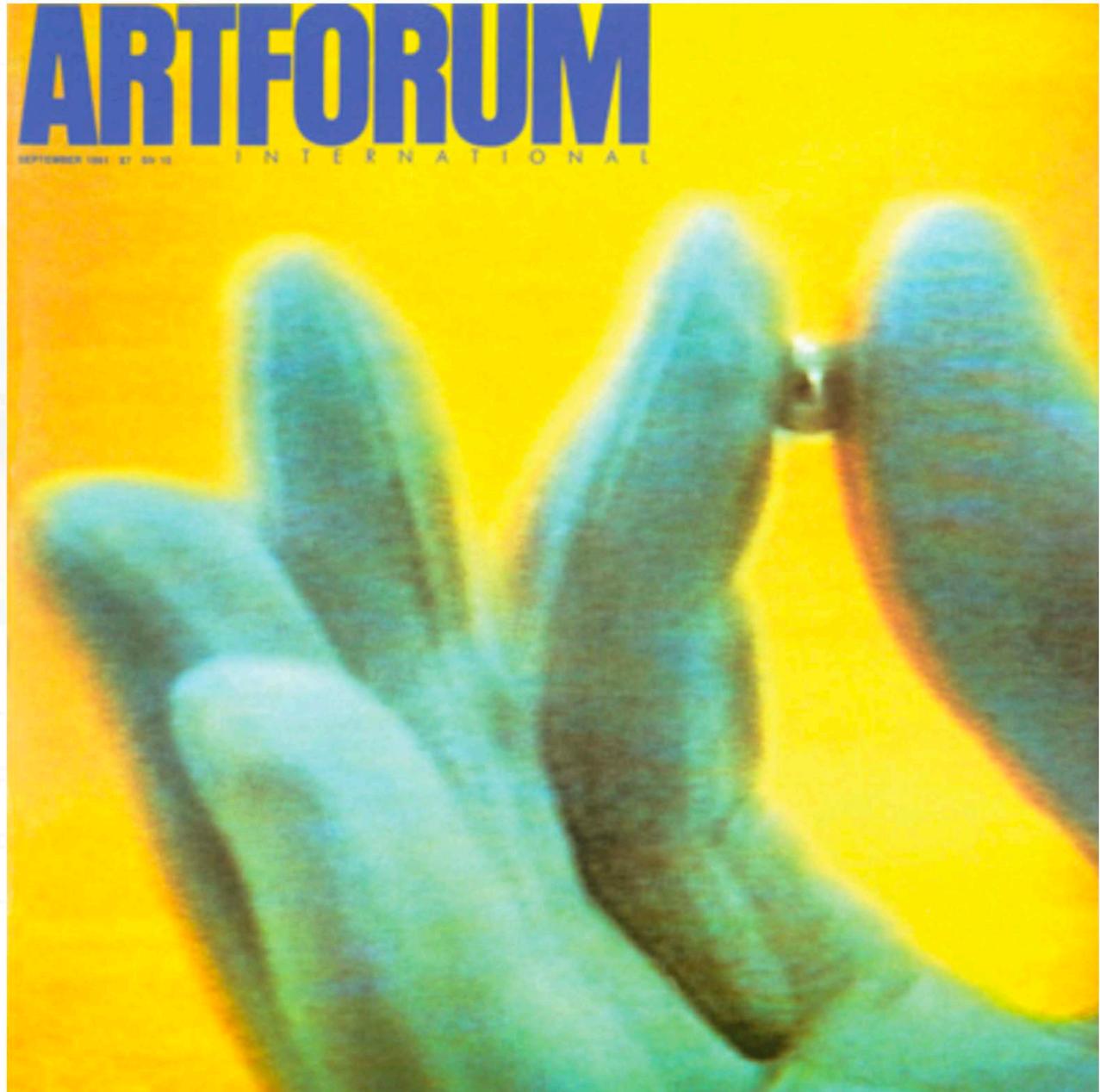


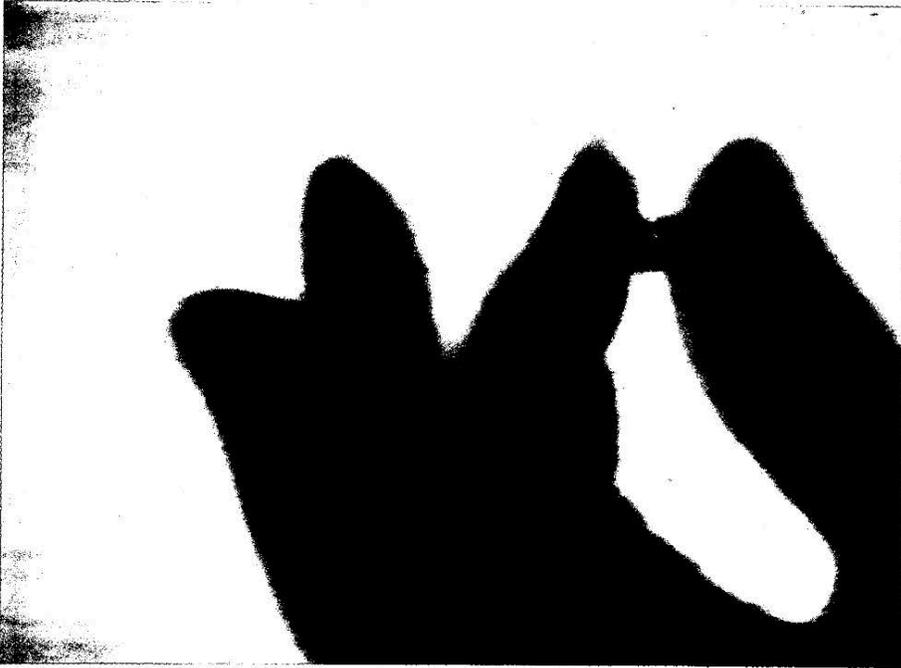
REGEN PROJECTS

Relyea, Lane. "Openings: Matthew Barney." Artforum (September 1991) p. 124 [ill., cover]

ARTFORUM



REGEN PROJECTS



Cover: **Matthew Barney, DELAY OF GAME, 1991**, still from color videoaction, 3 minutes 19 seconds. See p. 124.

Is there life after post-Modernism? We sense that a new discourse is in the making. But responding to the vast body of information and ideas now emerging about non-European-derived cultures, and about subjects that until recently had little or no access to the so-called mainstream of art, is a difficult task. It demands that we question not only the dichotomies of center and periphery, colonizer and colonized, but finally identity itself.

In this issue Robert Farris Thompson, in his analysis of the current exhibition "Africa Explores," reclaims the black and Latino influences in Modernism, and discusses the 20th-century art of Africa. And Luke Gibbons presents the symptomatic case of Ireland, a nation at the margins of Europe, on the occasion of the opening of the Irish Museum of Modern Art.

Massimo Carboni argues that in both European and non-Western cultures, ornament and decoration have historically borne deeper meanings than those assigned to them in the post-Modernist agenda. The issue of decoration appears again in Bruce Ferguson's article on Christopher Wool, and in the fabric patterns, all intended for clothing prints, chosen for Artforum by Joost Elffers and Susan Meller from their forthcoming book on textile design. Deborah Drier's article on Rosemarie Trockel shows how clothing is interwoven with problems of identity and gender, while for Carter Ratcliff, the relationship between fashion photography and art demonstrates how ideology—or the lack of it—assigns different meanings to apparently similar formal elements.

The artist William Anastasi proposes a peculiar case of identification in early Modernism in his reading of the influence of Alfred Jarry on Marcel Duchamp, the father of all appropriations. And while Howard Hampton excavates the ruins of Twin Peaks, Lane Relyea levitates to the ceiling, ascending in the footsteps of Matthew Barney. . . .

—IP

REGEN PROJECTS

Openings: Matthew Barney

Lane Relyea

In this ongoing series, writers are invited to introduce the work of artists at the beginning of their careers.

Witch-hunts, lotto, stupid pet tricks, prisons, mass displays of allegiance to the state, Arnold Schwarzenegger—there are some things we Americans just can't get enough of. Sex isn't one of them. Except, of course, when it's made to serve interests apart from its own, giving flesh to the very beliefs that degrade it. More than just good, sex must be good for something—for promoting ideology (the battle of the sexism), for affirming missionary-style hierarchies, for expounding the moral advantage of competition over sharing, defining the taking of pleasure as winning, winning as finishing first, climax as closure.

Americans can't get enough football. Neither, it seems, can Matthew Barney. An athlete turned esthete, Barney's a hardcore fan bent on acting out his fantasies, an erstwhile jock who approaches the art world as if it were one big training camp. His works (or workouts) typically take the form of installations: into already gymnasiumlike galleries Barney carts weight-room paraphernalia—dumbbells, curl bars, decline benches, floor mats, protective pads—for the most part objects meant to be engaged with manually rather than visually. Gracing each installation with a sense of sweaty mise-en-scène, Barney performs an exercise routine that determines the arrangement of the equipment; videotaped in private, the performance plays back on overhead monitors during the run of the show.

Art museum or health club? Actually, it's both in one—a public forum wherein people train their eyes inwardly on the ever-receding prize of self-improvement. Barney updates the image of the artist as isolated hero, whose retreat from society now extends beyond the garret and the canvas to the airtight privacy of the body itself. A mouth-watering if elusive specimen, Barney's naked video likeness floats cherubically over each piece, apparently oblivious to everything but his own self-amusement, cracking electronically as he spreads vaseline over his midsection with

a hydraulic jack or ambulates across the walls and ceiling using titanium ice screws and a harness.

Toying with the body and its representation, Barney supplies additional proof of the current nostalgia for the art of the early '70s, specifically that of Vito Acconci, Chris Burden, Joseph Beuys, and Bruce Nauman (the four horsemen to whom the art world's now hitched its bandwagon). Yet what Barney sees in the resurrection of body art is precisely a cadaver, spare parts left over from an exhausted search for artistic truths. Stitching these parts to others, Barney jerry-rigs his own fictional body, a mutable hybrid pumped up by a variety of

gear be overhauled to meet the challenge. Thus his recent show in L.A. featured a set of dumbbells cast in petroleum jelly, a blocking sled made of prosthetic plastic, a wrestling mat with a hole in it stretched open by a sternal retractor. (Barney appeared on one TV set tossing a ball—not a pigskin but a salt-water pearl.) A sticky-fingered King Midas, Barney has a desiring touch that ripens the sexual connotations in all his objects, transforming his rooms from sports clinics into porn shops, candy stores, torture chambers. Seemingly little things can get Barney off: what triggered his psychosexual chain reaction in L.A. was a wall-mounted publicity photo of Jim Otto, the Oakland

boyhood idol. Barney pumped up his fantasies through one desublimation after another, until the original object of his desire became lost in the crowd of images its displacement generated, and Jim Otto (hut, hut) exploded into Lord Gym.

In the end, though, Barney seemed less fascinated in Otto as a person than as a name, which is telling; graphically what Barney perhaps sees in the two and two T's are not only the bars and offices he repeats in his shows, but the component parts for a pair of womanhood symbols, suggesting lesbianism, or, more likely, mitosis and thus the birth envy characteristic of narcissism. Self-absorption is, after all, Barney's leitmotif. Unabashedly playing with himself in public, Barney aligns his art firmly within Modernism's long tradition of masturbation fantasies (when dangling from the roof, he brings to mind both autoerotic asphyxia and Marcel Duchamp's *Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even*). Masturbation is also the theme that links Barney with such contemporaries as Cady Noland and Pruitt K. Early, although the sex referred to in their wastescapes is more the hypersublimated dry hump of commodity consumption. Sure, masturbation's a waste, but only in the sense that it has yet to be rationalized—according to our society's grand scheme it's still good for nothing. Exhaustion for Barney serves only to extend pleasure, to hold in tension desire and its gratification. At heart, he's a tease. There are no conquests in his exploits, no winning or losing, just the channeling of sexual energy, desire flowing objectless, desiring only itself—in short, endless promiscuity. There's hardly even any ego in Barney's art, at least not in the old-fashioned sense—an ego that gets stroked, swells, stands erect, is decorated with medals. Rather, Barney puts all his muscle into role-playing and gender-bending, as if, by dissolving the ego, sex with himself will seem more like an orgy. Indeed, in Barney's hands, masturbation appears surprisingly like a team sport. □

Lane Relyea is a writer and a visiting lecturer at the California Institute of the Arts, Valencia.



Matthew Barney, *MILE HIGH Threshold: FLIGHT with the ANAL SADISTIC WARRIOR*, 1991, still from color videoaction, 45 minutes.

forces—organic, mechanical, institutional, psychological. Hence the televisually transcribed, sadomasochistic Robo-Barney, a cybernetic acrobat literally straining for ambiguity, elaborating his stunts to the exact point where they teeter between good clean fun and transgressions of the flesh. Odds are Barney's never met a boundary he didn't want to violate; besides suspending, contorting, and poking himself, he's often shown cross-dressing as well.

Understandably, Barney's prodigious pleasure-seeking requires that his athletic

Raiders' all-pro center from 1960 to 1975, who played most of his career with a plastic right knee. Otto is to Barney what the Tartars were to Beuys. The autographic double zero he wore on his jersey, Barney treats like a mystical glyph, repeating it mantra-style over and over in his show, not only in the holes he incessantly opened and filled, both in his pliant artworks and in himself (he was shown launching his wall climb with an ice screw up his ass), but generally in the recurrent themes of reversibility and proliferation. Toiling under the gaze of his