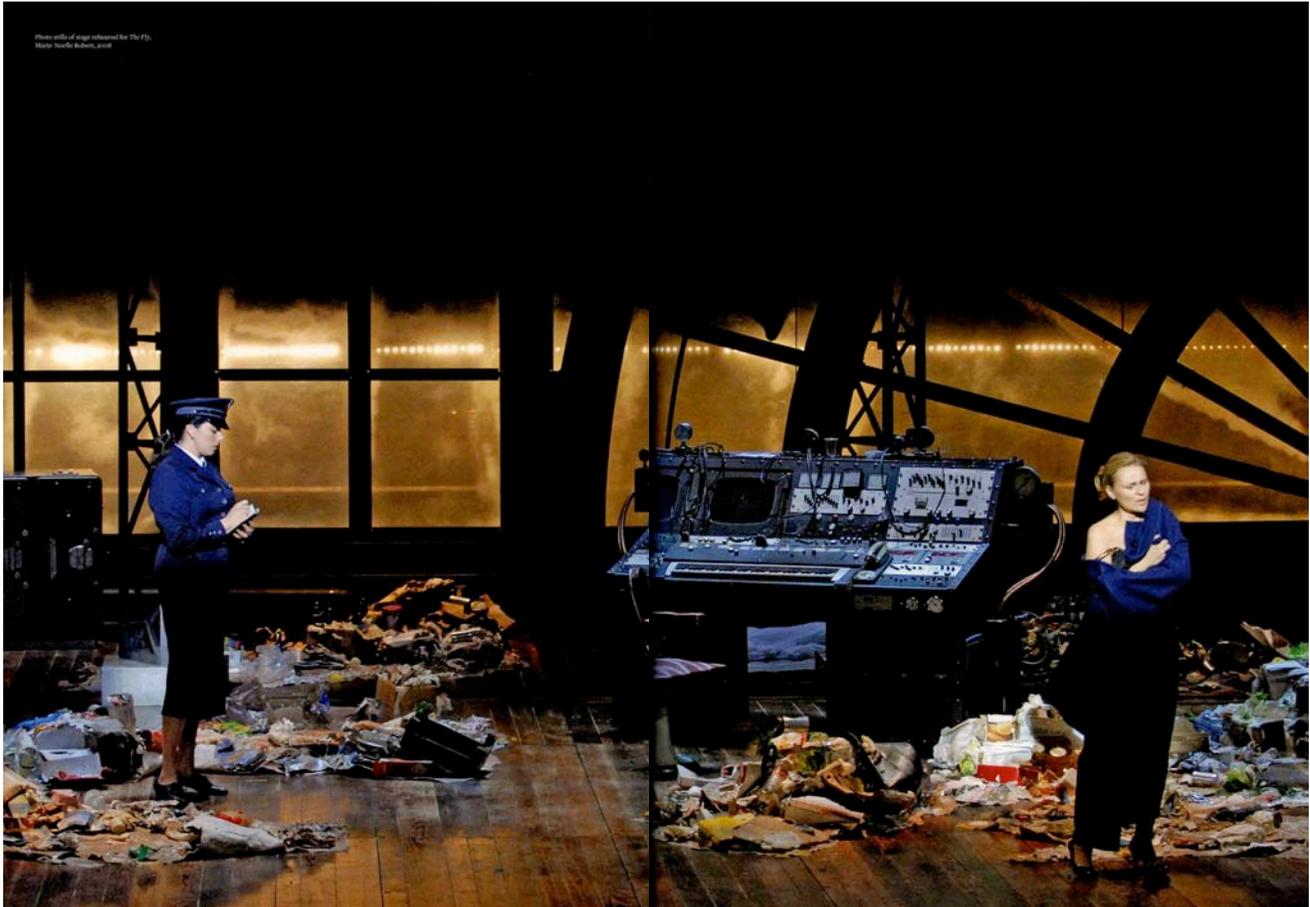
**BARNEY** Part of my interest in this is comes from wanting to take a significant break from filmmaking. I started to feel that if I continued to make films, it was very soon going to move into a place I wasn't comfortable with. Part of that has to do with being quite compulsive and wanting to see the organism I created live to its potential, watching it become more refined, while covering my tracks of process more and more. That's really what my interest is—the process of making something. By the time these films have been cut and finished, I can't see that process anymore, and it really bothers me. So part of the intention with this new project is to limit the production time, to limit the budget, and to try to make a more immediate piece that's not mediated.

**CRONENBERG** That's interesting, because when I watch the DVD of *Guardian of the Veil* and watch as things are constructed on stage, in a way part of that stage construction happens as you're watching. In film you wouldn't see that. You know, you could cut around it, but here the audience is sitting, watching as things are built.

**BARNEY** I know that every filmmaker has their own idiosyncratic way of doing things, but one of the things I've done in the past is construct scenes that had to be filmed in real time due to the nature of what's physically

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happening, where an action cannot be repeated. I really felt like if somebody could witness that, they would be more interested in the project than they will when they see the film.

**CRONENBERG** What about language? Will you be using dialogue derived from Mailer's book?

**BARNEY** Yeah, which I'm pretty excited about. I have to confess, dialogue is not natural for me. I'm quite poor at writing and directing it, but I am comfortable working with Jonathan Bepler and integrating text into the music that he's writing. It's something we've done with the *Cremaster* films. Most of them have text that's sung, that I've written or that has been extracted from other sources.

**CRONENBERG** So in that sense there will be a bit of traditional opera, in terms of dramatic dialogue that is sung?

**BARNEY** That's true.

**CRONENBERG** In terms of music, what are you planning?

**BARNEY** As each performance will take place in a different setting, in a different country, a lot of the music comes from things indigenous to that place. In Los Angeles, we worked with a drum and bugle corps from Southern California, a Mexican-American ranchera singer named Lila Downs and a mariachi group—things that feel comfortable in the Los Angeles landscape.

**CRONENBERG** How far are you in terms of the seven stages?

**BARNEY** I have three nearly resolved. It's the same way I did the *Cremaster* cycle, although that was executed out of order. There were certain things that were fixed ahead of time, but they were just general emotional relationships to the sites, whereas the narratives themselves were written later, during the preproduction phase. The difference with this project is that the chapters are being done in sequence, and it relates to one text, so I'm hoping that it will have a different kind of legibility than those films did.

**CRONENBERG** One of the odd things that came up with *The Fly* being done in Paris was the question of recording the performance or not. And the budget and the expenses of that. You've got one performance happening for each phase, and *The Fly* doesn't have that many more. The performances in Paris and six at the L.A. opera. And if no one is interested in picking it up, that's it. You know, for a filmmaker, that's pretty shocking!

**BARNEY** Yeah. Did you film it?

**CRONENBERG** Well, no. I mean, in opera there's very little money. It's all state supported or funded or sponsored. The notion of it not being recorded pleases me in a weird way, you know? Because obviously the great opera performances of the past were never recorded.

**BARNEY** Right.

**CRONENBERG** It's sort of interesting and sort of scary, that transience, which is something I know that you deal with in various ways. With the Manchester performance, basically you were recording the performance itself. It didn't seem that you were doing additional shooting.

**BARNEY** That's right. It's very provisional, and there was a moment when, like yourself, I was thinking, This isn't about making a film, so why should we even shoot this? And I went with that for a while, and as the larger project developed into these one-off performances, it started to feel a little bit perverse not to document it. In some of these locations, maybe we can only fit 500 people. So I started to think about how this could be filmed without interrupting the performance, because I do feel quite strongly that I don't want the presence of cameras—for it to feel like yet another media event. I feel if I'm watching something and I see that it's being recorded, I have a different relationship to the thing. So what we did was design surveillance housings that can hold smaller HD cameras and mounted them around the car dealership. Although there are certain things in this piece that can't be repeated, that will just have to happen during the performance itself. It's a bit of an experiment.

**CRONENBERG** Howard's been working on this opera for about three years, and the idea that it would be 11 performances and no one would ever see it again—of course, they could hear it again. But even for Howard to arrange a decent audio recording wasn't easy. Very strange. I mean, you think of making a movie that would only have 10 or 11 screenings...

**BARNEY** Would you rather let something go than put together a low-budget recording?

**CRONENBERG** I have this revulsion right now not to movies in general, but to making a movie event, or even a video event or a broadcast event, out of the opera. It's anathema to a filmmaker. At the moment, for example, I'm still trying to convince Warner Brothers to release a DVD of *M. Butterfly*. There never has been one.

**BARNEY** Wow.

**CRONENBERG** You think, Did I even make that movie? The prints are gonna be rotting eventually, the negative's gonna be rotting eventually. It's almost like if it's not on DVD, it doesn't exist. You never made that movie. There are some famous movies that were lost in the mist of time. I think *London After Midnight* was one—there's just a couple of stills, and in a way that's so mysterious.

**BARNEY** It's also exciting when a DVD resurfaces many years later.

**CRONENBERG** Somebody told me, "Oh no, there is a Chinese DVD of *M. Butterfly*."

**BARNEY** [Laughs] I love one of the last shots of *M. Butterfly*, where the concourse is pulling away from the plane. It's so beautiful.

**CRONENBERG** Aw, thank you. I remember when we were shooting that in China, I had a secret meeting with some underground filmmakers, and I had to be taken to them at night and no one was supposed to know because it was the kind of thing that was suppressed—and probably still would be.

**BARNEY** Do you think you would have ended up initiating or agreeing to make this opera if you hadn't made your last two films? Does it relate in your mind, what I see as a shift from a more visceral bodily narrative to a more external, moral narrative?

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**CRONENBERG** That's an interesting question because the script I'm writing now is one that I had written eight years ago, and I'm rewriting it. It's called *Pain Killers*, and it is very much a throwback to before I did *Spider* or *A History of Violence* or *Eastern Promises*, even though *Spider* in a way is also kind of a bodycentric movie. The other ones are too, in their own way, but I know what you mean. Howard was so enthusiastic, and he reminded me of how we've talked about the operatic character of *The Fly* and why don't we really do an opera? I could also see making an opera of *Dead Ringers*, for example.

**BARNEY** Absolutely.

**CRONENBERG** Or *Crash* or *Naked Lunch*—that would be kind of interesting. Of course, if I did *Crash* I would have cars on stage as well.

**BARNEY** I think there are twin tenors somewhere, someone told me that.

**CRONENBERG** No, really?

**BARNEY** A great pair of twin tenors, yeah. I can look into that for you. [Laughs]

**CRONENBERG** Also, it is a question mark for me whether the last couple of movies I did were a shift or a momentary diversion. Or just another couple of facets of the same crystal that seem to be quite different but really are the same. Obviously, for example, in *Eastern Promises*, there's

it to happen, but it always does seem to be there—in *Video-drome* and in *Crash*, evidence of another orifice that's been sealed but perhaps can be reopened.

**BARNEY** Right.

**CRONENBERG** I'm sure it has lots of resonances that I could articulate, and this is the first time I've ever actually done it. Just the meaning of a different phase in one's life. I'm sure that's why young people get tattoos. They're trying to distance themselves from who they were and creating a new identity with those tattoos. So it has a lot to do with identity as well.

**BARNEY** Mmm-hmm.

**CRONENBERG** I have a question for you. Much of your work has to do with death, either alluded to or anticipated and conceived in very bodily terms. And yet, the aspects of *Ancient Evenings* that you're focusing on are all post-death, the idea of a life after death. Aside from the intriguing aspect of trying to connect with ancient Egypt and a whole other mindset that goes with it, is there something that you're consciously exploring? In opposition to your approach before? I would have said that your approach before was existentialist, if we wanted to put it in the context of traditional philosophy.

**BARNEY** Exactly, and I think it's precisely one of the things that interests me most about working with *Ancient Evenings*, that it is opposed to the *Cremaster* language,

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a huge amount of body awareness. It's done in a different way, not in a sci-fi or fantasy way, but it's certainly there, in the tattooing and the violence and so on.

**BARNEY** Yeah, I was going to ask you about the scar that, in my mind, is almost like a repertory actor or something, like it appears in nearly all of your films.

**CRONENBERG** I'm using [makeup artist] Stephan Dupuis, the guy I've worked with since we met on *Scammers*. And I certainly noticed that the scar that Viggo [Mortensen] ends up with in *Eastern Promises* is very similar to the scar that Ed Harris has in *A History of Violence*. But it almost seems like it's the external world making me do it, you know? I'm not willing

and it's one of the reasons why we chose this particular car that we're using. It's the surviving car from the demolition derby from *Cremaster 3*. So in that sense there are two languages that are in conflict, and I'm pretty excited about that. And you've articulated them perfectly.

**CRONENBERG** Do you believe in life after death?

**BARNEY** [Pauses] I certainly believe in an energy that lives on and functions like some sort of adhesive between living people. So on that level I would say yes, but I think on the level of Egyptian mythology, no, I do not.

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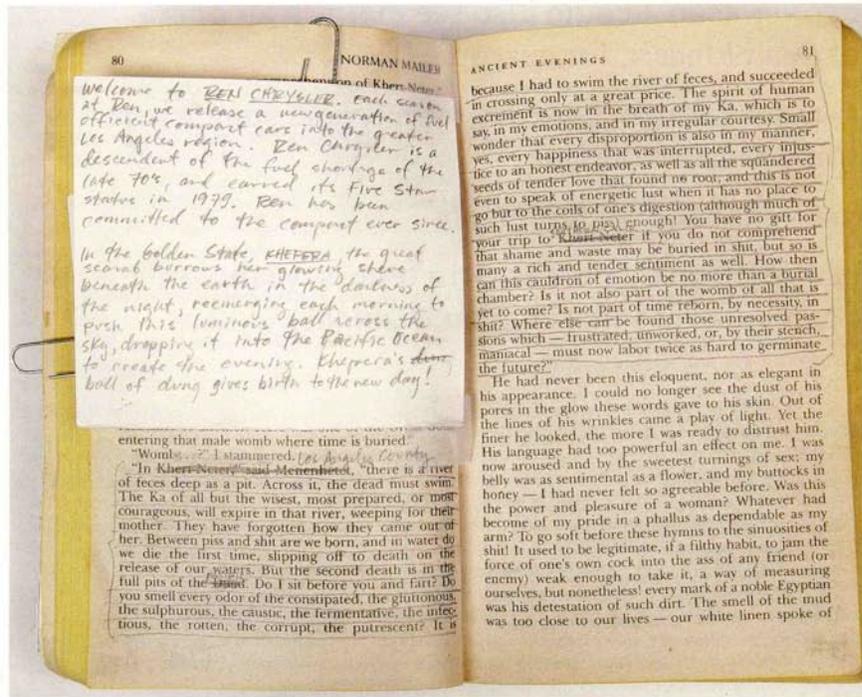
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ART DIRECTION BY  
MATTHEW BARNEY

Ink drawing on *Time*, 1973  
Photo: David Regen

Graphite drawing on a page  
from Norman Maller's  
*Ancient Evenings*  
(Little, Brown, & Co.)  
© Norman Maller, 1983  
Photo: David Regen

REN 2008 portrait  
Photo: Chris Winget



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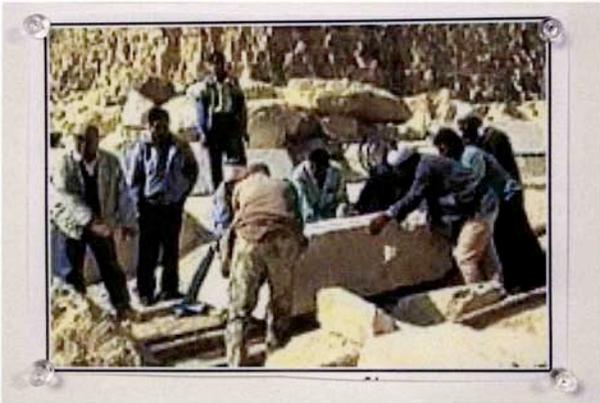


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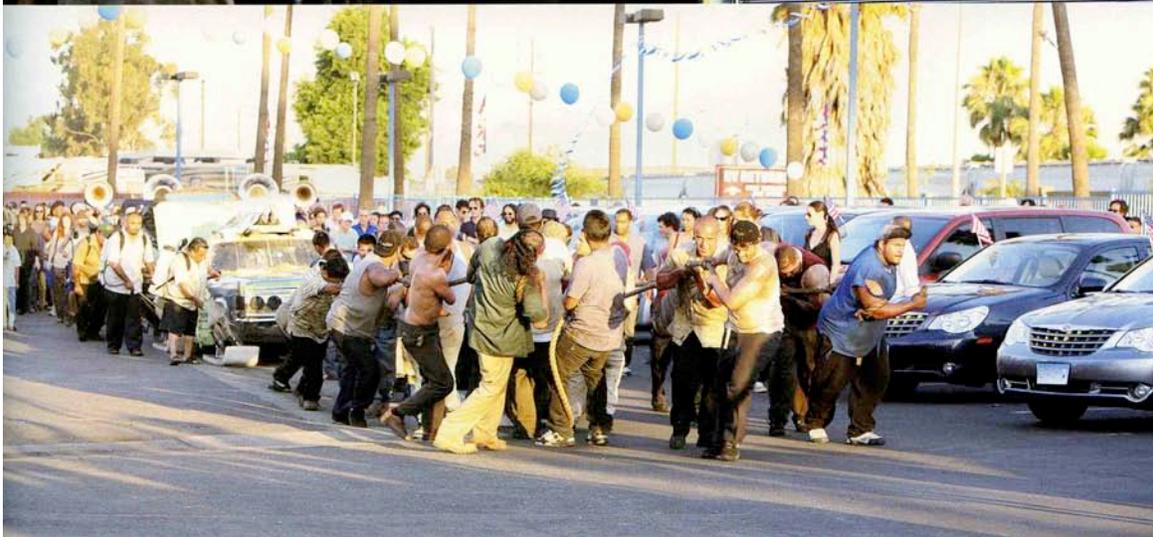
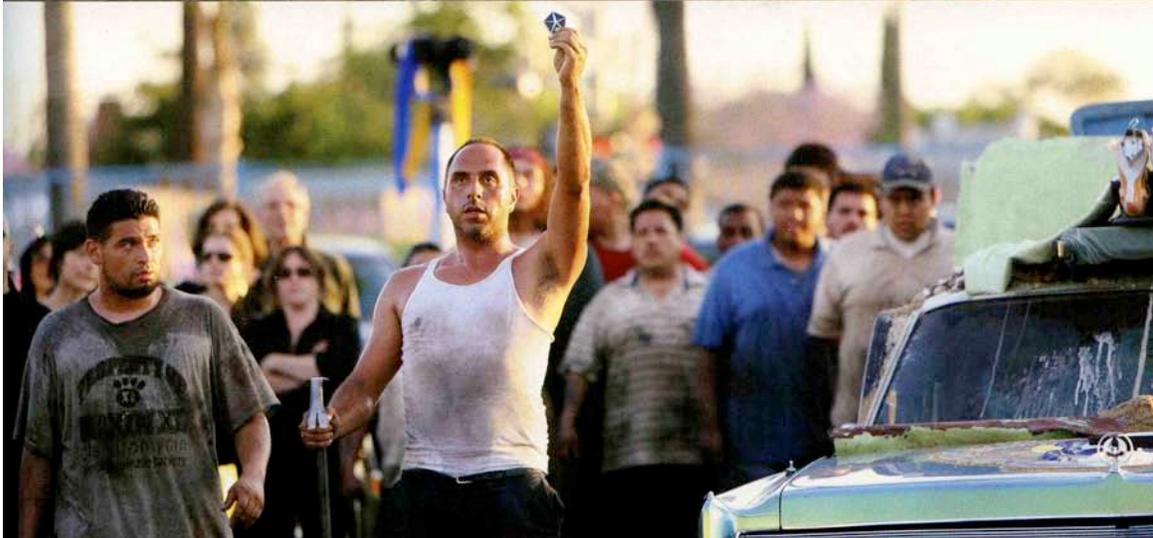
Storyboard details from  
*REN*, 2008  
Photos: David Regen

Performance stills from  
*REN*, 2008  
Photos, top: Kelly Thomas;  
middle and bottom:  
Catherine Ople



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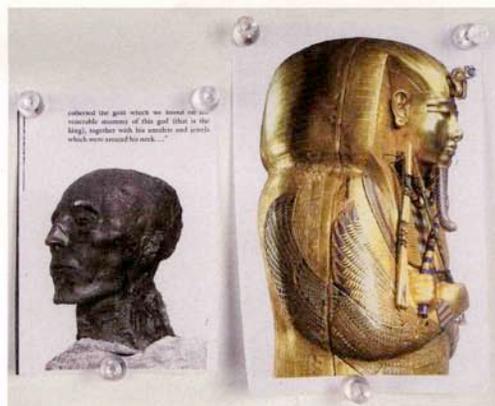
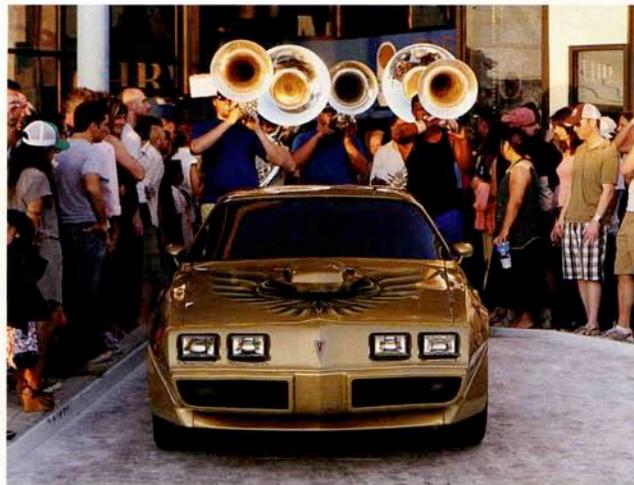


(On previous spread)  
REN 2008 portraits  
Photos: Chris Winget

Performance stills  
from REN, 2008  
Photos, top: Kelly Thomas;  
bottom: Chris Winget

Storyboard details  
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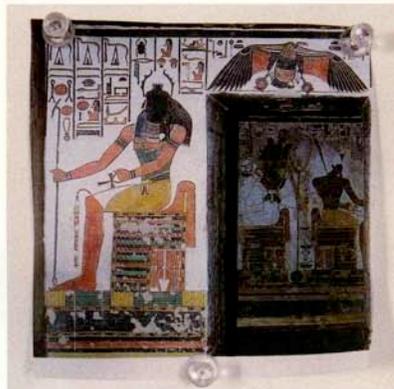
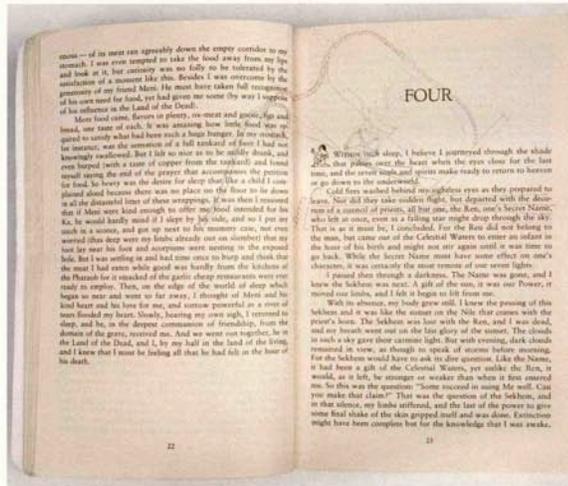
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Mailer's *Ancient Evenings*  
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