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Transformational Zones and Violent Encounters. Matthew Barney's "The Order"

Abstract

In "The Order," Matthew Barney transforms the Guggenheim Museum into a space reminding of a computer game or sports-arena. The protagonist struggles his way through different 'levels' and at the heart of the setting, he is confronted with the para-athlete Aimee Mullins, a cyborg embodying the Deleuzian notion of the ani/omalous. To complete his final task, the protagonist kills the creature. The question arises, why the ani/omalous has to be violently eliminated. In this respect, it is important to know that the DVD offers two viewing options: a film version structured according to a fixed narrative order and an interactive version where one can switch between the levels simultaneously. Thus, Barney's film also raises the question of the aesthetic order at work and invites to consider how what is shown relates to the way in which it is shown.

Keywords: Matthew Barney, becoming ani/omalous, Deleuze & Guattari, violence in art

Matthew Barney's hybrid monumental aesthetic work the Cremaster Cycle, consisting of film material, but also integrating drawings, sculpture, photography and performance elements can as such be considered as a multiplicity in Gilles Deleuze's and Félix Guattari's terms. In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari argue against Art (with a capital A) as a nominal concept and in favour of "the possibility of a simultaneous usage of the various arts within a determinable multiplicity" (331). That Barney's work is indebted to Deleuze's and Guattari's philosophy seems unquestionable.^[1] What interests me in this paper is the relation between Deleuze's and Guattari's thinking and Barney's own theoretical conceptions of art as well as how an example of Barney's artistic work locates itself against the background of these frameworks. To do so, I want to concentrate on a so-called "choric interlude" in Cremaster 3 titled "The Order," "which rehearses

the initiation rites of the Masonic fraternity through allegorical representations of the five-part Cremaster cycle” (Barney 2004, par 5), and thus constitutes a microcosm of Barney’s film project (Spector 54).^[2] Comprising a self-contained narrative, the sequence is also available independently on DVD. In the context of the Cremaster Cycle, it is located almost at the very end – that Cremaster 3 is the last part of the five films already shows that a linear sequence, a conventional order of numbers is subverted. Rather than following the numerical order from 1 to 5, the Cremaster Cycle is organized rhizomatically, in the very words of Deleuze and Guattari generating “an acentered, non-hierarchical, non-signifying system without [...] an organizing memory [...] defined solely by a circulation of states” (23).

Ordered Space

“The Order” is set in the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, which is architecturally arranged in circles. Its open rotunda is organised spirally: the exhibition space coils its way up in a ramp gradually, so that the levels of the building which are clearly discernable from the museum’s atrium seem to blend while walking up. The setting thus already juxtaposes clearly distinguished, numerically ordered levels and a circular space in which this order is dissolved. Contra-intuitively from a Deleuzian perspective, “The Order” highlights the distinguished levels rather than the continuous spiral: the camera does not focus on the gradual ascent. The protagonist, played by Matthew Barney himself, is an “Apprentice” passing through the initiation rites of the Masonic fraternity. He climbs the walls connecting the different levels and is faced with a task to be accomplished in each of them, in order to rise in the freemasons’ hierarchy.^[3] The spectators primarily see the Apprentice climbing from level to level from the atrium’s angle of view or the different levels as settings in isolation, so the order of the clearly distinguishable levels is stressed. The Guggenheim Museum is transformed into a space of obstacles and barriers to be overcome, reminding of a computer game or sports-arena.

The title “The Order” already accumulates a number of key-aspects negotiated in the sequence: the word “order” stands for “command” (OED 184) – the protagonist is fulfilling commanded tasks –, “sequence” (OED 182) – he climbs the levels of the Guggenheim in a linear order, more or less from bottom to top –, “fraternity” (OED 182) – he does so in the context of a freemason initiation rite

–, and “system” (OED 182). Etymologically, “order” goes back to the Latin “ordo,” designating amongst others “row,” “rank,” “regular arrangement” and literally a “row of threads in a loom” (Online Etymology Dictionary par 1). The space presented in “The Order” is thus at first sight an anti-rhizome: rather than a bundle of non-organised intertwining threads, the film sequence presents a strictly ordered and hierarchical system. It is worth noting that the Apprentice’s aim is to work his way up in the fraternity structured by ascending ranks or degrees after which the tasks he has to fulfil on each level of the Guggenheim are entitled in the film: 1st Degree: “The Order of the Rainbow for Girls,” 2nd Degree: “Agnostic Front vs. Murphy’s Law,” 3rd Degree: “Aimee Mullins,” 4th Degree: “The Five Points of Fellowship” and 5th Degree: “Richard Serra.”^[4] Moreover, the space is determined by a strictly defined, linear time frame: the sculptor Richard Serra tosses liquid vaseline into a drain curling its way down the Guggenheim’s ramp, suggesting that the Apprentice’s time to complete his tasks is up when the vaseline reaches the ground level. In Deleuzian terms, we are faced with the restrictive temporality of chronos, “the time of measure that situates things and persons, develops a form, and determines a subject” (289). The question arises as to what Barney, who generally embraces Deleuzian ideas in his works, is after when confronting the viewers with such a space. In order to investigate the significance and status of the system presented in the film further, it is crucial to follow the narrative thread it brings forward.

The Ani/omalous

At the heart of his quest, the third – and for the free mansions highest – degree, the Apprentice is confronted with the para-athlete and fashion model Aimee Mullins who plays a character of the same name.^[5] Intentionally blurring her persona in the film and the way she presents herself in the media, Barney stages Aimee Mullins as a heightened version of her real-life public image: a cyborg embodying Deleuze’s and Guattari’s notion of becoming-animal^[6] as well as the anomalous, or, in other words, the ani/omalous^[7].

By her highlighted prosthetic legs, Mullins is as such already marked as a hybrid creature between human and machine as well as between human and animal – Mullins’s running blades, the ‘Flex

Foot Cheetah', are modelled on and named after the shape of a cheetah's hind legs (Lemelson-MIT par 5).



Illustration 1: Aimee Mullins. Screenshot from: Barney, Matthew. "The Order." Cremaster 3. © Matthew Barney

In "The Order," Mullins transforms into a cheetah-woman when the Apprentice and she embrace, in the moment one would expect them to kiss. The scene turns from attraction to allurement and finally to an attack of the cheetah-woman and a fight between her and the Apprentice. The hybrid, transformational and transitional figure played by Aimee Mullins stands in contrast to the strictly organised space in the filmic sequence, and as Deleuze and Guattari claim of the act of becoming-animal, she represents a "deviation from the true order" (262). Her persona in "The Order" goes hand in hand with what Deleuze and Guattari designate as a-normal, referring "to that which is outside rules or goes against the rules" (269). Deleuze and Guattari claim that becoming-animal presupposes an "exceptional individual" (268), which Aimee Mullins embodies on all levels as a public figure beyond Barney's film. She is exceptional because of her disability and exceptional in her way of dealing with it, that is, in staging her prostheses not only in an athletic context, but also in an erotic manner and as something that makes her super-human^[8]: more beautiful, desirable and faster than any ordinary person. Not only in this respect does Aimee Mullins figure as a copybook example of becoming-animal and the a-normal. According to Deleuze and Guattari,

“[t]he anomalous is neither an individual nor a species; it has only affects, it has neither familiar or subjectified feelings, nor specific or significant characteristics” (270). All this applies to Barney’s Aimee Mullins-figure: she is too mutable to be considered a coherent individual; her characteristics change and cannot be pinned down; she cannot be categorised as a specific species like woman or cheetah; her actions – especially the change from affinity to attack – are not comprehensible in terms of certain motives or feelings, they rather seem to be driven by random affects.

The creature played by Aimee Mullins breaches the Order with all its implications, which is especially highlighted in the last scene of the fight. The Apprentice and the cheetah-woman end up flying across the Guggenheim.

The laws of physics, emphasised in numerous shots throughout the film, showing how the Apprentice climbs the levels by laborious physical strength, become inoperative in the impossible scene when the protagonists effortlessly fly across the ceiling.



Illustration 2: The Apprentice and Aimee Mullins flying across the Guggenheim's ceiling. Screenshot from: Barney, Matthew. "The Order." Cremaster 3. © Matthew Barney

The vertical climbing going along with the order of the fictional as well as the real world is interrupted by this implausible horizontal flight. After this scene, it becomes clear from the narrative logic that everything what follows is but a prologue to the elimination of the Aimee Mullins-figure, which is necessary to sustain the system, so as to keep its order of hierarchies, binaries, discipline and physical laws intact. It is thus barely surprising that the Apprentice's final task is to kill the creature that destabilises the order in which he wants to secure his position. Preserving an ordered system thus implies a violent extinction of what resists and is indeterminable, of the anomalous and the becoming-animal. Clearly, the order presented at this point suffers a negative connotation through the brutal depiction of how the Apprentice strikes the cheetah-woman dead with a hammer.

The Aesthetic Order

That being said about the general framework of "The Order," what is at stake in Barney's film is clearly also a question of the aesthetic order going along with the violent system expelling its Other. In the shot following the killing-scene, that is, after her death as becoming ani/omalous, or, in other words, as an embodiment of a Deleuzian conception of art^[9], we see Aimee Mullins frozen into a fixed image.

The scene in which Aimee Mullins does not move is laden with symbolism: Aimee Mullins is blindfolded, the bloody bandage recalls the blinded Oedipus, her bare breast echoes depictions of Nemesis, appropriately enough, the goddess of vengeance, and her prostheses end in tentacles, or snakelike excrescences reminding of Medusa's hair – note that the frozen image in total looks like an outcome of Medusa's petrifying gaze.



Illustration 3: Frozen image of Aimee Mullins. Screenshot from: Barney, Matthew. "The Order." Cremaster 3. © Matthew Barney

The broader symbolic implications of the noose around her neck and the sheep are not far to seek and do not require further discussion. Moreover, the banner serving as décor displays colours that play an important role in the symbolism Matthew Barney establishes within the Cremaster Cycle.

The whole setting points to elements of the first degree, and especially imitates an earlier scene featuring the Apprentice.

This staging of Mullins and the Apprentice also refers to the freemasons' initiation rites: in the course of the ritual, Apprentices are supposed to wear "a blindfold and a length rope called a cable tow" (Stavish 51).



Illustration 4: The Apprentice. Screenshot from: Barney, Matthew. "The Order." Cremaster 3. © Matthew Barney

Trying to interpret the scene with the aid of these symbols in the sense of a reading resulting from their implications, would, as I want to suggest, imply walking into a trap the film deliberately sets. We are not faced with non-sense that we could turn into sense, but with too much sense, a multiplicity of sense. The symbols can be encrypted individually and on different levels, but a

coherent reading turns out to be impossible. Stressing the impossibility of a coherent reading points to the violence involved in imposing a single meaning to an image like the one we are faced with. At the same time, one can hardly avoid trying to 'encrypt' the symbols and consider the meaning culturally attached to them. In this way, one participates in the violence of restriction prompted by symbols suggesting a fixed meaning. What seems to be stressed in the image overdetermined by symbols is that a violent aesthetic system results in an immovable, dead image. The violent aesthetic order culminates in this image, which highlights its main characteristics: resembling something pre-existing and suggesting a hidden meaning. Such an aesthetic order clearly stands in contrast to a Deleuzian organism made of "asignifying particles or pure intensities" that "pass" and "circulate" freely (4). In simplified terms, the scrutinised aesthetic order may be best located in traditional representational painting, for example iconic pictures.

The question arises as to how the film itself operates aesthetically – whether it supports or resists what it shows by the aesthetic means deployed. One approach of resisting what is represented as violent can be observed in how the space of the Guggenheim is used: the museum usually presents paintings in a conventional manner, that is, by placing them on the walls of the exhibition space as fixed objects. In contrast, the very same space becomes a space of action rather than observation in Barney's film. Instead of looking at immobile images (as one usually does in the Guggenheim), we watch the film's moving images in which the museum space is animated by living actors who occupy it physically. Even though the images are moving instead of fixed and the action in the movie rather works like a performance than a painting referring to something external, we as spectators still watch a representation arranged in a narrative order. This narrative order is questioned and to some degree usurped in the DVD-version of the film. The DVD offers two viewing options: the conventional film version and an interactive version functioning like a simple computer game^[10]. In the interactive version Barney's famous field symbol appears in the right hand corner of the screen after the different 'degrees' are presented, functioning as a virtual button.

By clicking on the numbers depicted on the field symbol, one enters the level designated by it and is allowed to navigate and switch freely between the levels without following their numerical order.



Illustration 5: Interactive version marked by the field symbol. Screenshot from: Barney, Matthew. "The Order." Cremaster 3. © Matthew Barney

Also the chronological time frame and the time limit stressed by the vaseline running down the drain from top to bottom is suspended, opening to the simultaneity of aeon, "the infinite time of the event" (Deleuze and Guattari 289). The ordered space thus dissolves into a sphere of plateaus, which according to Brian Massumi's introduction to the English translation of *A Thousand Plateaus*, constitute a "fabric of intense states between which any number of connecting routes could exist" (xiv). Instead of climbing the levels in accordance with his physical means, the Apprentice passes loosely through various processes of formation and figuration emerging through the obstacles he encounters in the interactive version. At some stage, however, this seemingly blissful and unbound state of switching levels free from a superimposed order comes to a halt, the field symbol disappears and the narrative sets in again – precisely before the scene in which the cheetah-woman is killed. To the viewers, who indulged in the illusion that they controlled the narrative and were able to float between the levels as they wished, this comes as a shock. The narrative order imposes itself on them along with the violent murder-scene. Bereft of our power to interact, we cannot intervene and spare the Aimee Mullins-figure her brutal death. The violence of the killing-scene is intensified in the interactive version, as it goes hand in hand with our disempowerment by the same system that necessarily has to extinguish the hybrid creature. In the interactive version, the audience is immersed in a space functioning according to the non-rules of the Aimee Mullins-

figure. The death of the creature epitomising transformation is rendered scandalous because it goes hand in hand with the forceful submission of the viewer to the very narrative order that eliminated her.

Internal Tensions of Art

What do we make of this? Barney chooses not to pit one aesthetic order, the conventional film version associated with forced hierarchical restrictions, against a preferable alternative one, the interactive version, as one might have expected. Both versions end in the same result: the violent exclusion of the ani/omalous. Rather than considering this as an impasse, or a deficiency of a certain aesthetic order, I suggest to read the seemingly dissatisfactory outcome of both versions of “The Order” along with Mathew Barney’s own reflections of art – as a dilemma exposing the field of tension an aesthetic work is always involved in. Barney differentiates three stages a work of art necessarily traverses; the first is designated “Situation”:

Situation is raw drive. It is a sexual energy without discipline or direction. It is described by a diagram of the male and female reproductive system in the six weeks old developing foetus. The sex of the foetus remains undifferentiated for the first seven weeks. Situation is undifferentiated sexual energy, and is characterized by hunger and indiscriminate consumption. (Barney 2006-2010, par 1)

The analogies between Situation, the state of drive and pure potential where differences do not exist yet, to Deleuze’s and Guattari’s notion of becoming, are obvious: both imply a process of continual transformation that radically subverts dualisms like the difference between male/female. Moreover, instinctual drives and undirected affects are characteristic for becoming-animal. For Barney, this “first” stage of an artwork gives way to a second one, termed “Condition”:

Condition is the visceral funnel. Condition disciplines the oral intake of Situation. In Condition, the undifferentiated field of sexual energy begins to take form. Condition functions like the stomach, systematically breaking down the bolus ingested by Situation, nourishing it and encouraging growth. (Barney 2006-2010, par 1)

The development from the undifferentiated state of an artwork's pure potential to a more concrete form finally ends in the last stage, "Production," or "output":

Production is the anal output of the path. Production is described by the form of the two-headed dumbbell called the unit BOLLUS. The unit BOLLUS has the potential to close the three-phase PATH, joining the anus of Production, enabling a meditation on an endless loop between desire and discipline. (Barney 2006-2010, par 1)

The stages of aesthetic production outlined by Barney must not be considered in a linear manner, that is Situation followed by Condition, followed by Production – full stop. Instead, the phases are mutually dependent and connected or closed in a cycle, "enabling [...] an endless loop between desire and discipline." Preserving the state of Production as a final result would lead to a frozen, dead work like the final image of Aimee Mullins. Nancy Spector argues that the Cremaster Cycle attempts to extend the state of Situation endlessly by rebelling against forced differentiation (33). However, were a work to remain in the state of Situation, it could not be considered an artwork altogether, as some kind of manifested form is a necessary condition that something can count as an artwork at all. Barney indeed pushes the boundaries between an artwork's production process and the resulting artistic object: especially in his Drawing Restraint series, the way in which works are produced is at the centre of the individual performances, films or sculptures while the result is only a by-product. Nevertheless, Production is inevitable: there always is some kind of output of the artistic activity. The three states which according to Barney constitute the artwork do not go smoothly hand in hand. To the contrary, they contradict or even mutually exclude each other on closer inspection: the undisciplined, undifferentiated state of Situation cuts across the disciplining interventions of Condition. Determined by "indiscriminate consumption," the unrealised, unformed state of Situation also clashes with Production. Maintaining all three states in an artwork thus results in a dilemma: it seems that in order for Condition and Production to become effective, Situation has to be overcome. That Barney resists that assumption and considers the three stages as being at work in an artwork, continually implies that an artwork is always involved in an interior struggle of contending forces.

After having outlined Barney's own reflexions on art, we can relate them back to Deleuze and Guattari so as to approach the aesthetic questions at stake in "The Order." Even though Deleuze and Guattari grant the notion of becoming-animal, which resonates with Barney's state of Situation, a space in artworks, they agree that it cannot be contained in representation. Becoming-animal has nothing to do with resemblance: "there is a becoming-animal not content to proceed by resemblance and for which resemblance, on the contrary, would represent an obstacle or stoppage" (257). Resemblance is based on differences (261); in contrast, becoming "it is affect in itself, the drive in person, and represents nothing" (286). "Becoming produces nothing other than itself" (262), it is a process without manifestation, which is by definition something other than the process. These reflections may offer a new approach to the murder of the Aimee Mullins-figure in "The Order." They open another reading than simply considering it a violent extinction of the Other by a violent system. Given that we are concerned with a work of art, given that becoming-animal cannot be re-presented in an image, or in moving images, and given that the state of Situation alone is incompatible with a manifested artwork, the death of the Aimee Mullins-figure can be seen in different terms.

Even though the force she re-presents necessarily has to be killed as a re-presentation, it is by no means out of the question that such a force is maintained on another level – as a force operating within a field wherein it agonistically counteracts other forces, or other stages like Condition and Production. Even though the narrative of the film suggests that the strictly ordered system is preserved and gains mastery over the force of becoming, we have to take into account its very last shot, which is almost equivalent with the shot opening "The Order." The camera zooms into the Guggenheim's ceiling on which Barney's field symbol is projected, drawing closer to the circle in its centre.

The field symbol has been used by Barney as a visualisation of the three stages, Situation, Condition and Production in the context of his Drawing Restraint series.



Illustration 6: Final shot. Screenshot from: Barney, Matthew. "The Order." Cremaster 3. © Matthew Barney

It also can be related to the notion of becoming, which Deleuze and Guattari describe in abstract terms as a line: "A line of becoming is not defined by points that it connects, or by points that compose it; on the contrary, it passes between points, it comes through the middle" (323).

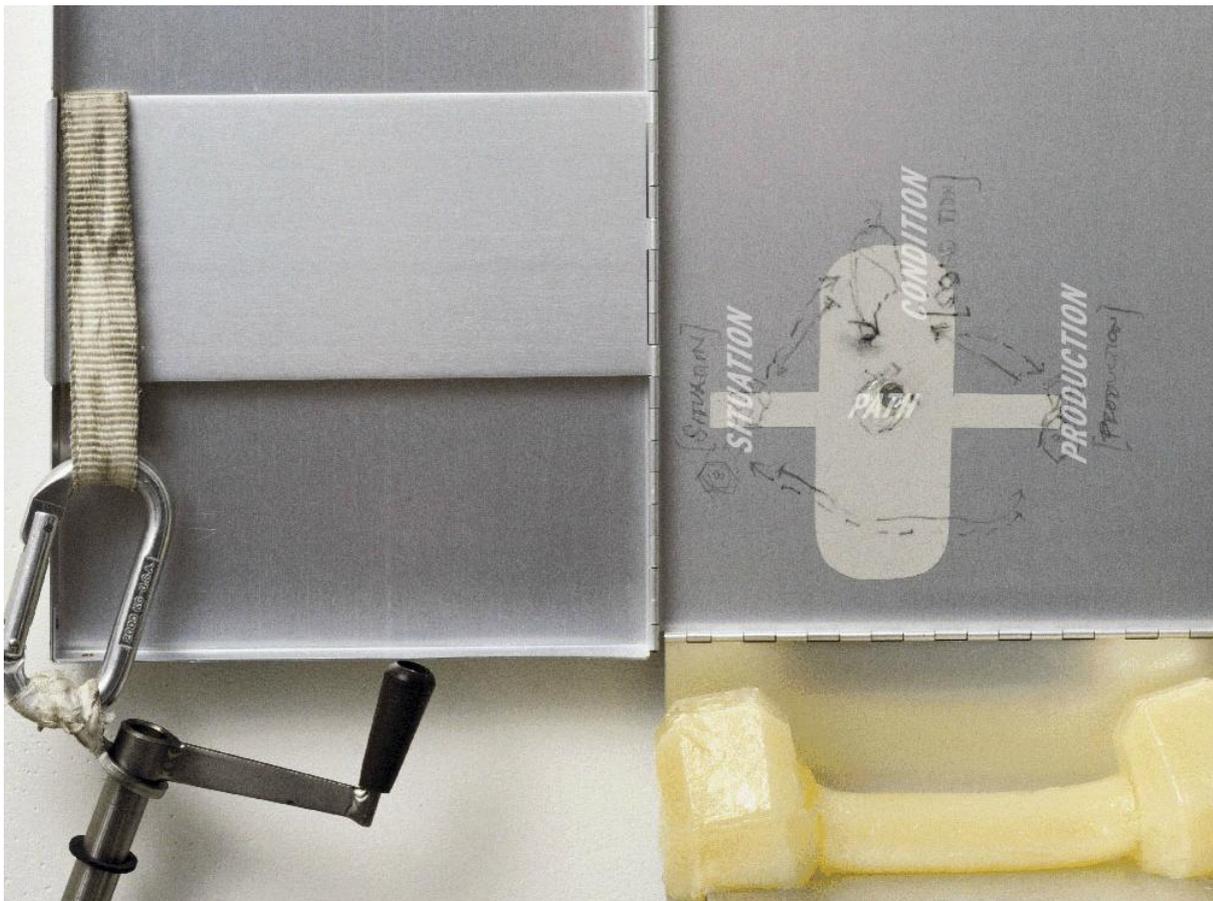


Illustration 7: Situation, Condition, Production. From: Barney, Matthew. DRAWINGRESTRAINT.NET. 2006/2010. © Matthew Barney

The horizontal line of the field symbol precisely works like this: it does not connect fixed points and it runs through the middle of the ellipse, marking a transition without dividing the shape into differentiated pieces. Deleuze and Guattari link the image of the line to artistic creation: “Creations are like mutant abstract lines that have detached themselves from the task of representing a world, precisely because they assemble a new type of reality” (326). In art, becoming-animal thus rather has its place in the abstract line than in representation: it does not refer to something given, but to something in the process of forming itself. When Barney stresses the abstract field symbol, which he (in contrast to his critics) never ties to a fixed meaning, in the last shot of “The Order,” the force of becoming-ani/omalous which has been represented by the creature played by Aimee Mullins finds its way back in the system which seemingly expelled it. That the circle in the centre of the Guggenheim’s ceiling is the final image – and that the film opens with almost the same shot and thus itself forms a circle – already suggests a cyclical structure of states in transition, for example of Situation, Condition and Production: the endless loop between the stages is highlighted.

Moreover, the shot recalls the scene in which the Apprentice and Aimee Mullins are flying across the Guggenheim – the climax of the force of becoming-animal thus reappears. Finally, the virtual button that marks the interactive version of the film has the shape of the field symbol. It is clicking on the field symbol that allows the unbound switching between the levels. Also in this respect, the undifferentiated state of Situation is evoked in the last shot – not as that which predominates, but as something that constitutes a field of tension along with other forces or conditions.

As an artwork, “The Order” cannot remain in an undifferentiated state – it nevertheless has the potential to transform itself continually and to form a multiplicity. The film as a whole does not constitute a system like the one it represents. It neither forms a purely hierarchical, disciplined system based on binaries, nor does it cherish the illusion of the aesthetic order of representation and interaction respectively in an unreflected manner. The viewers are not in a position of mastery, being able to control the narrative and bend it according to their wishes – not even for the sake of an ideal Deleuzian state of unbound transitions –, as the interactive version at first suggests. However, the viewers do have their part in turning “The Order” into a rhizomatic space “that is perpetually in construction or collapsing, and of a process that is perpetually prolonging itself, breaking off and starting up again” (Deleuze and Guattari 22). In his article on “Becoming + Performance Art,” Adrian Parr highlights that “the Deleuzian concept of ‘becoming’ is especially useful [...] in that it allows us to consider art in terms of a transformative experience” (25). In order that art can be considered as a transformative experience at all, an artwork cannot be seen in isolation – the artist and the viewers have to be taken into account:

“Becoming” points to a non-linear process of change and when used to assist us with problems of an aesthetic nature we are encouraged not just to reconfigure the apparent stability of the art object as ‘object’ defined in contradistinction to a fully coherent “subject” or an extension of that ‘subject’ but rather the concept of art’s becoming is a fourfold becoming-minor of the artist, viewer, artwork and milieu. (25)

The viewers introduce a force of non-linearity in “The Order,” less in the way they interact with the film in one viewing option the DVD offers, than in the way they are invited to reflect on it thanks to the two viewing options. Thus, viewers actually find themselves in a field of indeterminacy and

potential open to change. "The Order" presents a creative and resistant potential being at work without offering a resolution of the dilemma inherent in art and thus opens a contingent space of indetermination.

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[1] Barney's work has been related to Deleuzian thought in numerous studies, for example Zepke and O'Sullivan 203; Davis 17; Dagan; Spector.

[2] Of course, Nancy Spector's claim that "The Order" constitutes a microcosm of the Cremaster Cycle as a whole can be contested. Investigating the relation of "The Order" to Cremaster 3 and the whole Cremaster Cycle would be an interesting, yet extensive endeavour, which I cannot pursue here. In my article, I do not claim to make statements and observations about the Cremaster Cycle as a whole, or Barney's oeuvre in general. I am rather concerned with "The Order" as an example from Barney's work and my argument refers to this individual piece alone.

[3] The Apprentice is the lowest degree of freemasonry (Stavish 51), followed by Fellowcraft and Master Manson (Stavish 50).

[4] Except for "Aimee Mullins," the specific tasks to be fulfilled in each level are not relevant to this paper.

[5] Marquard Smith stresses that Mullins's appearance in "The Order" is essential to the whole Cremaster Cycle: "Aimee Mullins comes into view in the third degree of 'The Order' and thus personifies the third episode of the Cremaster cycle, Cremaster 3 itself. She is a personification of the very film in which she acts" (63).

[6] In *What is Philosophy*, Deleuze and Guattari claim that becoming "is true of all the arts" (169). Forms of becoming, e.g. "[b]ecoming animal, plant, molecular, becoming zero" (169) are characteristic for all kinds of art. Embodying becoming, the creature played by Aimee Mullins thus also embodies art from a Deleuzian perspective.

[7] The notion of the ani/omalous goes back to Monika Bregović's project "Become-ani/omalous."

[8] For a discussion of Mullins's staging as a "figure of supraerotic fantasy" and a "perfect example of posthuman progress" (Smith 58) see Smith 58-60.

[9] Cf. footnote 6.

[10] It is worth noting that David Martin-Jones examines computer games "as illustrative of the rhizome," arguing that computer games are generally "structured around a process of mapping that

implies possible de- and reterritorialisations within the particular game world” (11). I would argue that the “rhizomatic potential of the video game” (Martin-Jones 13) is consciously displayed in the interactive version of “The Order.”



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