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**Affective Entanglements
of Posthuman Bodies in Pain
in Matthew Barney's *Drawing Restraint 9***

Abstract

This article analyses Mathew Barney's 2005 experimental film *Drawing Restraint 9* in the context of affective entanglements of the human body with biological, technological and geological processes. The artist's production, as the paper proposes, indicates the necessity to rework the heightened hierarchical relationships of humans with non-human worlds. The bodies in pain—both human and non-human—in his work undergo constant morphogenesis, becoming a complex multiplicity with multiple layers of reference far beyond the human-social paradigm. As the paper implies, by referring to the writings of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari and their new materialist theoretical reworkings, Barney's film reveals unfolds the sustainability of interconnections and intra-actions of different matters that produce forms of socio-cultural resistance, eventually opening up possibilities of bodily regeneration.

Keywords

Mathew Barney, Affective Encounters, Posthuman Bodies, More-than-representational Theory, Affirmative Aesthetics

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Physical pain does not simply resist language but actively destroys it, bringing about an immediate reversion to a state anterior to language, to the sounds and cries a human being makes before language is learned.

Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain*

Introduction: The Body in Pain and More-than-representation Processes

In her 1985 study devoted to the functions and possibilities of the conceptualisation of physical pain in social responses, Elaine Scarry highlights its inexpressibility in any linguistic or semiotic system. Physical pain erases any appropriation and representational processes, placing itself always at the primordial stage, beyond socio-cultural frameworks. As she subsequently argues, “[pain’s] resistance to language is not simply one of its incidental or accidental attributes but is essential to what it is” (1985, 5). Not surprisingly, questions as to how to render such pain, how to make it visible, have engaged artists working across different media for centuries. For artists who seek to capture, imagine and represent it without falling into the traps of generalisation, naturalisation, fictionalisation, sentimentalisation and—ultimately—indifference to the sheer weight of pain, Scarry’s theoretical contribution paves the way for reconfigurations of discursive and representational methods. These reworkings have established a new non-representational agenda, also known as “more-than-representational theory” (Lorimer 2005, 83), based on “embodied actions rather than talk or cognitive attitudes” (2005, 84).

What particularly interests me in this quotation is the return to the pre-linguistic level as a significant step in the socio-cultural recognition of the complexities of bodies in pain. Though enflashed, pain becomes depersonalised as language structures cannot fully evoke its true nature. In other words, referring back to the introductory quotation, pain is expressed via unidentified sounds produced by inner struggles, states and passions that are not adequately expressible within linguistic and paralinguistic frameworks. As such, bodily processes previously analysed mainly through a discursive lens, by means of poststructural writings, are now reconfigured by performative practices that challenge forms of representation, activating the unknown, unwanted and deeply hidden meanings of pain. In the idiom of

Rosi Braidotti, this is the point at which bios-zoe power¹ is restored (2011, 302), which she defines as the non-human aspects of our lives embedded in our embodied entanglements. The shift from the linguistic approach to the dynamics of flows, intensities and passions brings us closer to our interrelations with both human and non-human forces that operate on the same affective level. From that perspective, the acknowledgement of pain can be associated with openness to others, understood—in Spinoza’s sense—as affecting and being affected by others through mutually dependent correlations (Braidotti 2011, 304). Against the dominant rhetoric of advanced capitalism that continually reproduces the negative discourse of melancholia and suffering, pain, under this stance, no longer derives from negative connotations—often neutralised by language and semiotic material—but instead from bodily interactions with the environment that allow one to comprehend and sustain its complexity and affective relations with the non-human. This moment of the disposal of inner passivity, which stems from cultural conceptualisations of pain, and the subsequent realisation of constant modulation and interrelation with the non-human, drawing from Spinoza’s ethics, is “the qualitative leap through pain, across the mournful landscapes of nostalgic yearning” (Braidotti 2011, 322). Also, as Braidotti asserts, in this manner, we can experiment with other relations as a way of producing an ethics of affirmation (2011, 320).

This theoretical line of thought brings me back to the recent shifts in artistic practices and performances which concentrate on doings and affective resonances rather than on representations to address bodies struggling with pain. Moreover, if we describe affect, following Simon O’Sullivan, as extra-discursive and extra-textual potential outside discourse and socio-cultural structures that is felt as differences in intensity (2001, 126–131), we may deduce that affect belongs to the “realm of non-representable” (Bal 2012, 134). Thus the performativity of the body plays a pivotal role in these artistic experiments due to its endless affective capacity for actions that often transcend the human, and restore relations with inanimate objects, living non-human matter, place, ephemeral phenomena and technologies (Vannini 2015, 5–6). In effect, through their regained agencies, images and multimodal practices can reveal the inexpressibility of the body in pain, which is always relational, and interconnected with the social, cultural and non-human.

¹ To be more precise, for Braidotti “zoe” is associated with non-human life (2011, 99), whereas “bios” stands for the discursive, social sphere. Zoe decentres bios as the measure of all things, creating harmony between both.

To analyse the affective potential of images of bodies in pain, I propose to critically examine Matthew Barney's 2005 experimental film *Drawing Restraint*² (with music composed by Bjork, who appears, with Barney, in the production). It is the continuation of the artist's series of practices, initiated in the late eighties, centred on numerous tests of physical endurance and human transformation. As the title of this project indicates, it pries into the tension between resistance and creativity that also subverts the logic of the representational process. Since his earliest works, Barney has been challenging the physical constraints imposed by socio-cultural frameworks, showing that the body, when pushed to its limits in order to forge close interconnections with hostile environments, is "constructed as a productive system that strives for potential metamorphoses" (Zapperi 2014, 3). The artist produced a diagram³ that illustrates the productive role of numerous constraints in the creative process. Divided into the stages of situation, condition and production, Barney's considerations on artistic practice emphasise that the body is the raw material—a living organism comparable to plants, animals and other living matters—with which he works through restrictive and often harsh conditions (Zapperi 2014, 5). While producing artistic forms, he challenges the borders of endurance to different kinds of matter, regardless of the pain he has to bear. While exercising his body to its limits, he blurs the line between being an athlete and an artist. Barney constructed body-building equipment for his projects so as to have more physical obstacles to overcome during the artistic process. This equipment enabled him to indicate that both artistic and physical acts are complicated, even harrowing, experiences.

² The film is the result of extensive research into Japanese history and culture, which Barney fuses with his interests in the metamorphosis of the body in extreme states. Mathew Barney is a contemporary American artist who has been working with multimedia formats (sculptures, experimental films, drawings, photographs and performances) that are artistic reflections of bodily processes. His project *Cremaster Cycle*, produced between 1994 and 2002, consisted of five feature-length films that feature Barney in myriad roles. While dealing with the world of mythological symbolism, art history and taboo topics, Barney explores the potentials of bodily reactions in the cycle. However, it was the *Drawing Restraint* series, firstly initiated by Barney in 1987 and continued today, that brought the artist wider acclaim. Influenced by his earlier athletic experience, Barney's series indicates that art-making is like athletic training, as the body plays a central role in it. The series consists of 19 pieces of material, some of which are videos, sculptural installations, photographs or drawings that evoke ritualistic processes of creation.

³ The diagram is available on Barney's website (www.drawingrestraint.net).

Interestingly, his earliest works from the *Drawing Restraint* series, which investigated the body exposed to considerable physical effort and pain, delve—with an almost surgical precision—into the transformation of its anatomical processes. These “tests” are particularly accentuated in his 1991 collage work *Hypertrophy*, whose title refers directly to the medical condition of growing and developing muscles through the enlargement of cells. This method of muscle expansion is common in bodybuilders, who practically torture their bodies to achieve what they see as the perfect physique. From that perspective, Barney’s work can be interpreted as the medical evaluation of his own physicality and, most importantly, as an artistic practice that can be perceived as a form of exercise during which the artist has to endure and resist. Moreover, as Barney explains, “the principle of resistance training is that you exhaust your muscles, effectively tearing them down, then resting for a period of time to allow those muscles to heal [...] I always imagined it as an ascending sine curve of growth and recovery” (Barney 2005, 87). These physical practices led Barney to consider “how [his body] might make a case for resistance as a prerequisite for creativity” (2005, 87). Barney’s works show that representations of the body sometimes require an act of self-creation in tandem with processes of self-destruction on the part of the artist.

While focusing on the reworkings of the species dichotomy *Drawing Restraint 9* examines the materiality of both human and non-human bodies and explores the complex alliances between human and non-human engagements, composing an affective “*mise en abyme* of posthuman⁴ landscape” (Frichot 2015, 55). It is set in Japan’s Nagasaki Bay—to be more precise on a whaling factory ship, the *Nisshin Maru*. In this work, Barney performs the relationality of the human body with biological, technological and geological processes, indicating the necessity to rework the heightened hierarchical relations established by humans and also the violence inflicted upon non-human worlds. To indicate those disproportions, the posthuman bodies of Barney’s film perform to the level of exhaustion and experience pain as a direct result of their unequal relationships with the environment. Barney’s film activates a posthumanist environmental ethics⁵ in which the artist’s

⁴ Posthuman landscape is understood here as the condition in which all lives—human, animal, vegetal—are equally related to one another. It illustrates the ethics of interaction between humans and non-human others.

⁵ Posthuman ethics is far less concerned with defining the principles and rules that mark the human as an exceptional kind of being than it is with attending to ecological principles underscoring complex patterns of connectivity (Bignal, Hemming and Rigney, 466).

work transcends the model of the exhaustion of the body within the natural world of the Anthropocene. It allows for a more empathic understanding of the body as changing, changeable and transformable due to its intra-activity with the environment, understood here—following Karen Barad—“not as a static relationality but a doing, the enactment of boundaries, that always entails constitutive exclusions and therefore requisite questions of accountability” (2003, 803). In effect, this affective conceptualisation of life processes enables the artist to demand that humans should see themselves as co-agents of environmental processes.

Barney’s Affective Bodily Practices

For Brian Massumi, affect is an “intensity”, and not “semantically or semiotically ordered”, which is “embodied in purely autonomic reactions most directly manifested in the skin—at the surface of the body, at its interface with things” (2002, 24–25). In other words, what he attempts to convey is that these are sensations of vibration, resonance and movement that can affect bodies at a material, pre-subjective, signifying level. Affects are independent of consciousness and emotions but produce unexpected spaces of immersion which enhance, in the idiom of Massumi, the “shock to thought”.⁶ This anxiety and uneasiness, which is a direct result of the application of performative methods, is significant in the experimental nature of Barney’s work. In an interview conducted with Barney in the documentary film *Matthew Barney: No Restraint*, the artist emphasised that the stories of *Drawing Restraint 9*

are the removal of the arm from the field and the oval of the field is the body [...] It is about removing the resistance from the body and there being a potentiality for a sensuality or eroticism or something that then the project has not allowed itself to have before. So there is the sense that removing the restraint can allow for something emotionally positive, but that puts the body in a state of atrophy somehow (2008).

When analysed from this perspective, the film does not convey pre-determined meanings but instead acts against our expectations, continually challenging the idea of the static image and engaging viewers in an accumulation of variable forms that “circulate, mix with one another, solidify and dissolve in the formation of more or less enduring things” (Vannini 2015, 5). These intensities of different textures of unsettling imagery make Barney’s

⁶ I am referring here to the title of the collection *A Shock to Thought. Expression after Deleuze and Guattari*, edited by Brian Massumi (2002, New York: Routledge).

production an insight into morphogenetic processes accelerated by embodied movements and affective intensities. To be more precise, *Drawing Restraint 9* is a feature-length work combining non-linear narratives on human and non-human worlds, large-scale sculptures, photographs, musical pieces and drawings that produce a mixed media work with multiple affective layers. Also, although the film focuses on Barney, latterly accompanied by Bjork, as a Western guest in Japan, with the two of them visiting a whaling ship and developing closer relations with crew members as well as the natural habitat—more attention is clearly paid to uncovering different materialities than to the development of the characters. The gradual corporeal transformation of the artists in fact occurs in tandem with the material processes triggered by the complex web of events that unfold on land and sea. Viewers may be left with the impression that, as Ron Broglio notes, “land and sea, fur-bearing humans and smooth-skinned ones develop a language of give and take, a pidgin language of hospitality and exchange” (2011, 128). However, going even further beyond the linguistic perspective, Barney’s world is full of rapture and fissures that produce new vectors, movements and intensities reactivated by affective encounters of materials, images and stories often not related with one another semantically or formally. For instance, scenes from highly industrialised areas are accompanied by shots taken during the celebrations for a new ship in the bay, underwater explorations, the tea ceremony below deck on the whaling ship and the geology museum. They all form an assemblage of human and non-human elements. As a result, we receive the aesthetics of potentialities that emerges from the formal and semantic combinations. As such, if we believe that “affect marks a body’s *belonging* to a world of encounters; a world’s belonging to a body of encounters” (Gregg and Seigworth 2010, 2; emphasis in the original), the constant exchange of matters in Barney’s images is always beyond the discursive, actualising for us the invisible and unknown universes in order to lead viewers to numerous material engagements. The different methods and techniques of conceptualisation applied by Barney thus unfold the dynamism of biological matter and various material forces, emphasising that “affect is not the passage from one lived state to another but man’s non-human becoming” (Deleuze and Guattari 1994, 173). And as Deleuze and Guattari explain, affect is “a zone of indetermination, of indiscernibility, as if things, beasts, and persons endlessly reach that point that immediately precedes their natural differentiation” (173). Barney’s production thus accelerates the affective processes that trigger potentialities which are often hidden within the world’s complexities.

Geological Bodying and Sustainability in *Drawing Restraint 9*

The initial scenes of the film introduce us to the territory of human and non-human affects through sequences showing a woman carefully wrapping two halves of a fossilised shell and Barney wearing an animal skin standing on the deck of the whaling ship, observing the industrialised harbour of Nagasaki Bay and its natural beauty. The scene intimates that the artist will test the limits of his own body in the context of the land's geological history. Barney's investigation of the complexity of geological materials makes of him an archaeologist or geologist who studies the transformations of layers and structures of the Anthropocene through focusing on understanding human interactions with the land. However, even though the Anthropocene is officially defined as the epoch of the irreversible influence of human and global industrialisation, the work does not present clear pictures of species extinction, ageing populations, global warming, post-peak oil and the wholesale exhaustion of worlds. Rather than using widely acknowledged images of ecological catastrophe, in subsequent scenes Barney opens up his and Bjork's bodies to the complex structures of the environment and its materiality, forging a mobile network of constitutive relations with fossils, underwater flora and fauna, highly industrialised objects produced by the factories in the bay and socio-cultural rituals conducted on the deck of the whaling ship. In other words, referring to Stacey Alaimo's concept of transcorporeality that implies humankind's inseparability from the environment, the work emphasises the idea that "if nature is to matter, we need more potent, more complex understandings of its materiality" (2010, 2), not the sentimental and romanticised representation of nature that is dominant in socio-cultural codes.

Thus, in the opening scene, the camera closely studies the details of the fossils and their porosities, trying to find signs of their agency in an attempt to establish their connection with the human world and unfold the history that derives from the accumulation of human and non-human encounters. In this respect, this relationship is inspected not merely in regard to human history, but also to a measure of time that uses "rock strata as the main focus for understanding evolution and change" (Parrika 2018, 51). The ritual of wrapping the fossils indeed suggests the complex interaction of both social practices and natural phenomena. The fossils are the archives of human and non-human activities throughout geological epochs, thanks to which we can understand our interactions and relations. The scene implies that thinking through both bodies and the world's materiality "may catalyse the recognition that the environment is not an inert space for human use but, in fact, is

the world of fleshy beings with their own needs, claims and actions" (Alaimo 2010, 2). So even though this is a world on the verge of ecological disaster, the work avoids looking at the tragic position of the human and instead unearths the other entangled territories/layers of materials and discursive, natural and cultural elements, biological and textual, as if trying to prove that this is a fluid space, with many alternatives and potentials that enable humans to act creatively and to understand the substance of the self as being interconnected with the environment.

Barney's subversion of the traditional apocalyptic scenario is in line with Rosi Braidotti's assertion that by "moving across and beyond pain, loss and negative passions" (2011, 322), humans can actively create affirmative ways to overcome the resignation, passivity and negative connotations that have come to dominate our existence in the Anthropocene. This approach allows the artist to subvert the anthropocentric fallacy which lies behind the solely scientific understanding of the Earth framed through modes of the visual: data visualisation, satellite imagery, climate modelling, etc. Instead, we are in fact both affecting and being affected by mental, social and environmental transformations, constantly undergoing an endurance test. As Frichot contends, "Barney's experiments can be seen as a series of extreme experiments that enable an imaginary of these new ecologies to emerge, but only by placing the man-form under extreme duress" (2015, 61). Braidotti also emphasises that our body can signalise and map out the threshold of sustainability and limit-experience which breaks the frame of predictable subject positions (2011, 316). For her, the poetics of sustainability entails the necessity of containing the other, suffering, enjoyment, the organic and non-organic, and allowing subjects to redefine the same-other relation, affecting and being affected by others through mutually dependent correlations, and finally finding possible and creative ways to endure the painful consequences of the ecological transformations of the planet. Indeed, this emphasis on the relational materiality of ecologies and bodies allows us to trigger more positive approaches towards the relationship between the human and the non-human in the Anthropocene. Also, while continually imposing obstacles to overcome his physical limitations in the film, Barney sees the body as a productive system that strives for potential metamorphoses, as we will see in the next section of this essay.

Multispecies Bodying and Posthumanist Ethics

McKenzie Wark points out that, in trying to redefine the anthropocentric perspective, “one can understand the Anthropocene as a metabolic rift, movement of materials and the labour that mobilises these elements” (qtd. in Parrika 2018, 51). Inevitably, this fluid exchange and assemblage of bodily and socio-cultural processes is particularly accentuated in the scenes of the film that take place below deck on the whaling ship where Barney and Bjork participate in a traditional Japanese tea ceremony. Just before the event, the guests are bathed, dressed and groomed in the elaborate skin and fur costumes associated with traditional Shinto wedding attire.⁷ Bjork’s teeth are blackened with squid ink and porcupine quill ornaments are placed in her hair, and horns are attached to Barney’s head, enriching his arctic-like fur. The natural adornments on the garments worn by Bjork and Barney—shells, feathers, antlers and animal skins—are not intended to make them more sophisticated or to assert human superiority over other organisms, but rather to place all those elements close to one another irrespective of their roots and traits. There is a tension between self-imposed resistance and the restrained body overburdened with the heavy garments, and the possibilities of crossings between inside/outside, human/animal, natural/artificial, organic/inorganic dichotomies. The process of becoming non-human is set in motion, building up the two artists’ relations with the more-than-human worlds. Then, interestingly, the stable connection with the non-human is enriched with the social event in a tatami room below deck, where they engage in the highly-ritualised tea ceremony during which the tea ceremony master asks a series of questions. So although the words—the only discursive moment in the whole production—provide the guests with rules and patterns of behaviour that must be obeyed in order to respect tradition, they also constrain them, both by limiting their bodily movements and by making them follow a normative code of behaviour.

When the formal ceremony finishes, the artists are left alone, and an erotic and passionate embrace takes place. However, this intimacy does not last long as we are soon exposed to the images of the subsequent morphogenesis of the artists’ bodies. The transformation is accelerated by the

⁷ Barney refers here to the traditional Japanese Shinto wedding tradition, which is connected closely to practices of worshipping nature. While performing wedding rituals, the couple—dressed in traditional outfits—firstly undergoes the ritual of purification, and then they participate in a ceremony of sharing sake. Barney’s film adopts the core stages of the traditional ceremony, which brings the actors closer to the natural world, blurring the borderland between the human and the non-human.

stormy weather outside and the events happening on the deck, where the crew are constructing a sculpture created from a Vaseline-like substance that resembles the shape of a whale. Then everything changes all of a sudden when the tea-room begins to flood with a mixture of seawater and petroleum from the mould, covering up the bodies of the lovers and filling the space below deck. The distance between various bodies and matters is reduced as the liquids engulf and implicate all participants. And as the mixture of Vaseline and water rises rapidly, Bjork and Barney pick up flensing knives (used for the butchering of whales) and begin to cut flesh from one another's legs, layer by layer, very carefully, the whole process being observed by the viewer. The ritual of slaughtering of whales transforms here the lovers themselves. However, rather than blood and gore covering the scene, the substances emitted from the wounds they inflict on each other mix with the other substances present in the room, producing a metabolic assemblage of human and non-human fluids.

At this point, it is worth noting that pain barely surfaces in the scene. It is there but beneath the visible, belonging to the realm of affects that accelerate the characters' mutation to the non-human. There is the acknowledgement of pain, but then it is reconfigured into something more positive. Following Rosi Braidotti, we can see this as a direct effect of the awareness that "internal disarray, fracture, and pain are the conditions of possibility for ethical transformation" (2011, 322). As the flesh is removed from the artists' legs, whale-like tails are revealed beneath and, finally, we see the artists' metamorphosis. They become half-whale, half-human. However, there is neither sentimental glorification of the proximity of humans with animals nor an attempt to make visible the brutality act of cutting away the flesh, since the action is driven by their desires and passion, strengthening their close relationship with the underwater world. We may conclude that Barney and Bjork dissolve into a series of non-dualistic and non-oppositional dualities, organic and nonorganic, visible and invisible, the important hybrid matters (Braidotti 2011, 145), subsequently also destabilising the cinematic imagery of the production.

These scenes imply that one gets to know the other through the fragility of the human subject stretched to its limits. Pain in Barney's film is not understood as an obstacle, but as a threshold that maps out vectors of emancipatory practices. If for Deleuze and Guattari becoming-animal means "making the move, reaching a continuum of intensities that only have value for themselves, finding a world of pure intensities, where all the forms get undone, as well as all the significations in favour of matter yet un-formed" (1986, 13), these scenes from the film go further, showing that experiments

with the limits of our bodies and the levels of subversion that are possible can challenge the complexities engendered by our historicity. Once the interaction with non-human affectivity is embodied, its materiality can be explained by its particular metamorphic quality, which oscillates between the states of disintegration and reintegration. As Ron Broglio asserts, “Barney’s cutting undoes human subjectivity and the myth of human interiority [...] there is no interiority there, no *Dasein* or being-there below or within the human body. Instead, there are layers of flesh and organs that shift in shape and function” (2011, 131), while encountering the other. The artists’ organs are repurposed as they now stretch between the lives of humans and the life and death of whales, “spilling out in new ways, in a pidgin language of surfaces, worlds and desires” (2011, 133).

Coda

Pain is a sensorial, affective phenomenon as it stems directly from our encounters with the inexpressible and the diminished, bringing us closer to the more-than-human-world. One of the aims of artistic practice is thus to experiment for the living in the damaged world, picking up on non-representational methods that offer us possibilities to forge a relationship with the non-human. As Karen Barad contends, “all bodies, not merely ‘human’ bodies, come to matter through the world’s iterative intra-activity—its performativity” (2003, 823). In other words, human bodies are not objects with internal boundaries and properties; they are material and discursive phenomena, not inherently different from the non-human. Seen in this light, Barney’s performative production, while taking us on a journey—a rite of passage through his physical, psychological and geographical landscape of digestion, repression, morphing and destruction—accelerates transformative affects that point out the markers of sustainability. Viewers are confronted with scenes of the surplus accumulation of objects and posthuman bodies, interconnected thanks to movements and transformations of different matters. His posthumanist reflection allows the artist to rework the discourse on pain and its relation with the Anthropocene and thus concentrate not only on the negative impact of humans on the environment but also on offering a reading of human history through the atmosphere and geological processes (Parrika 2018, 51), indicating the complex patterns of connectivity that produce outcomes of justice and injustice. Barney’s assemblages show, and particularly so during the tea ceremony scene of the film, that “[in] Japan we recognise ourselves as a part of nature, accepting the impermanence of our existence” (Barney 2005).

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