BARRY X BALL

To fully experience the art in Barry X Ball's recent sculptures, one has first to overcome, in an initiatory trial, the demons of a technology which is declared: *a)* In the materials: an artificial marble patterned in alternating white and black layers/bands (a quotation of classical tradition inside an act of advanced industrial production); a grid of rods and cables in stainless steel which keep abstract and hermetic the blocks of fictional architecture suspended in air through a feat of acrobatic engineering. *b)* In the forms: complicatedly carved, almost ungraspable structures of conceptualized matter, defying gravity by their soaring upward. *c)* In the idea moving the work: stop remembering the future of sculpture since we no longer even know how to invent its past. Ball's pieces neither evoke socialized spaces nor represent types of object-making, of object-being; on the contrary, they seem to defy and obliterate Memory by bluntly denying any specific reference to used things, historical loci, or symbolically charged media. It's precisely the naked process of representing and fetishizing technology that deceptively arises in his sculptures as the initial form confronting the viewer. Until, moving around the pieces, one starts to notice that the perverted, obverted geometry at work in them destabilizes any technological self-absorption; that whatever fetishization of process or material rules here is, in fact, the mark of an intellectual obsession, of a quasi-mystical abandonment to both the inscrutable numerology governing the secret relations between shape and weight, between measure and structure, and the unmanifest analogy linking coveted archetypes of sculptural architecture to recovered types of architectural sculpture. One of the most significant innovations of Andre, Judd, Morris, Flavin's sculpture consisted, indeed, in their works' diverse relationship with architecture. The floor and the wall became essential support/context, the locus of sculpture was no longer an idealized ground set aside for pure contemplation, but the physical event of an inhabited architecture. Sculpture went from being *decoration* to being essential *furnishing*, defining the surrounding space as all but inseparable from the works' geometric volumes. The very materials of sculpture—

wood, iron, copper, steel, plastic, neon—appeared to be an extension of, or to aspire to a symbiosis with, architecture. Rachel Whiteread seems to be now striving toward a further socialization, or internalization, of this symbiosis by creating sculpture from what are the actual furnishings of an inhabited architecture. Conversely, advanced architecture tends today to increasingly embrace the linearity, volumetric flexibility, and look, sometimes even the aesthetic parameters, of Minimalist sculpture. Going a step farther, Ball's new work literally hooks the basic elements of architecture (floor, wall, ceiling) to sculpture by suspending his machinery of steel cables and rods. While the suspension in space of cube-derived isometric and hypergeometric forms allows an in-a-round perception/view of the massive block floating in mid-air, however, this block nonetheless obliquely harks back to classical statuary.

Ball's striped blocks are designed and modeled on a Computer-Assisted Drafting system; but that's just the initial technological medium that informs the work's message. All pieces are built out of layered, ¾"-thick sheets of alternating black and white Corian, a composite solid surfacing made of epoxy, polyester resin, and inert fillers that looks very much like marble, a marble of pure black or pure white, perfectly identical in all its parts, a perfected marble, in a sense, with a stronger molecular density than its natural counterpart, that can therefore be attacked only by a high-powered machine. The sheets are laminated layer-by-layer with cyanoacrylate (also known as Krazy Glue) to form massive long, cubical units which are carved according to each CAD model on a computer-controlled milling machine and finished by hand. The black-and-white striping carries of course multiple connotations, ranging from the Romanesque or Gothic façades of medieval Italian churches (most notably the interior of the Siena's Duomo) to the optically charged paintings of Bridget Riley and Ross Bleckner. Optical complexity and architectural analogy obviously play an important role in Ball's sculptures, but the specific referencing of archetypal, religious buildings internally connects many of his Corian pieces from the last five years to the Sacred Imaging alluded to in the gold-leaf surfaces of his works from the early 1980s with their empathetic pointing to the intensity of meaning conveyed by Byzantine

painting and Russian icons. The blocks shaped by computerized carving are kept suspended in mid-air from floor-to-ceiling stainless-steel cables grafted onto solid steel rods strategically inserted at the end and in the middle of the solid masses of Corian. Only *Sculpture 2*, the first of this cable-supported group, has a side propped against the wall. Together with the religious and architectural memory encoded in the sculptures, the aerial grid which is created by the cables, rods, and indented volumes—whose design and shape may change from one side to another—further points to a multilayered typology of bisexed, obsessed, and compacted architextures marked by an avidly post-minimalist, consistently connoted by high-technology, program. The black-and-white striping and checkering also recalls, not incidentally, the white *omophorion*, covered with a patterned design of black crosses and open squares, worn by the Saints in many Greek and Russian icons. ill. 46

In *Sculpture 2* (1995), the first piece in which Ball looked for ways to make sculpture independent from the support of the wall without resorting to the support of the floor, and introduced therefore floor-to-ceiling cables as a novel structure to generate freedom of volume in space, that process is just beginning. Two long, symmetrical blocks of striped, synthetic marble are propped on one end against the wall, just like Judd's stacked-up steel-and-plexiglass boxes, but on the opposite end are kept perpendicular to the wall by a cable which, hooked to both floor and ceiling, neutralizes the force of gravity of the piece's solid, rectangular cubes by holding them straight through metal rods inserted on their top and bottom sides. The rods are a technological device not only allowing the cables to hold in place the two blocks of Corian, but also ensuring that the sculpted forms remain open to a full perception of their perfect, golden geometry.

The block of *Sculpture 6* (1996), while completely freed from any symbiotic relationship to the wall by being held suspended in mid-air by four floor-to-ceiling cables attached to rods placed at the four ends of its longitudinal mass, is also carved in a particular way on its parallel sides so that only the faces that are opposite to each other are similar: the longer, vertical ones present a checkered surface; the two short ones, where the rods are inserted, show a heraldry of diagonal strips;

and finally the top and bottom ones are shaped like *X*s. The surfaces of all faces are though equally jagged, for the block had been rotated around its axis while being geometrically carved in order to obtain a series of stepped planes. It would seem then appropriate that Ball might have wanted to fuse the two opposite modes of making sculpture posited by Michelangelo, for whom *pure sculpture* was obtained by force of subtraction while sculpture done by adding-on resembles painting. Both pictorial and sculptural effects are in fact sought by Ball, not only in order to invest his project with "complexity and contradiction," but also because conceptually he has tended to compose sculpture as an intermediate form between painting and architecture. In *Sculpture 10/11* (1997), two different blocks are used to create a vertical image that, when looked at from two of its sides, appears to have the shape of a vertical double diamond; looked at, instead, from the other two sides, it has the shape of a full diamond in its middle and two half-diamonds below and above it. Four cables, again, hold the piece suspended in space, but rather than being parallel, as in *Sculpture 6*, they are here perpendicular to each other, with three rods coming out of the block at the top, center, and bottom of the side forming the two full diamonds, and two rods only—in correspondence to the top and bottom pyramidal points of the central full diamond—on the side adjacent to it. This shifting of geometry from one side to another evokes the visual movement a viewer has to make when confronting Bernini's *colonne tortili* in Saint Peter's in Rome (afterward imitated in countless Baroque churches), but also quotes the "spiral expansion" and "development in space" of Boccioni's "plastic ensembles." As religious architecture and futurist sculpture keep emerging as a constantly referenced subtext in Ball's work, at the same time the optical multiversity arising from his strenuous, perfectionist, high-tech belaboring of blocks of striped Corian points to an incessant quest for a most uncanny combination of technology and mysticism. One might be tempted to call it a transcendentalist technosophy. ill. 47

19 April 1997

Sculpture in contemporary American (but also European and Asian) art, unlike painting, has not had a master narrative (Pollock/Newman, Burri/Manzoni, Johns/Warhol-like) to which to anchor its leaps and bounds, unless one tries (it should not be too hard) to find it in Duchamp's readymades, eventually assisted and rectified in their (r)evolution by the intensely iconographic assemblage of *Étant donnés: 1° la chute d'eau, 2° le gaz d'éclairage* (1946-1966). In their most recent and radical instances, American sculptural modes have coalesced at the intersection—or rather the synthesis—of three *signs* or conveyors of meaning: a socially charged object or figure, an idiosyncratic material, and a surface carrying the inscription of an individual sensibility or ideology. These signs are meant to draw attention to a particular sculptor's style of subjectivity. A work also constitutes the artist's response to the task of confronting the spectator with an experience of the physical/conceptual world in which they are both living. Koons has constructed and deconstructed objects, icons, specimens of mass consumption, each time inventing for them a shiny, hyperchromatic, symptomatic skin, made of plexiglass, painted wood, mirror, porcelain, stainless steel: all heightened surfaces that push the mimetic image over the top of consumer desire, revealing, naming, deflating, challenging viewers' expectations of an aesthetic Ideal with its lowest denominator, a *negative* or inverted sublime. Gober's early wooden beds, doors, playpens, cribs, or plaster sinks and urinals, wore a uniformly dull, low-pitch, semi-evocative, creamy enamel surface, a skin of dilapidated memory appealing to a low enough register of psychological involvement on the part of the viewer. His subsequent works instead directly inscribe the human figure: male legs, butts, and torsos realistically cast in ivory wax and hyperrealistically emphasizing hairiness. These body parts, sometimes wearing shoes, socks, worn-out pants, occasionally implanted with candles or metal sink drains, often come off or lean against the gallery wall as if forever outcast. They do imply homelessness of the body in both the art and the human domain, becoming plastic metaphors of a broken, divided, spatial, or

social environment. The chrome plating's industrial brightness of car parts, beer cans, metal baskets, fences, posts, of handcuffs, pipes, of all sorts of recognizably mass-produced, socially iconic objects scrapped into a living junkness, is the signature surface of Cady Noland's post-tribal accumulations, which she has also repeated in fabricated pieces consisting either of large aluminum sheets imprinted with newspaper photos and texts and usually set leaning on the gallery walls, or of metallic forms built according to her specifications. Finally, the gray surface, greasy texture, light materiality, Vaseline look of the petroleum-jelly structures of Matthew Barney (whose portrait is the underlying myth, the subtext of Barry X Ball's most recent work) have taken on the role of producers of this artist's formal identity. Even in his photographic pieces, made of selected images from his films, the round-cornered, jelly-like, self-lubricating acrylic frame constitutes the *work* that gives them the attribute of *art* and makes them a distinctive part of his canon.

Belgian black marble, Italian alabaster, Portuguese gold marble, Mexican onyx are the high-grade stone elements—impaled by a stepped column of polished stainless steel—from which Barry X Ball has carved, between 2000 and 2003, a small group of highbrow portraits (a collector, a photographer, a painter, a sculptor). He thus continues the modality of casting social content, idiolectic material, signifying surface as the three distinctive, interlocking characters of contemporary sculpture. Ball's earlier abstract pieces, with their layering of alternate, black-and-white slabs of marble-like Corian—which clearly referenced the striped façades of Tuscan Romanesque churches—were already marked by a post-Minimalist mood. His most recent work is decidedly looking to, and even openly appropriative of, art-historical archetypal carving, stepping out of the Duchampian and Beuysian traditions of recontextualizing icons and detritus of the post-industrial consumer/consumed society, and positing the Baroque instead as a style of adventurous, even adventurist, subversion of established histories, available for being paraphrased by, maybe already a paraphrasis of, the Digital Age. To start with, Ball's new work focuses on representations of the human head as against, and not by chance, Gober's insistent presentation of the lower half of

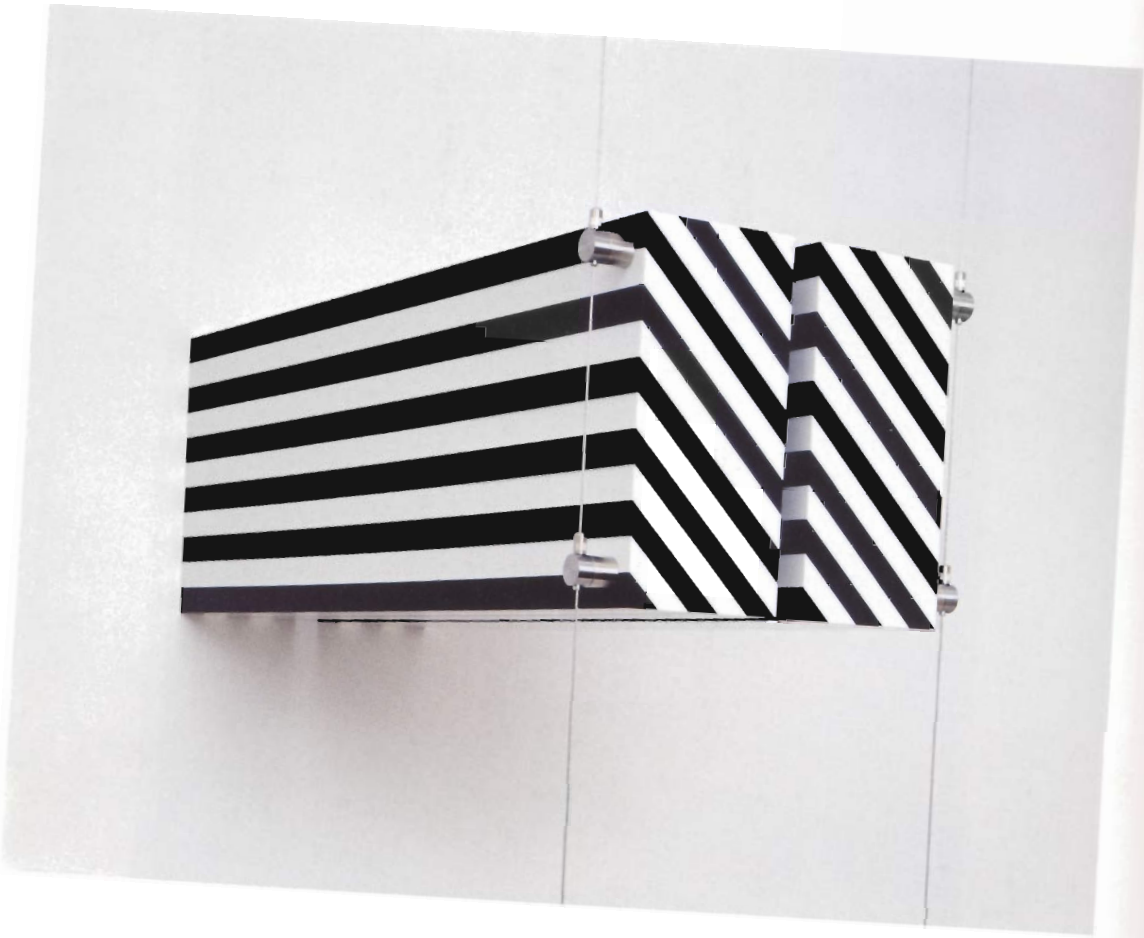
the human body. Such heads inscribe the social world that is the artist's familiar context, the society producer and consumer of material and conceptual objects, that thus provides a referent for a type of art that maintains the fragmented and signifying body, if still in a mirror stage, at the center of its theme. The Baroque interrogation in Ball's portraits, which are indeed studies in invented character: expressivist modulations in stone and a quest for sublime surfaces—they strongly recall the *Physiognomic Heads* of the eighteenth-century Austrian sculptor, Franz Xaver Messerschmidt—emerges initially from how the marble's skin evolves into pictorial color and light, with the imperfections of its texture explicitly made into components of meaning. Ball's hyperworked images are molded into excessive representations, courtesy as we said of the Digital Revolution. Just as in painting, the use of photographic sources and computer imaging conceptually translates here subjectivity from the artist's craft into the collective superconscious of the media. Ball *photographs* his sitters by making a cast of their head and neck so he can have a pre-constructed, unsubjective presentation of a socially charged content. After some initial refinements and further alterations of the positive plaster cast, the model is then digitized with a 3D laser scanner. The digital file is in turn converted to machine language so that it can be milled in marble on computer-controlled stone-carving lathes. Once the sculpture has been removed from the machine, the artist brings it to completion by carving by hand the details and polishing the stone. In between the machine's laboratorial shapings of the piece, the head undergoes further, radical changes that transform its former and formal reality into the art's hyperreality.

(Matthew Barney) is a cast of the artist Matthew Barney's bust converted into an archetypal image of saint/martyr by being impaled on a 69-inch golden shaft (a stainless-steel spike plated in 24K gold): an (im)probable allusion to the strenuous physical exertions this sculptor endures in his performances. The sharply pointed shaft in penetrating the head from below and coming off its top almost like a bullet (Ball has lingered on a detailed rendition of the spike's exit hole as it breaks the head's vessel) might, with its goldenness, even carry a suggestion of mystic/erotic lacerations, since ill. 48, 49

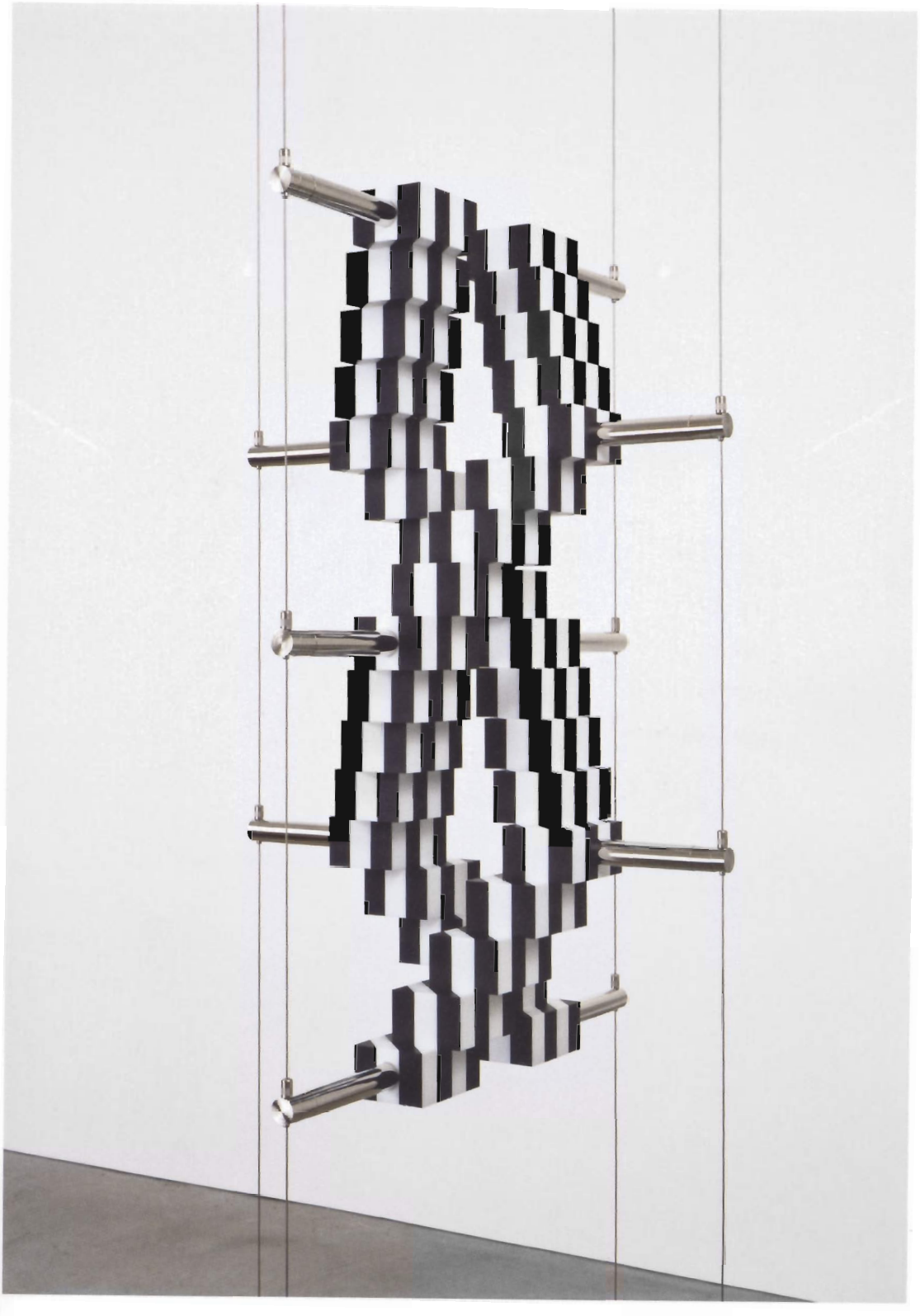
a source for the pen(as in *pen*is)etration had been the Angel's golden arrow aiming to enter the nun's richly draped, levitating body in Bernini's *Ecstasy of Saint Theresa* (in the church of Santa Maria della Vittoria in Rome.) A further Baroque, if also obliquely tribal, intensification of the martyred portrait is conveyed by the patterned relief decoration covering the head and the neck's lacerated flesh of the art warrior. This was another step toward the sculpture's full immersion in art-historical waters, for the lace-like ornamentation etched in Barney's features had been digitally lifted from an embossed Victorian pattern. The inscription of martyrdom in *(Matthew Barney)* is most clearly legible in the flesh hanging from its freshly butchered neck—an image harking back to Michelangelo's (presumed) self-portrait as the flayed head of St. Bartholomew raised by the apostle himself in the Sistine Chapel's *Last Judgement*—and in the various wounds inflicted to its figure by the reddish/brown fissures and cavities naturally formed in the onyx's translucent, tawny ivory. *(Matthew Barney)*'s suspended subjectivity is also connoted by its theatrical installation (which possibly infers, since this is after all a portrait of the artist as a young martyr, the theatricality of the *Cremasters*' images in movement). The head is, in fact, kept floating, almost levitating in space by a curving funnel, a conical array of thirty-two superthin, stainless-steel cables whose configuration is meant to produce a Brooklyn-Bridge effect (but the funnel quotes the pendentive fan vaulting of Henry VII's Chapel at Westminster Abbey). The cables, threaded as in a giant needle on the top section of the spike plated in metaphysical gold, have the head/shaft assembly hanging from a layered, stepped construction of decorative roundels, approximately measuring 10×10 feet. The virtual ceiling, which belongs to the sculpture not to the room where it's installed, extends the portrait's sculpturality into an architectural fiction. Its model, reenacted here once more with a Baroque twist, lies in the grid of futuristic capitals that culminate the lily-pad columns in Frank Lloyd Wright's Johnson Wax Building in Racine, Wisconsin. This fictional ceiling is made of a star-like configuration of twenty-four white-painted, polyurethane decorative medallions gradually decreasing in diameter, arranged in eight radiating beams and anchored at the center by a

much larger medallion sporting four angel heads. The entire assemblage is attached to the room's ceiling by a hidden structure of wooden posts and discs, with the sculptural installation occupying an imaginary 10×10×10-feet cube, and virtually creating a three-dimensional, secular tabernacle for an art incessantly recreating its own religion.

7 November 2003



46. **Barry X Ball**, *Sculpture 2*, 1995



47 **Barry X Ball**, *Sculpture 10/11*, 1996-1997

48. **Barry X Ball**, *(Matthew Barney)*, installation view, 2000-2003

49. **Barry X Ball**, *(Matthew Barney)*, detail, 2000-2003