

MUSIC/LIFE

DRAWING
RESTRAINT 9

BJÖRK & BARNEY

ISSUE

FORTH

A CETACEAN

CHILD

Björk looks content and relaxed and it is no wonder. She has just passed the last six months working over 12 hours a day, seven days a week on the score to her partner, Matthew Barney's new film installation, *Drawing Restraint 9*, a soundtrack she released on July 25. Now she is on a break, she announces gleefully. She is going to learn how to skipper boats in Iceland with the intention to sell up her and Matthew's New York home and buy a boat on which she hopes to live and have a studio. One wonders if her fervour for things nautical stems from her time shooting *Drawing Restraint 9* last November on a whaling ship in Nagasaki Bay, Japan.

TEXT : DON DUNCAN (PARIS)

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The installation is number nine in a series because, as a teenager in Boise, Idaho, Barney already created eight *Drawing Restraint* installations, some of which at a local gallery where he would tie himself to a fixed point and proceed to draw on the wall within the physical restraint of the rope. The film continues this fundamental morality of forces between boundless creativity and self-imposed restraint. For Barney, creativity can only co-exist in the face of a restraint of some kind on its force. This is expressed in his signature logo: an oval shape bisected by a horizontal bar which punctuated his *Cremaster 5* series. It reappears in *Drawing Restraint 9* both as a logo and as a huge vaseline

sculpture on board the Japanese whaling vessel.

The film's salient narrative thread is intermittent, absurd and unconventional, in classic Barney style, assailed by many other narrative layers, some developed, some cut short, abandoned or simply stillborn. "As he does not like narrative," says Björk, "Matthew works around a central core. His films are like sculptures." Barney's filmic sculpture, then, is a matrix of mythical, historical, biological, auto-biographical, ethnographical and inscrutably personal references weaved together in pleasing, public accord and unsettling idiosyncratic discord.

Like the role she plays in the film, Björk, in writing the score, was also an accidental guest in the Japanese musical tradition. She introduces the sound of the "Sho" a traditional Japanese instrument which resembles a complex mouth organ, as well as a traditional Noh singer of the Noh theatrical tradition whose themes are frequently shamanistic, a feature Björk felt rang well with the cetacean transmogrification at the close of the film.

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D : Don Duncan **B** : Björk

D : In *Drawing Restraint 9*, you and Matthew's characters undergo a dramatic physical metamorphosis whereby you become whales. It made me look at transformation is an essential element of creativity.

B : In the film, there is a storm scene which is probably the most dramatic scene in the movie. For this, I got a traditional Japanese Noh singer to sing a ten minutes long poem which Matthew wrote. In the Noh theatrical tradition, there is always a shamanistic moment, a moment where the characters contact the spirits or the other world and there is a transformation of some sort. The storm, then, is a preparation where things are getting chaotic. You're leaving mundane reality and it's like a transformation into the next stage and in order to fuel the real physical transformation that later happens when we [Matthew and I] start to change into whales, you need the storm, thunder and lightning.

D : I suppose the energy and conflict in an artist's work in a way fuels the transformation that enables him/her to evolve his/her art and produce his/her next work. How do you feel your evolution as an artist has helped you reach your work on *Drawing Restraint 9*?

B : If I had done this after *Debut* (1993), this music would have been very different. But then again the reason I said 'yes' to this project is because I was where I am. When I did work like *Medùlla* (2004) or *Homogenic* (1996) or *Vespertine* (2001), I would learn things I could bring

to future projects. I tried creating, with *Vespertine* for example, hundreds of micro-beats over a year and then I discovered that 90% of it didn't work so now I know what works, you know, and then I can go into a project and I don't have to do that 90%.

D : How does *Drawing Restraint 9* compare to your most recent work, on *Medùlla*?

B : With this project, it was a very different mood. It's more ambient for lack of a better word – or how Matthew works, he does not like narrative, he's more thinking about what's around – he is more like sculpture than having the human being at the centre. So to think like this is maybe the opposite of where I was with *Medùlla*. In working with the vocals, I was trying to enter the heart and the centre of the narrative and the passion and the heat but with this project it was almost the opposite. Every time you go somewhere a little bit hot you have to back out (gestures hand being burned). It's kind of a tease.

D : I presume then that there has also been an evolution for you in the experience of scoring film from when you did the score for Lars van Trier's *Dancer in the Dark* in 2000?

B : In *Dancer in the Dark*, it was used as an effect to have silence broken with all these music issuing from the main character: the girl who is blind. It always comes from her so all the music was written from one person's point of view and from a very particular character at that. *Drawing Restraint 9* was very different. It's not written from

a specific person and in fact, I was trying to write as impersonal music as I could yet still remain emotional because I believe in emotion and I will always approach everything from an emotional point of view. So it was about trying not to have the heart as the focus point, like in *Dancer in the Dark* – it's the opposite, it's the widest circle you can draw, and (it's) from the outside. It's like "Furniture Music" [musique d'ameublement: theory of minimalist background music expounded by early 20th century French avant-garde composer Erik Satie] which is basically ambient music – it is not music from the person but from around the person. So maybe that's the biggest difference between *Dancer in the Dark* and this project: there is no "furniture music" in *Dancer in the Dark*. There, it's always all from the centre of a heart and in *Drawing Restraint 9* it is more "furniture music." It's ambient music which is definitely not inferior music, I think it's just as important.

D : What does the film mean to you?

B : First of all I'd like to say I am not an art critic. I would be a horrible art critic. Of course, I just understand the film in my own little ways which is again, I have to repeat, emotional.

Matthew has a symbol which is like this (vertical oval) and has a (horizontal) line thought it which is in all his work. In this particular project, it is about creativity and resistance, or basically discipline, or the amount of discipline you have to put on yourself to be able to be creative. I am



the sort of person who believes in freedom, you know. And for Matthew, he believes in resistance. He says if you put discipline on yourself, you will be free and I'm like "Oh no, no, no..."

Of course we are both right, it's not that one is true and the other is false, it's just two ways of approaching the same thing.

D : Don't you think the concepts of "freedom" and "restraint" have assumed new meanings since 9/11?

B : You could even say the film is loaded with all this war business and the US and us living in New York. It means certain things for me and Matthew has to listen to my point of view which is difficult: a European telling the US that they're fucking up right now, that it's no fun. So maybe the film is about the point of view of the rest of the world versus the American view of the world. I'm sorry I cannot answer in one specific way but it's because the nature of his work is so layered. If you were to ask Matthew [what the film means to him], he would say something completely different. I do think that the film is about freedom.

D : Do you think the role of the American artist has changed also in this new world order?

B : I feel for artists from the US: you are born and you are young but still you have to answer for nuclear bombs and starvation in the rest of the world. It's like I don't have to answer for any of these things. I mean, in Iceland, we don't even

have an army so our international affairs are not very complicated there are, like, none. The worst thing I can be is being a pixie from Iceland.

[In this way] I think it was very appropriate that Will Oldham opens a movie for Matthew Barney. He has a lot of things in common with Matthew: he is a young American artist that is carrying all these problems that being an artist from the US has. But they refuse to take on this American macho image and want to find something else which is more poetic. It is complicated and both of them have dealt with it in a very graceful way of not taking on all this guilt.

D : I've heard this project was intense in terms of the time limit it had to be produced within...

B : This project was very hard because we had six months to do two hours of music, which for me is a record because it usually takes me two years to do 40 minutes so this was like doing three albums in six months. So I was working like six or seven days a week which I don't believe in. With my hand on my heart, I don't think I believe in it because you start slowly not having a life and how can you write something that's alive if you don't have a life.

D : How do you manage this both as a female artist and mother?

B : I always believed, maybe as a woman, that you cannot just shut life down so as to do some project because that approach is anti-life. I've always had a baby, I've always had friends, I always cooked and then I also wrote songs

and it's all together. However, I think this project was different because usually I believe my work is intertwined with my life.

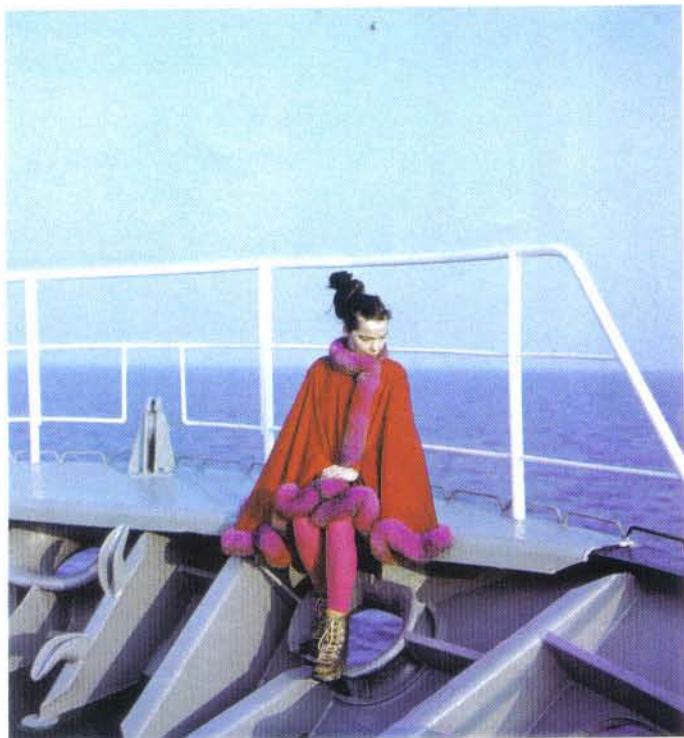
D : Do you find that changing your working conditions or rhythm like this maybe enables you to discover new things artistically?

B : I think it's okay as an exception and it was a great test for me, just to see how far I can push myself. It was very interesting not having the usual editing process: you just write something and that's it, onto the next piece. And actually, by knowing you can't edit it, you have to give everything. You cannot just do something and then think: "Oh I'll look at it in three weeks and see if it's ok." None of this. It's closer to the energy of when you are doing live concerts but instead you're writing, on the spot.

D : Maybe this could be a new methodology for you?!

B : I don't think I want to do my next record like this. I think I could do this because I hadn't done this for ten years before and it's just one project and it has been fruitful. I know the next project I do will be more integrated in my life, maybe five days a week like normal people (laughs) not seven at like 12 hours a day or something. But it's fun. It is fun but it becomes very fanatical. I think it's an easy drug. Sometimes it's good to be in high-pressure/emergency situations because something comes out that wouldn't come out in a cozy corner after a cozy meal.





D : How about Matthew's artistic approach?

B : Matthew's work is never just one narrative but like 50 narratives together and it's kind of layered. And that's why everyone gets a different story from his movies.

Matthew is very submarine, very subconscious and most of the things – I am very open emotionally so I sort of know why I do certain things – he never knows. It's all very submarine. So I think there are a lot of connections he may not even be aware of but there are connections [there for me].

D : I guess your being partners in life greatly influenced your work together on this project...

B : One of the reasons I said yes to this project was because I knew there were a lot of 'seeds' that had been planted over the last five years [with Matthew] that were ready there for me [when I started work on this project]. A lot of things [in *Drawing Restraint 9*] started to grow along time ago. That's one of the reasons why I could do this. I mean for example, I live by the ocean in Iceland with all these ships outside my window and Matthew knows I would like to write a 'ship sym-

phony' or whatever or a mini-symphony, like ten minutes. So there is always a seed there and he comes to me and says "the hunter vessel - the ships" and I go and do it and it is not something I just thought of that day, you know it's a few years old.

D : What are you turning your hand to next?

B : I think part of me is excited about doing music that's about music. There has been a lot of visual arts in my life last year and I think visual arts is great but it's very much the eye, the eye, the eye and one of the reasons I like music is because it's all the other things, you know. And I think really, right now, I'm ready for all the other things. But I enjoy it too like when I was a teenager, everybody I knew were poets and they were getting drunk and arguing and screaming out bad poetry at each other and I was sitting there just (folds arms and assumes vacant expression) and then I would go home and write a song, you know? It's kind of fun too, to be in an environment that is different to your head because it is not so literal. It's like you are eating your own tail if you are talking about music and you write music, it becomes very claustrophobic.

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The Film: *Drawing Restraint 9*

Japanese-American Relations

Drawing Restraint 9 touches on many things including Japanese-American international relations since WWII, whaling, petroleum-based energy, American imperialism, evolution, artistic energy, creative restraint and ideological, artistic and biological transmutation.

The film begins with a procession at a Japanese oil refinery, where a tanker truck, loaded with hot petroleum jelly, is paraded from the factory gates down to the local harbor. The tanker is led by oxen, horses, deer, and wild boar and is accompanied by hundreds of locals as it arrives at an enormous factory whaling ship. The hot petroleum jelly is then pumped into a massive, open mold on deck. The ship departs, headed for the Antarctic, and over weeks the mass of petroleum jelly cools forming a sculpture in the mould. "One of the main stars of the movie, of course, in a Matthew Barney movie, is a piece of sculpture, not an actor," explains Björk. Whale processing methods and tools are used to facilitate the creation of this sculpture. The action and metamorphosis occurs on a vessel which is in movement itself but which is surrounded and framed by the ocean. "I was trying to represent the ocean with a voice and with a female voice, which I think the ocean is [female]," explains Björk. "Matthew was thinking about the whaling ship, about the sculpture, about the construction of a sculpture and yet all around it is the ocean so it is framing his work, without interfering."

"Guests' Score"

This is a film with almost no dialogue [the "Guests" utter some sentences to each other] and so the concerns and issues of the film are conveyed through imagery, recognisable mythological tropes and extra-diegetic elements such as Björk's score. The exposition, for example is almost entirely owed to the first song where the American singer Will Oldham sings the words of a 1946 letter from a Nagasaki native, thanking General McArthur for his lifting of the ban on whaling so as to relieve the hardship experienced in the area since the US dropped the atomic bomb.

The arrival of two occidental "Guests" (Barney and Björk) on the ship signals a turn in the story where the sculpture is de-molded, (the resistance is removed) and its collapses. It is cut up and thrown in the ship's engine, melting the petroleum jelly which floods the cabin in which the "Guests" are becoming intimate. They enact a ritualistic cutting off of limbs sprouting whale tails and fins. All the while, the "Guests" are being progressively engulfed in the amniotic-like liquid vaseline. Their metamorphosis completes when they become whales and swim towards the Antarctic.