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River of Fundament

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Matthew Barney's singular new film.

L to R: Matthew Barney and Jonathan Bepler, River of Fundament: REN, 2014, Production Still. Photo: Chris Winget; Matthew Barney and Jonathan Bepler, River of Fundament, 2014, Production Still. Photo: David Regen. © Matthew Barney.

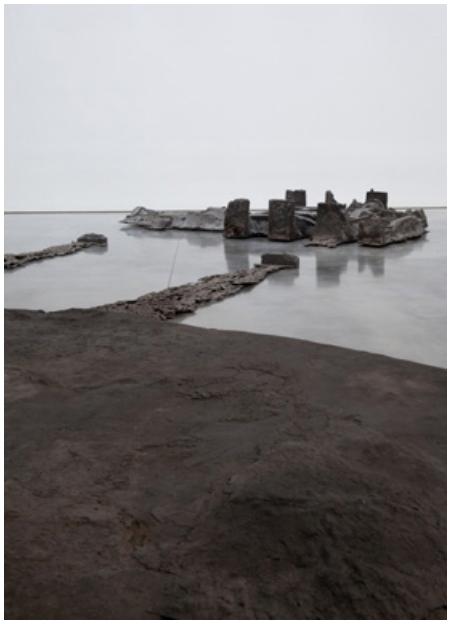
Matthew Barney's studio, the birthing place of some of the biggest and most ambitious art of our time, sits in an industrial New York netherzone by the East River in Queens. A couple blocks down is a garage for cast-off food carts in states of obliteration and disarray. On the streets stroll workers whose sturdy coats solicit calls to 888-WASTEOIL, for the service of all waste-oil wants and needs. Alongside the studio the mercurial river flows, its current changing direction several times a day.

Inside are forklifts to move things like six-ton blocks of salt and sculpturally abetted Trans Ams. Football jerseys hang on a wall, including one for the fabled Oakland Raiders center Jim Otto (his number, 00, puts Barney in mind of extra-bodily orifices). A staff of a half dozen studio hands oversees projects of enterprising kinds, from building and bracing large architectural oddities to disrupting and destroying sculptures and letting objects rot.

It was here that Barney completed *River of Fundament*, a new epic film project premiering this week at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, with a running time of nearly six hours (including two intermissions) and passages that play as extravagantly abstracted and absurd. The film was inspired by Norman Mailer's 1983 novel, *Ancient Evenings*, set in ancient Egypt and invested in stages of reincarnation that come after death. The story would not seem to be eminently filmable.

But *River of Fundament* is not exactly a film. It draws on a series of site-specific performances and elaborate happenings—live actions related to the project date back as far as 2007—and all of them, however cinematically presented in the end, fit as sensibly within the traditions of theater and opera. Shoots lasted for days, doubling as rituals or séances, with characters performing for an audience that would come to be part of the work.

"I really was not in the mood at that point to make a film," Barney says of the earliest stages of the project. "That's not where my head was." Instead, after an eight-year period devoted to directing films for his phantasmagorical *CREMASTER Cycle*, Barney conceived *River of Fundament* as a premise for more immediate experiments and events to be presented on stage. The first was a performance at his studio that later went public, in 2007, at the Manchester Opera House.



L to R: Matthew Barney, DJED, 2009-2011, Cast iron and graphite block, 20 1/4 x 406 x 399 inches (50.2 x 1031.2 x 1013.5 cm). Photo: David Regen; Matthew Barney and Jonathan Bepler, River of Fundament: KHU, 2014, Production Still. Photo: Hugo Glendinning © Matthew Barney.

"I don't have much of a relationship with opera," Barney says, "but I'm interested in opera houses, the way organic spaces are designed acoustically to receive the human voice. It's like the resonant chamber in your body. You feel like you're inside another body when you're in an opera house. I like thinking about a character on stage performing inside another body."

After the first performance, a critic for *The Guardian* puzzled over what to make of a show that featured a live bull and, in its human cast, a "pair of incontinent contortionists, one of whom arcs her body and pees all over the stage." Another character came across as a "static, naked odalisque [who] spends almost the entire performance with her head hidden under a black rubber veil, and with a hand up her own bottom."

The strictures of the stage did not exactly suit him, Barney says now. "I couldn't work with the same level of physicality that I'm used to. I also couldn't create a close-up."

The idea to adapt *Ancient Evenings* came from Mailer himself, whom Barney had cast to play Harry Houdini in Cremaster 2, which also enlisted elements of Mailer's nonfiction masterpiece *The Executioner's Song*. That book, about the crime-scarred life and complicated execution of Gary Gilmore, was an established classic from its release in 1979. The novel *Ancient Evenings*, however, had not met with the reception Mailer thought it deserved.

"It is, speaking bluntly, a disaster," wrote Benjamin DeMott in the *New York Times*. Though his review thrills over elements of a story that "pulls its reader inside a consciousness different from any hitherto met in fiction," DeMott found the bulk of the book a dire mess, populated by characters who came across as "ludicrous blends of Mel Brooks and the Marquis de Sade." Other less-than-charitable dismissals cast the book as "pitiably foolish," "impossible to summarize," and blighted by "pointless, painful, unintended hilarity."

Mailer himself was of a different mind. "He loved that book," says John Buffalo Mailer, the writer's son, who plays one of three incarnations of his father in *River of Fundament*. "He would no sooner pick a favorite book than he would a favorite child, but *Ancient Evenings* was a labor of love"—it took more than ten years to complete—"and it was heartbreaking the way it got, I don't want to say 'written off' … The truth of the matter is the first hundred pages of that book are incredibly tough to get through. If you make it through those hundred pages, then it starts reading like *The Naked and the Dead*. It starts to flow and move. He always wanted to see something more happen with it, which is why he talked to Matthew."

Barney dug into the book at Mailer's insistence and found elements of its surreal, body-snatching story fit for extrapolation. He tangled with Mailer's prose and read reactions to its bawdy, sprawling sensationalism. "I was influenced as much by a review of *Ancient Evenings* as by the book," he says. That review was Harold Bloom's in *The New York Review of Books*, which was vexed by parts of the novel but rather more pleased with its scope than many others at the time.

"Our most conspicuous literary energy has generated its weirdest text," Bloom wrote, before making a case for its endearing, invigorating, spiritually searching weirdness. He continued: "I don't intend to give an elaborate plot summary, since if you read *Ancient Evenings* for the story, you will hang yourself." But: "*Ancient Evenings* rivals *Gravity's Rainbow* as an exercise in what has to be called a monumental sado-anarchism." And: "*Ancient Evenings* is on the road of excess, and what Karl Kraus said of the theories of Freud may hold for the speculations of Mailer also—it may be that only the craziest parts are true."

Key to Bloom's reading of the book, for Barney, was the notion that the most meaningful characters in *Ancient Evenings* were in fact stand-ins for Ernest Hemingway and Mailer himself. The review, Barney says, posited "that the book was effectively autobiographical, that Mailer saw himself as being too late—that the great American novel wasn't needed anymore by the time he had come into his own. He wanted to be Hemingway but he couldn't. That interested me. So I started putting Mailer himself into the role of the protagonist, in reincarnations of the same character."

His revelation as to how to approach *Ancient Evenings* came after his conversations with Mailer, who died in 2007. "We talked about in what way it could function as a libretto," Barney says. "But he passed away not long after that, so unfortunately he never saw it develop into the hybrid that it is now. There are definitely things about the film that I couldn't or probably wouldn't have done were he alive. I'm not so sure what he would have thought about it."

But the prospect of a less-than-literal approach must have been on the author's mind. "I think he certainly knew, from the way I used *The Executioner's Song* in *CREMASTER 2*, what adaptation means to me," Barney says. "It's loose. I always visualize these things as host bodies and my language [as] a guest passing through the host body, touching it but not really becoming it. I think Mailer understood that."

John Buffalo Mailer, for his part, thinks his father would have been pleased. "There were not many people in the world that Norman acknowledged as a genius," he says. "Matthew was one of them."

The spirit on a Matthew Barney film set is never less than unconventional. For a stretch in the fall of 2012 the artist's studio in Queens was outfitted with a precise replica of Norman Mailer's former Brooklyn home. The author's book collection sat on dusty shelves, with actors in zombie garb roaming among real-life literary mavens and Hollywood stars. Emblems of ego and achievement strained for space on the walls. There was a memento from a debate with William F. Buckley in 1962, and a framed Life magazine cover trumpeting Mailer's life-ali-frazierreport on a fight between Joe Frazier and Muhammad Ali (with a cover photograph by Frank Sinatra)

On a day of shooting, Barney, as director, painted gold accents on grisly undead characters' faces and guided actors through dialogue drawn from Mailer as well as Hemingway, Walt Whitman, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and William S. Burroughs. "Past and future come together on thunderheads, and our dead hearts live with lightning in the wounds of the gods," bellowed one character, in a scene that required more than a few takes to get right.

With his bushy white beard, and wearing a black T-shirt ornamented by the death-metal band Cannibal Corpse, Barney looked like anything but a refined cineaste. But his charge was much the same. "Pour it a little more aggressively," he said through a mouthpiece to a production designer wetting the set with a strange, unidentified liquid. To the actress Ellen Burstyn, in the midst of a stubborn scene, he suggested, "I think we should not smile." He was right: the eerie Burstyn's version of not-smiling makes for an effect not to be forgotten.

A month later, another day of shooting began at 6:30 A.M. and called for floating an outdoor replica of Mailer's apartment around the New York waterways on a barge. As the cast ate catering in the dark outside the studio, preparations were made: structures hoisted, lifejackets secured, boats untied. Shortly after sunrise, the industrial-size barge drifted off, pushed by a tugboat and followed, at a distance, by a camera boat with Barney and a few others on deck.

The floating processional made its way down the East River to Newtown Creek, an industrial waterway separating Brooklyn and Queens. In the midst of the workday, noisy and clanging, industrial rigs filled barges with dirt. Towering silver "digester eggs" gleamed in the sun, doing the work of a nearby sewage treatment plant. All seemed still on the water as, on land, cranes separated piles of trash at a recycling receiving center. "That pile's pretty bad-ass, with the seagulls on it," Barney said to the camera operator. The gulls were eating glass.

On the barge, characters from the story, in dirty makeup and costumes like decomposing clothes from the grave, spent the day standing sentry on the apartment's balcony for shots to be mixed with scenes set inside, at Norman Mailer's wake. Actors playing guests at the wake make up an eclectic cast: Paul Giamatti, Maggie Gyllenhaal, Elaine Stritch, Salman Rushdie, Debbie Harry, Dick Cavett, Lawrence Weiner, and Larry Holmes, among others. But today the action was contained to just a few mourners and undead souls, to be filmed from out on the water.

With footage from the morning logged and the afternoon whiled away in wait, the schedule led to a sunset scene featuring the avant-garde vocalist Joan La Barbara singing Walt Whitman beneath the Brooklyn Bridge. The boats loosened up and ventured out again, past the United Nations Headquarters, the Chrysler Building, the Con Ed East River generating station. Closer to the bridge, floating out in the middle, the drummer Milford Graves stepped onto the barge's balcony and began banging on the railing, shaking bells and making a racket. Then La Barbara stepped out and sang, her mouth moving and her microphone on but her sounds falling silent across the distance and the wind. Her song drew words from Leaves of Grass, recast by Barney's own sense of writerly refraction. Of the style of the script, La Barbara later said, "It's almost like Virginia Woolf, the way she will turn a phrase and then bring a phrase back after having put it through some kind of prism."

As the sun went down, the sky glinted pink off the water. The barge continued drifting beneath the bridge, crossed above by traffic with no notion of what was happening below. The tugboat started its laborious turn. It was time to go home. The sky, as it blackened, looked somehow both sensuous and macabre. "It's a beautiful sky, isn't it?" Barney said.

Back at the studio, the barge and the boats nested into their docking stations. Bringing such vessels in is no easy feat. The barge was more than fifty yards long, with nearly forty feet of height between the water and the top of Mailer's floating home. The tugboat was large enough to marshal the barge. The camera boat was smaller and easier to steer but less resilient against its surroundings. "Steel on fiberglass?," the driver asked as he idled his way in. "Steel wins."

Spells of shooting happened elsewhere in New York and other locales as well. A crucial scene was filmed last summer with a mass of more than three hundred extras in a disused dry dock at the Brooklyn Navy Yard. Before that came a trip to sites where salmon spawn in Idaho, near where Hemingway died and Barney was raised. Toward the beginning of the project, the traveling road show ventured out for extended stays to film and perform in Los Angeles and Detroit.

Both cities figure prominently, as part of a triumvirate with New York, in a film that is intensely peculiar yet permeated by a sense of place. A typical scene from LA features a ragtag marching band playing discordant music at a gnomic ceremony outside a car dealership (for Chrysler, which seems significant and proves to be, but in ways that are more cryptic than clear). A curious speech transpires on the subject of putrefaction, feces, fermentation, and rot. A gold 1979 Trans Am, which turns out to be one of the movie's lead characters, drives off a lot to a parking garage where a naked woman with bugs in her hair writhes around as a group of musicians makes sounds with horns and guitarróns.

L to R: Matthew Barney and Jonathan Bepler, River of Fundament: Khu, 2014, Production Still. Photo: Hugo Glendinning; Matthew Barney and Jonathan Bepler, River of Fundament, 2014, Production Still. Photo: Keith Riley. © Matthew Barney.

In Detroit, slow panning shots of an urban hellscape give way to more action involving the car, which races around mysteriously and drives off a bridge from which Houdini once jumped. A monumental set piece takes place at an abandoned steel plant where Barney and his crew spent months designing and building a custom set of furnaces to melt rock into metal. Onscreen, five towers rise, fire shooting from their tops, as hard forms are made molten by temperatures topping two thousand degrees. “It was very dangerous,” Barney said. Actors wore safety suits; an audience watched. The result of the orange streams of iron, bronze, lead, and copper was an indelible film scene and a series of sculptures made from twenty-five tons of material poured.

Many of the memorable scenes in New York telescope out from Mailer’s wake, with the writer himself featured in three reincarnated forms. John Buffalo Mailer, who plays the youngest form of his father, features in one scene for which he climbed inside the cut-open cadaver of a cow. “They had cleaned it out as best one can, but it’s the inside of an animal,” he remembers. “I will say that once I got inside I felt oddly peaceful and sheltered and taken care of.” The jazz percussionist Milford Graves, in his role as the second incarnation of Mailer’s soul, later plays the cow as drums, from the inside.

Musicality, in fact, plays a significant role in *River of Fundament*’s sense of anarchic freedom and its sense of shape. Remnants of the project’s beginnings as an opera remain on screen, in dialogue delivered with an unorthodox sing-song cadence and set pieces given over to surreal musical interludes.

“In film, it’s very hard for people not to think of music as something there to inform one’s sense of what the emotion is,” says Jonathan Bepler, a composer who collaborated with Barney on all stages of *River of Fundament*. (He wrote music for the *CREMASTER Cycle* too.) “For me, it’s much more than that.” Blurring the distinction between opera and film proved catalytic, he says. “In opera, musicians are allowed to be anywhere at any time. Having that permission helped.”

For Barney, as a director whose concerns are more sculptural and imagistic than conventionally cinematic, music is a liberating agent. “I’m really interested in the abstractness or openness that music can provide,” he says. “It can also do the opposite—it can be so emotionally fixed that it works against what I’m interested in. But the way that Jonathan composes music is quite similar to the approach I take in terms of less-determined ways of thinking about linearity and storytelling.”

In his studio, commanding actions to continue after *River of Fundament’s premiere*, Barney is quiet and intensely present. His speech is considered and slow, with long pauses when searching for the right word, if in fact a word will convey something that silence cannot. He is affable but also able to deflect vacant questions back with eyes that have grown dark and hard through looking.

“He is incredibly focused and centered as an individual,” says Barbara Gladstone, the gallerist who gave Barney his first New York show in 1991 and has since represented him on his rise to prominence in the art world. “As Matthew thinks about something and works at it in his head, it becomes evermore complex.”

With the film just recently finished—final edit set, sound mix complete—Barney sits in a makeshift office above the construction floor below. His beard is gone, and he wears a winter hat adorned with the logo of Budco Enterprises (the favored source of steel fabrication for Richard Serra). Pages for an elaborate *River of Fundament* catalog to be published this summer by Rizzoli hang tacked up on the wall, along with images of art works to travel to an exhibition, opening in Munich in March, of sculpture borne from the project.

The exhibition is as much a part of *River of Fundament* as the film itself. In terms of scale and sheer materiality, many of the pieces are more formidable than work from earlier in Barney’s career. In place of his signature use of plastics, jellies, and all manner of oozing agents is a new focus on earthy materials like iron, bronze, sulfur, and salt.

“There are descriptions in *Ancient Evenings* where you have elemental waste coming from the earth, like sulfur, molten iron,” Barney says. “Elements are interchangeable with the waste products of the body. Sulfur and excrement are used in a very similar way in the writing, as a sort of fundamental state.”

They figure into infrastructure too. In New York, “it’s all there along the waterways but barely visible,” Barney says. “You see it in a flash on your way to the airport—you look down and see the recycling plant, wastewater management, the natural gas and sanitation department. But the view from the waterways … I was interested from the start in framing the city through these waterways,” he says. “Working here on the East River and seeing it every day, watching the current change the way that it does, moving both directions, has a lot of power. The rivers are big working rivers. Once I started exploring the water, it changed my perspective on the city as a natural landscape.”

The notion of cities as natural machines for living, in all their grotesquery and pageantry and gasping for air, figures as one of *River of Fundament*’s prevailing themes. The camera fixes on sights of industrial might and decay the same way it ogles objects with a wizened sculptor’s eye. From those objects come stories, and the current washes back.

“The story comes first, then out of the story come reductions that are distilled,” Barney says. “I have to start with a story, as a sculptor. I haven’t really figured out any way around that.”