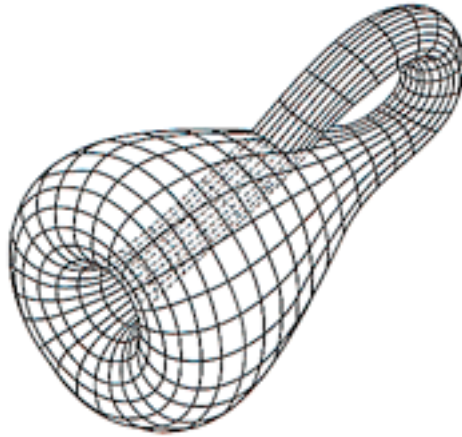


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## Matthew Barney and a Klein Bottle of Vaseline



### Betrayal

*... from within their nearly mad identification with it, they never cease to feel the appeal of its being violated.*

–Leo Bersani, discussing the relationship of gay men to masculinity (209)

Betrayal was the overwhelming sense I had on discovering that Matthew Barney was not in fact gay. I felt like I had been fooled. What I had initially read as deflationary strategies: opening the male body to an eroticizing gaze, opening its orifices for penetration; surfacing the homoerotics of sport; doing drag; engaging in wildly transformative gender play within a continuous field of potential sexual morphologies; showing gender as performative; showing the body as infinitely mutable and prosthetically promiscuous ... the significance of all these gestures were suddenly transformed and I felt compelled to read Barney's oeuvre as an elaborate system for the reinscription of dominant masculinist modes within a changed, postmodern situation. For as Bersani points out, "The sexist power that defines maleness in most human cultures can easily

survive social revolutions; what it perhaps cannot survive is a certain way of assuming, or taking on, that power” (209).

In reading Barney’s work then, what is at stake is the question of the possible transformations of masculinities in a milieu which must account for the critiques not just of feminism but of queerness. It is equally probable that Barney stands as evidence of a regressive retrenchment of the masculine in these circumstances as it is that he stands for just the opposite, a masculinity that can renounce a determined mastery of a dominant role in relation to nature, women, creation, self, etc.

Further, what complicates a reading of Barney for queer men is the particular implicatedness of their subjectivity in the definition of masculinity itself. Bersani directs our attention to the way homosexuality is located at a point of extreme ambivalence in relation to the masculine. “The logic of homosexual desire includes the potential for a loving identification with the gay man’s enemies ... the object of that desire necessarily includes a socially determined and socially pervasive definition of what it means to be a man” (208). The contradiction within a gay male erotics, within a gay male politics, is that masculinity is defined centrally (though not exclusively) in terms of heterosexual object choice; to choose otherwise is to compromise one’s masculinity. And yet, to be gay is to choose another man. So, the consummation of desire confirms the object as something less than masculine and therefore less than ideal; only unconsummated desire can remain “perfectly gay.” At the same time, there is a significant investment in both the consummation of desire and the validation of a kind of masculine subjectivity (a queer one) that does not depend on a hetero object choice or on gender norms.

Homosexuality, from this perspective, can become a pleasure in the defeat of masculinity as signed in the opening of the putatively male body to the erotic pleasures of another male. For Bersani, the subversiveness of homosexuality generally, and anal intercourse specifically (as a sign of sexualized submission), lies in the way that, “it never stops re-presenting the internalized phallic male as the infinitely loved object of sacrifice (222). Gayness might then be an apotheosis of the fallen, corrupted and violated male. But even by this definition, the relational reliance on an idealized masculinity (prior to the fall) remains. (And so does the concomitant and potentially misogynist dissidentification with femininity.) The gay man loves the man he never becomes.

In *Refused Identification*, Butler suggests an inverse formula at work in the logic of hetero-masculine subjectivity. “The straight man *becomes* (mimes, cites, appropriates, assumes the status of) the man he ‘never’ loved and ‘never’ grieved” (147). This enquoted never-never refers to a doubly disavowed primary homosexuality that founds masculinity such that, “a masculine gender is formed from the refusal to grieve the masculine as a possibility of love” (146).

### **Impossible**

*... sex is at once given and accomplished—given as that which is (always) yet to be accomplished ...*

—Judith Butler(165)

*... we are often in the melancholic bind of having lost our own sex in order, paradoxically, to become it.*

— Judith Butler (166)

By these formulations gay and straight men are structural inversions of each other. Each is contained within the other and acts as a locus of impossibility. Not only is the impossibility determined in that the idealized positions are never achievable perfectly (as performances—imperfect imitations of gender ideals in the Butlerian sense), but each position in this structural relation is characterized by an uninhabitability guaranteed by the logical contradictions of its very definition. Not only is gender dependent on sexuality rather than sexuality being an expression of gender, but both gender and sexuality are impossible. They are impossible and at the same time they are mandatory.

If sexual orientation could be considered not in relation to the gender of one's object choices but rather in terms of a kind of vector of attention, activity or consciousness, we might see the gay man as being oriented to loving and the straight man to becoming. Libidinal investments of any sort and in any direction are a threat to masculine becoming; they raise the specter of that melancholic primary homosexuality. They threaten with a lack incompatible with full being. Love threatens masculinity with formlessness, with the loss of self that comes in sexual activity. The ideal masculinity is a thing in and of itself, fully formed, neither containing nor contained. The orientation of the gay man is to the perversion of masculinity. Gayness shows a masculinity resigned to imperfection, open to penetration and to the scopophilic pleasures of the other; it is therefore, by its mere presence, always a threat to masculinity. Gayness is in fact invested in threatening masculinity and perverting it, while masculinity is always under siege. Masculinity is a defensive posture *contra* femininity, *contra* love, *contra* the

formless. From the defensiveness of masculinity follows its aggressiveness, its strenuousness and its violence.

There is a possibility of overstating the case here and producing an idealization of gayness as a liberating force, marching on the body of masculinity. Instead, what I see is a symbolic system that locks opposed subject positions in an interminable struggle. These are the terms that define a predicament that plays itself out in the field presented by Barney's work and in the interpretation of that work which is implicated in the same struggle.

*Drawing Restraint 7* (1993), made just prior to the commencement of work on the *Cremaster Cycle* serves as a convenient allegory of the locked struggle of the hetero/homo male pair. In it, Barney plays the Kid, a naked, hairless, neutered goat-boy with nascent horn buds protruding from his scalp. The Kid, chases his tail in the front seat of a stretch limo, and in the rear, two satyrs, one half goat, the other half ram, wrestle. The car drives ceaselessly through the bridges and tunnels of the Manhattan night while the satyrs in the back compete to be the one to make a mark in the condensation on the moon-roof. In the end, the goat succeeds. Then the two align their Achilles tendons and flay one another (Spector 22).

To return to where I started, it is possible to read Barney either way: as visionary or reactionary. The majority of critics tend to the former interpretation. When the latter is the verdict, the fact of Barney's heterosexuality is often cited (and I would guess, most often by queer critics). Bruce Hugh Russell, for example, in a *Parchute* review of his work, marks feminism and gay liberation as the antecedents to the situation in which he

describes the *Cremaster Cycle* as, “... the eschatological struggle of the already castrated heterosexual male to prevent the interiorization of a previously uncontested vestige of male sexual differentiation, the testicles, from their absorption into the body ...” (42). Commenting on the disappearance of Barney’s penis from the *Cremaster Cycle*, he writes, “The penis phallus has been ‘disappeared’ to prevent its further desecration by female and gay male gazes.” In explanation of Barney’s flirtation with gayness and anal penetration—perhaps the most difficult aspect of his work to figure out—Russell writes, “an act of profound sensuality and intimacy is caricatured as a performance of anxiety and violation to be endured, nothing less than penetration as abjection” (43). He goes on to say that, “he is penetrated to demonstrate that he is man enough to resist the nominative power of the act” (43).

So, why should it matter that Barney is straight? (And it should be noted that this is a presumption arrived at from scant evidence, like his recently publicized liaison with Björk and the ensuing birth of their love-child; others have made a case for a kind of queerness, under the inclusive sense of the term encompassing a perverse heterosexuality.) Why especially, if we have renounced the concept of the authority of the author? Isn’t this a reinvestment in just that authority?

Compare this problem to Kobena Mercer’s reading and re-reading of Mapplethorpe’s photographs of black male nudes. He introduces the material as the site of a guilty scopic pleasure attended by a troubling recognition of the racist and fetishistic nature of the gaze, which frames the photos. The reassessment of the photographs allows for his identification with Mapplethorpe along the vector of homoeroticism, and

for a redemption of the work as being *about* racism rather than an example of it. Mercer cites the “modernist tradition” of textual ambivalence as the basis for the possibility of racist and antiracist readings as well as homophobic and homoerotic ones (288). But then he seems to refer to social identity as the arbiter of connotative meaning for both the interpreter and the author of work, effecting the same kind of incorporative collapse of identity which allows for an authoritative interpretation on the basis of authorial intent within the modernist tradition of criticism outlined and critiqued by Jones in *Body Art* (149). Granted, Mercer’s recourse to authorial intent is strategically motivated, “it is necessary to argue that it really does matter who is speaking whenever artists, because of their sexual, gender, or racial identity, are assigned ‘minority’ status” (288). AIDS and NEA controversies created a situation in which there was a compelling political reason for a black gay critic to want to align himself with the defenders of Mapplethorpe rather than his detractors. and just as significantly, not to disallow the availability for pleasure of the photographs in question, even if that put Mercer in the strange and problematic position of identifying with the white gaze.

    Mercer’s strategies still leave him trapped in a scopic logic governed by racialized phallicism. What he can credit Mapplethorpe for, is bringing that logic into view within his work; it can be *about* rather than an instance *of* racism. But what if Mapplethorpe were an unknown? What if Mercer thought Mapplethorpe was black? Clearly it is possible to read Barney as gay (or at least queer); I in fact did. And doing so, whether out of ignorance or through a willful misreading demands the assignment of a very different kind of meaning to the work. The negative valences of the reading of

Barney's work as reactionary depend on the assignment to the author of a heterosexual defensiveness.

Instead of underlining the dependence of interpretation on the specification of the identity of the author, what this might reveal is that there can be no reading without the projection of a sexual orientation (or race) onto the author function. Authorship itself cannot function unsexed. Or alternatively, interpretation might not be able to function in an undifferentiated state. The work, before interpretation, is formless and produces in the viewer an anxiety which must be resolved by attribution. If this can be achieved in reference to "the real," well, so it is, and if not, a phantasmatic assignment will be made according to a strategic expediency, the libidinal investments of the interpreter, and the logic of the sex and gender structures in which they find themselves embedded and positioned. In this way, the problem of sexing the object is analogous to the problem of interpretation itself; what is presented to consciousness as formlessness produces an anxiety that demands resolution by the assignment of significance.

The other very interesting question is, to what degree is a text or a body open to any interpretation, to any reading, or to any use? In terms of a the libidinal investment of a gay viewer of Barney's work (or body), this is one of the things at stake, together with the question of the presence or absence of an ideology of sexual and gender normativity. Interpolating from the use of pornography, it should be a simple matter to dispense with the necessity of an attribution of gayness to the body in question as a prerequisite for scopic pleasure. We can get off on Barney's nudity or watching him shove an ice screw up his ass whether or not he is gay, whether or not he likes it, and



whether or not he wants us to. This is the price of his submission to the camera's eye, and what, from that point on, makes his masculinity suspect (as available for both our use and his potential redemption— if that is what he judges it demands). However, given the queer interest in the violation of masculinity, desire directed towards his body is inclined to want it to be “really gay” and really available. To be available admits the possibility of the reciprocity of desire, a consolation for the melancholy of gender and the impossibility of inhabiting the ideal masculinity. Instead, we will inhabit each other and extinguish ourselves and all necessity in the friction of that insertion. The intimation that he is not “really gay” provokes disappointment and resentment and I suspect even fuels the vehemence of counter-homophobic critiques as punishment. In this move, the gay male critic, ironically, becomes straight in that he mirrors the melancholic incorporation of masculinity, disavowing the attachment and the grief and transferring his self-reproach to the other.

### **Androgyny**

*There is a kind of intellectual melancholy in the loss of a third sex that never existed and so can never be mourned ...*  
– Adam Phillips (158)

In *Drawing Restraint 7*, as the Kid, Barney characteristically casts himself as a third term outside of the conflict between a binary opposition; beyond difference or prior to it, maybe even mediating between it. In the complex of systems that overlap and present themselves through his pieces, this idealization of an undifferentiated or balanced, androgynous state is repeatedly presented. Neville Wakefield describes the video *Mile High Threshold: Flight With the Anal Sadistic Warrior* (1991) as a reinvention

of the Deleuzian body without organs, “a body no longer obsessed with genital accomplishment” (121). The production of this ungendered, polymorphously perverse body is celebrated as a kind of triumph of the will over biology. Within Barney’s cosmology, it is an example of the state of restrained pure potential out of which comes creativity. Barney returns to a pre-Freudian model of sexual differentiation, the so-called, “one-sex” model wherein, “sexual organs had been construed as internal or external versions of a single genital reproductive system” (Wakefield 123). This system is seen as freer, more elastic, and less polarized than the modern system. His nostalgic strategy performs the same work as the strategies of ungendering or androgenizing. According to Katy Siegel, “You could say that Barney makes art about the reluctance to occupy the role of the individual adult male in the modern world, a role destined for friction” (134). And if Barney made art about a refusal (not just a reluctance) to occupy that role, motivated by a solidarity with women and queers (not just a fear of becoming a target of critical friction), I might be inclined to a more sympathetic assessment of the project.

### **Masculinity Reprised**

*... I hate maleness and I hate male domination, but because it is so culturally embedded, I can readily fall into it ...*

–Vitto Acconci(Jones 135)

Barney’s appropriation of the Freudian script in *Mile High Threshold* suggests another possible reading of his obsession with the pregenital. We can read his antics as counterphobic exercises: a regression to the anal-sadistic phase, as is seen in Freud’s case of the Wolfman, a defense against a fear of castration (Russell 39). Ultimately, it is

difficult to see Barney as having renounced any of the privilege that accrues to the bourgeois straight white man. To the contrary, Barney's work suggests a heroic passage to masculine maturity and artistic achievement in a traditional masculinist mode, with the difference of an extended detour in a fantasyland of utopic polysexuality. This detour is not just a temporary escape from the strain of inhabiting a politically contested maleness, but it seems presumed to have apotropaic power. Tempered by a dalliance with drag and anal penetration, he is free to become a perfected masculine subject, now untouchable by the complaints of the marginalized subjects that he has incorporated on his way to differentiation and exclusion: the sensitive man for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

### **Creation**

The hallmarks of Barney's process are strenuousness, violence, proliferation and scale. His latest work, the *Cremaster Cycle* (1994-2003) is monumental: "a self enclosed aesthetic system consisting of five feature-length films that explore the process of creation ... not just cinematically, but also through the photographs, drawings, sculptures and installations the artist produces in conjunction with each episode" according to the exhibition guide (5). It is difficult to discuss *Cremaster* without reference to Wagner and *Gesamtkunstwerk*. or Nietzsche and the will to power. If we see allusions to Busby Berkeley in *Cremaster I*, Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will* is lurking in the shadows (Bryson 32). The creation of *Cremaster* resembles the Hollywood studio system in that its fabrication is expensive, long term, and highly controlled in terms of production, distribution, and even branding. Barney is produced as an iconic

branded entity in relationship to the commercial distribution of an exquisitely produced and tailored star vehicle, which effects his insertion into the art world as the consummate art-star (complete with a logo in the form of the “field emblem”). Moreover, Barney’s feint, which hides his penis and his phallicism behind a fantasy of genderlessness, functions differently from, for example, Acconci’s obsessive performance of masturbatory rites. Rather than surfacing the erotics of the art market, Barney enacts them, “the commodification of male procreative prowess via a hidden mechanics of transference, whereby masculinity is most valuable when it is carefully hidden behind (and conflated with) the objects of art” (Jones 138).

So just as Pollock served as a machistic antidote to postwar anxiety about declining masculinity (Perchuk 32), we are served a dose of Barney to address today’s anxieties. The list of metaphors for masculinity is almost identical: space, scale, action, trace, energy, intensity, athleticism, heroics, presence, and violence. Barney’s involvement in his own mythologizing and marketing has parallels as well; Rothko remarked that, “Pollock is a self-contained and sustained advertising concern” (quoted in Perchuk 41). (Barney himself hints at a genealogical relationship to Pollock through the inclusion of Serra’s reenactment of *Castings* with Vaseline in *Cremaster III*.)

In her discussion of Pollock, Jones points out that creativity is the central concern of the male artist within both modernism and postmodernism. Creativity is what allows him to separate himself from the taint of femininity associated with bourgeois domesticity; a differentiation achieved by dint of his “genius.” Essentially, what the artist creates *is* himself; through the mechanism of performance, the artist and the work are

conflated. According to Jones, the artist “performs himself and is performed through modernist criticism as being identical with his work” (65). This move, taken as the innovation of the “pollockian performative,” and becoming typical of masculine artistic production after Pollock, seems a particularly apt description of Barney’s practices which actually foreground a masculine self creation within artistic production.

## Myth

*Every myth confronts a problem, and it deals with it by showing that it is analogous to other problems, or else it deals with several problems simultaneously and shows that they are analogous to one another. ... A solution that is not a real solution to a specific problem is a way of relieving intellectual uneasiness and even existential anxiety ...*  
– Claude Lévi-Strauss (171)

While the *Cremaster* episodes have a kind of narrative trajectory, their logic is really more properly mythic as opposed to novelistic. Characters are flat and iconic—undeveloped archetypes that move along stiffly choreographed trajectories based on their location within the basic symbolic systems. There is little difference between the animate and the inanimate since all are characters in this sense, and play similar roles in the stories—the molten Vaseline as much as the Chrysler building or the Loughton Candidate.

The *Cremaster Cycle* could be seen as an elaborate set of variations on the mythic theme of male parthenogenesis. Watch as Barney gives birth to *himself* five different ways. The layering of metaphors, allusions, and appropriations is incredibly thick and dense, but there are a small number of guiding metaphorical systems. Most centrally there is the cremaster muscle which controls the ascent and descent of the

testicles to control their temperature. This vertical movement is connected intimately with an embryological notion of the migration of gonads during sexual differentiation from a neutral ungendered state to an ascended female morphology where they become ovaries or a descended male morphology where they become testes. From the athletic world, comes the notion of hypertrophy, the breakdown of muscle in order to grow muscles in weight training. Related to this is the notion of resistance—as in resistance training. For Barney, form comes from the struggle against resistance. Again, the systems collapse onto each other because the struggle of the hormonally catalyzed gonads against their destiny to ascend or descend is likened to the struggle against resistance. The undifferentiated state represents pure potential. The state of potential—of restraint against urges—is then mapped onto the effort to create an enclosed body by sealing all orifices. The Field Emblem, the cycle's "logo," is a sign of this state: an orifice crossed by a bar. The creation of form is the mysterious result of the alternation between desire and restraint wherein "something slips out." Finally this logo is a map of a territory in which the drama of restraint takes place; it refers not just to a field of play, but also to architecture more generally. (Spector 4-9,*passim*).

One of the most immediate sources of metaphors for mythic deployment is the body itself, which, like a host of other objects, is conveniently formed in the shape of a tube, replete with multiple paths for alimentary and sexual utilization. Lévi-Strauss sees the combinatorics of orifices (open for receiving, open for expelling, closed) as deployed in a cycle, which brings a hero through the various possibilities:

(1) the hero's body enters a tube that contains him; (2) a tube formerly contained in the hero's body emerges from it; (3) the hero's body becomes a

tube—something either goes in or comes out of it. The tube is first extrinsic, then intrinsic: the hero's body is first contained, then becomes a container. (162)

This same combinatorics is at play in the *Cycle* and in Barney's work more generally. For while the symbolic system finds expression morphologically in the characters of the cycle, the narrative movement is spacialized as a traversal of systems transposed onto architecture or geography (or time). Key moments of tube traversal occur in each episode of the cycle as well as moments of exteriorization. *Cremaster 3*, the staging of the mediate and most undifferentiated state in the work, is the most crowded and complete with multiple versions of every aspect of the tube cycle.

The image of the Klein bottle holds a special place in Lévi-Strauss' analysis of American myth in *The Jealous Potter*. This mythic complex, like Barney's is full of tubes and orifices, and the Klein bottle's topography performs the same logical trick that the myths do: it effects the continuous connection and reversal of the inside and the outside. A Klein bottle's exterior and interior are one continuous surface. The bottle instantiates the transitivity of containing and contained. The nature of mythic thought might not be conveniently reduced to a single meaning, but the basic ontological problem of the imposition of form on matter is at the heart of all these symbolic systems and it can be seen as analogous to the problem of gender, or of culture, or of creation, among other things. Contemplation of these problems "in the shape of a Klein bottle" is characteristic of mythic thought as it rehearses all the possible relations of matter to form.

If we take Lévi-Strauss' suggestion that the cycling transitivity of mythic thought serves only to allay intellectual anxiety about unsolvable existential dilemmas, we have

another way of understanding *Cremaster*. The linked problematics of masculinity and form circulate endlessly in a combinatorics of orifices and gender. Matter is to form as sexual undifferentiation is to masculinity, as potential is to activity, etc. So Barney valorizes the state of undifferentiation as pure potential and disavows production. Production is another impossible site. Not only is this a strategy for relieving castration anxiety and dodging feminist and queer critique, it is an allegory of sublimation. Desire, being constrained, transcends and becomes beauty. Form occurs (as if by magic/genius) as a byproduct of a struggle to constrain desire (as opposed to the formless), in other words, to become male. And since the achievement of masculine identity has collapsed into the work of art, a circular trajectory finds that sexual undifferentiation leads to art as well. Here too there is a link from the poetics of form to the melancholy of the heterosexual male: “The raw material, pulled out of the limitless range of potentialities, is lessened by the fact that, of all these potentialities, only a few will be realized” (Lévi-Strauss 178). Form entails a loss of potential, the foreclosure of possibilities, which must be grieved by the creator. Alternatively, this loss is subjected to the double disavowal that constitutes a melancholic incorporation; no other forms were possible and they never grieved—the very logic of the ideology of perfection—that which allows one to inhabit the subject position of masculinity and of the artist.



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