

Matthew Barney: River of Fundament

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The extraordinary American artist, Matthew Barney, worked for seven years on his new project RIVER OF FUNDAMENT. It is more colossal, overwhelming, and beautiful than anything else he has ever created.

Matthew Barney is standing in a sound studio in Manhattan; his sweater is full of holes and he's wearing work boots. There is no question that he's in a period of high concentration. Only four weeks remain until the premiere of his new film RIVER OF FUNDAMENT. Barney stares at the screen. An old man - more beast-like than human, covered in mud and earth - reaches for a rusty knife and cuts a piece of flesh from his stomach and throws it onto the wooden planks: Plop. Matthew Barney nods. Plop - that sounds good. Very genuine, very real. On to the next scene. Barney's films are like journeys into the subconscious: Bizarre, arduous, extraordinary. Barney himself is polite, almost shy, very serious but not grim, somehow obsessed and yet somehow free. He thinks for a long time, sometimes 20 seconds, before answering each question. Then he is very quiet. Occasionally he laughs, but not in embarrassment. When RIVER OF FUNDAMENT is finished, he will have spent seven years making it.

SZ-Magazin: Mr. Barney, your former partner, the singer Björk, once said that you reminded her of a submarine. Do you know what she meant by this?

Matthew Barney: I think she meant that for weeks and months, sometimes even for a year or two, I can disappear when I am working on a new project. I'm in my own world then; I hardly sleep, and I don't talk much. At the moment this is the case.

But you're giving an interview now.

Yes, but that's really it. I'm working around the clock on my new film. In the next room, a few sound technicians are working on the final details. Please don't be offended, but I have to go over there from time to time to check on what they're doing. We're in the final production phases, and I haven't really slept in days.

On March 16, Munich's Haus der Kunst will open an exhibition of your works, including sculptures, drawings, and photographs, which were created alongside the film. That same day, the European

premiere of RIVER OF FUNDAMENT will screen in the Bayerische Staatsoper. Why not in a traditional movie theater?

I briefly visited the Munich Opera House just for a few minutes, but I immediately sensed that it was the right place for this. The film has more in common with an opera than it does with a movie. Its length alone - it has three acts, two intermissions, and is five and a half hours long - is a reason why I found an opera house the more logical choice.

You make it sound as if the film has to be endured, like a Wagner opera.

Endured is the wrong word, but anyone who wants to get something out of it has to invest time, energy, and discipline.

Like Adorno's principle: "Pleasure grows where there is suffering"?

Of course you're exhausted after four or five hours. The mind is tired and concentration flags. The film has nothing to do with a 90-minute Hollywood movie, whose emotional breadth is intentionally constructed to accommodate the public's ability to concentrate. The film is more of a psychological journey.

You once said that you half-liked, half-disliked opera. Which part of it do you like?

For me, opera is first and foremost a spatial or an organic experience. In the opera I'm intensely aware that I'm sitting in the middle of a resonance chamber. I feel as if I were sitting in the stomach of another creature, for instance, an enormous whale. Have you ever noticed that the darkness in an opera hall is different from that in a movie theater? It's lighter in the opera house. The little light that exists is reflected by the chandeliers and mirrors. You sense the people around you much more intensely than in a movie theater.

And you don't like that?

Opera isn't physical enough for me. The singers are only representative; they seem artificial to me, in contrast to ballet. I love experimental dance, including classical ballet. I'm addicted to physicality. I built a weight room in my studio, where I regularly train.

Your mother once said: "Matthew thinks through his body." Training is a kind of meditation for me. And I want to be prepared for what I do. I've spent seven years working on this film, and more than a thousand people have been involved in its production. We put everything we had into this project. When it's over, we'll be mentally and physically exhausted. It helps if the body is trained.

You used to play American football and worked as a model. Did you experience things then that have helped you as an artist? Yes. Playing football and modeling are physical, very tangible activities; at the same time, they take place within a staged framework. American football is a game, but you could also define it as an abstraction of war. The same is true for fashion shows. There, too, the focus is on the real body, but the atmosphere, the

aesthetic, is as surreal as an illusion or a dream. This balance between artificiality and naturalness fascinates me. This is also the concern of RIVER OF FUNDAMENT.

Because the film is a mixture of classic film and documentation and is half-artificial, half-natural?

That's right. RIVER OF FUNDAMENT has become a hybrid: Half-movie, half-documentary with three live performances that took place in Los Angeles, Detroit, and New York. When I started the project, I had lost interest in filmmaking. At that time, I was more interested in performance situations that unfolded in real time before an audience. It was actually my original plan that the entire film would be executed as a live performance. I love rituals that follow a set procedure. And I like it when the ritual is performed by people with physical exertion. Only this way is it possible to create a drama in the ancient sense of the word.

The weather, the crowd, the security ... don't you have to compromise a great deal with live performances?

Yes, but that's exactly the point. I want to make compromises.

An unusual statement for an artist.

A muscle grows through resistance. Creative power grows through restriction. I'm dependent on resistance in my work. You could speak of a dynamic form of problem solving. I can make sense of it, surrendering myself, I mean, surrendering myself artistically.

What do you mean?

That I can recognize when something is bigger than I am. I see this as liberation; it is an existential experience to relinquish control, and to do this with a work that I have created. You could say I'm working on an organism that follows a logic I have created and that then evolves independently after a certain point. All of a sudden, this organism demands things of me to which I must respond, and respond instinctively. The result is a fight I might lose, maybe even have to lose. It is important that, during a live performance, there's always room for improvisation and mistakes.

Why room for mistakes?

Because there must be the risk of failure. Only then are my senses alert, my instincts sharpened; only then are my survival mechanisms set in motion, and only then I am both open and focused.

Are you obsessed?

Definitely.

Do that make you suffer?

I don't think so.

In your performances, do you want to preserve mythical experiences that threaten to disappear in the digitized 21st century?

I do not want to preserve them; I'd like to experience them.

What is the role of the audience at a live performance?
The audience is there to witness the drama that is taking place. It is not just about watching; it's about responsible participation. For this reason there shouldn't be too many viewers; 200 is a good number. It not a question of a spectacle, but of the collective experience of a mystery. A performance can't be rehearsed or repeated. It takes place once and never again. You shouldn't confuse a performance with a play that can be performed any number of times; indeed, its charm lies in the slight variations that may arise from one evening to the next.

A critic once wrote, "Barney's work has no composition, no structure, no feeling, not even irony." Do statements like this bother you?

I have no problem with it when I have the feeling that a critic hates my work with a passion. I am satisfied even if someone is irritated by my work, when he senses something, but does not know exactly what it is or from where it comes. Having said that, I am aware that my work cannot be liked by everyone. Irony really doesn't interest me, by the way.

Why not?

Because it subverts the intention of my work. What I do, I mean to do.

What about humor?

Irony weakens a statement, but humor can reinforce it. I appreciate humor that has to do with the body, as when someone trips, or an object falls down or falls apart. I like Buster Keaton, even Jackass. Humor that explores the potential of the body and variations of failure.

Is RIVER OF FUNDAMENT meant to be entertaining?

No.

What is the film about?

I can't give you any interpretation, even if I wanted to.

You don't like to talk about your work, do you?

I find it difficult because I don't work rationally, but intuitively. At exhibitions I'm almost always disappointed, because I am given too much information. In most cases, the magic of the work is destroyed by this information. It is like a photograph that is overexposed. If something is too obvious, it is destroyed.

Do you have an example of this?

Think of a famous painting. It does not matter which one, just a painting of which there are countless copies and reproductions. You can't avoid constantly seeing this painting. Then, you stand in front of the original for the first time and it's disappointing because your perception suffers from this inflationary confrontation.

Is a work of art only good if it can't be fully understood?
Not necessarily, but it is the case with art I like, actually also with people that I like. A work of art only appeals to me if, even after years of exploring it, I cannot decipher it; when it carries a mystery in itself, for example, the video works by Bruce Nauman, without which I probably would have never started to make films.

Can you explain the idea upon which the movie is based?
The film is based on the novel 'Ancient Evenings' by Norman Mailer, published in 1983.

The novel is not one of Mailer's greatest works. What made you choose it?
That's true, the novel was not very successful, and I wasn't familiar with it until Mailer told me about it shortly before his death. He said, "Matthew, have you ever read 'Ancient Evenings'?" And I replied, "No, honestly, I've never even heard of it." He then said, "Read it, at least have a look at it. I'm sure the book will be of interest to you."

Was he right?
Yes and no. I found the first 100 pages fantastic. The action takes place in Egypt around 1200 B.C.; the protagonist dies three times and is reborn three times; it's about reincarnation. I have been interested in Egyptian mythology for years and immediately felt familiar with the material. But, as the story progresses, the text becomes more explicit, and there is constant talk of sex and genitals. It's basically a pornographic novel. The question was how could I integrate these simpler scenes into the film without their flatness getting in the way of the film's logic and atmosphere. I both liked and disliked the book, and for me this was ideal.

Why?
Because I need something to love and hate at the same time so I can work with it. Do you know the novel Crash by J. G. Ballard? The story revolves around a group of people who get sexual pleasure from staging car accidents. Never in my life could I create a film of this novel. I have a unique relationship to this book. I love it. As an artist, however, I rely on doubt and ambiguity. Thus, my interest in mythological structures.

Because they are beyond a historical interpretation?
Yes. They are about open and flexible belief systems, which are not monotheistic but have many centers and allow different approaches of interpretation. This works for me because I don't perceive my work as linear in the sense of a chronological narrative structure, but as a system, as a flexible cosmos and continuum in which everything is interconnected, the films with the sculptures, with the performances, and with the drawings. The one arises from the other, creating a kind of meta-sculpture.

Even your CREMASTER cycle (1994-2002) was full of cross-references to Egyptian mythology. How thorough is your knowledge of it?
It's not a question of accumulating knowledge from books. I'm an artist, not a scholar. I enter this vast mythological space and

look for the aspects in it that fascinate me. I don't read much in general, really only for research purposes, not for fun. I cannot follow a linear narrative structure. I don't read novels, and I don't read before falling asleep.

All your work is about destruction and resurrection, birth and decay. Do you believe in reincarnation?

I believe in transformation. As an artist I even depend on something like transformation being possible.

What do you mean by transformation?

In Scandinavia, they found thousand-year-old blast furnaces from the Iron Age, in which metals were smelted to make weapons. During the excavations, they also found the remains of human bones. Researchers believe that the bodies of fallen warriors were thrown into the fire. First, to make the fire hotter and second - and this is the point that interests me - so that the soul, the spirit of the dead warrior could enter into the steel of the new sword. That's what I mean by transformation.

A spiritual energy that cannot be destroyed.

One that lives on and can be transmitted to people and objects. This is all that happens when I make sculptures. I put feelings into materials, into iron, copper, Vaseline. The idea that these feelings are inherent to the sculptures fascinates and satisfies me. Only now, after 20 years of working as a sculptor, am I beginning to understand what it means to create sculptures. The fact that these sculptures are not only unique in the sense that they are singular works, but that they are unique because they harbor a spiritual core that outlives me as an artist. I see myself primarily as a sculptor, not a filmmaker.

RIVER OF FUNDAMENT begins with a wake in Norman Mailer's home. Yes, we recreated Mailer's house - nearly completely and exactly - in my studio. The kitchen, the library, we even had the same edition of every book that had stood on Mailer's shelf. The film begins quite realistically, but after a while, the atmosphere changes. The mourners are replaced by their spirits. Mailer dies three times and is reborn three times. The young Norman is played by his son, the middle-aged Norman by an African-American jazz drummer, the old by a 95-year-old Lakota chief. The events of the funeral service are mirrored by the performances that I did in Los Angeles, Detroit, and New York.

What are the performances about?

They are also about reincarnation. It's not a person who goes through the cycle of reincarnation, but rather a car, the Chrysler Imperial 67, which played the leading role in CREMASTER 3. The plot is based on the myth of Isis and Osiris.

In the performance of KHU in Detroit, 25 tons of liquid iron were cast to create a giant sculpture in the shape of the djed pillar, an Egyptian hieroglyph, which will also be featured in the exhibition in Haus der Kunst.

Yes, the djed pillar represents stability as well as Osiris's spine.

What continually fascinates you about the bleak city of Detroit? Detroit embodies my concept of beauty. The first time I went there, I just wanted to visit a salt mine that lies underneath the city; but then I suddenly saw this enormous wealth of minerals and understood why Henry Ford had settled there to build his cars. He had everything he needed to make steel. In Detroit, all phases of history, including the layers of upheaval and success, hubris and decline, are simultaneously visible. Triumph and failure stand side by side; I feel that as beautiful.

How much did RIVER OF FUNDAMENT cost to make?
I could give you a number, but it would be meaningless.

How much did the performance in Detroit cost?
I'd rather not say. One can well imagine that a tremendous amount of money has gone into this project. I sacrificed a great deal of my savings to make it. Believe me, the movie is not economically smart and certainly not lucrative. I've lost a lot of money.

But you will make millions selling limited copies of it to museums.
The film is not for sale.

Why not?
Because I could only make it the way I wanted to make it if it were not for sale.

People watch movies to be moved, to learn about love, death, jealousy, revenge and friendship. Your films don't really deal with these emotional states. Do you find such feelings superficial?
Conventional Hollywood cinema conveys emotions from A to B. And there are quiet moments in my work when I try to do this as well. But, basically, I do not like to be bombarded with feelings from a stage or a screen.

Do you ever sit at home on the couch and watch a romantic comedy?
No, but don't get me wrong. I like to be deceived and manipulated; I'm just picky about how. I also would not say that I do not work with emotions. As I said, I'm interested when emotions take hold of a place, a landscape, or an object. You probably know 'The Shining' by Stanley Kubrick. This is one of the movies that influenced me greatly; I like horror movies anyway. Not those with monsters, but psychological ones, where one's body is the bearer of horrors. In 'The Shining' it's not a body, but a piece of architecture in which the horror is manifested, which is basically the same thing, because the place functions just like a body. This tension between the inside and the outside world, the way the fear takes over, this is exactly what I mean.

Did you have a daily routine while you were working on RIVER OF FUNDAMENT?

When I'm in New York, almost every day passes the same way. In the morning, I drive to my studio and start working at around 8:30; I take a break for lunch and drive home at about 6:00 pm. I have to

do it like this, because I have to have contact with my work every day, especially with the sculptures.

Do you also draw in your studio?

No, my studio is like a small factory. To draw, I need quiet and I only have that at home.

You are one of the most successful artists of our time. Does it become more difficult to produce good art the more famous you are? Success is indeed a problem. Even to be able to get a feel for a project, I have to feel helpless. This is essential for my work. I have to feel lost, almost timid, to get in touch with my instincts. Unfortunately, the more successful you are, the less helpless you are. Fame is is the greatest enemy of art.

What do you do about it?

I protect my privacy as much as possible. I'm not a hermit, but I rarely go to parties; only occasionally to private viewings of friends. I have to be like this because I would no longer be able to work if I were a public figure.

Interviewer: Tobias Haberl