

# GLADSTONE GALLERY

Chris Doyen, "Matthew Barney's REPRESSIA (decline) at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art," *Whitehot Magazine*, December 5, 2023



## Matthew Barney's REPRESSIA (decline) at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art



Matthew Barney, *Cremaster 5* (production still), 1997 (fig. 1) © Matthew Barney, Photo: Michael James O'Brien, Courtesy of the artist and Gladstone Gallery

BY CHRIS DOYEN December 5, 2023

Whether it be staging a demolition derby in the Chrysler building, filling the Goodyear blimp with Vaseline sculptures, deconstructing the motif of American football, or referencing the Roman goddess Diana, the formal characteristics of Matthew Barney's artworks often seem to dismantle mythologies from the inside out (fig. 1). Barney's current exhibition at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art titled *Matthew Barney: REPRESSIA (decline)* runs from July 2023 to January 2024. The exhibit features a sculptural installation from the 1990s, including a two-channel video installation.

Barney's tactics are subversive, for instance stationing raucous punk bands to battle it out in the hallowed halls of the Guggenheim Museum. Other examples come by way of employing weighty Masonic symbols or taking on involved themes such as Japanese whaling or tea culture. What follows will illustrate how the mechanisms of Barney's methods hollow out systems of signification from within, before remythologizing them.

As a physically fit, college football athlete who studied art at Yale University, Barney's rise as art star may be said to be metaphorically alluded to by way of his literally scaling the walls of the Guggenheim as a rock climber. This motif is again employed in *REPRESSIA (decline)* (fig. 2), which references the sports of both wrestling and climbing. The videos show, among other things, Barney climbing the walls of the gallery in the nude, physically dominating the white cube.



*Matthew Barney, REPRESSIA (decline), 1991 (fig. 2). Installation photo, Matthew Barney: REPRESSIA (decline), at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, July 23, 2023 - January 7, 2024, © Matthew Barney, Photo: Museum Associates/LACMA, Courtesy of the artist and Museum Associates/LACMA*

Barney subverts traditional sculptural practices in a number of ways, including the use of petroleum jelly as a sculptural material, in one instance completely covering in Vaseline the exterior of a bar in the Chrysler Building in one of the films of the *Cremaster Cycle* (1994-2002). The present study asserts that the effect of Barney's sculptural aesthetic produces an emptying of the objects' signification, followed by what could be termed a "re-signification." Barney's sculptural objects become signifiers that resist signification: they flirt with being non-messages. In his book *The Semiotic Challenge*, French philosopher Roland Barthes examines the object as message in a chapter titled "Semantics of the Object": "As it happens, objects do not give us that meaning which they have in a frank, declared manner. When we read a highway sign, we receive an absolutely frank message; this message does not play at being a non-message..." (189). There exists in Barney's sculptural objects a provocatively fluid tension hovering between message and non-message; indeed, I contend that the object in the Barney installation functions as a sign that at once both signifies and impedes its own signification. By way of example, a particular focus of this article will be the white spherical objects (fig. 3) that crop up in a number of his works.

MENU



*Matthew Barney, REPRESSIA (decline), 1991 (detail) (fig. 3) © Matthew Barney, Photo: Museum Associates/LACMA, Courtesy of the artist and Museum Associates/LACMA*

These tiny spheres (fig. 4) resist both denotation and thus connotation. Made out of tapioca, the utterly novel objects ultimately subvert nomination, becoming difficult to classify; a useful term used by Barthes in his lectures on the Neutral published in 2005 is the concept of the “nonsimplifiable” (191). Moreover, the impetus to cover objects completely with these substances also calls to mind the Japanese artist Yayoi Kusama’s obsessive-compulsive replication of colorful dots over all conceivable surfaces of her sculptural objects.



Matthew Barney, *OTTOshaft*, 1995 (detail) (fig. 4) © Matthew Barney, Photo: Museum Associates/LACMA, Courtesy of the artist and Museum Associates/LACMA

With this move, Barney dismantles notions of the traditional art object. In *The Responsibility of Forms: Critical Essays on Music, Art, and Representation*, Barthes notes in relation to Barnard Réquichot's artworks that his goal was "not to see better or to see more completely." Rather the goal was "to see *something else*" (223). Réquichot accomplished this through assemblage artworks that "produce[d] that supplement which disturbs meaning, i.e., recognition (to understand... is to recognize; the sign is what is recognised; Réquichot belongs to that race of artists *who do not recognise*" (223). In Barney's installation, we encounter the unrecognizable art object.



Matthew Barney, *Cremaster 3* (production still), 2002 (fig. 5) © Matthew Barney, Photo: Chris Winget, Courtesy of the artist and Gladstone Gallery

MEN  
This formal mechanism morphs powerfully into what we may call “an answer of the fifth type” in Barney’s *Cremaster* series. In the structuralist semiotic square based on a simple binary—let’s say the yes/no binary—our four answers will be: yes; no; yes and no; neither yes nor no. The merger that unifies the “yes” and “no” may be called the complex third term, while the unification of “not yes” and “not no” would be the fourth, neutral term. However, could things be pushed even further than this? I contend that a solution comes via an answer of the fifth type. Although Barthes’s focus on androgyny in his analysis of the neuter offers a rich conceptualization that neutralizes the male/female dichotomy, Barney takes things a step further by portraying himself in one instance of the *Cremaster* series as a being that transcends this binary (fig. 5).

With sculptor Richard Serra looking on—perhaps as a kind of mad scientist who has just created an androgynous Frankenstein—Barney spawns a tertium quid, which may be defined as a merger of A and B (or yes and no), where the product, however, is pushed so far that it no longer resembles either A or B. With a blurred reference to clearly delineated genitalia, Barney’s creation transcends the male/female binary. We might label this formal mechanism a more powerful re-gendering that transcends the A+B complex merger of femininity and masculinity examined in Barthes’s analysis of androgyny.

The sexual organs invented by Barney ultimately remain unclassifiable. They become like the utterly novel instrument (as analyzed by Barthes) to cover one’s feet fashioned out of newspaper and twine—an object that does not yet signify a shoe. Perhaps the term “pre-signifying object” might be an apt label for this phenomenon. In this vein, Barthes (1985) suggests: “. . .to find objects without meaning we must imagine objects which are altogether improvised. . .; in order to find absolutely improvised objects, we should have to proceed to completely asocial states. . .” (182-183). However, no sooner does society encounter this makeshift shoe than it immediately becomes a sign, entering the contemporary lexicon of objects. In its utterly innovative uniqueness, Barney’s creation of a completely undifferentiated sexual identity comes across as decidedly foreign. More than the merger of femininity and masculinity entailed in both the hermaphroditism and androgyny analysed so intently by Barthes (2005), Barney’s alien creation represents a powerful re-signification of form.



*Matthew Barney, Cremaster 3 (production still), 2002 (fig. 6) © Matthew Barney, Photo: Chris Winget, Courtesy of the artist and Gladstone Gallery*

Barney murders the art object. One helpful phrase offered by Barthes (1985) involves what he calls an “exheredation of the object” (226). In reference to Réquichot’s boxes—evocative of the sculptural assemblages of Joseph Cornell (1903-1972)—Barthes points out a process that “severs the inheritance from the name” (226). Barney’s artworks actively sever imagery and objects from their inherited denotations and connotations.

Unpacking objects in this manner entails an undermining of the unconscious process of the naturalization of signs. Further, a “pre-naturalized” or “un-naturalized” art object represents more than just the complex or the neuter; rather, it is a double movement that un-signifies in the midst of signification.

Take another example: a sculpture from Barney’s *Cremaster 3* (2002) (fig. 6) which hollows out signification through a complex merger of animal and object. The connotations of the hooved animal begin to reference common Greek and Roman mythological creatures—a common motif in Barney’s oeuvre. However, the non-organic, man-made structures inserted into the animal corpse function as formal devices that thwart signification in a process of demythologization. Similarly, a process of remythologizing can be found echoed in Barney’s utilization of the Scottish kilt and headdress, featuring a bloody rag stuffed into his mouth as an abject twist.

Barthes (1952) argues that in order to topple the pillars that prop up the status quo, our cultural myths themselves must be mythified—or we might say “demythified”: “Truth to tell, the best weapon against myth is perhaps to mythify it in its turn, and to produce an *artificial myth*” (246-247). The goal here would be to uncover the artifice that masks what is normally mistaken as natural.

Whether it be the wrestling mat, the football training sled, or the speculum—among many other things—Barney demythifies the objects in his video and installation art. Signs are emptied before being refilled, in what may be termed a process of re-signification. **WM**

## References

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