

MATTHEW BARNEY
RIVER OF FUNDAMENT

By
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With contributions by
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RIVER OF FUNDAMENT, a film-opera

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Music composed and directed by
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Produced by
MATTHEW BARNEY and LAURENZ FOUNDATION

Director of photography
PETER STRIETMANN

SYNOPSIS

Set across the American landscape, *River of Fundament* is an epic story of regeneration and rebirth, inspired by Norman Mailer's 1983 novel *Ancient Evenings*.

Mailer's protagonist, the ancient Egyptian nobleman Menenhetet I, is replaced with the figure of the author himself, and his progress models that described in *Ancient Evenings*: like Menenhetet, Norman seeks reincarnation three times in the hope of achieving immortality; like Menenhetet, he impregnates his granddaughter Hathfertiti three times; and like Menenhetet, he embarks on a journey through the underworld on the path to reincarnation, which culminates in crossing the river of excrement that is the soul's final obstacle to rebirth. This narrative unfolds through two alternating story lines: Mailer's wake and a series of three live actions filmed in Los Angeles, Detroit, and New York, each of which recounts the myth of Osiris and Isis via the destruction and reincarnation of an American automobile.

The book is divided into chapters, each corresponding to one of the seven stages set out in ancient Egyptian lore that the soul undergoes in its journey towards new life. Each chapter weaves together storyboards, excerpts from the libretto and musical score, film and live-action stills, key drawings, and in-situ documentation of the sculpture cycle at Haus der Kunst. Separately conceived and formatted playbills for the three live actions *Ren*, *Khu*, and *Ba* are included.

I
OVERTURE 21–30

The *ka* spirit of Norman (the Apprentice) ascends from the underworld—he enters the house of Norman Mailer where preparations for Mailer’s wake are underway—he summons the spirit of the Pharaoh Usermare—Usermare sodomizes the *ka* of Norman—the female *ka* spirit of Norman (the Novice) performs a sacrificial rite.

II
THE WAKE OF NORMAN MAILER 31–46

Guests gather for the wake at Mailer’s house—reigning Pharaoh Ptah-nem-Hotep is among them—a eulogy and toast are given and music is performed as guests, family, and the invisible undead interact.

III
REN (Secret Name) 47–80

Los Angeles, May 17, 2008. Playbill texts by Neville Wakefield and Zach Baron. A ritual at a Chrysler dealership yard in Los Angeles—a musical procession accompanies a 1967 Chrysler Imperial (the spirit of Norman I/Osiris) to the showroom, the place of execution.

IV
SEKHEM (Mobility) 81–106

The wake feast begins—the secret name of Norman is revealed and the spirit of Norman I arrives from the underworld—Ptah-nem-Hotep shows Norman I his throne room and they exchange commonalities—with the help of the girl Hathferti, Norman I descends to the underworld to prepare for reincarnation.

V
KHU (Light) 107–138

Detroit, October 2, 2010. Playbill texts by Rebecca Ruth Hart, Angus Cook, and Shane Anderson. A ritual in the industrial district of Detroit by the River Rouge—the spirit of Norman II is embodied by a Pontiac Trans Am—the myth of Isis and Osiris is enacted by the *ka* spirits of Norman in the double roles of Isis and Osiris—Set binds and locks Osiris into the car, which plunges into the river—Isis and Nephthys recover the body from the river—Isis is impregnated before Osiris’s automotive corpse is cut into pieces by the enraged Set and fed into a massive furnace—the molten car body is formed into a massive iron pillar.

VI
KA (Double) 139–162

In the underworld, Norman II is born—he ascends to the wake—the woman Hathferti welcomes him—some guests leave, the mood turns darker and the undead sport—Nephthys and Set enact their domestic conflict—confrontation between Usermare and Hathferti, who reveals herself as his daughter—the Pontiac Trans Am surfaces in an industrial canal in New York—inside it Isis gives birth to Osiris’s son Horus.

VII
BA (Heart) 163–194

Brooklyn, New York, June 29, 2013. Playbill texts by Sean Campbell and Ross Simonini. A ritual at a dry dock at the Brooklyn Navy Yard—Horus and Set vie for the throne—a simultaneous battle ensues at the taxi garage—a crown is fashioned from the grille of the Ford Crown Victoria Police Interceptor in preparation for the coronation of a new king—Usermare holds court at Mailer’s house and Horus and Set are judged—Horus emerges victorious.

VIII
KHAIBIT (Memory) 195–216

The elderly Hathferti is coming to the end of her life, having assisted Norman II towards his next rebirth—she rejects Usermare’s admonishments again and dies in her sleep—Norman III emerges on the upper floor of the Mailer house—he attempts rebirth but without Hathferti he is trapped—the lineage of Norman ends—without their charge, the *ka* spirits leave the house and return to the underworld.

IX
SEKHU (Remains) 217–226

Sawtooth Mountain Range in Idaho—the cabin of Ernest Hemingway on Redfish Lake—sockeye salmon make their way to their spawning grounds on the River of No Return—the cycle of death and life continues.

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