

The athlete is the artist, the artist is the athlete

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A reading of Matthew Barney's *Hypertrophy*



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«The knowledge of our body is the result of a continuous effort [...] The development is guided by experience, trial and error, effort and attempt. Only in such a way we can gain the organized knowledge of our body.»
(Paul Schilder, *The image and appearance of the human body* [1])

Based on a previous study of three images taken from the volume *Exercise physiology: energy, nutrition and human performance* edited by William McArdle and Frank & Victor Katch and first published in 1981, Barney's *Hypertrophy* constitutes an attempt to establish a theoretical foundation for the principle of resistance and for the notion of development through exertion and decay. [2] This «medical» assessment of his early self-directed artistic exercises suggests a mutual influence between bodily enhancement and environmental constraints.

The subject and the materials of this drawn diagram are issued from the first three episodes of the permanent project *Drawing Restraint* [3] and are employed to outline an «analogy for the creative process» [4].

Thanks to the principle of encumbrance, Barney establishes «a measure of artistic success that depends upon maximising the scale, quality, and quantity of the artistic activity he generated» [5].

The *condition of hypertrophy* corresponds to the proliferation of the connective tissue along with the satellite cells which surround the muscle fibres. This process, which increases the muscle's connective tissue hardness, allows muscles to develop and grow. As Barney describes it, «the principle of resistance training is that you exhaust your muscles, effectively tearing them down, then resting for a period to allow those muscles to heal [...]. I always imagined it as an ascending sine curve of growth and recovery» [6]. The fact that the muscle tissue depends on resistance in order to grow led Barney to think «how it might make a case for resistance as a prerequisite for creativity» [7].

One can discern, at the core of Barney's inquiry, an attempt to take biological facts as a way of describing a larger theoretical system: the *Drawing Restraint* series puts into practice what Schilder used to call *topography of the postural model of the body* [8], meaning a chart of the perpetual inner self-construction and self-destruction of the body image, in which motion and action are necessary for development. Barney's organised system of resistance is in fact grounded in the entropic dissipation of the energy of production and is sustained by the cross-influence of expenditure and regeneration.

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Fussnoten

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Paul Schilder, *The image and appearance of the human body, Studies on the constructive energies of the psyche* [1950], London 1999, p. 287.

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In 1990 Barney drafted his *Notes on athleticism*, where he sketched for the first time the physiological ideas of hypertrophy, body intelligence and inverted pyramid. In this occasion, he programmatically states: «The athlete is the artist [...] The artist is the athlete» (Matthew Barney. *Drawing Restraint: Vol. V, 1987–2007*, text by Neville Wakefield, introduction by Kitty Scott, Serpentine Gallery – Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, London/Köln 2007, pp. 18–20). The theory of hypertrophy constitutes the basis for the subsequent development of Barney's graph of artistic process (the Path), which indicates three structural phases of the creative act: Situation, Condition, and Production.

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In *Drawing Restraint 1 and 2*, Barney runs up an incline while strapped with an elastic band. In *Drawing Restraint 3*, he lifts a barbell cast in petroleum wax and petroleum jelly.

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Matthew Barney, *Drawing Restraint Vol. I 1987-2002*, edited by Hans Ulrich Obrist, fiction by Frances McKee, interview with Matthew Barney and Hans Ulrich Obrist, Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, Köln 2005, p. 87.

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Linda Weintraub, «Strategic success - creating resistance: Matthew Barney» in eadem, *Making contemporary art. How today's artists think and work*, London/New York, p. 395.

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Barney, *Drawing Restraint* (note 4), p. 87.

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Ibidem.

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Body image is not a fixed static entity: «it is in perpetual inner self-construction and self-destruction. It is living in its continued differentiation and integration. Studying it, we shall study the meaning of

the idea of development for physic structures» (Schilder, The image and appearance of the human body (note 1), p. 16).

Abbildungen

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Barney Matthew (b. 1967): Hypertrophy (incline), 1991. New York, Museum of Modern Art (MoMA). Light-reflective vinyl, petroleum jelly, and pencil on paper sewn with thread to self-lubricating plastic frame, 10 1/4 x 11 1/2 x 1 1/4 (26.2 x 29.3 x 3.1 cm). Gift of R.L.B. Tobin. Acc. n.: 192.1993. DIGITAL IMAGE © 2012, The Museum of Modern Art, New York/Scala, Florence.