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### **Drill Team: Vaseline, Hair, and Paperclips**

Matthew Barney is generally considered one of the most important artists working today, and his early work entitled *DRILL TEAM: screw BOLUS* is an installation first exhibited in 1991 at the Barbara Gladstone Gallery in New York. Like many of Barney's sculptures, the work is closely related to his video narratives – here, *OTTOshaft*, a video cycle involving an improvised conflict between Jim Otto, an NFL player of equal renown for his exploits on the football field and the surgical table, and Al Davis, the alternately celebrated and vilified owner of the Oakland Raiders during Otto's heyday in the 1970s

The installation of *Drill Team* includes 44 dumbbells scattered at either end of a long barbell that rests upon a shallow sled. Modeled after the heavy metal equipment repeatedly pulled across football fields during practice, this sled also holds two autographed twin zero Otto jerseys as well as translucent, fluid-filled tubing positioned as a harness. Each dumbbell is also penetrated with an ice screw that Barney had used to suspend himself from the ceiling of the Gladstone Gallery during a previous performance.

During the initial installation, the dumbbells and barbell were cast mixtures of microcrystalline wax and petroleum jelly, or Vaseline. Although the barbell retained the milky appearance of this mixture, the dumbbells established a tonal scale based on Barney's varied additions of blue pigment. Conical flashing was left intact on each dumbbell and doubles as a visible trace of process and as an orifice into which each screw was inserted through a pool of Vaseline.

This, however, was not the *Drill Team* found in Barney's studio in the summer of 2004. This *Drill Team* was in pieces, covered with dirt, hair, stains, and protruding paperclips – the nasty remains of the 1991 installation. While these failed armatures mark the inherent vice of the materials, the dumbbells' ten-year storage wrapped in wax paper in a cardboard box could only have worsened their condition. In addition to broken elements, many handles were apparently warped by heat or pressure during storage, dark yellow staining appeared to result from contact with the acidic wax paper, a thick layer of grime and hair had collected on virtually all surfaces, and Vaseline remnants had darkened and penetrated into the body material. Although such decay is common in much of Barney's sculpture, and as discussed later, unintended traces of aging have sometimes become vital to his work, these dumbbells were never intended to host dirt or hair and were considered unexhibitable by the artist.

While dirty and broken sculpture is typically cleaned and reassembled, Vaseline presents an atypical dilemma. For most of Barney's applications, these jelly surfaces are meant to appear smooth, glossy, and in a low value palette – qualities only possible when this tacky material is free of grime. Solvent-based cleaning methods are inapplicable due to Vaseline's solubility in organic spirits, and any brush or swab technique would disrupt the surface. Barney's studio has previously used a spatula over Vaseline surfaces to remove both debris and discolored material, but here "cleaning" is actually a removal of the original sculptural fabric – a means quite at odds with normative conservation ethics. In these cases, jelly must be added after several cleanings since the volume begins to be noticeably reduced, and first hand experience has shown that this process is extremely difficult for all but flat surfaces.

Quite obviously, the desired formal qualities of Vaseline are diametrically opposed to its aging characteristics before one even considers handling or storage. As with the underbound, intense chroma surfaces of Ad Reinhardt and Yves Klein, proposed recreations are devices to regain lost formal qualities, but invariably open up an ethical can of worms. As demonstrated by Carol Stringari's 2004 exhibition at the Guggenheim entitled "Seeing Double: Theory in Emulation and Practice," any such emulation of a work retains some values at the expense of others. For example, any future migration of Cory Arcangel's hacked Nintendo shoot-up called *I Shot Andy Warhol* could preclude the intended period reference of 1980's television sets and glitches caused by twenty-year-old hardware. A better comparison piece for Barney's work may be *Site*, a performance by Robert Morris and Carolee Schneeman in 1964 that was shifted to video format during its 1994 recreation at the suggestion of art historian Rosalind Krauss. In this case, as in Barney's, full rights to the work were retained by the artist; hence qualities lost during the reconstruction may be viewed in terms of the artist's ongoing creative process. Morris recognized that the audience's free-flowing gaze across the stage became constrained by the camera's eye, but that "it has also become a record in perpetuity of that performance – the only one other than my notes." Since the work was not owned by a museum or collector, the proposed sacrifice of performance space toward the work's longevity remained the artist's decision alone, and *Site*, therefore, exists in two guises today: a 1964 event, fully expired but described by photography and text, and a 1991 video that is a living hybrid combining qualities of the original and its documentation. This latter model will provide the context for *Drill Team's* metamorphosis from Vaseline to Elvax, a durable ethylene vinyl acetate copolymer that is also used in a new generation of basketball shoes.

As part of a larger effort to renovate past work for both posterity and a massive exhibition beginning in Kanazawa this June, Barney elected to recast the dumbbells in Elvax, but to complicate the transition, Barney decided to cast off the aged, deformed Vaseline dumbbells rather than reuse the original molds. Although departing from the work's original appearance, this strategy establishes a

paradoxical continuity with the replaced dumbbells by indexing traces of their aging in a material not subject to them at all.

Barney has previously collaborated with conservators toward the maintenance of his work and each of these treatments has taken place on a sold piece. In contrast, *Drill Team* was never sold and Barney utilized this freedom to reconfigure the work. As denoted by *Drill Team's* dual date of 1991/2004 today, its reconstruction was not a conservation treatment, but rather, was part of Barney's continuing creative process. In fact, Barney's decision to engage *Drill Team's* aged appearance rather than merely reenact its original intentions recalls typical conservation ethics, whereby unintended traces of aging are often accepted rather than reversed. Although visible pentimenti, discolored pigments, or fractured surfaces may disrupt a work's aesthetic or conceptual aims, the conservator negotiates the conflict by harmonizing aging with artistic intent, rather than maintaining the original appearance at all costs. As we'll see, Barney ironically inverts this method by adapting his own intent in accord with traces of aging.

In collaboration with the artist, a system was devised to maintain the variety of aged colors and forms between the Vaseline and Elvax versions of the dumbbells. Barney selected five Vaseline originals to be used as models and tried to capture the full spectrum of deformation. While one dumbbell's shape appeared nearly unchanged, the others contained various twists, bends, and dents that summarized the total range of possibility. Barney then chose five colors in the originals that included the darkest, lightest, and three intermediates. The original dumbbells were each classified according to the form and color they most closely resembled, the originals were destroyed, and production began.

Wax was melted first, Elvax beads were poured into the liquid, and wax color was added before the hot solution was taken off the burner. The liquid was poured into the molds, and allowed to set for several hours before demolding.

In the Vaseline originals, any insertion or removal of the titanium ice screws would remove body material, and to compensate, a steel collar was inserted into the top of each dumbbell. Each column was deliberately undersized for the inserted ice screw, and each collar was thoroughly heated to melt the walls of the shaft as it was inserted with as much force as possible. A tang one centimeter-long descended from the bottom of the collar, and received the threaded ice screw to lock it in place.

Similar procedures were followed for the barbell and barweights, and many miscasts later, the set was complete and included backup dumbbells in each of the five colors as well as two extra barweights.

Adolph Gottlieb wrote in 1956 that "all artists have to solve their problems in the context of their own civilization, painting what their time permits them to paint, extending the boundaries a little further." Gottlieb hardly envisioned Vaseline drenched synthetic resins as the stuff of art, but it's exactly this sort of industrial material-based aesthetic boundary pushing that characterizes a lineage of works reaching back to Naum Gabo's cellulose nitrate, through the Ducos of David Alfonso Siqueiros and Jackson

Pollock, through Yves Klein's polyvinyl acetate, Eva Hesse's latex, and to Barney's Elvax. In addition to his aggressive use of contemporary materials, however, Barney is a member of another material current highlighted by *Drill Team's* reconstruction.

The aesthetic employment of aging processes of non-traditional artist's materials has been central to many modern and contemporary artists. Decay may be alternately underscored, accelerated, or halted, as a given material's ephemerality can operate in terms of allegory as well as sensory effect. For example, William Pope.L's rotting peanut butter canvases mix references to heroic abstraction and food stamp dinners while highlighting painterly qualities of the condiment, aestheticizing mold growth, and overpowering the viewer with smells evolving from nutty to rancid. In skirting an implicit agenda of Theophilus, guild structures, and the European academies, such strategies no longer minimize signs of aging from the start, but retain a similar sensitivity to temporal effect by finding expression through these very means. In cases where a superficial resemblance appears between, say, Cennino Cennini and Damian Hirst, the essential difference is the valuation of aging. Although both gold ground panels and formaldehyde-bound sharks are intended to remain static, minimizing signs of aging *preserves* meaning in Florentine painting – where intended formal and narrative devices are most clear at their time of execution – but *provides* meaning in Hirst – where the suspension of time is the very subject of the work. A map of such strategies will expand on these generalizations and provide a basis for understanding Barney's unique position in this lineage.

To continue with the example at hand, works by Hirst and Jeff Koons exemplify one handling of aging processes characterized by the vitrine. Designed to isolate a work's atmosphere, this museum device is a traditional means to minimize visible changes and extend an artwork's lifetime. In artists' hands, however, these aesthetic consequences are often aligned with social concerns. While a shark suspended in both formaldehyde and time is a platform for reflections on progress or legacy, Koons' *New Hoover Convertibles* highlights what Vienna School art theorist Alois Riegl calls newness value, or the relative absence of signs of decay. First exhibited in 1980, *New Hoover Convertibles* encases pristine vacuum cleaners within spotless, fluorescent-lit, plexi vitrines to logically extend commercial propositions of immaculate products in shiny wrappers in polished advertisements. As in the Minimalist aesthetics of Donald Judd or Ellsworth Kelly, Koons' address of commodity culture hinges on the absence of visible aging. Aestheticizing the suspension of time is a dubious proposal with the help of even the most skilled conservators, but the vitrine is a step in the correct direction.

Hirst's *A Thousand Years* shows that the vitrine may also be used to preserve temporal equilibrium – a situation that privileges the visible advance of time while maintaining the overall appearance of the work. Adjoining plexi cases enable this paradox by both containing internal sources of change – maggots, for example – and closing the environment to external sources of change – such as

dust. Flies hatch on a rotting cow's head only to be electrocuted moments later, and a fluid lifecycle is displayed in static terms.

Since the vitrine can only slow, rather than stop, the visible advance of time, it may also be used to display an object's decay. In contrast to Hirst's shark, the sausages of Joseph Beuys use degradation as a consciously accepted part of the creative process. Although change is inevitable in all artist's materials and begins from the moment of the mold's release, the brush's lifting, and so on, Beuys used the vitrine to highlight such effects and ostensibly demonstrate political or spiritual values. In Sonja Alhäuser's *Exhibition Basics* (2003), the vitrine itself decays as it's cast in chocolate and caramel, and slowly devoured by the audience. "It's worse than religion," Robert Rauschenberg said in 1985, "we've had to inherit this attitude that art is forever."

Outside the vitrine, a similar aging strategy is apparent in the operatic canvases of Anselm Kiefer and the unwieldy *assemblages* of Dieter Roth. In each case, vast expanses of non-traditional artist's materials are applied with an understanding that they'll soon bulge, flake, decay, or pop off. Although larger elements are continuously reapplied – "if something lifted . . . just stick down," says Kiefer – smaller ones are invariably lost, appliqués break, and soft metals warp downward. Mold invades Beuys' chocolate, insects nest in Kiefer's straw, and such artists not only accept decay, but actively seek it out.

Returning to Matthew Barney, we find an artist with an acute awareness of material aging that uniquely combines the models just proposed. Barney's shift from ephemeral materials to more durable polymers is characteristically complex, and the discussion will proceed to *Drill Team* via one other work.

*OTTOshaft: Metabolism of the Hubris Pill* comprises two shelves that contain references to Barney's video cycle of the same name. A staff rests on the upper polyethylene shelf, while the lower steel ledge holds a series of seven oversized pills of various composition. Six pills are cast with food products and one with Vaseline. In concert, they signify a stepwise conversion from reactant (glucose) to product (pound cake) via five intermediates (fructose, sucrose, Vaseline, tapioca, and meringue). The final pill is intentionally broken, however, and suggests a failed alchemy from simple carbohydrate to a complex amalgam of sugar, protein, fats, and starches.

While the composition of each pill is necessary to the function of this failed conversion, surface appearances are similarly vital since "dirt," according to the artist, "speaks to the failure of the process." In fact, Barney didn't consider this work to be art at all, until its tacky surfaces had attracted dirt, as well as maggots and rodents over the course of several years left on a shelf in the studio.

The visual tension between fresh, synthetic materials, and putrefying, natural ones on the two shelves was preserved by Barney's desired treatment for the work, which entered the studio in broken pieces covered in dirt, hair, larvae, and mouse droppings. The artist first added a layer of Vaseline to rebulk the damaged central pill and toned it to match the surrounding jelly. Loose fragments of two other

pills were then adhered to redefine their shape as necessary for the serial conversion. On the other hand, feces and filth were left in place. Nonetheless, Barney now seeks a complete suspension of aging for the *Hubris Pill*, and in essence, Barney uses time and its traces in the creative process *to a certain extent*, after which the work is entrusted to a vitrine and conservator who share the responsibility of stopping time. Rather than merely pristine, this work is intended to be pristinely squalid.

While the vitrine in Beuys displays such aging processes, Barney's is meant to stop them altogether. Surrounded by plexi, stored at low temperature and relative humidity, and placed away from UV exposure, dust will no longer collect on candy surfaces, vibrations will no longer crack cakes, and Vaseline will no longer yellow and become opaque. Objects that became art only through the visible passing of time are now to remain atemporal, a prospect that defines Barney's aesthetic intention regardless of its practical impossibility. Without lavish treatments such as storage under inert gas, candy *will* host bacteria, epoxies *will* yellow, and the continuation of artist's intent remains the task of the conservator.

It appears that an aesthetic that draws equally from the appearance of time and its suspension will require invasive treatments similar to those discussed here, lest both organic and synthetic poles fester and diminish the impact of his work. In *Drill Team*, however, the treatment was conducted as a studio assistant rather than as a conservator, and Barney utilized the flexibility afforded by the unsold sculpture to further complicate its temporal dimension. Rather than combining space age and squalid appearances, this treatment eliminated the decaying Vaseline dumbbells to enhance the newness value of the work. The shift is incomplete since dirty socks and athletic tape remain in the piece, but the current work appears cleaner and generally more up to date.

Paradoxically, a symbolic reading of the refabrication finds opposite results. Because Elvax stabilizes Vaseline's temporal defects – torqued handles, drooping edges, etc. – the shift toward newness value takes decrepit form. Like Richard Serra's thrown lead in *Castings* from 1968, the durable form reflects a past event and properties of its preceding fluid state. In Barney's language, such sculptural hardening is “the clearest manifestation of . . . taking an undifferentiated mass and willfully differentiating it in one gesture.” From this perspective, differentiation is the physical separation and hardening of a material through processes dependant on time, temperature, and the creative gesture. Unlike lead, where hard and soft are time-dependant forms of a single material, Barney's dumbbells translate Vaseline's decay into a different material altogether. As in the *Hubris Pill*, Barney employs time selectively, but now precludes the vitrine with a new casting material altogether. The creative gesture can no longer be recognized only in the casting process, but now also in the substitution of Elvax itself. The paradox that results for the conservator is a treatment that preserves traces of aging rather than the original artistic intent.

While such preservation of signs of aging is uniquely desirable in the dumbbells, Barney's other surfaces will invariably confront this tension in unintended ways due to UV exposure, handling, and inevitable polymeric degradation. Like the Minimalist painters before him, material selection and application operate in aesthetic terms absolutely opposed to patina. Barney swallows his own hubris pill in his resolve to outmaneuver time, and this proposition will result in shifting aesthetics whether deliberate – as in the case of *Drill Team* – or not.

In closing, a FAQ of customers of both Vaseline and Barney's sculpture is "What is the shelf life of Vaseline products?" Vaseline's website responds "Three years, store in cool dry area." As *Drill Team* has shown, it's probably good advice.