MATTHEW BARNEY's Heart of Darkness

By Vince Carducci

On View

Various Locations
In And Around Detroit, Michigan
October 2, 2010

KHU, Matthew Barney and Jonathan Bepler, October 2, 2010, Performance Still. Photo: Hugo Glendinning, Courtesy Gladstone Gallery, New York.

I was once the client of a small ad agency that was acquired by a global conglomerate. The new regime's work included some Budweiser commercials shot in Jamaica featuring bikini-clad women under a waterfall. What made them "big-time" advertising wasn't the creative direction but the size of the production budget. I remembered this while witnessing Matthew Barney's performance extravaganza, "KHU," done in collaboration with composer Jonathan Bepler, in Detroit on October 2.

Act II of Barney's work in progress, *Ancient Evenings* (based on Norman Mailer's 1983 novel), "KHU" had a rumored budget of $5 million and it showed. Dozens of people flew in for it from across the country and Europe, most of them from New York. After schmoozing beneath Diego Rivera's magisterial 1932-33 mural cycle, *Detroit Industry*, in the Detroit Institute of Arts, brunch for 200 was served. A film segment was screened depicting the journey into the afterlife from the Egyptian Book of the Dead, riffing on two of Barney's thematic characters: artist James Lee Byars, who was born in Detroit, and Harry Houdini, who died there.

The group then boarded two charter buses for its own passage to the Western Lands. We arrived at an abandoned factory where workers fashioned sheet-metal stringed instruments, handing them to musicians upon completion. The steadily growing orchestra droned over the percussive background of the assembly of more instruments. The factory was spectacular: moldering gray brick and steel girders, cracked windows caked with years of grime, a boiler in back oozing some toxic effluent, and a large pulley suspended above with its metal hook dangling like the Sword of Damocles. With the wind and rain welling up, it was the perfect setting for a soulful aria by P-Funk vocalist Belita Woods.

Continuing, we rode a barge down a river like an expedition out of Joseph Conrad. As we approached the sprawling Ford Motor Company River Rouge complex, we were surrounded by watercraft commandeered from Homeland Security. On board each, saxophonists performed an Albert Ayler-esque jazz motif while a large crane pulled a wrecked 1967 Chrysler Imperial out of the water. Placed on the barge's deck, it was disassembled by a female chorus dressed as

F.B.I. agents. One of them, played by Aimee Mullins, straddled the engine block with her trousers down after she inserted snakes into the cylinder holes and rubbed herself with slimy water.

The Chrysler represented Osiris, god of the afterlife, also associated with the annual flooding of the Nile, lifeblood of ancient Egyptian civilization. Mullins represented Isis who, according to mythology, retrieved Osiris's corpse from the river, revived it, and conceived Horus, a deity with many associations in the Egyptian pantheon. The scene evoked the creative process, in which the shamanistic artist transforms dead matter into sacred objects for worship by the adepts of secular-humanist society.

The final segment took place in a decommissioned steel mill on the Detroit River 15 miles south of the city, where the Chrysler was melted down and transformed into a new sculpture. Populated with musicians, singers, foundry workers, and other extras, it was a postindustrial mash-up of Heronymus Bosch, Cecil B. De Mille, and Sun Ra.

Reflecting on all this sent me to Herbert Marcuse's book *The Aesthetic Dimension: Toward a Critique of Marxist Aesthetics*. For Marcuse, art is authentic and revolutionary not based on its content alone, as early orthodox Marxists like Georg Lukács believed, or "pure" form, as later formalists like Clement Greenberg held. Instead, its revolutionary status is tied to the way content is given form through what Marcuse terms "the redeeming character of *catharsis*." Art is radical where it transcends social determination and frees itself from established reality to be recognized as embodying truth otherwise suppressed. His example is Andy Warhol's Campbell's Soup paintings.

The soup can's serial iteration announces art as the commodity it's always been in modern western culture. It reveals a reality completely deracinated by capitalist relations, from everyday practices like meal preparation to rarefied high culture experiences such as aesthetic contemplation. It also supplants the Romantic "natural genius" and replaces it with the artist as a commodity-sign, the product of a semiotic system, the "artworld" as Warhol interpreter Arthur Danto would have it. ("Andy Warhol" is a registered trademark, USPTO Reg. No. 3707078.)

Similarly, Barney's work reveals contemporary art as a potlatch of global capitalism. It provides cathartic release from the imperative of relentless accumulation, giving vent to the wealth concentrations that neoliberalism has delivered into a few hands. (It's no accident that many of today's biggest art collectors are hedge fund managers.) And like the often-ruinous ritual gift-giving among Pacific Northwest tribal chieftains, Barney's art grows in stature the more conspicuous its waste. "KHU" was alluring yet repellent, a spectacle of artistic gold.

Contributor

Vince Carducci

VINCE CARDUCCI is a doctoral candidate in sociology at the New School for Social Research and an adjunct instructor in liberal arts at the College for Creative Studies in Detroit.