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National College of Art and Design  
Faculty of Fine Art Painting

Matthew Barney and Surrealist Vision  
- A Critical Dictionary.

By Stephen Dunne

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## INTRODUCTION

Since 1988 the American artist Matthew Barney has exhibited using a wide range of media, particularly video and sculptural works presented in installation form. To date Barney has exhibited ten videos since leaving Yale in 1989. He has shown work in major shows around the world including Documenta IX and the 1993 Venice Biennale. To coincide with each film props and sculptural pieces are exhibited creating bizarre installation spaces.

The video works to date are:

Scab Action 1988, Field Dressing, 1989,  
Pace Car for the Hubris Pill, 1991,  
Delay of Game 1991, Radial Drill 1991,  
Ottoshaft 1992, Drawing Restraint 7 1993,  
Cremaster 4 1994/1995, Cremaster 1 1995,  
Cremaster 5 1997.

Alongside the videos sculptural and installation pieces have included bizarre and disturbing materials to further elaborate the work outside the frame of video/cinema into the world of actual experience. Materials such as medical and sports equipment, petroleum jelly, silicone gel, tapioca and stainless steel ice screws. The works made from these substances are often exhibited nearby the film work and as such place them as sculptural objects in their own right. However since his early college projects involving weights and pulleys along with climbing the installation spaces to the epic *Cremaster* series the bizarre and strange has informed the work.





The nature of Barney's work and the visual strangeness of it led the research in such a way as to trace a clear link with the much older tradition of surrealism. In drawing parallels between the two, both mainstream surrealism or that which surrounded Andre Breton, and something referred to as dissident surrealism or the group surrounding Georges Bataille are discussed.

Much recent discussion of surrealism has included the rehabilitation of Bataille. Bataille's version of surrealism revolves around the perverse, the monstrous and the violent much of which it became apparent are concerns of Barney's.

In looking at Bataille and his group there was a publication known as *Documents* which founded in 1929 also included a *Critical Dictionary*. This mock dictionary, subversive in intent was to be a vehicle for expressing the group's surrealist definition of the world. To call it a critical dictionary implied subversion because a dictionary can never be critical; it must never be questioning its content. This element was to allow for slippage and the introduction of the *formless* or *informe*. Bataille's aim here was for a negation of definition. The overall project was to define words by the effects they induce and not their sense. "A dictionary begins when it no longer gives the meanings of words but their jobs". (Georges Bataille, *Documents* No. 2, pp.40, 1929).

This anti-dictionary was by design opposed to completion and due to the erratic and irregular contributions it barely followed alphabetical order. *Documents* lasted until 1931, it was a lavish production but its two-year run was ill fated due to disagreement amongst the contributors over Bataille and his increasing dominance. Later many of its contributors had work published in *Minotaure*, which lasted from 1933 until 1939. Contributors included



Michel Leiris, Robert Desnos and Marcel Griaule for *Documents* but later work from Dali, Brassai, Man Ray, Raoul Ubac and Hans Bellmer. Importantly *Minotaure* united both Bataille's group and Breton's in opposition to the rise of fascism. Bataille and Breton were intensely opposed to each others views, Bataille favoured alteration towards baseness and Breton saw Bataille as an "Excrement Philosopher" (Second Surrealist Manifesto pp.36). Breton was the dominant force behind surrealism and aggressively organised the group through inclusion and exclusion. Bataille as excluded from this was similarly aggressive but more so in thought and writing than in deeds.

The thesis takes the form of the *Critical Dictionary* published in *Documents* and uses the phrases Bataille used. In a discussion of Matthew Barney's work through the dictionary a new order has been imposed. The original order was not alphabetical, and this one is. Form has been imposed on the formless so that the overlapping nature of the ideas presented by Barney's work and surrealist ideas can be seen. The A to Z format is logical and also it prevents favouring one term over another. Rather the whole of Barney's work is discussed and overlapping material further emphasises the unforced nature of linking his work to the Surrealist tradition. The terms to be discussed along with a brief description of each term and it's relationship to Barney is as follows:

**Anamorph:** Barney's sculptural pieces are discussed here including their relationship to Bataille's *informe* and to Dali who wish to place the viewer in front of a "Psycho Atmospheric Anamorphic Object".

**Base Materialism:** Barney presents many images relating to a half-man, half-beast hybrid so to Bataille writes of the axis of man which when altered from vertical to horizontal relates to baseness and bestiality.





**Caves:** In Barney's work images of holes and caves abound, either the body in a hole or holes in the body so to Bataille writes of the cave paintings of primitive man and the urge to despoil surfaces. The cave of the orifice features strongly in Bataille's writing particularly the anus.

**Double:** Barney presents many doublings and symmetries, but for the surrealists a doubling of form and the ideas of *convulsive beauty* and *convulsive identity* are discussed.

**Ecstasy:** In the *Drawing Restraint 7* series Barney presents fighting and ecstatic creatures. So too ecstasy is discussed relating to Bataille's theories of excess and of baseness.

**Game:** Play and games of both a literal and an allegorical nature exist in Barney's films from the sports aspect to the axis of alteration which similarly pervades in Bataille's writing.

**Geometry/Symmetry:** There are symbolic uses of logos and gestures in a film such as *Cremaster 1* which features performers being manipulated by symmetrical diagrams in a puppet performance. The symmetry of the body also is discussed here.

**Hat:** Fetishism such as the fetish presented as the *Cremaster* project a fetish of Barney's own testicles presented as epic project or the wheel modification made in *Cremaster 4* which includes bulbous shapes in a bizarre pit-stop. For Man Ray's hat photographs a theory was presented relating to the fetishisation of ordinary objects.



**Informe:** Formlessness and gooey matter exist in Barney's use of petroleum jelly but for Bataille this term was central in the *Critical Dictionary* as a subverter of all form, for alteration on a grand scale.

**Jouer/Dejouer:** Play and misplay inform the overall game implied in Barney's work and the nature of this misplay was termed by Bataille as the "accursed share" (Documents 7, pp.46, 1930). The "accursed share" was attributed to values excluded from predominant forms of civilised culture the profane instead of the sacred for example.

**Labyrinth:** Barney presents labyrinthine structure and in *Drawing Restraint 7* presents the labyrinth of New York as metaphor including the presentation of *Satyrs* within. For Bataille the labyrinth presented the formless and the Minotaur who represented man and beast combined.

**Mantis:** Barney's *Drawing Restraint 7* shows fighting mantis-like creatures; mantis-like in the sense that they fight or mate and one is overcome by the other. For the surrealists the mantis was prized as an imitator of nature and which killed its mate after making a form of "mad love" precious to Breton in his novel "L'amour Fou".

**Objective chance:** This refers directly to Breton, yet Barney relates to this term in a will for *hubris*. Relates in opposition to Breton and this term for the language of destiny, which is unconscious, for Barney aggressively assaults Breton in the sense that it is planned out systematically. Bataille was opposed to *objective chance* also as he saw reality as something to be recut consciously not through chance but through mechanisms like language.





**Photography:** Barney re-presents his world photographically and cinematically. The early surrealists saw the camera as an enlarger of reality within which psychoanalysis and the cracks within reality could be manipulated. A fantasy world is presented by Barney as is a surreal world explored by the likes of Man Ray and Brassai.

**Rotten:** In Barney's work the rotten or more precisely the clearing away of the rotten to reveal the new, a decomposition of form which similar to Bataille leads to alteration.

**Screen:** Thanks to the screen no representation of the world ever reaches the viewer. In such protection the spectator finds himself carefully isolated from any kind of reality or unreality that might be presented.

**Third term/Jouer/Dejouer II:** The subversive nature of laughter. Barney presents tragedy or more precisely a subversive, eccentric world that is tragic yet self-consciously comic. It invokes laughter in its bizarreness, laughter which for Bataille was central in subversion, laughter as scatological response to unknowing.

**Universal:** Constants within the work create the universal with the element of humour again placed as a central subversive and surreal element constantly woven into the structure of Bataille's thought and Barney's films.

**Value:** The generation of meaning in culture by binary oppositions. Oppositions which structure Barney's work and Bataille's thought.



**Wind/Unwind:** Yin and Yang, the use of opposites to create the whole. Male and female, climbing and descending, the opposite as central in Barney's world and again in Bataille's writing.

**X-Marks the Spot:** Documents or evidence imply crime. This term refers to work exhibited as though it was the scene of a crime. This refers to the need to leave a mark, and the nature of the marks made as an act of defacement.

*Documents* presented a combination of ethnology, aesthetics, philosophy and writing, yet it did so in a subversive or criminal minded way. It's contributors wished to present fetishism, subversion and revolution.

**Zoology:** The range of characters and influences in Barney's world including his own characters and the mythological references he makes such as the Narcissus myth explored in *Cremaster 4*.



## ANAMORPH

In 1991, Barney exhibited a piece called "Transexualis (decline)" (**Fig. 1**), (Artforum pp.22, April 97), described as a walk in cooler; cast petroleum jelly decline bench; human chorionic gonadotrophin; silicone gel pectoral form; and twin video monitors. Similarly Dali on a number of occasions made images which are clearly melting or *anamorphic*. Dali wrote an essay explaining how he wished to place the viewer in front of a "psycho atmospheric anamorphic object" (Dali, Art and Writing, pp.167).

*Transexualis* by Matthew Barney would seem to be just that object. It is atmospheric in its containment in a walk-in fridge, alludes to the psychological in it's relationship to both the viewer and the allusions to weightlifting or muscle development and anamorphic as the whole construction within the fridge is made from barely solid petroleum jelly. To compound it's strangeness the twin monitors display Barney's video work suspended with climbing harnesses from the ceiling.

The piece alludes to Bataille's formless in that it could melt and dissolve easily. The *informe* or formless is presented and therein lies an implied blurring of boundaries. The "trans" in "*Transexualis*", the decline also in the title refers not only to the decline bench but would seem to hint at the decline into the formless should the fridge be switched off. It seems the whole *psycho atmospheric anamorphic* nature of the object is on the brink of decline into the *informe* and entropification. It contains both a reversal of the resistance to form and a bare holding together of form. If it were exhibited as formless melted petroleum jelly it would allude directly to Bataille's statement of "the Universe as spit or a crushed worm" (Visions of Excess, pp.31).





Resistance too has been a common thread since the *Drawing Restraint* series described by Barney as “a series of operations designed to defeat the facility of drawing” (Parkett 45, 1995, pp.60). Barney used his own body and experience of athletic training, combining the biological ability for hypertrophic muscle development with an understanding of the self-imposed restraint/release inherited from de Sade, whom the surrealists, not least Bataille, prized as a subverter of reality. Indeed Breton mentions de Sade in the *First Surrealist Manifesto* (pp.156 ), as does Man Ray in a number of portraits of de Sade, both photographic and painted.





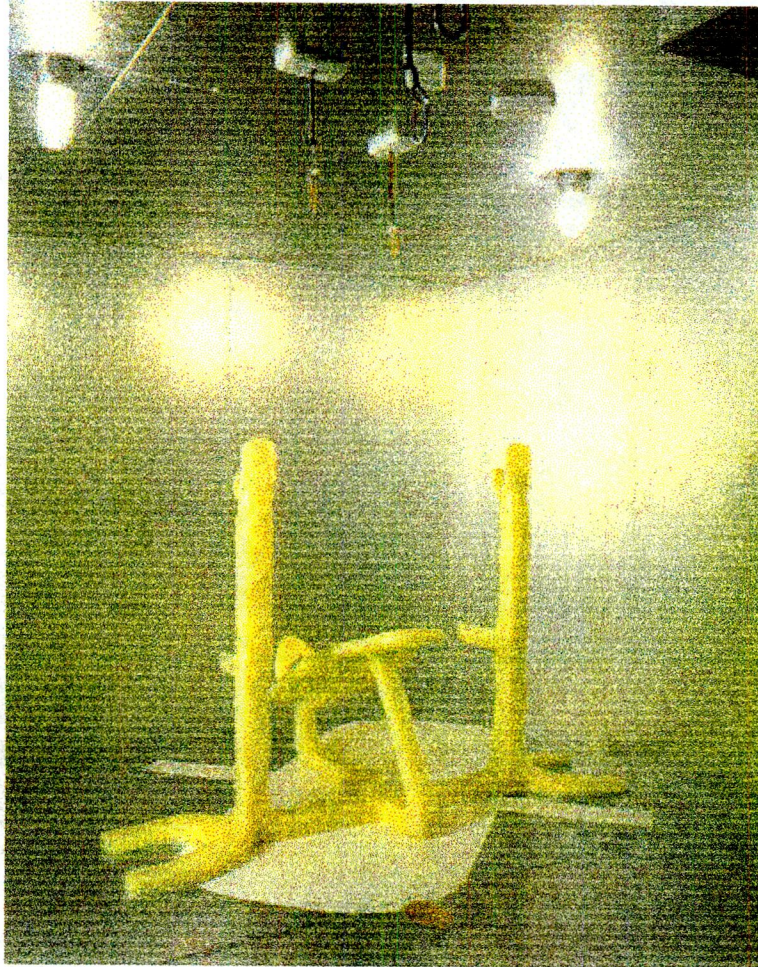


Fig. 1 Transexualis (decline). Mixed media (1991)



## BASE MATERIALISM

In both *Documents* and *Visions of Excess* for Bataille the dictionary entry base materialism was specifically referring to the opposition between the horizontal and vertical axes and of a rotation of them. The mental axis as the one connecting the eyes and mouth issuing language, the biological axis connects mouth to anus, ingestion to excretion. For Bataille to lower or rotate these axes was to herald a transformation into the animal or bestial. In the body the head is at the top; in society it is the king; and in the universe it is God. However, once this horizontal/vertical axis is rotated, the whole lot topples to baseness and filth. However not to impose a new set of values, a labyrinth of possibility is presented where everything is unstable. This becomes an allegory for the fall of allegory itself, embodied also in Bataille's story "The Solar Anus" (*Visions of Excess*, pp.5).

Barney presents many characters, base in a half-man sense. Both the satyrs and *The Loughton Candidate* (**Fig. 2**) are presented as half-beast. The animal is present in the form of a ram or goat which leads to Pan and to the devil, which again leads to base thoughts and subversion in an evil sense, both in behaviour and in desire.

For Barney to assume the persona of a Pan-like creature links him directly to the axes of man, rotated towards baseness through alteration.







**Fig. 2** The Loughton Candidate. Still from *Cremaster 4*, (1995)



## CAVES

Matthew Barney's ever-evoking symmetry plays the game of holes in the body and the body in holes. In his works numerous orifices are presented then penetrated and invaded. The orifice is mouth and anus, entry and exit point. In *Cremaster 4* the *Loughton Candidate* has holes in his head awaiting future horns or the holes on his feet where the faeries attach precious pearls with needles. Later he travels through a gooey tunnel beneath the island only to emerge from a hole in the ground after a traumatic journey through the island's/body's interior passage (Fig. 3). Escape from a hole, escape and re-emergence is the continued metaphor where Barney alludes to Harry Houdini the master escapologist.

In *Documents* Bataille talks of the caves in relation to the myth of Narcissus and of the need to make marks, to deface or despoil and of how original cave painting was simply the urge to despoil. Rosalind Krauss writes in *October Magazine* that Bataille suggests

*to draw an animal on a cave is to possess it, to have already succeeded in hunting it.*

(October 36 1992, pp.39).

Also for Bataille the cave signified the dark place where the Minotaur was discovered along with the terror of the labyrinth. (*Visions of Excess*, pp.171). He also mentions how in the case the myth of Narcissus is replaced by the Minotaur, the transparency of the mirror replaced by the terror of the beast within. (*Visions of Excess*, pp.180).





In Cremaster 4 we see the narcissistic Barney crawling up the passage of his Isle of Man, staring at the holes on his head in the mirror and becoming altered in the tunnel. The myths of Narcissus and of the Minotaur in the cave are invoked here as is the Bataillan gesture of crawling metaphorically up his internal passage.





**Fig. 3** Still from *Cremaster 4* (1995)





## DOUBLE

Images of the double persist in Matthew Barney's work. There are obvious doubles such as the Siamese twins in *Cremaster 5*. (Fig. 4) The two identical fighting satyrs from *Drawing Restraint 7* which when shown is always displayed on twin monitors. However this use of doubling and symmetry of form is an optical device whereas a doubling on much deeper levels also occurs within the work. For instance the Isle of Man doubling with the body of a man or the *Loughton Candidate* aiming for a sexual doubling implied in the Loughton ram with it's twin sets of horns.

In *Compulsive Beauty* Hal Foster writes that the concept of *Convulsive Beauty* is at the core of surrealism and representation of this aesthetic exists essentially in photography. (Compulsive Beauty, pp.23). The process of replicating, manipulating and doubling, presents us with the copy a convulsed reality. In the world of fantasy wherein resides Matthew Barney's representation of reality is a doubling or convulsion of the real and fantastic as though in a distorted mirror version of the world. This presents an invented performative space.

Within *Convulsive Beauty* lies also the concept of *Convulsive Identity* (Hal Foster, Compulsive Beauty, pp.28). Borrowing from Freud and psychoanalysis the surrealists link to the uncanny, with a return to the regressed. This, according to Hal Foster, means that trauma must somehow inform surrealist art (Compulsive Beauty, pp.23). Also Hal Foster discusses here how Freud distinguished primal fantasies in our psychic life; that of seduction, the primal scene proper and that of castration. These scenes were seen by Freud as fundamental in sorting out the basic riddles of the origins of understanding sexuality, the individual and sexual difference.



The convulsed identities Barney assumes in the *Cremaster* series recreate these scenes in many guises. Recreated, the seducer takes the form of Barney cast as *the Magician* in *Cremaster 5* where his romantic figure is involved with the "*Queen of Chain*" (played by Ursula Andress).

The castration element is evident in both the *Loughton Candidate* in *Cremaster 4* and the Giant in *Cremaster 5* where through prosthetic effects any appearance of genitalia are eroded. Finally the primal scene proper is not featured in the work to date, yet the issue of the origin of the individual is not at the core whereas sexuality and sexual difference are.







Fig. 4 The Queen's Ushers. Still from *Cremaster 5* (1997)





## ECSTASY

*Sensibility in a pure state, joy that is insupportable, useless, impossible and joyless.*

(G. Bataille, *Encyclopaedia Acephalica*, pp.156)

For this entry in *Documents*, Bataille writes of the architecture of the human form as being transformed in moments of greatest pain or pleasure. Then, says Bataille, the subject will grip his or her neck and throwing the head fully back, will assume the position in which it is the mouth that is at the end of the vertebral column which will issue an expressive cry. Indeed Bataille is best known as a writer of pornographic fiction from "The Story of the Eye" or "Tears of Eros". For him the pornographic was the most physically immediate aspect of literature and the most unclassifiable in its unacceptability.

Pornography also links Bataille directly to the subversion of de Sade, who remains virtually unpublishable and similarly physically immediate in his writing.

"Mile High Threshold (Flight of the Anal Sadistic Warrior)" was the title of an early Barney piece (Pace Car for the Hubris Pill Catalogue, pp.30). It was in this piece that Barney climbed the gallery walls and filled his orifices with petroleum jelly in the act of self-enclosure, an ecstatic quest for enclosure which fetishised the anal. At the end of the piece Barney inserted various objects into his orifices and in doing so related directly to de Sade's and to Bataille's writing, which it would seem he was obviously aware.

Barney uses the myth of Marsyas the satyr in *Drawing Restraint 7*. According to myth Marsyas was an archetype of man and a symbol of the sexual poly-presence of nature who accidentally discovers the music of the gods.



Eventually the God Apollo challenges him to a contest, wins and has Marsyas flayed alive. In *Drawing Restraint 7* two sadistic satyrs fight each other in the back of a speeding car (Fig. 5). Their fighting is both vicious and sexually ambiguous as they attempt to overcome one another. Eventually one is overcome and has his horns snapped off.

Meanwhile the driver of the limousine in the film is chasing his tail/colon and is masochistically pulling it from within his body. Malice sadism and masochism are exhibited here as ecstatic ritualistic behaviour. The nature of what is going on is both decadent and celebratory a kind of sublime effort similar to Bataille's call for baseness and subversion in eroticism. This is very similar to de Sade whom the Surrealists valued as a subverter of the normal.







**Fig. 5** Still from *Drawing Restraint 7* (1993)



## GAME

Considering the entirety of Barney's work, the game is of alteration. Within *Cremaster 4* the game is to become the Loughton ram after alteration from his beginnings as the *Loughton Candidate*, which is in itself a representation of Barney as altered by special effects and prosthetics. If Barney alters himself to become the ram with the ascending and descending horns (sexual organs), then finally a sexual omnipotence or wholeness has been achieved; the gender game as metaphor.

In a more obvious game as metaphor Barney uses American football imagery. In "Pace Car for the Hubris Pill", he sites the video on an indoor football field placing mythical Jim Otto the footballer as central character. Otto played with an artificial knee for a number of years. Barney's game is of achieving the hubris pill. Hubris is excessive pride or defiance of the gods. Here the temptation or madness of wanting to be god on earth takes the form of a pill.

*Too large to be either swallowed or ignored,  
the hubris pill is offered as the intermediary or  
transporting agent to the biological space the  
other side of hypertrophy. Representing  
competition as opposed to training.*

(M. Barney, Pace Car for the Hubris, pp.11).

In the film Barney's game is of achieving the hubris pill. It involves a mock football game where the ball/pill undergoes a number of transformations.

*The hubris pill is a glucose tablet its actually a  
prehubris pill, glucose is the state of prehubris,  
then metabolic change turns it to tapioca, to  
meringue and on to pound cake.*

(M. Barney, Artforum, May 95, pp.69)



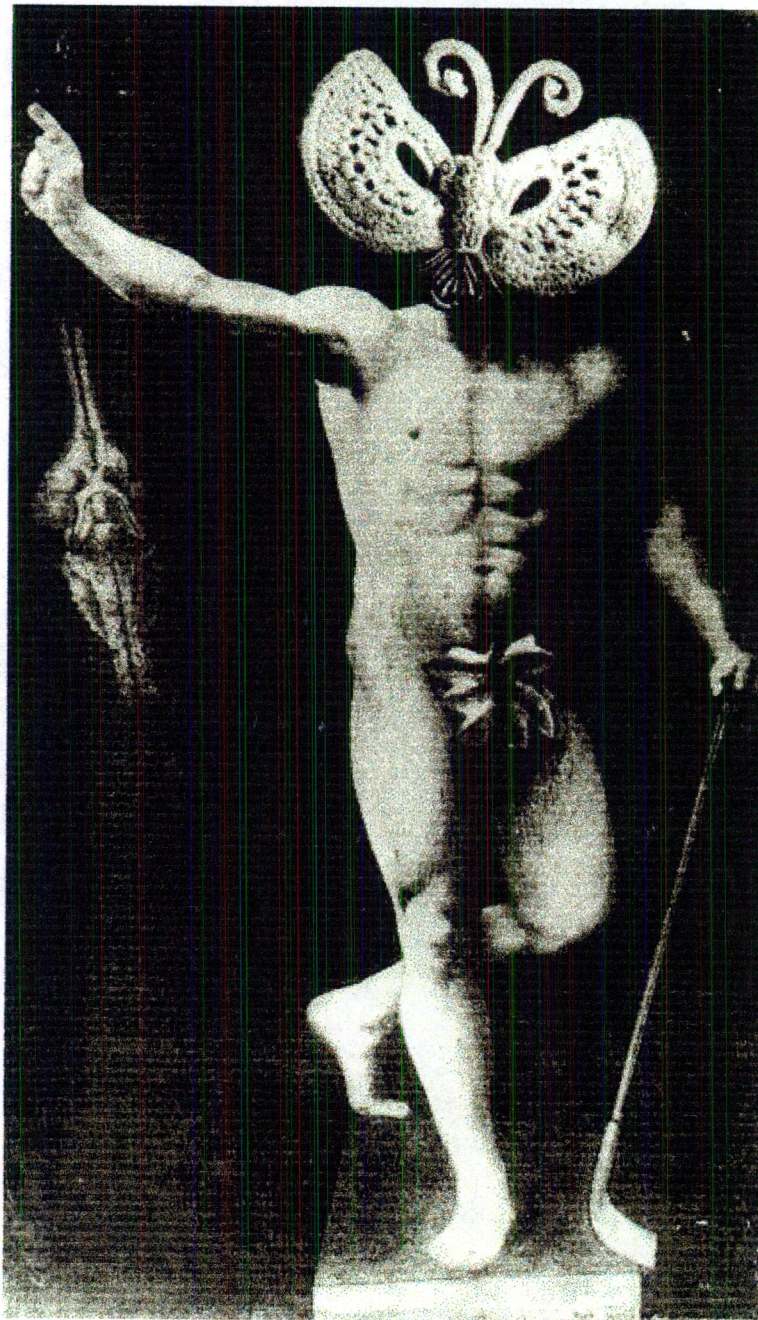


In the same interview Barney goes on to explain how the pill never makes it to pound cake/hubris, and the bagpipe never gets to play "amazing grace".

As minute and detailed as this account is, it only hints at how minutely detailed and intricately woven Barney's world actually is. The bagpipes mentioned above directly refer to the bagpipe drone later used in *Cremaster 4* or to the pipes of the god Pan which from Pan leads to the satyrs of *Drawing Restraint 7*. Indeed the drone in *Cremaster 4* is the fall from "amazing grace" - fall from grace suffered by the *Loughton Candidate*. The game as presented by Barney is grand and labyrinthine leading to alteration of himself and of the viewer.







**Fig. 6** *Health Through Sports*. Max Ernst (1920)





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## GEOMETRY/SYMMETRY

Geometric symbolism is rife in Matthew Barney's work. The *Cremaster 4* video has a computer animated rotating Isle of Man logo superimposed upon a diagram of a wrestling mat. The same logo is worn by the twin cycle teams who in, geometrically opposite directions, traverse the island. This symbolism also applies to the ascending and descending horns of the Loughton ram and it's attending diagrams, which are drawn by Barney.

If any geometry exists in Barney's work it exists as a combination of opposites and as a logo which symbolises power. In *Cremaster 1* this refers to the character of Marti Domination who throughout the video film is aboard one of two Goodyear blimps (suspended above in an indoor football stadium in Barney's hometown of Boise Idaho). Marti Domination manipulates grapes into geometric symbols which control a host of dancers on the field below. All the patterns she makes are variations on the wrestling mat logo. Below her a chorus of fifty or so teenage girls in bright costumes is controlled by the shapes made in the balloon. The girls dance and replicate the patterns made by the grapes in a bizarre display of puppetry. The costumed chorus resembles cheerleaders in American Football Stadiums.

This is a tale of Marti Domination's struggle to stop the ascent of the ovary like blimps into a purely female state similar to the *Loughton Candidate's* attempts in opposing rigid sexual definition and favouring openness in possibility.

In the *Optical Unconscious* (pp.162), Rosalind Krauss quotes from Ozenfant and Jeanneret in *La Peinture Moderne*, which devotes a chapter to "Formation de l'optique moderne". Krauss writes that if the machine has constructed a





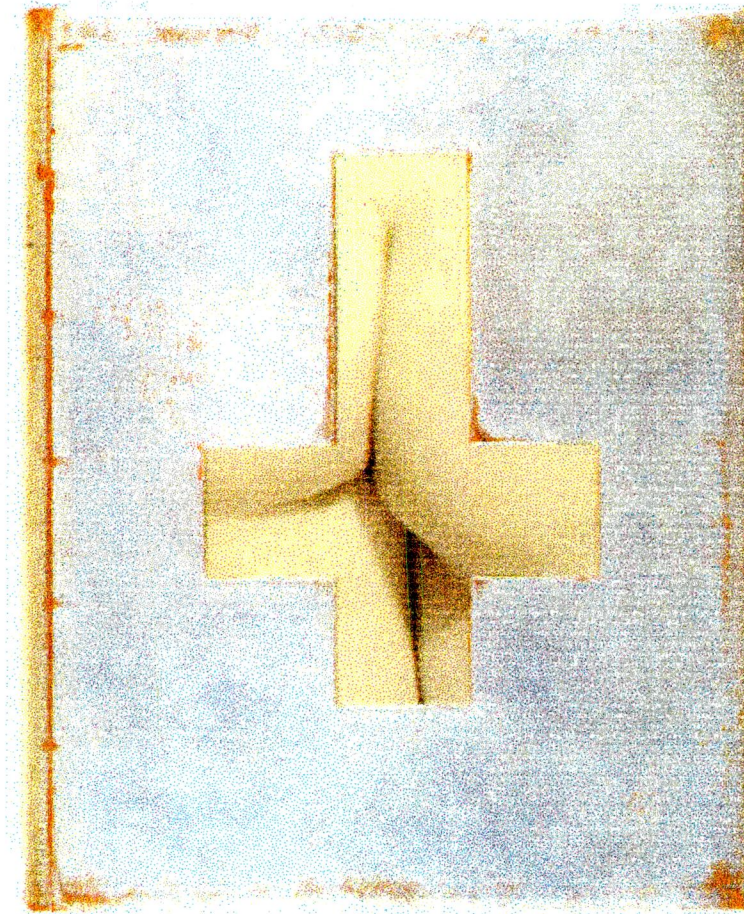
"modern optic" it has done nothing more than connect modern man to his beginnings and to a primal need for the geometric.

*Man is a geometric animal, man's mind is geometrical, man's senses, his eyes are drawn more than ever to geometrical clarities. We are in possession now of a refined alert penetrating eye, and of an exalting mind.*

(Ozenfant and Jeanneret, *The Optical Unconscious*, pp.162).

For Barney the modern optic is his use of the media of film and photographic presentation and in connecting his beginnings as a student on a football scholarship to the football field in his hometown shown in *Cremaster 1*. Through an exacting mind he has used the geometrical to find clarities and possibilities to signify power and sexual diversity.





**Fig. 7** *Monument a d.a.f de Sade*. Man Ray (1933)



## HAT

Man Ray's hat photographs (Fig. 8) were made along with several others to accompany an essay by dada's founding spirit Tristan Tzara about the constant unconscious production of sexual imagery throughout culture, here in the design of hats. (Minotaur No. 3, 1933, pp.81-85).

Natural mimicry was prized by the surrealists. For example there are Blossfeldt photographs of flowers that resemble architectural forms, the Brassai photographs of involuntary sculptures or of everyday materials subconsciously moulded into strange shapes and the Man Ray photographs of hats that subliminally elaborate upon genital forms. In Man Ray's photos the subject is the fetish.

According to Freud the male fetishist regressively believes in the primal fantasy that a woman has a penis. The fetish then is a compromise construction "such as is only possible in the realm of unconscious thought". (Hal Foster, *Compulsive Beauty*, pp.91).

Matthew Barney often uses the fetishist image. The race drivers in *Cremaster 4* halt in a bizarre pit-stop where the Faeries (fetish creatures in themselves) replace the tyre of the sidecar with a wheel which has bulbous testicle-like attachments.

The newly remodelled bike, having been given testicles, obviously cannot function properly, given the fact that the two new lumps are on the wheel itself. The sidecar is now rendered useless so the faeries remove the wheel and the race continues.





All of this alludes to the primal fantasy where Barney projects the addition of male genitalia however the newly added balls don't work so they are removed and the quest for the *Cremaster* solution continues. The quest is for both male and female organs, and this pit stop only presents half the equation, so the race or quest goes on.





**Fig. 8** *Untitled*. Man Ray (1933)





## INFORME

For Bataille the *informe* is a condition which he describes as the blurring of distinction between not only animal and human but between the solidity of matter and the nature of gooey unformed or *abject* formlessness. (Visions of Excess, pp.31). Bataille writes also of *informe* as shapeless matter; the lack of form, "like spittle or a crushed worm". (Visions of Excess, pp.31).

On a deeper level the *informe* is a conceptual matter, the undoing of boundaries such as the *Critical Dictionary* itself. This is disturbance or alteration, as in for example the slicing of the eye in the Dali/Bunuel film "Un Chien Andalou".

Indeed *informe* can be applied as a term to a host of surrealist photographs; Man Ray, Raoul Ubac, Dora Maar, Brassai, Boiffard, Bellmer and Tabard. This term was meant by Bataille to allow one to think of the removal of all boundaries by which concepts organise reality. Bataille gave *informe* the job of undoing formal categories to deny things their proper form. To imagine meaning as shapeless.

***Affirming that the universe resembles nothing  
and is only formless amounts to saying that the  
Universe is something like a spider or spit.***

(G. Bataille, Visions of Excess, pp.31)

Bataille's entry of formless into the dictionary itself gave a sense of formlessness to language, a subversive attempt to deny meanings.



The link between the animal and human in the fighting satyrs on the *Loughton Candidate* presents human, animal, ram and devil connotations. Barney seeks the *informe* as a blurring of boundaries between sexual definition, and in the structure of the films themselves, which present allegory before narrative and simple understanding.

Most importantly the *informe* is present in the shapeless goo of the petroleum jelly used by Barney in his sculptures, performances and films, for example the mucus and goo-laden tunnel explored by the *Loughton Candidate* in *Cremaster 4* (Fig. 9).

There is a celebration of gooey matter in all of Barney's work, for he seems intent on using the formless as a constant metaphor for the formlessness and definition-defying nature of the work.







**Fig. 9** Still from *Cremaster 4* (1995)





## JOUER/DEJOUER

Play and misplay. Systematic transgression of play, sport and athletics is a constant within Barney's work. When asked in *Artforum* in May 95 what he liked about American football, Barney said that:

*I like the way order can be made out of a completely confusing field of people moving in opposite directions. I think its really beautiful how eventually a puncture is made in that haze.*

(Artforum, May 1995, pp.70)

This statement establishes Barney's sense of play/misplay in that the puncture made by a goal destroys the order of the opposing teams. How the chaotic running nature of the game sporadically becomes a site of victory and loss, order/chaos play and misplay.

His own fabricated world is similarly a labyrinthine and complex field which on the surface seems chaotic and confusing, where the haze is occasionally punctured by an event or occurrence signifying a change. The race in *Cremaster 4* eventually becomes punctured by a crash and a futile pit-stop. The fighting satyrs in *Drawing Restraint 7* end with a victor and a flayed satyr. Play is then followed by violence or a form of systematic transgression from the playful to the ultra violent. In *Artforum* May 95, Barney has said that the interest in the satyrs comes from the fact that Pan is the root of panic and then Pan leads you to Bacchus who gives you the moment of unease before you let yourself go into decadent excess.

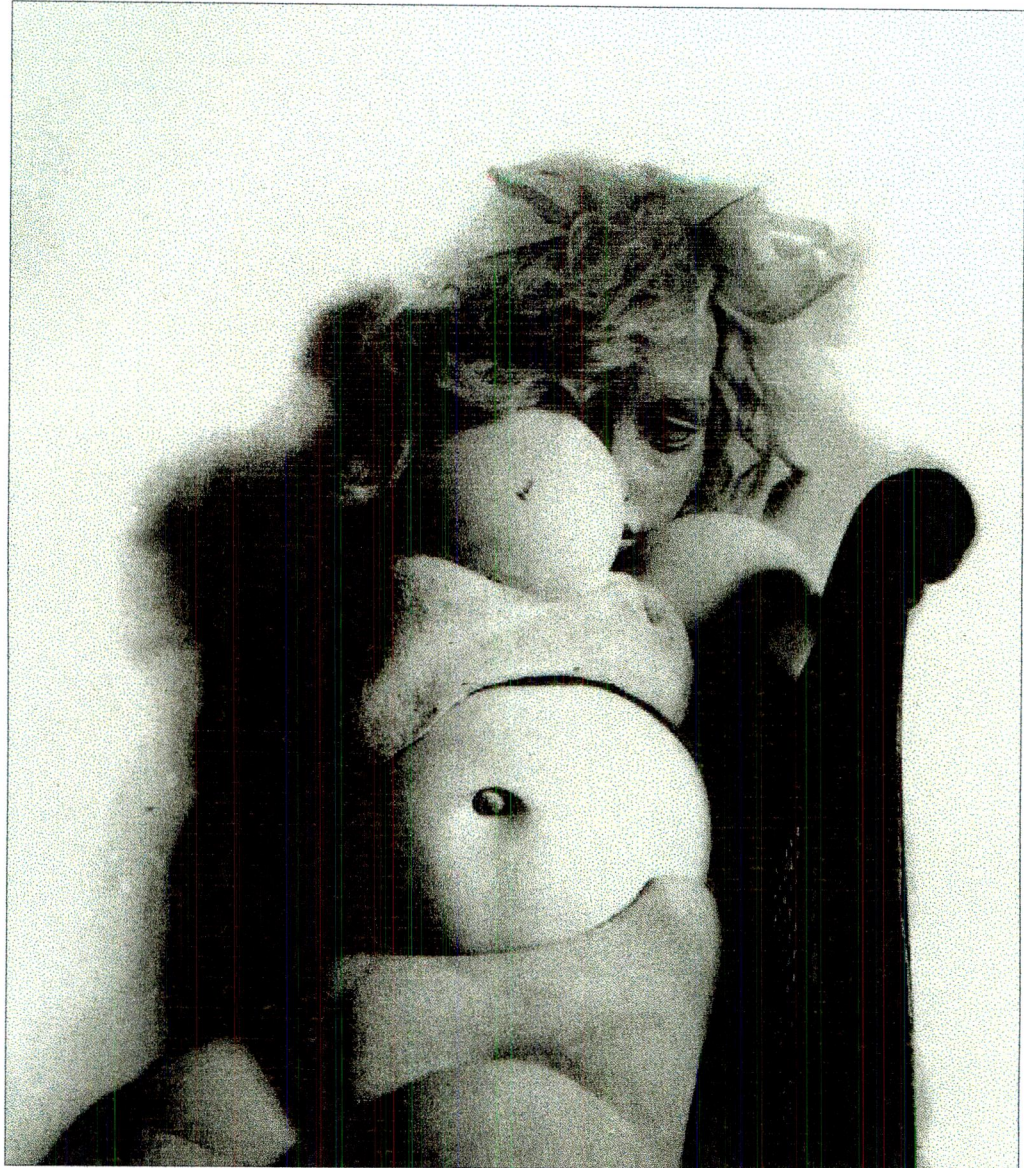
This moment of unease prior to release is again the jouer/dejouer of systematic transgression. Barney's surrealism is brought about not through Breton's



objective chance but through Bataille's sense of alteration. By careful planning leading to the convulsed reality of unease then release and base seduction.







**Fig. 10** *Doll/La Poupée* Hans Bellmer (1937)





## LABYRINTH

The labyrinth is a place of violent opposition: up versus down, left versus right. For Bataille the labyrinth was a place to discover the Minotaur; to uncover the monstrous. In mythology Theseus actively seeks out the Minotaur and after a sacrificial battle that evokes bullfighting his triumph over the animal victim comes only after he has identified with it likewise in *Drawing Restraint* 7. Barney's two satyrs fight in the back of a limousine as it makes its way through the labyrinth of New York City (Fig. 11). The loser in the fight has his horns broken off and in doing so Barney puts a twist on the myth of the Minotaur and identifies the beast as dominant.

The nature of the labyrinth, as Bataille would insist, was not form but alteration.

*It is only necessary to track for a little while the routes repeatedly taken by works to discover the disconcerting sight of human beings labyrinthine structure.*

(Dennis Hollier, *Against Architecture the Writings of G. Bataille*, pp.57).

The labyrinth is a disorienting space, one never is inside the labyrinth because unable to leave it, unable to grasp it with a single glance one never knows if one is inside it. We must describe the labyrinth as the insurmountably ambiguous. As regards to Matthew Barney, particularly in *Cremaster Four* which is set on the Isle of Man (also referring to the island of a man), we never know if we are inside or outside the body metaphorically. The film shows Barney climbing through jelly smeared tubes under the island whilst twin motorbike and sidecar teams traverse the island in opposite directions following the same route as the TT race route. Here we don't know if we are seeing Barney and the motor cyclists as inside the island representing a body,

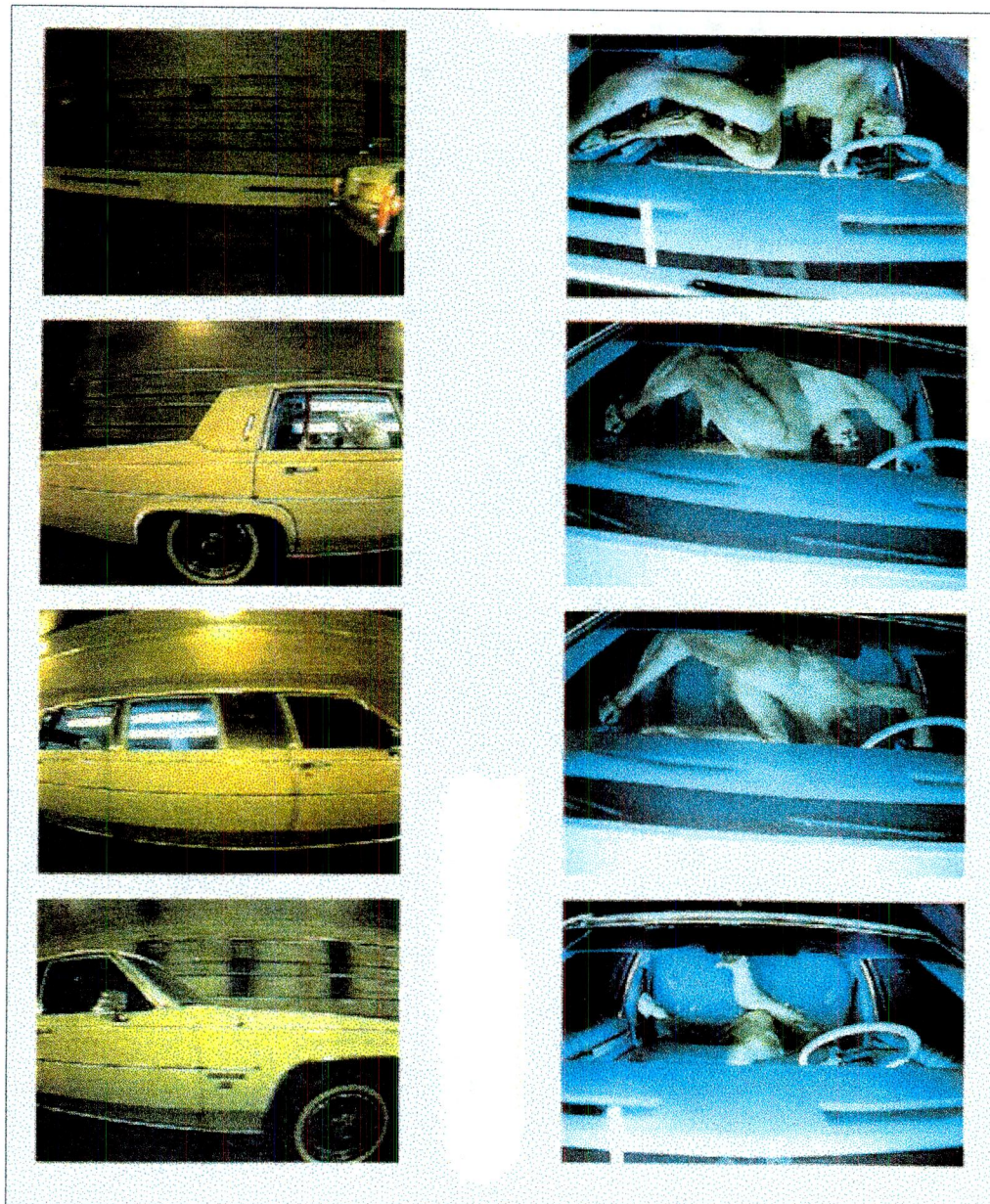


for example the circulatory system or internal passages, or as inside the labyrinth of metaphor which, is the ambiguity required to get lost in the labyrinth itself. Barney uses labyrinthine structure in each project where endless meanings or lack of understanding can be found.

In attempting to understand the work we find ourselves placed in labyrinthine settings by Barney who becomes the minotaur himself, half man, half identity quest. Each project presents a new labyrinth yet cross-references among the works create his whole body of work as labyrinth. It is no small coincidence that the title of the surrealist publication was Minotaur (1933-1939). There are also clear links with the aims and objectives within this labyrinthine publication, which was published in thirteen issues in ten instalments containing over a thousand pages and fifteen hundred illustrations. Laid out in issue one Minotaure sought to represent the surrealists "and will do so with reference to the history of religions, to mythology, to psychoanalysis". (ref: Minotaur, Feb. 1933, pp.17).







**Fig. 11** Still from *Drawing Restraint 7* (1993)





## MANTIS

Throughout the 1930's Hans Bellmer made sculptures of Poupees; dolls which he assembled, positioned and photographed in a variety of settings (**Fig. 10**). Bellmer cast the doll as fantasy, dream and projected desire. He obsessively reinvented and recontrived the doll within different settings - the kitchen, the stairs, the woods - all of which situated the fantasy in real everyday places. Bellmer said:

*I agree with George Bataille that eroticism relates to a knowledge of evil and the inevitability of death.*

(Hal Foster, *Compulsive Beauty*, pp.262).

Bellmer's doll is lifeless but it imitated life. The surrealists prized the mantis, the insectoid, almost robotic (automaton) creature with the defence against predators of playing dead, lifeless and inanimate. After mating the female killed its mate – this symbolised 'mad love' or 'l'amour fou'. Indeed Breton, Eluard and Dali all kept mantis collections in cages and jars.

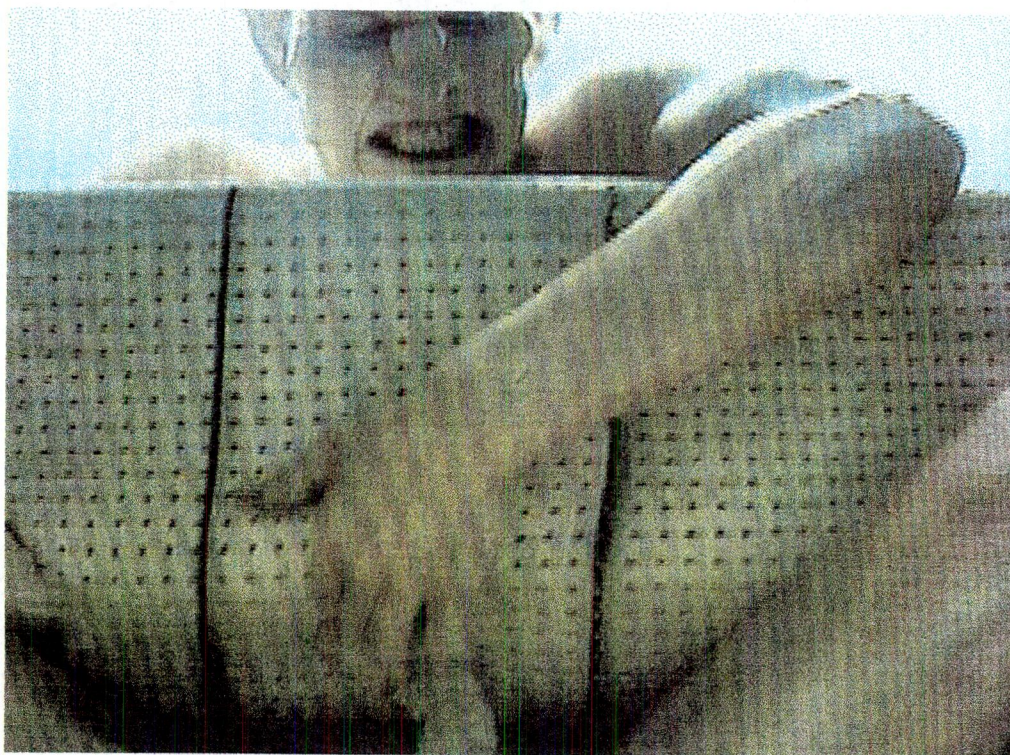
For Barney, eroticism relating to knowledge of evil and the inevitability of death lies again in the fighting satyrs in the *Drawing Restraint 7* project (**Fig. 12**). The satyrs who hiss and strike each other mantis-like. As invented characters by Barney they are imitations of a life imagined. Like Bellmer's dolls they stage an erotic mantis-like fight which allows Barney to position and film them in a bizarre projection of desire which as fantasy relates to the disturbing fantasies of Bellmer. A sadism is inscribed into both the Satyrs and the doll as much as a fetishism. All of this as Hal Foster states in *Compulsive Beauty* renders the fantasmatic art of surrealism simulcral, but structures the surrealist image as a signifier of an involuntary memory, a traumatic fantasy.





(Hal Foster, *Compulsive Beauty*, pp.269)





**Fig. 12** Still from *Drawing Restraint 7* (1993)





## OBJECTIVE CHANCE

In the *First Surrealist Manifesto* Andre Breton proposed that through the language of testing the will to become something was enough for unconscious thought to recut reality to the measure of desire. This he termed *Objective Chance*. (Andre Breton, *Surrealism*, pp.55). Bataille was opposed to Breton's passive approach, which relied upon the unconscious to do all the work. Rather he sought to instigate change aggressively by actually doing. That the only way to subvert or change reality was through action. Bataille wrote in "*The Story of the Eye*" of a variety of mechanisms for assaulting reality but mainly this assault was to take place using language.

Barney assaults reality through the visual but would seem to side with Bataille in actively and aggressively recutting reality through the production of video and installation work of a bizarre and subversive nature. Desiring the unconscious to recut reality is not enough for Barney rather he represents his unconscious and imagination through careful planning in constructing work both metaphorical and elaborate (Fig. 13). Objective chance bears no relation to carefully orchestrating the complicated procedure of making and producing films and installations requiring expertise from many fields. Barney recuts reality into a personal mythology. Sigmund Freud, in his essay on the uncanny, relates it to a belief in magic, animism and narcissistic omnipotence. Freud would seem to have predicted Barney's narcissistic drive for a poly-present sexuality and a quest for hubris to become god-like.

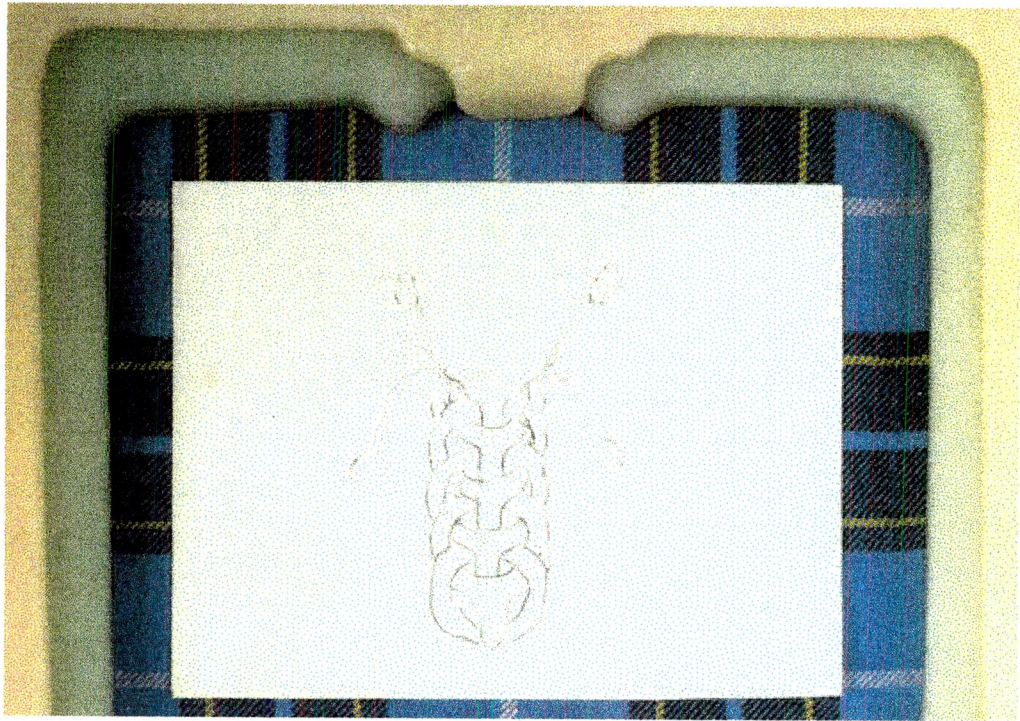
However, Barney is actively exploring and engaged with this subject matter in an ironic and manipulative manner. The work which touches on magic is elaborated upon by travelling to Bavaria and calling one of his characters *the Magician* in *Cremaster 5*.



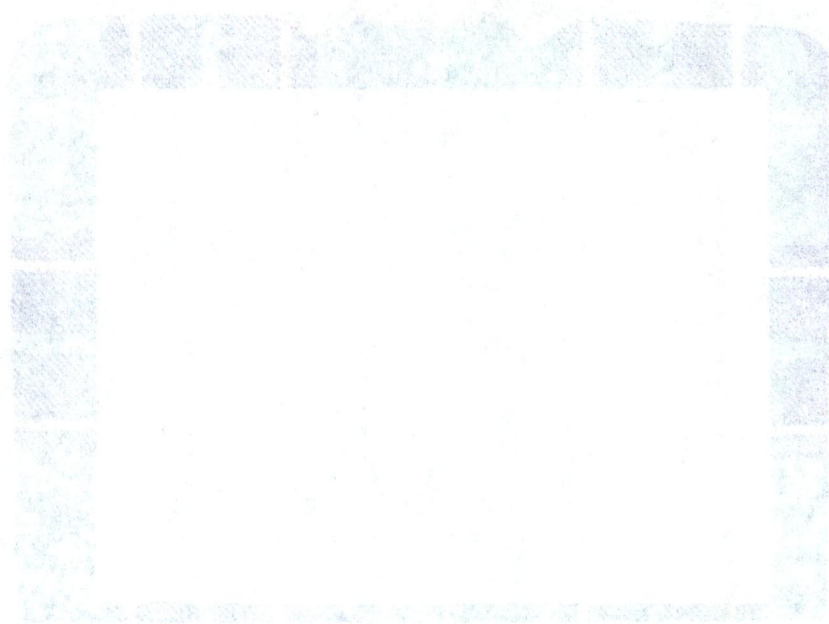


Freud further describes "the uncanny" as a breakthrough into consciousness of earlier states of being and in this breakthrough, itself the evidence of a compulsion to repeat the subject is engulfed by the idea of death. Barney on the contrary is engulfed by the idea of life and of diversity in life. His is the dionysian celebration of life through exploring its boundaries and attempting to transcend them. The objective chance then lives in the boundaries actually coming down or not.





**Fig. 13** Drawing for *Cremaster 4* (1995)





## PHOTOGRAPHY

The photographic conditions of surrealism are paralleled in the similar conditions within Matthew Barney's work.

In 1936 when writing in his essay "A Small History of Photography", Walter Benjamin (*One Way Street*, pp.70) described how the camera can enlarge vision. Benjamin likened the camera to the surgical knife that can operate dispassionately on the human body, can enter more deeply into its reality.

In the Man Ray photograph *Monument to de Sade* 1933 (**Fig. 7**), Man Ray frames the photographic subject in an inverted cross transforming it into a phallic symbol. Within this photographic frame is the object of its sexual pleasure that of an anonymous bottom. This Sadean act of sacrilege is similarly mirrored by Barney in work which is often perversely contained in "self lubricating frames", within which are displayed various images from the films. Barney's films are made with the intention of repeated viewing so that the conscious mind can decipher the layers of metaphor. The work has to be understood and assembled from the initial viewing which leaves many unconscious images awaiting to be unravelled. For the original surrealists photography aimed for displacement and condensation; for an intervention into reality. In the First Surrealist Manifesto, Breton focused on the quest for certain states of mind, dreams, the marvellous along with processes such as automation. The marvellous for Breton had two aspects, convulsive beauty and objective chance. As a medieval term the marvellous signalled a rupture in the natural order. This rupture in reality led to the surrealists' fascination with magic and alchemy, with mad love and analogical thought. It is always unclear in the marvellous whether it is external or an internal event of otherworldly, secular or psychic origin. For surrealists the primary purpose of the



marvellous was the negation of the real. Likewise Matthew Barney's work  
heads for a negation of the real





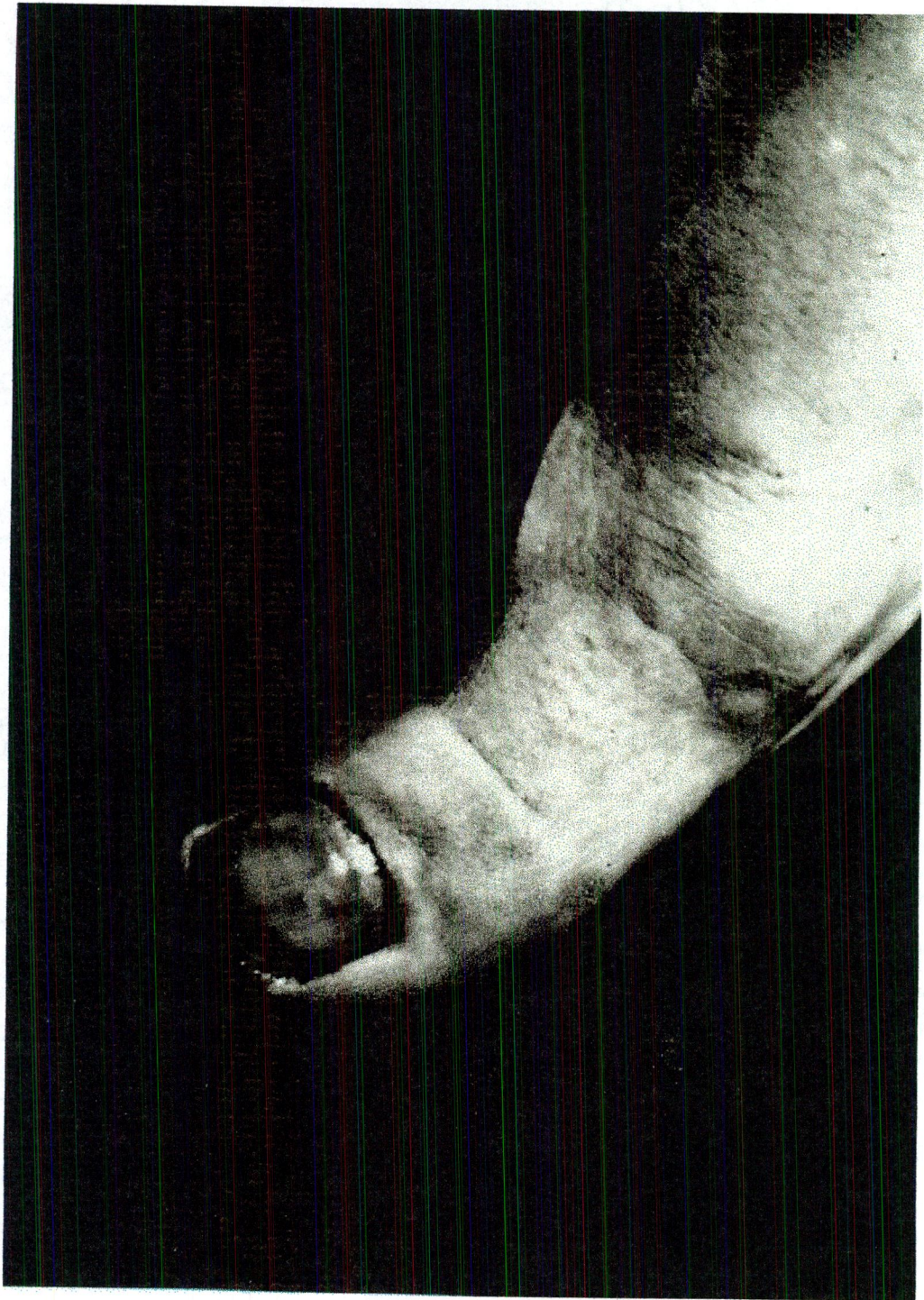
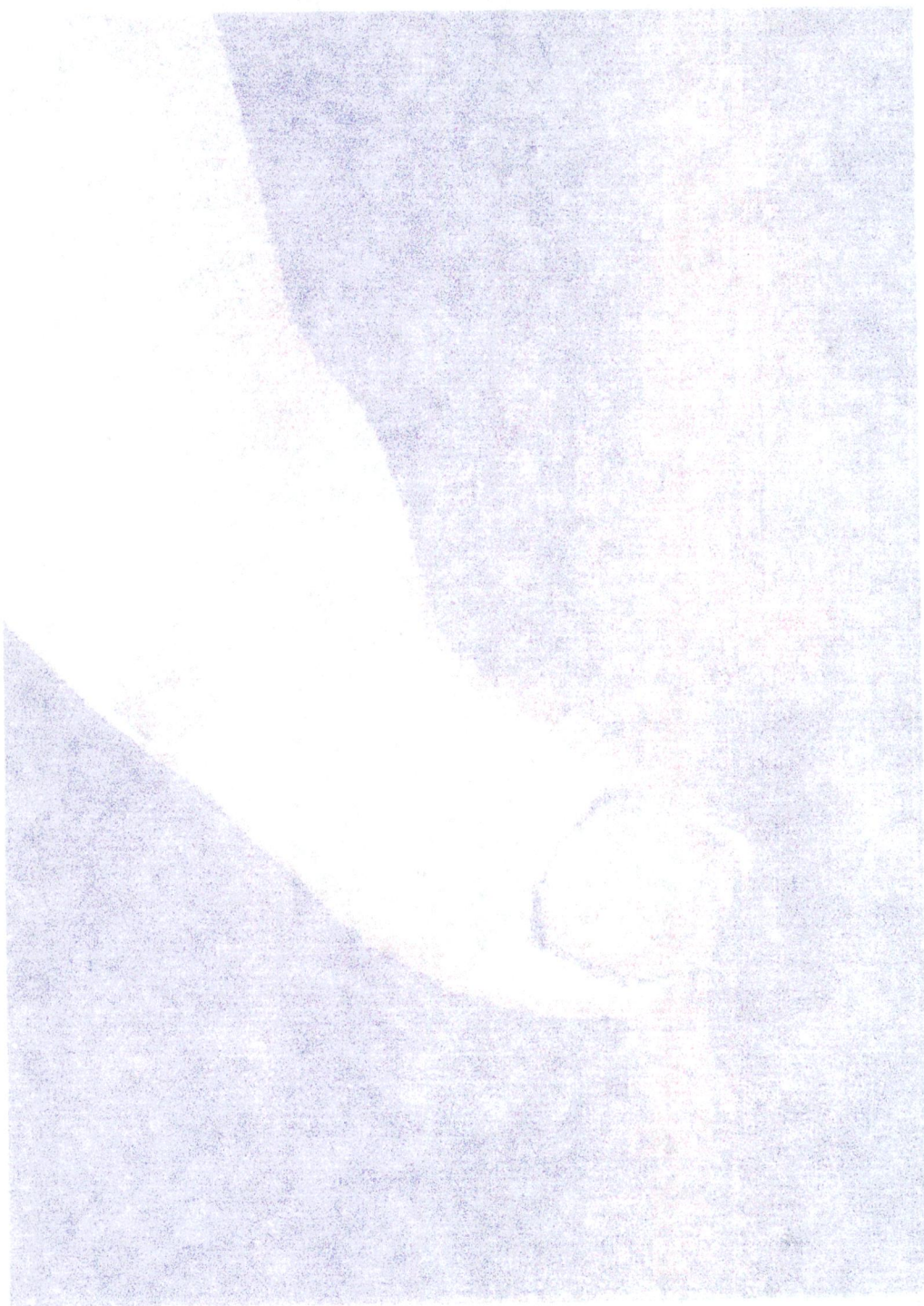


Fig. 14 *Big Toe*. Jaques-Andre Boiffard (1930)





## ROTTEN

The decomposition of form, the rotten leads back to Bataille's *informe*. But this term also refers in the *Critical Dictionary* to a clearing away of the rotten to reveal the new.

For the *Loughton Candidate* in *Cremaster 4* the clearing away of the rotten holes in his head leads to a preparation for new horns, signifies his new found poly-sexual diversity.

Indeed the foundation in Barney's work of sports and medical equipment and of the body as a field of modification and redesign also points at a clearing away of the rotten. Prior to the *Cremaster* series the videos and sculpted objects make reference to the equipment used to rebuild the athletic body of weights, harnesses and wrestling mats. Also there are references to sucrose, steroids, choriotropin and amino acids (Pace Car for the Hubris Pill, pp.14) all of which points at an implied clearing away of rotten or atrophied muscle, to rebuilding new, leaner tissue which is stronger and which leads to hubris and superhuman transformation.

Medical instruments such as clamps, speculums and distracters, as well as teflon and titanium, are all used in sculptures made by Barney, where boundaries for mutation and medical modification lead to the post-human.

The implied sterile space of the medical theatre or the white cube of the gallery clears away the rotten outside world for the presentation of the new.

Barney's quest for hubris, for super powers and a transcending of nature leads to the surreal (Fig. 15).



*Ottoshaft* (1992) was inspired by the magician and escapologist, Harry Houdini, who was capable of invading or escaping from any space. According to Barney:

*Houdini knew how to pick a lock that hadn't been invented. I'm interested in the physical transcendence that kind of discipline proposes.*

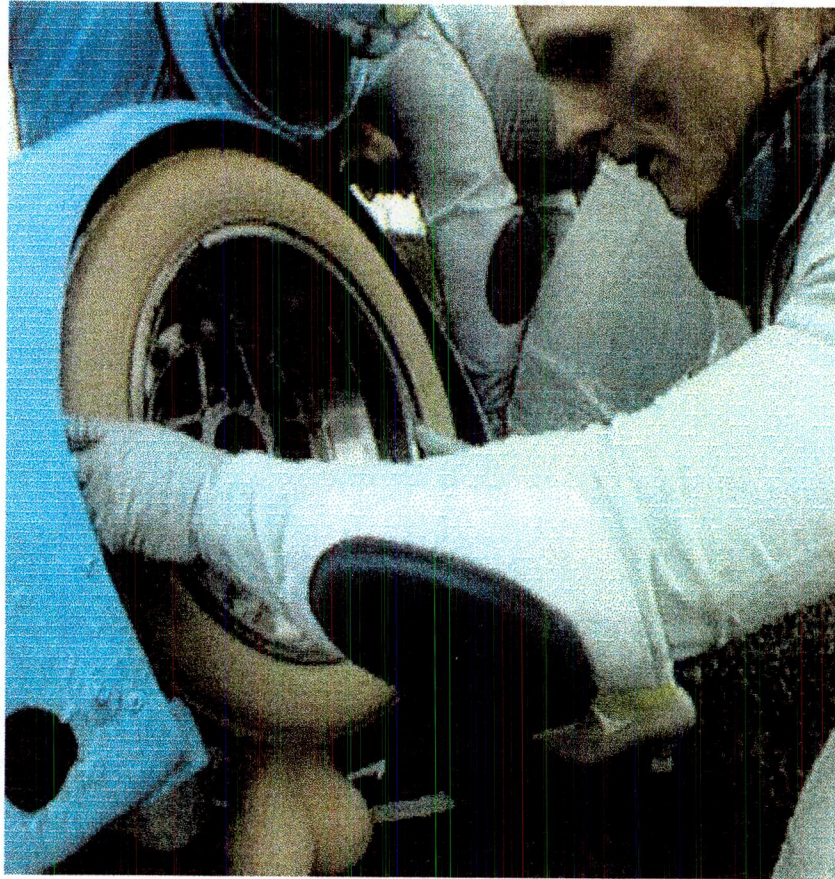
(Artforum, May 95, pp.68.)

In *Ottoshaft* he also reaches a point where we see him covering over with a seal of petroleum jelly every bodily orifice. Later in *Mile High Threshold* he seals up his anus with a stainless steel object. This act of total self-enclosure in the context of the rotten would seem a gesture of removing oneself from the rotten outside world, then metamorphosing into the fantasy personalised world of the *Cremaster* series.

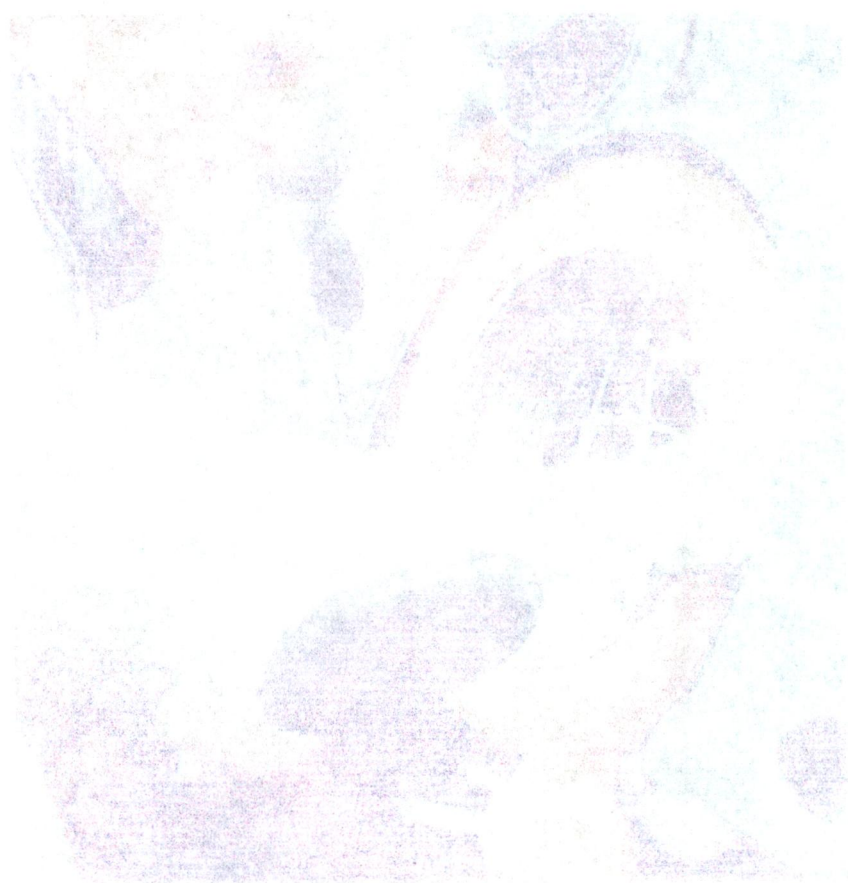








**Fig. 15** Still from *Cremaster 4* (1995)



## SCREEN

In an interview with Glen Helfand for *Shift Magazine* Barney was asked how the use of video in his work related to its use in sports and art video. In response Barney stated that video only interested him in lieu of doing live works and of the notion of seeing something but already having some sort of experience of it, of the presence in an installation space being recorded.

Barney then goes on to discuss Houdini who intrigued him as someone who could physically transcend restraints and locks.

The screen as boundary or constraint; yet the Barney reference to Houdini is not to be underplayed. As an "escapologist" of world renown Houdini spent his entire life trying to defy physical constraint. His identity was driven by a will to escape, so that any definition or imposition of set structure was something to be outwitted.

Self made mutability and shape-shifting trickery were at the core of Houdini's creativity. Similarly Barney's attempts at self made mutability have led to centralising the Houdini figure in *Cremaster 5* (Fig. 16).

*Cremaster 5* is a sculptural video opera set in Budapest the supposed birthplace of Houdini and in the video film Barney dressed as a magician character performs a manacled bridge-jumping feat. Also in an exhibition which ran concurrently with the video screenings, Barney showed props from the film in his *Ehrich Weiss* suite. Ehrich Weiss is Houdini's real name. The escapologist changed his name and identity from Jewish immigrant to magician and escape artist of world fame. The screen here also takes the form of a false identity and fantastic character who could transcend his





surroundings and magically disappear and reappear.







**Fig. 16** *The Magician and the Queen of Chain* (Ursula Andress). Still from *Cremaster 5* (1997)





### THIRD TERM JOUER/DEJOUER II

In *Visions of Excess* Bataille says that Third Term or Jouer/Dejouer II is in essence laughter. That laughter is the mark of base seduction.

*That laughter baffles modesty, creates within the very logic of meaning something eccentric, something scandalous in the operations of sense.*

(G. Bataille, *Visions of Excess*, pp.16.)

Bataille also speaks of the erotics of the foot within the world of modesty. Instead of exhibitionism he invokes laughter as seen in the ridiculousness of the toes, their ugliness and grossness. Alongside this article in the *Critical Dictionary* the toe photographs of Jacques Andre Boiffard (Fig. 14) were printed in *Documents* 8. Here Bataille also declared:

*I defy any lover of painting to love a picture as much as a fetishist loves a shoe.*

(G. Bataille, *Visions of Excess*, pp.20.)

The foot as fetish is one thing but Bataille also invokes laughter in picturing the art-lover loving his pictures in an erotic sense.

Laughter in Barney's work is inherent in his bizarre characters and their ritualistic behaviour. The scandalous and the fetish apply equally to climbing the gallery space smeared in petroleum jelly and to fetishising the *Cremaster* muscle as a grand narrative for films exploring sexual identity.



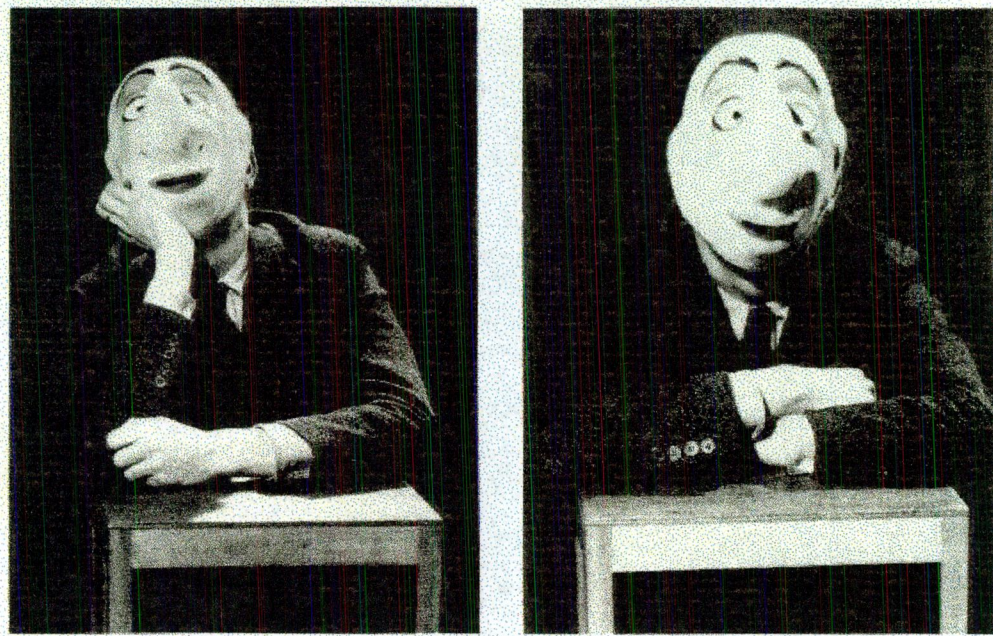


Just as Bataille did before him, Barney conveys something scandalous and eccentric with humour an obvious part. The erotics of the foot, as superseding the love of painting, relates also to Barney's erotics in restraint or in his use of video as superseding painting.

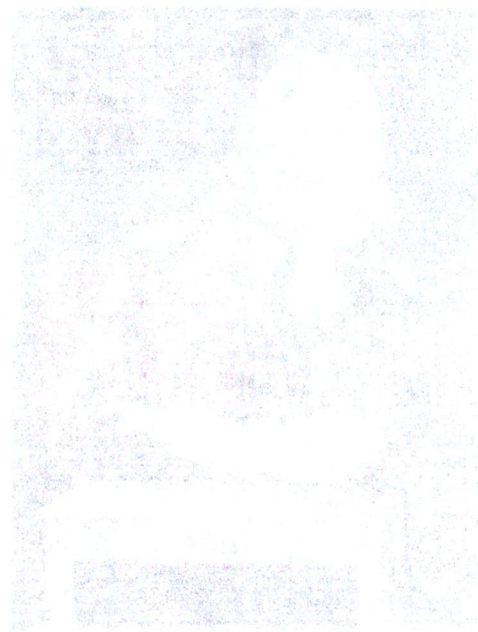
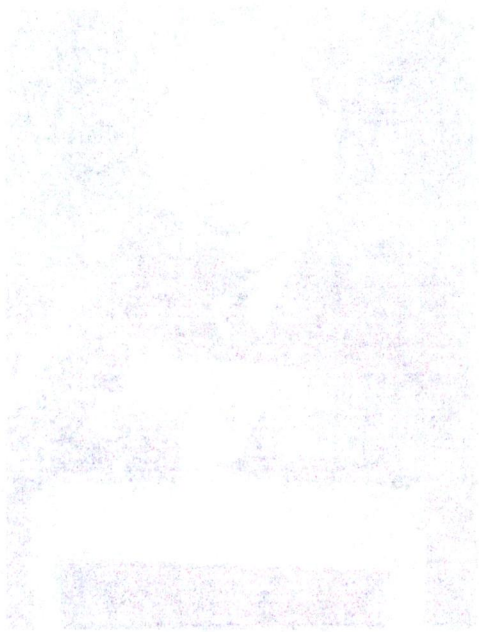
Eccentricity is the name of the game since Barney includes Jim Otto, Faeries, Harry Houdini and Ursula Andress amongst his characters.

The ridiculous nature of the Cremaster series creates a laughter which to use Bataille's words, is something eccentric, scandalous and barely seductive.





**Fig. 17** *Untitled*. Jaques-Andre Boiffard (1930)





## UNIVERSAL

There are numerous universal constants within Barney's work, principally through a desire to get to the heart of things, particularly issues of gender difference which lie at the centre. Barney has created a universe populated with strange magical creatures and places. The films have been shot in familiar places and given the Barney twist. *Cremaster Five* which although shot in Budapest leaves the modern city invisible.

Instead Barney shows us the Danube as a site for reference to escapologist Harry Houdini. The reference is made with Barney dressed as a black coated magician. Barney's isle of man again on the surface contains roads and the route for the TT race, yet underneath the island is a bizarre gooey tunnel. The island is also populated with faeries (**Fig. 18**).

Plans to make *Cremaster Two and Three* on an iceberg and in the Chrysler Building show that Barney's world is not our own but a fantasy world constructed from the real world with the imaginary placed in it.

The universal here is Barney's universe. The universe is a metaphor for our own but dissimilar enough, exaggerated upon and visually elaborate, containing a heavy layering of metaphor and analogy. Another important universal element to both the Surrealists and to Barney is the sense of humour often displayed. The element of humour is used by Barney in a wacky dead pan manner. The seriousness and tongue-in-cheek nature of his grand bizarre narratives involves luminous orange faeries and Goodyear blimps whilst climbing through tunnels of goo in a white suit, spats and devil-like prosthetic make up could not be anything other than a knowingly mocking gesture. In the universe of the surrealists humour abounded. One need only look at the





two untitled photographs of Jacques Andre Boiffard taken in 1930 or to Man Ray's portrait of Andre Breton (also taken that year) for similar levels of tongue in cheek seriousness.





**Fig. 18** Still from *Cremaster 4* (1995)





## VALUE

In her book *The Optical Unconscious* Rosalind Krauss writes that value according to Roland Barthes "regulates all discourse". She mentions this in the context of the system through which culture generates meaning, not by naming things but by opposing two values within a structure of binary oppositions. (*The Optical Unconscious*, pp.186).

The value in Matthew Barney's work which regulates the discourse, is the structure of the video and of the installation. Oppositions concern sexual difference and a coming to terms with diversity in inventing a third sex (**Fig. 19**) in the *Cremaster* series. In the *Drawing Restraint* projects the oppositions include self imposed restraint/release which seems to stem from de Sade and muscle development/hypertrophy. This is opposition through force and resistance in weight training.

Value also resides then in the satyrs fighting and the race cars travelling in opposite directions around the Isle of Man.

The binary opposition of materials is seen in the sculptural pieces of hot and cold, solid and liquid, by presenting frozen cast petroleum jelly inside a walk-in freezer. For Bataille the form of things was lesser to the *informe* but in Barney's sculptural work the *informe* is resisted and the tension itself is preserved and placed as important. The form of the object is frozen but the *informe* lies just a flick of the refrigerator switch away.

Binary oppositions within surrealist works such as those of De Chirico or Dali were presented as dream and waking with empty metaphysical space and strange objects filling it.



Opposition for Breton is in *Objective Chance*, between the will to make something happen and whether or not it actually happens. Value is preserved here in the unconscious rather than prized as baseness as it was by Bataille. Alteration carried value for Bataille and the alteration and mutation inherent in the *Cremaster* project would seem to place Barney alongside Bataille in finding value through alteration.

For example Bataille adds to Breton's oppositions of "good and evil, pain and joy" with "divine ecstasy, and it's opposite extreme horror." (G. Bataille, *The Absence of Myth*, pp.172).

Extreme horror, divine ecstasy, hubris and Barney's sometime horrific vision, for example the Pan in panic, give a value that is twisted which to quote Breton from *The First Surrealist Manifesto* is "surreal in it's sadism".





**Fig. 19** *Loughton Ram*. Still from *Cremaster 4* (1995)





## WIND/UNWIND

Yin and Yan; the blue and yellow sidecars which race in opposite directions; the *Loughton Candidate* who climbs and descends from the sea through the tunnel; the ascending and descending horns of the ram. *Cremaster Four* hinges on opposites and symmetries. The clockwise and counter clockwise movements of the race drivers leads to inevitable east west collision. The terms Yin and Yang are not out of place here in the quest for rising and descending male and female organs combined. Towards the end of *Cremaster Four* we are presented with an asexual crotch with a mound of puckered, flaccid flesh in which electrodes are stuck in two symmetrical blocks (Fig. 20). The electrodes are capable of transmitting or receiving energy through a series of wires connected to and from the sidecars. From machine to crotch or vice versa energy can be wound/unwound. The *Cremaster* of the title is termed by the Oxford English Dictionary as "the thin suspensory muscle of the testicles". It is the temperature control of the scrotum, a thermostat which regulates up and down in accordance with hot and cold external to the body. The *Cremaster* reaction can also be initiated by fear. The *Cremaster* wind/unwind is reproduced in the video itself. The references to sexual winding and unwinding and of flux are central to the series.

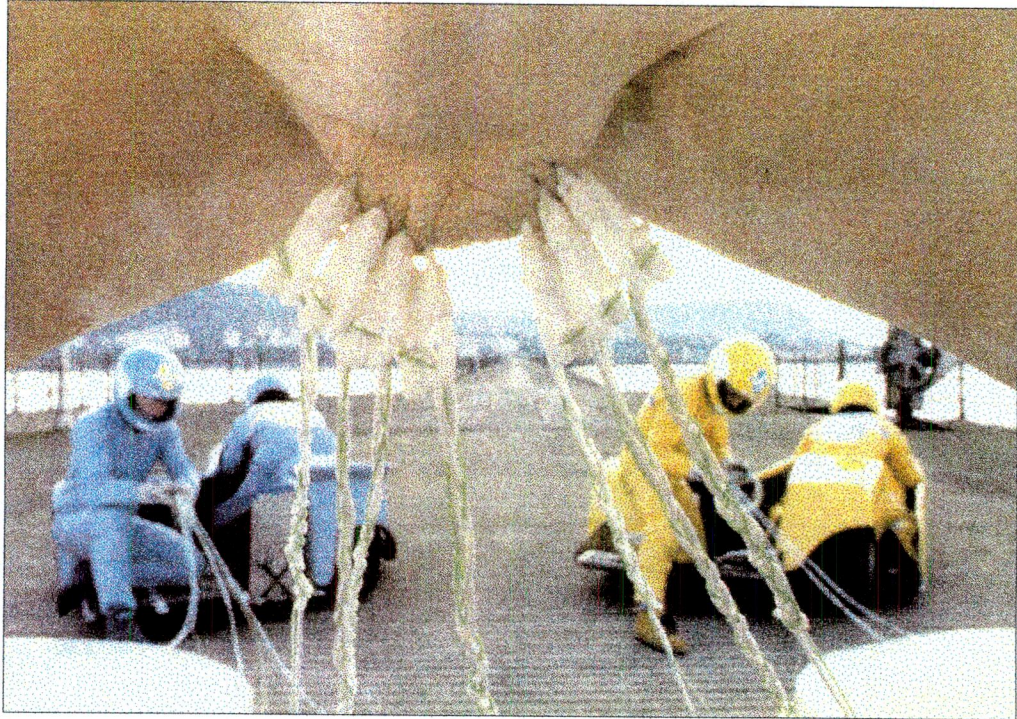
Wind/unwind of a different kind occurred in both the "*Ottoshaft*" and "*Radial Drill*" early videos, which involved Barney climbing and descending a huge tunnel and secondly featured a variety of performers attempting to execute an American football style touch-down run. The game involved teams blocking and running and eventually mutating into costumed Scots Guards of the Black Watch ritually attempting to transform the ball through metabolic change from sucrose to petroleum jelly to tapioca to meringue and eventually to pound cake. But it never makes it to pound cake and the wind is led to unwind. The



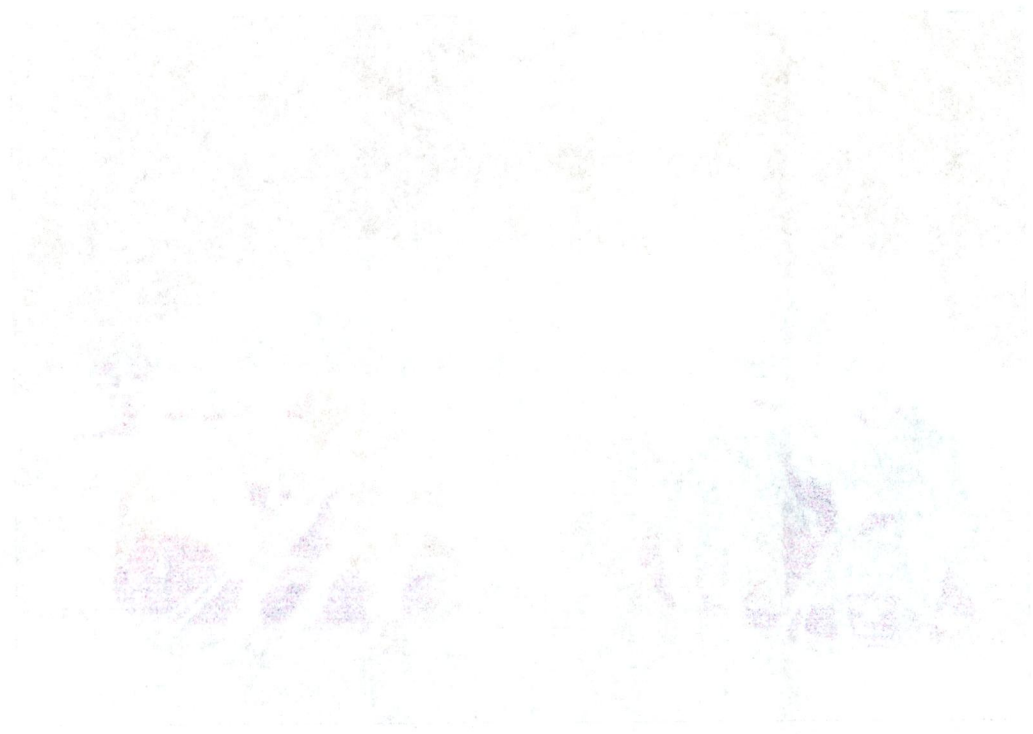
metabolic conversion fails and the video ends. The video format is again a form of wind to fast forward to unwind again.







**Fig. 20** Still from *Cremaster 4* (1995)



## X MARKS THE SPOT

Bataille's article of this name in *Documents Two*, No. 8 (1930), (pp.437), muses over a book on crime in Chicago and the forensic photographs of the victims of gangland members. He also mentions the work of Brassai who was similarly interested in crime photography and more specifically about how the nature of X-marking the spot can be traced back to cave art. Brassai photographed graffiti scratched into walls in Paris and in doing this drew a parallel with the cave drawings made by primitive man (**Fig. 21**).

Bataille would later refer in *Documents* to primitive cave painting, as the primal need to despoil surfaces. To leave a mark that signifies nothing more than an act of defacement. Here he sites the birth of Art as the need to make dirty marks and to defy language and communication.

In Matthew Barney's work, the x-marks the spot of the scene of a crime, or even of the Art event, began with his first installation, when he put on mountaineering harnesses and climbed around the installation space, ritually smearing himself in petroleum jelly. The performance was done privately with no audience except for two video cameras. The following day the work was exhibited in the form of video monitors and the residual marks from the climbing and jelly smeared walls. The very nature of the work of art as the scene of a crime and of x-marking the spot is evident here.

Another important aspect of x-marks the spot in Barney's work is seen in the numerous drawings he produced alongside each of his projects. The *Drawing Restraint 7* project showed two fighting satyrs in the back of a speeding limousine. As the two satyrs fought their horns made automatic marks on the



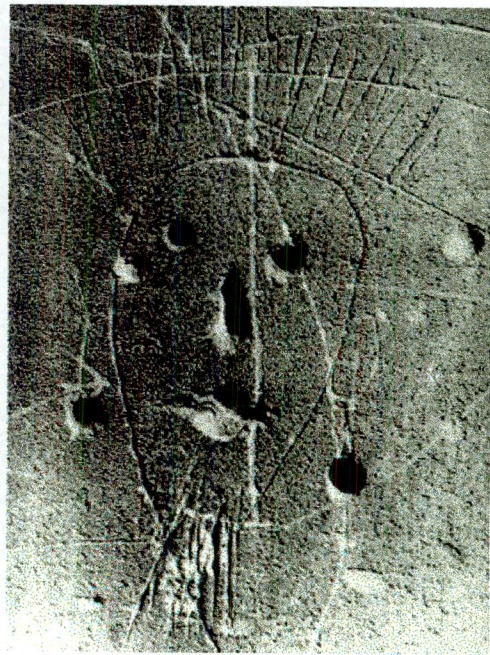
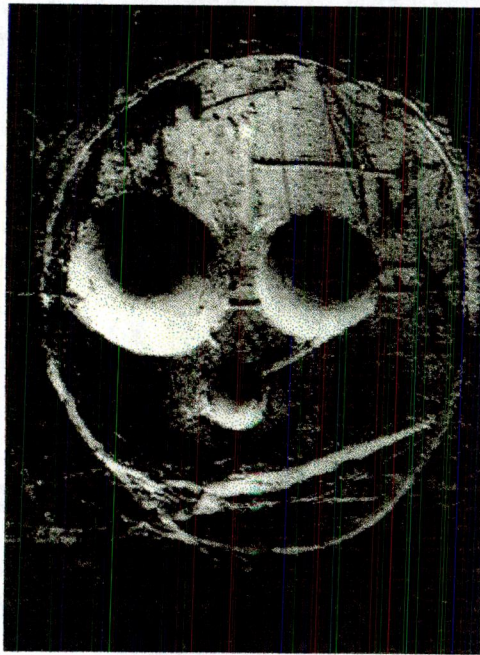


condensation and glass of the sunroof. The marks made created a drawing which marked the scene of the struggle in true x-marks the spot irony.

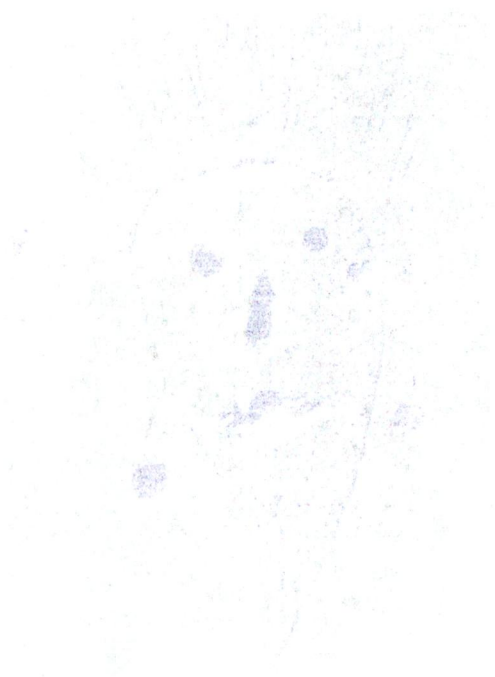
Other drawings of a more meticulous nature were made to accompany *Cremaster 4*. Images of a spine drawn to resemble an Isle of Man ribboning technique was based on a traditional early medieval design. It fed into ancient culture as found locally on Gort's crosses. These drawings also related directly to diagrams of the human reproductive system. The goal of the *Loughton Candidate* in the film is for a kind of sexual omnipotence through possessing neither male nor female organs but both. The drawings illustrate an anatomical x-marking the spot for both sexual difference and as a marker for what the Barney character wishes to achieve: an anatomically poly-sexual character which being against nature is a kind of crime. So again the x-marks the spot of the drawings is the scene of a crime.







**Fig. 21** *Graffiti*. Brassai (1934)



## ZOOLOGY

Within the whole of Matthew Barney's oeuvre there lies a host of characters and identities, creatures marvellous, strange and symbolic. A tradition of the marvellous exists from when as a medieval term it signalled a rupture in the natural order. Unlike the miraculous it was not necessarily divine in origin. It came from a fascination with magic and alchemy. Alchemy, later adopted by Duchamp and the surrealists, appeared to be concerned with transmutation and a type of metabolic change in objects, but essentially it was to do with the self. Surrealism and the re-enchantment of the world implies the re-introduction of the marvellous. Always within his work Barney appears as a transformed being. Around himself he has invented a personal, mythological zoo. In the *Cremaster* video series he appears as *the Giant*, *the Diva*, and *the Magician*. As the *Loughton Candidate* and in the *Drawing Restraint* video, he appears as a satyr.

Mythological characters are a pivotal point in the Barney films. For example, in the *Cremaster 5* video piece, Barney plays "*the Giant*"; a Neptune or river-god-like character (Fig.22). At one stage he walks into a pool at the baths in Budapest while naked, and underwater nymphs frolic around his feet attaching Jacobin pigeons tethered to ribbons, which are attached to his genital-less crotch. Here we are presented with the marvellous and the surreal or uncanny in both costumed drama and castration role playing.

Ritualised performance is a constant for the characters in Barney's works. The Faeries in *Cremaster Four* are three androgynous luminous orange-haired bodybuilders who both help and hinder the *Loughton Candidate* (Barney) in his quest to become the *Loughton ram*.







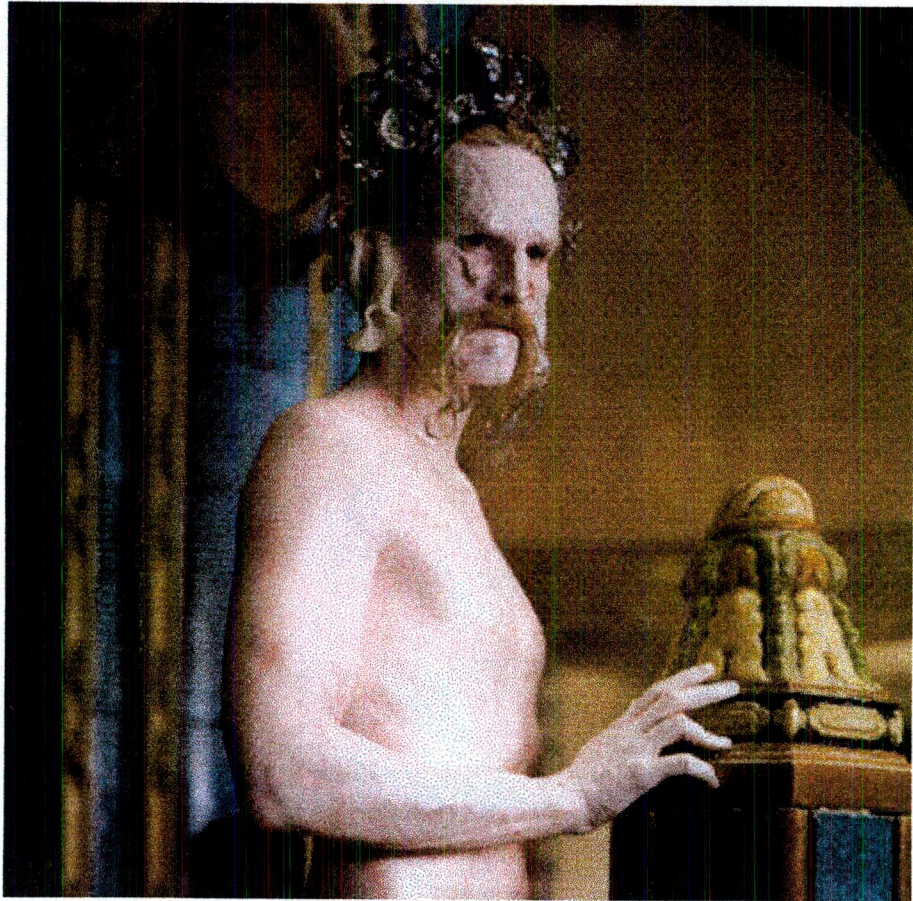
The characters themselves are both strange and mysterious in their purpose and likeness to one another. As muses they ritually perform bizarre and metaphorical acts within the film.

Influences within the work hold another zoology of sorts. The famous Harry Houdini escapologist, eccentric Willy Wonka, the American footballer Jim Otto and a host of characters from horror films all inform the work.

The marvellous and bizarre in characterisation lies also in reference to classical mythology. Barney's work ties itself by implication to characters such as Narcissus, Oedipus, the Minotaur and the labyrinth, to Daedalus the inventor, Pan and Bacchus, and Marsyas the Satyr, symbol of sexual poly presence of nature who challenged the Gods and who was punished by being flayed alive. This parallels the Pan in both *Cremaster* and *Drawing Restraint* 7 in the satyrs who fight and one who loses and has his horns snapped off.

The surrealists too can be related to Narcissus and Oedipal reference through their dabblings with psychoanalysis. Pseudonyms were used by many of the Surrealists as a further attempt at confusing and subverting identity. Duchamp disguised himself as Rose Selavy and Bataille first published the "Story of the Eye" under the pen name of Lord Auch in 1928.





**Fig. 22** *The Giant*. Still from *Cremaster 5* (1997)





## CONCLUSION

Barney's work, as seen through the *Critical Dictionary* from *Documents*, raises a number of points. First the spirit of surrealism is alive and well within his work. It would be impossible to believe Barney isn't aware of the links his work has with a tradition such as this. Many of his themes including references to de Sade, Nietzsche, Freud and psychoanalysis were deeply influential to the surrealist movement.

The nature of alteration is central to Bataille's thinking and there is an abundance of alteration going on within Barney's projects. There is alteration and metabolic change called for with the *hubris pill*, the alteration of the *Loughton Candidate* and amongst this there is Barney's alteration of himself as part of the process.

Barney's work would seem to be permeated by the pseudo-scientific and psychobabble as was the surrealist group. Links exist in similar production of objects that could be termed as "Psycho Anamorphic and Atmospheric".

Indeed the medium of film or video itself is just this "Psycho Anamorphic Atmospheric device". In his essay on surrealism and cinema, Adrian Martin writes that the surrealists worshipped B-films, especially horror, fantasy and science fiction because of the heights of dream-like abstraction that could be obtained precisely because of its artificial blatant nature (*Revolution by Night*, pp.193).

Breton stated on many occasions that Murnau's film *Nosferatu* was his favourite, similarly Barney lists as influential films:





The Evil Dead series (Sami Raimi, 1987)  
Delicatessen (Jeunet and Caro, 1991)  
Hellraiser II (Tony Randall, 1988)  
The Shining (Stanley Kubrick, 1980)  
and Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory (Mel Stuart, 1971).

(Pace Car for the Hubris Pill Catalogue 1996, pp.13)

The above listed films tie in with Adrian Martin's mention of B-film and horror genre are central to surrealism and similarly to Barney. The listed films although not expressly surrealist point to the uncanny, the bizarre and the humourous.

Dream cinema presents a term which relates to cinema as an experience of the unconscious. Similarly the work of Matthew Barney is an experience, dream-like and disturbing.

Automutilation was the theme proposed by Bataille in his essay "Sacrificial Mutilation and the Severed Ear of Vincent Van Gogh (Visions of Excess, pp.61-73). This essay places alteration and automutilation as a surreal proposition. In a way Barney proposes similar alteration. Our imaginations or our subconscious are filled with the uncanny and fantastic once we have seen the films or installations. Once the work is encountered the viewer is altered. Barney himself is literally altered in his many disguises throughout the projects yet also altered by the rituals he performs within them. This is a return to various primal scenes conjured in the Freudian discovery of sexuality and the unconscious. This is shown through sadomasochism, trauma even hysteria and fetishism.



Barney presents equivalent images or scenarios to the traits and characteristics of the surrealists, as manifested in their early dabblings with psychoanalysis and Freudian theory.

The prosthetically castrated or genital-less Barney often appears in the *Cremaster* series as images as do images both masochistic and sadistic. These images have a precedent amongst the likes of Bellmer's doll project for example.

As a tool for examining Barney's ideas the *Critical Dictionary* has imposed a form on the formless, a kind of reversal of Bataille's true intentions but obvious similarities have been exposed throughout and Barney would seem to be surrealist in every aspect.

Differences too have arisen in that for Bataille and the surrealists there is a revolutionary aspect of a far reaching and political agenda. They wished to change the conditions of social reality and at one stage even aligned themselves with Marxism as a response to the rise of fascism in Europe at the time. Revolutionary zeal infected both Breton's and Bataille's groups and in contrast Barney's work resides firmly within the sphere of the somewhat elitist contemporary art world.

The implications and messages in Barney's work are deliberately arcane and confusing. The vision or surrealist vision in his work is a personal one and is not aligned to any group or movement. Indeed if anything the work is too exclusive and the films can only be seen through the Barbara Gladstone Gallery in New York or on rare touring exhibitions.





For obvious historical and technological reasons early surrealist work relied on collage and simple photographic processes as well as small-scale painting and sculpture in contrast the massive budget and heavy production machine behind Barney is all the more elaborate.

The challenging nature of both Bataille and the *Documents* group is just as fervent in Matthew Barney's work. Both share a vision of alteration and a refusal to accept the norm. Bataille wrote pornographically and vehemently against the mundane, similarly Barney shares the shocking and thought provoking as central to his surreal vision and surreal presentation of gender and even a third sex.



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