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Abstract

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The American contemporary artist Matthew Barney has been recognised for, among other things, using the 1996 Paralympic champion Aimee Mullins as a primary actor in his critically-acclaimed film and installation piece *The Cremaster Cycle* (1994-2002). In this piece, Barney weaves the physical fact of Mullins' two prosthetic legs into his complex theorisation of the deconstructed Subject. Barney's thematic concerns with hybridity and hubris become readable in *The Cremaster Cycle* through the disabled person, who cannot be read outside the marking by the prosthetic. Thus the disabled person is, like so many of Barney's characters, a hybrid Subject, a Subject marked by an incorporation of otherness into itself. This radically deconstructive stance, epitomised by Mullins' character of the sphinx-like Leopard Queen, is the pinnacle of Barney's ongoing interest in prosthetics and the body which has grounded his work since he was art student at Yale University. In this paper I would like to use Barney's choice of Mullins as his actor as an index into not only his work in general on the prostheticised body-Subject, but as a model for looking at other artists working through the theorisation of the prostheticised, hybridised body, ultimately working up to the embrace of a radically de-centered, deconstructed Subject.

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Disability as Deconstruction: Reading the Prosthetic in the work of Matthew Barney

Matthew Barney's *The Cremaster Cycle* (1994-2002) comprises 5 feature-length films, each of which is supported by photographs, sculptures, installations, and poems, all shown in conjunction with each other in gallery and museum venues. Through his extremely complex visual and narrative constructions, Barney weaves a mythic system, perhaps the mythic system--of Western civilisation, including, foregrounding, the secret foreign bodies that have been actively encrypted for centuries.

Barney makes use of a troping system in the cycle, that is, a set of figures which recur throughout the five films which bind his otherwise overwhelmingly vast aesthetic system together. Through the immense experience of viewing *The Cremaster Cycle* we can identify the following tropes: prosthetics; hybridity; hubris; Celtic myth; brotherhood; architecture; ascension; descent; pills; supplement; masculinity; narcissism; beehives;

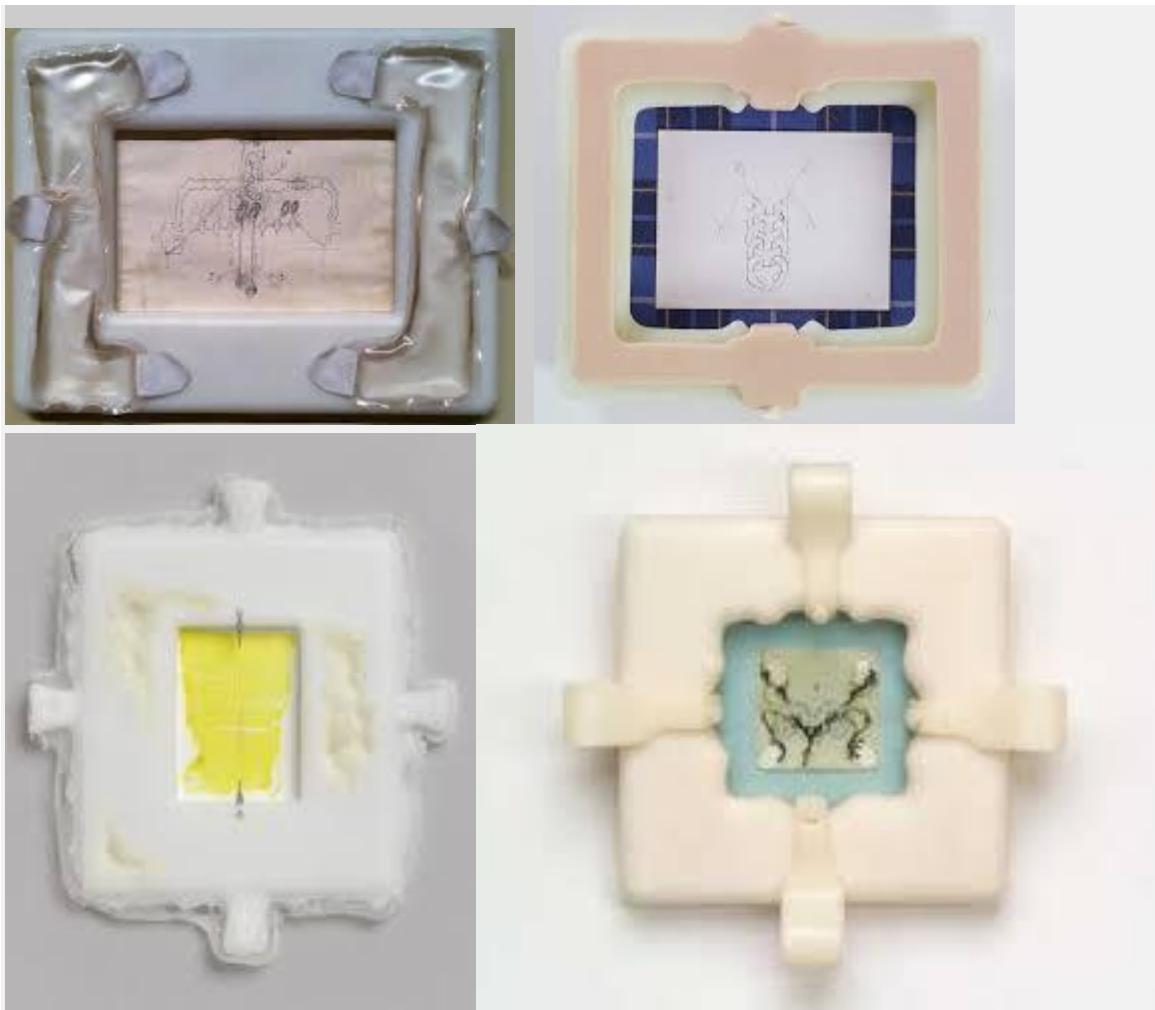
verticality; climbing; foundation; ligament; myth; Master and Apprentice; blood atonement; cars; femininity; betrayal; and, finally, Matthew Barney himself. Today we tackle the tropes of prosthetics, hybridity and hubris.

The body is the paradigm, the theoretical framework, the wedge of deconstruction in all of Barney's work. This paper follows Barney's dismantling of the unified, coherent, self-present, able, metaphysical body which has persisted only, and arguably, *in order to*, foreclose the prosthetic and all the prosthetic carries with it. For, like writing's relation to the unmediated presence of Speech, the prosthetic attachment to and penetration into "the body" introduces artificiality, death, otherness, and a hybridity which indicate a certain danger or threat.

Matthew Barney as a theorist of "the prosthetic" means that he is also a theorist of "incorporation." When we think of what "incorporation" means in a legal or every day sense, an entity or "body" incorporates something outside of itself which becomes integrated into "itself"—thereby constituting "itself" as an "itself"—a body "proper", with an "ownness". But Barney constantly throws this contained, unified "ownness" into question. Bodies are *not* containable; their boundaries are always trespassed either from within—as seepage-- or from without—as sites of penetration by non-organic substances.

At this point we might consider Barney's unusual but highly effective use of material in his sculpture. The sculptures, which he has described as the primary vehicles for his films, are made of petroleum jelly – tons and tons of it. He also creates, for the display of his drawings and photographs, self-lubricating picture frames, which ooze into the image.

figure 1: Barney's self-lubricating frames:



The “ooziness” of the medium is, for Barney, an expression of what he describes as the state of *potential*, of the energetic possibility, of the *entropy* of matter and of the body.

The premiere of the film *Cremaster 3*, sponsored by the London-based organisation ArtAngel, took place at the Ritzy Cinema in Brixton, London, in 2002. Barney and his crew built a large wooden frame in the cinema lobby. The re-inforced plywood was 4 feet high and over 16 feet wide, and curved around the space of the lobby. The crew then filled the framework with a mixture of butter-colored material made of 3 parts petroleum jelly to one part wax. There were TEN TONS of this stuff!!!! Barney had had it trucked in from a factory in the Midlands and pumped hot, into the wooden mold.

His plan was to unbolt the mould and take all the wooden support away, once the jelly had solidified. Five video monitors were installed in pentagonal form just above the

installation, each one playing a different part of the *Cremaster* film cycle, simultaneously, through the three weeks that the sculpture remained on view.

However, the mixture never did quite solidify, and, when Barney removed the wooden frame, the jelly escaped all over the lobby. Although this was not in the plans, Barney welcomed the unstable potential of the medium, and was happy to be what he described as “at the mercy of the material.” (Tomkins, 57)



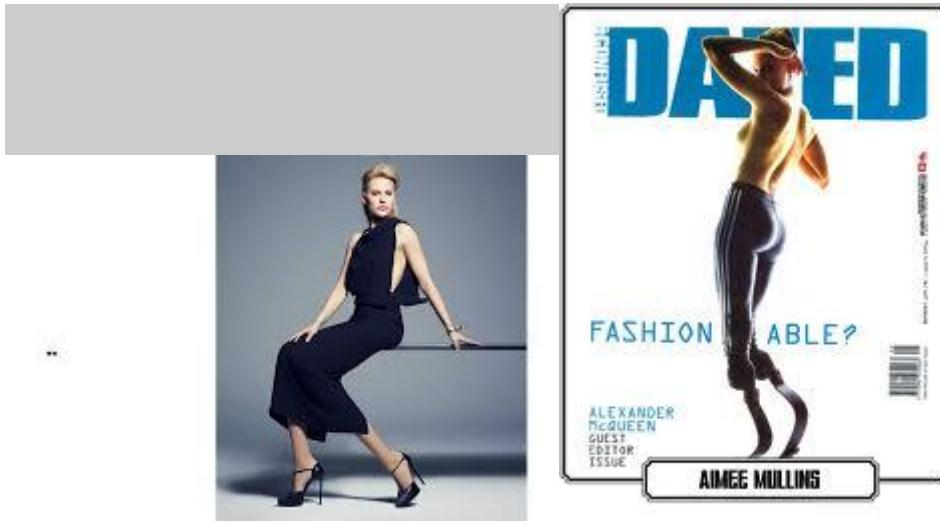
figure 2:petroleum for *Cremaster*

Being at the material’s mercy was similar to what happened when he imposed restraints upon his own body in his former work, since he was a student at Yale in 1987. This was the *Drawing Restraint* series, in which he experimented with the fact that one just had to see where the resistance (or in the case of the jelly, the lack of it) took the work. Barney loves this idea of imposing resistance, such as harnesses or other restraining devices that dictated the outcome of his drawings. Relatedly, he is also interested in what happens when a foreign object is introduced into a body. This foreign object might be a surgical instrument; it might be another species; it might be a prosthetic limb, it might be a dose of steroids. It could be any object which is, supposedly, outside of the given entity. For Barney, the boundaries and limits of any given entity, always figured as a *bodily* entity, are always full of holes, sites which open up the body to penetration from the outside, or, which allow for leakage and secretions emanating from the body. This inherent instability of bodily boundaries is the key motif in *The Cremaster Cycle*, and in all of Barney’s work. His designated openings, or holes, deconstruct any kind of idealised, organic intactness of the body; the body is never a unified, uniform closed system; it is constantly inviting and negotiating the incorporation what is *other to it*. Hence, we arrive at the prosthetics and hybridity central to *Cremaster*.

Aimee

No doubt you may all be waiting to hear more on the ostensible topic of this paper, which is Barney's use of the double-amputee Aimee Mullins as actor in his films, particularly in *Cremaster 3*, in which Mullins plays multiple roles.

figure 3: Mullins as supemodel in Alexander McQueen; and on the cover of DAZED magazine:



Mullins was born without fibulae and when she was a year old, both legs were amputated at the knees. She was always athletic (like Barney himself, a teenage football star), and when she was a student at Georgetown University, she competed with able-bodied people on Georgetown's nationally-ranked Division 1 track team, with the aid of woven carbon fiber prostheses modeled after the hind legs of a cheetah. She went on to set world records in various sprint competitions and participated in the 1996 Paralympics. In 1999 she was asked to model for Alexander McQueen and since then has continued modeling and acting. Matthew Barney's *Cremaster 3* was her first job as a film actor.

In the book *The Prosthetic Impulse*, theorist Marquand Smith observes what he calls the “technofetishism” of Mullins by the press and media, that is, the fetishistic eroticization of Mullins’ prosthesis—at the expense of her being read or seen as an amputee. Mullins, he writes, was embraced as a “Cyborgian sex kitten”; a pinnacle of “posthuman progress”, but this entailed that she was never permitted to be embraced as an amputee or

disabled person. (Smith, 58) Barney, however, in Smith's critical view, does not fall into the fantasy of technofetishism with regard to Mullins. Barney's awareness of the technofetishism surrounding Mullins foregrounds the technofetishism and creates a critical distance from it. And Barney would have liked Mullins to play a role without any prosthesis, but Mullins declined, saying it would have been too intimate not to have a barrier between her body and the floor.

Figure 4: Cremaster 3, Mullins as Cheetah and Barney as Entered Apprentice, Guggenheim Museum:

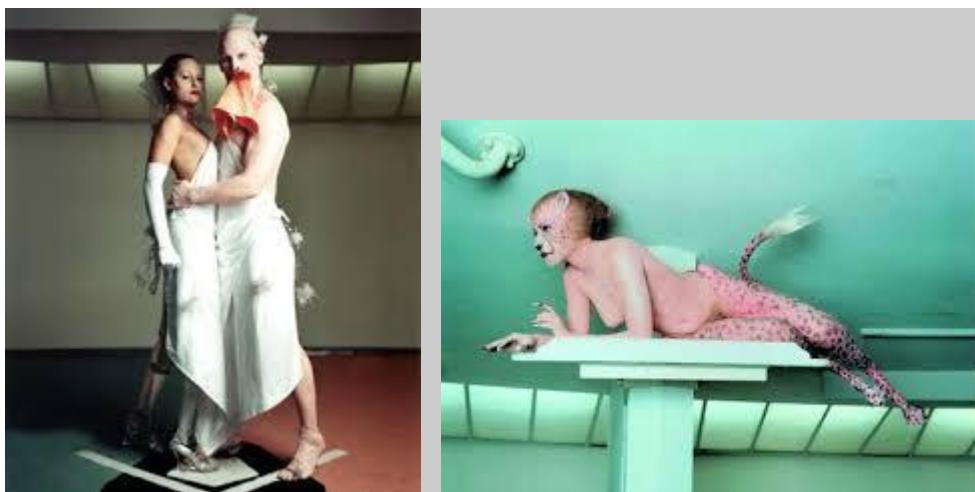
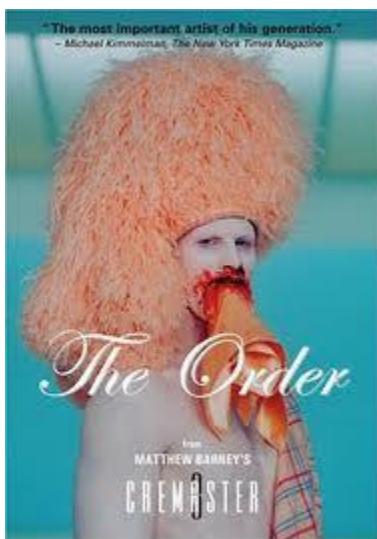


Figure 5: “The Order” in Cremaster 3:



“The Order” is the title of the film segment of Cremaster 3 set in the Guggenheim Museum in New York, where the final installation of all 5 parts of the Cremaster Cycle took place, which we’ll look at soon. “The Order” has several meanings. In a general sense, an “order” is a command that needs to be followed. But in the context of the Cremaster-3, “The order” refers to the name Freemasons give themselves for their collective brotherly body; it is another name for Freemasonry itself. Site specifically, “the Order” refers to the ritualistic and narrative sequence in which the museum viewer participates upon his or her ascent up the spiral of the Guggenheim. Barney’s narrative sequence here mimes the ritual of the Masonic 3rd Degree, the degree into which a candidate must be initiated before he is permitted to join the brotherhood. Thus we, as spectators, are being initiated, raised to the 3rd Degree.

Which of course, we aren’t really.

But Barney effectively collapses the boundary, bursts the “cement bonds” (as described by the Freemasons in their own rhetoric) of fraternal secrecy, and betrays all the secrets, even the most guarded one of all, the secret of all secrets: that the 3rd degree ritual re-enacts a primal murder, that of Hiram, builder of King Solomon’s Temple. The initiate is maimed 3 times, with 3 different masons’ tools, by 3 assassins. The initiators play the part of these assassins, wielding the tools of the architectural trade, and the initiate, playing Hiram, then falls into the coffin outline on the floor, either in a Masonic Lodge, or, here, on the Guggenheim floor. Mullins’s and Barney’s characters dance and fight around this coffin outline. See the following clip from “Cremaster 3”:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nx8jhc2Frh4>

And what happened to the murdered body of Hiram as prescribed by Masonic ritual? All sorts of things, which are also part of the ritual.

Figure 6: The “5 Points of Fellowship” component of Masonic 3rd degree ritual as interpreted by Barney:



But on another level, a collective unconscious level, the corpse of Hiram remained a secret body at the heart of Freemasonry, around which an entire culture grew; it is a foreign, dead body that remains hidden for centuries. It inaugurates and supports an economy. Psychoanalytically speaking, the dead body of Hiram becomes *incorporated* into the living fraternal body.



Figure 7: Cremaster 2, 3: the corpse of Gary Gilmore:

In Barney's narrative, the naughty Masonic Apprentice who was building the Chrysler Building cheated and did not lay a pure ashlar square; instead, he shortcut the process. Instead of carving a perfect square foundation, he pours cement into a mold, which, bizarrely, is the inside of a Chrysler car—the same Chrysler car which held the corpse of Gary Gilmore in another part of the Cremaster narrative. Thus instead of the perfect square for the foundation of the Chrysler Building in New York, effectively the dead body was the keystone. For his hubris, the apprentice gets punished in various ways. His

nosebleeds indicate that he has gone too high; he has dared to ascend beyond his place to challenge the father figure/Master Mason, played by the sculptor Richard Serra.



Figure 8: Richard Serra as Master Mason:

Figure 9: Cremaster 3, potatoes/bee larvae wedged into the Chrysler Building bar



with prostheticized woman (Aimee Mullins):

Throughout *The Cremaster Cycle* Barney deploys tropes of introduced foreign bodies, incorporated intact into a given entity. Psychoanalytically, this inclusion indicates an unsuccessful mourning, a melancholic disposition, and Barney's work most definitely lends itself to theorization in this critical framework. But for the purposes of this paper, I want to emphasize the deconstructive aspect of Barney's trope of inclusion of something foreign, because his tropes perform as radical catalysts to the disunification of the body, making an important wedge into the unified, able-bodied subject of metaphysics and its attendant philosophies.

Etymology teaches us that the incorporation of otherness into a unified perfect body presents a certain danger. Barney investigates this danger in his play between *hybrid* and

hubris, which is a consciously applied figure throughout Cremaster cycle. **Figure 10:** from Cremaster 2, Barney as Satyr; Bee-Woman:



The cheetah character played by Aimee Mullins is also a hybrid body.

In his earlier work, the *Drawing Restraint* series, Barney created the figure of “the Hubris Pill”—which corresponded to a hybrid, prostheticized Subject. The Hubris Pill is the boost, the intervention, a kind of prosthetic jump- start which unleashes the body’s potential. The distinctive shape of the Hubris Pill can be seen throughout Barney’s work and throughout the Cremaster Cycle.

Figure 11: the Hubris Pill motif throughout Barney’s work:

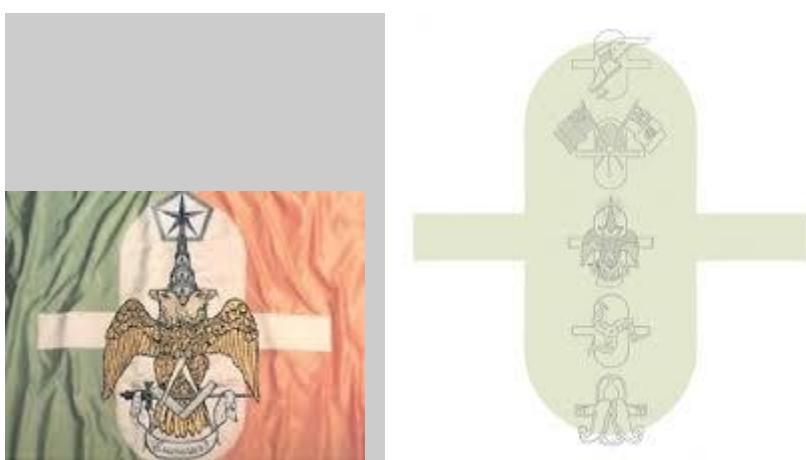


Figure 12: director-woman character, Cremaster 1 (prosthetic shoe with hubris pill design for football field):



The Hubris Pill, steroidal and hybridizing, intervenes in a body, dis-assembling and adding a boost to that body's "ownness."

Part II: Barney meets Derrida; the Political Imperative

The hegemony of the unified, coherent, living body postulated by metaphysics, kicked into gear by Plato, has worked long and hard to repress and renounce the disabled and the prostheticized body. These subjectivities—disabled and prostheticized-- are interchangeable in the metaphysical schema. Jacques Derrida's deconstructive play with the dynamics of text recognizes the corporeal metaphor of *logos*, or speech, idealized by Plato in his Dialogues. *Logos*, as a mode of expression, is pure, alive, unmediated; but when writing is introduced to accompany it (Derrida recounts Plato's retelling of the story of the Egyptian god who invented writing), it threatens *logos* with proximity to death and the artificialization and with the outsourcing of memory.

(projected on screen): (CITATION OF DERRIDA CITING PLATO):

In describing *logos* as *zōon*, Plato is following certain rhetors and sophists before him who, as a contrast to the cadaverous rigidity of writing, had held up the living spoken word...

Socrates [to Phaedrus]: But to this you will surely agree: every discourse (*logon*), like a living creature (*ōsper zōon*), should be so put together (*sunestanai*) that it has its own body and lacks neither head nor foot, middle nor extremities, all composed in such a way that they suit both each other and the whole (264-c).

In this bodily sense figured in Socrates words, *logos* is complete; it needs nothing added, and does not want anything added. The dialogue of the Phaedrus is all about writing, and

how bad it is, how dangerous it is, because it pushes its way up against and into the living body of *logos*. Derrida, on the other hand, embraces writing as the good supplement, the site of textual play, radical in its deconstruction of the metaphysically unified, intact “body.” And thus, writing is prosthetic, it is a necessary intervention; and *logos* would struggle to survive without it.

Barney’s massive, mythic *Cremaster Cycle* offers this same deconstructive force as Derrida’s deconstruction of the unified living body of *logos*—but Barney’s is more of a deconstructive WALLOP, foregrounding the prosthetic as an always already, potential inclusion into “the body”—the coherency and intact unity of which, as implied by Barney, was never there to begin with—the potentiality of its hybridity signified throughout the Cycle.

The Cremaster Cycle’s rich aesthetic system offers a hot theorization of the prosthetic body which points to the radical imperative of dismantling and deconstructing Metaphysical edifices—no easy task--, as well as providing fertile critical ground for the incorporation of the prosthetic into artistic practice. Barney’s rich reading and writing of The Prosthetic embraces and presumes The Prosthetic as the primary site of potential.

References

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