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Author
Doyle, J

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Media and Desire in the Sport Spectacle

Jennifer Doyle

Soccer (2004) is an atypical sports text. The video installation features Wu Ingrid Tsang and Math Bass performing as the queer collaborative couple Marriage. Dressed in purple satin body suits with pads slipped over their knees and elbows, Tsang and Bass run in place while they rehearse the basic gestures that define soccer training. In this short video (the first of their Fortuneatre Living trilogy), the two look like aliens belonging to a third or forth sex. Should we see them as boyish girls? Girlish boys? They have the unapologetic and insouciant sexual presence peculiar to the teenager: an inherently queer failure to aspire to "adult" sexuality. They run in place and sweep the ground with their feet and to their right as they shout, "Touch left!" and "Touch right!" They jump in the air and jerk their heads as they shout, "Head left!" and "Head right!" They each awkwardly jugggle a ball with their feet, knees, and shoulders. They kick the ball against the wall. Sometimes they just sit. Or stretch. Or catch their breath. One seems slightly more competent than the other, but both seem unsure. They are clumsy, goofy, and shy in relation to each other—ill at ease, too, in and of themselves. They are sweet, and weird.

This weekly choreographed, lo-fi, and oddball work gestures toward the specifically queer nature of the girls sports team—and toward what Judith Halberstam describes as the "utopian vision of a world of subcultural possibilities" associated with transgender experiments in gender ambiguity. That utopian impulse registers on the screen, though, in a gesture—in a shy look, a stolen glance, and a slight discomfort with being caught in this setting, in which the two are both perpetually together and not. An odd tenderness develops between the two "players" as they rehearse these routines together, moving in parallel lines toward some form of unspoken intimacy. If I describe this work as queer, it is neither because it depicts girls wanting to be boys (they are far too gender ambiguous to be that for the viewer) nor because it shows two girls together (they are "together," but they do not exactly interact with each other—they are not quite a romantic couple). It is more nearly because it playfully draws out the erotics specific to queer fantasies about what it means to play together—and what it means to play together as boys.

Soccer is a half-baked dream, an incomplete sentence, a desire not quite formed but nevertheless traced across the field of vision. This is what makes it feel "queer"—if as José Muñoz writes, "queerness is essentially a rejection of a here and now and an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility in another world," then that queerness registers as a gesture, as "that thing that lets us feel that this world is not enough, that indeed something is missing." Soccer refuses to offer the basic elements demanded of the sports text: there is no victory; there is no competition; there is no game; there is no audience.

This essay considers the intersection of gender, mediation, and sport in a handful of works by contemporary artists. It was written to address a negative space. When asked to speak at an exhibit centering on masculinity and sport in contemporary art, I found myself disturbed by the absence of images of female athletes from the exhibit (or, however, include work by female artists). Surveying contemporary art overly engaged with sport, I found a dramatic difference between the amount and the formal character of work featuring images of women engaged in sport—this essay represents the beginning of an attempt to figure out why this is so.

On one level the answer is simple: many of the most high-profile works engaged with sports are less interested in sport, or the athlete, than they are in the spectacle of sport. Harun Farocki's Deep Play (2007) and Douglas Gordon and
Philippe Parreno’s *Zidane: A 21st Century Portrait* (2006), for example, centers on our romance with the technology of the sport broadcast. The media spectacle of men’s sports is overwhelming in both its volume and its complexity. In especially televised sports spectacles, media itself becomes the platform through which the spectator experiences his passion for the sport. Glossy production, rapid edits, dynamic graphics, and elaborate sound effects theatricalize spectatorship in terms of technology and, implicitly, gender. Statistical forms of analysis turn bodies into arrows, diagrams, and numbers. The distance between the visual experience of watching an NBA broadcast and the visual geometry of a game like *Madden NFL* decreases with each revolution in product development (moving now toward 3-D). Such technological rituals organize an enormous amount of attention and desire around the male athlete’s body for the pleasures of the presumed male spectator/consumer. “Technology itself operates as an ally for the homosociality of men’s sports by making subjective pleasure look and feel like objective facts, by rendering a desire for proximity into a need for accuracy.” Parreno’s twelve-channel installation *Deep Play* submerges the spectator in a room full of visual data—all culled from the 2006 FIFA World Cup final. Lines move across one screen, tracking the offensive position, another channel tracks each player’s movement across the field; one screen camera is trained on the French national team’s bench, another on that of their Italian opponents. We have an external shot of the stadium over the duration of the match and even a security camera’s view of the parking garage. The work eschews cut to the unconscious embedded in the sport spectacle—a paranoid demand for more information, for more detailed tracking of the body, for more accurate forms of measurement.

Elaborate protocols of reading and viewing manage how we see and experience these scenes of intimacy and belonging. Gordon and Parreno’s *Zidane: A 21st Century Portrait* is perhaps the most perfect expression of the collision of intimacy and publicity in the sport spectacle. Multiple cameras reproduce for us the experience of being company with the athlete in the middle of the arena. The film exploits what Eve Sedgwick calls the “privilege of unknowing,” which allows us all to lurking in the spectacle of Zidane’s athleticism without, however, considering what it is that we are doing as we gaze upon the crowd of Zidane’s tech, as we admire the sweaty sheen of his skin, or as we contemplate the sublimity of the athlete’s weathered face.” Take artist historian Michael Fried’s remarkable appreciation of Zidane’s total absorption in the game:

Indeed, Zidane’s dazzling and unerring footwork, his astonishing control of the ball, his instantaneous decision making—all exemplify his seemingly unerring focus on the game even as they combine to keep the viewer perceptually on edge, as does the sheer violence of his high-speed physical encounters with rival players as they try to strip him of the ball and vice versa. . . . Another factor: in this is Zidane’s physiognomy, not just its leanness and toughness, but also the grace and acrobatic skill he brings to his body, his mastery of the ball, his ability to control events on the field, his absolute command over the ball, his ability to dictate the pace of the game, his power and strength. . . . Zidane is a true artist, a true master of the game, a true artist at work, a true artist at play, a true artist at rest. . . . Zidane is a true artist, a true master of the game, a true artist at work, a true artist at play, a true artist at rest. . . .

Gordon and Parreno’s film is an intricately choreographed ballet of admiration and disavowal. This beautiful portrait reaches toward something like the experience of keeping company with Zidane while he plays this match, but it is also a deep meditation on how Zidane is visibly “produced” as a spectacle by cameras, by radio, and by television broadcasts. It is marked by a nearly painful awareness of the fact that it is hard to see through the spectacle of the game (the moodiness of the film is amplified by Mogway’s deeply melancholic sound track). As we watch Zidane move around the field in the early minutes of the film (and the game) his thoughts stretch across the screen. The player recalls his boyhood attraction to evening football telecasts:

As a child, I had running commentary in my head when I was playing. It wasn’t really my own voice. It was the voice of Peter Cugilis, a television analyst from the 80s. Every time I heard his voice, I would run towards the TV as close as I could get, for as long as I could. It wasn’t that his words were so important. But the tone, the accent, the atmosphere, was everything.

Even Zidane’s primal scene, in other words, is not the sensual immediacy of the action on field but the intimacy of the television broadcast. Zidane takes not desire as its subject but the mediation of desire—not our desire for the man but our desire for the image of the man. Zidane explains, “I love the idea of transmitting the image of the player, of this guy on the field that brings happiness to those watching at home.” When he plays now for the camera, he knows he is on that screen, pulling another little boy toward him. In fact, that little boy is us. Although Zidane clearly cites *Football with my Dad* (1974), Hellmuth Carlisle’s real-time portrait of George Best as he played a Manchester United match against Coventry (a nearly Warholian film in both its simplicity and its eroticism); Zidane’s closest contemporary cousin actually is the YouTube football homage. Hundreds (if not thousands) of homemade compositions see the highlights and lowlights of a player’s career to pop songs. *Zidane: The Emotional Movie*, for example, created by rapidwads/tomzxcv and posted by multiple users on YouTube in 2007, shows clips of Zidane on and off the pitch (many of these are pulled from Gordon’s film).
to the Timbaland/One Republic pop song "Apologize," which then fades into the Sick Puppies song "All the Same." The opening lyrics of that painfully sincere rock ballad are, "I don't mind where you come from, as long as you come to me."

Other Zidane homages draw their music from Coldplay ("Beautiful World"), Madonna ("Love Tried to Welcome Me"), and even the Spice Girls ("Viva Forever"). At last check the video set to Madonna and the Spice Girls had recorded well over 200,000 views each. There seems to be no irony in the use of pop ballads to score these montages. If anything, these songs (culled from European pop radio playlists) are perfect vehicles for communicating the powerful emotions that undergird world soccer culture. These two—\textit{Zidane: A 21st Century Portrait} and \textit{Zidane: The Bトレクション Movie}—are formally linked by their explicit deployment of what James Tobias describes as "the masculinist of time-based media" and by the movement of sentiment along the currents of popular music. But Gordon and Parris's film is a big-budget and highbrow translation of a popular, wildly sentimental, and decidedly lowbrow hobby in which the "art" is produced by the disavowal of the popular.\textsuperscript{10} Zidane elaborates on the spectacle that substitutes for the person to allow for a viewing pleasure that might otherwise be too viscerally queer. In doing so, the film raises the homosocial intensity of football culture by another factor. It repeats it, aestheticizes it, makes it clean, and makes it respectable. Zidane is a successful spectacle (an image in which we are interested, an image for which there is an audience, an image that we feel precession to look at and enjoy)—it is in fact a hyper spectacle in which the thrill of the enjoyment of offer is derived from the awareness that we, as audience, are part of a global spectacle. We are happy spectators to our own spectatorship. Zidane turns homosocial desire into a glowing spectacle.

Women's team sports live in the abject shadow of that world. Women's sports are framed by mainstream media as making a bad spectacle, either via sensationalist stories of female masculinity or via the reproduction of the notion that women's sports are boring. Broadcasts of women's team sports use fewer cameras and little to no graphics, and they are scheduled at less desirable broadcast times, often on floating cable channels that do not appear on digital menus. Audiences are smaller—watching your team from your living room can be doubly isolating when you can see very few people watching them in the stadium. The circulation of what broadcast footage exists is tightly regulated—with so little material out there, the illegal distribution of Olympic soccer matches on YouTube, for example, is easier to police.\textsuperscript{11}

Viral videos about women's sports are less likely to feature the prowess of athletes than they are to humorize or overt misogyny. This was the case for a viral video mocking the idea of a "WNBA Live" video game (WNBA Live is the most popular basketball game series). In the video parody a man in lesbian drag plays as being a WNBA star introducing his bored friends to the new game—an object, outdated, and comically slow-moving "virtual" basketball game in which a lone female stick figure lingers across the scene and makes a bad shot. The player then falls over "injured" when she gets a "heart infection."

"There is, turns out, a whole subgenre of YouTube videos mocking the WNBA—not because the authors of these videos have a problem with the organization but because they can't get over the idea that women play basketball and that there are people who want to watch them. The "WNBA Live" parody has a home on Sports Illustrated's website, where it is posted in their "Hot Clicks" section without critical comment.\textsuperscript{12}

More problematic, in the fall of 2009 ESPN broadcast a story about a "catfight" on a soccer field (a series of unchaste hard fouls in a regional college match, broadcast on a local television channel). ESPN's video went viral and international. Multiple parts of clips from the ESPN story on YouTube have been viewed well over one million times each. Elizabeth Lambert, the college student who was the center of the footage, became an international headline. The story became a media phenomenon and was, by far, the most exposure given to women's soccer in 2009. The referee who failed to discipline her in the game (as was his job) was never named in the media, nor was he sanctioned for letting the game get out of control. It is hard to imagine video footage of a regional men's game in any sport becoming this newsworthy, even if such a game involved clearly violent behavior (soccer players of both sexes sometimes throw punches...
and are normally ejected from the field for doing so). The story was attractive because it fed into the notion that female athletes are female monsters—that the sports in which they participate make them unnaturally violent.

Toby Miller points out that the entry of women into the visual sphere of sports media is fraught with "cosmic gender ambivalence." The becoming visible of the female athlete raises gender and sexuality immediately as problems to be visually managed—on the field, in the visual presentation of the sport, and in the stands. Pat Griffin writes, "Women's presence in sport as serious participants dilutes the importance and exclusivity of sport as a training ground for learning about and accepting male gender roles and the privileges that their adoption confers." Anxiety about the inherent, structural, and defining qualities of especially women's team sports constrains the circulation of images of female athletes in popular media. That constraint plays out on different levels: sports media is always already uninterested in women's sports (having decided it is not appealing to male spectators and consumers), and women athletes themselves have a lot to lose. Marriage plays with this in Soccer: the low-b, DIY aesthetics, their oddity, and their isolation speak to the alienation of female athleticism. But it also suggests that the homosocial space of women's sports is a more generous and more elementally queer one for its "failure" to produce a good media spectacle. Bass and Tsang play, but they aren't playing along.

Artists like Gordon and Farrow collaborate with the sport spectacle. Their works in fact require the full cooperation of the institutions that produced the matches they choose as their respective subjects. Gordon and Ferrone worked with La Liga, Spain's professional league, and Zidane's club, Real Madrid. They had the athletes' full cooperation, as well as that of his teammates. Farrow's project required the cooperation of FIFA (which controls the use of World Cup broadcasts) and the numerous television networks whose feeds he appropriated. These works and others like them extend the sport spectacle into the museum. Work like this can't be made about women's sports. Queer feminist work that takes mainstream sports spectacles as its subject won't be made with the cooperation of sports media. The character and quality of the image, the geographies of desire that connect artist and spectator, are qualitatively different.

The ideological limits that organize and contain mainstream representations of the female athlete body aggressively and ambivalently surface in Stand Tow Ground (2006), Moira Lea's photographic installation of claustrophobic portraits of the women who play for the Doncaster Rovers Belles. The Belles are one of the older women's soccer teams in England. Women working the stands selling programs for the local professional men's team, the Doncaster Rovers, founded the Belles in 1966. In Lea's portraits the contemporary Belles do not meet the camera with the obligatory disarming smile asked of women athletes on those anomalous days when the media takes interest. Nor are these traditional team photos presenting the united front arranged in tidy rows on the pitch, embodying the team's identity en masse. Lea's images are amorous. Each portrait couples a player with the team's coach. Taken as a series, the work seems to manifest the pressure to "straighten" the female athlete out, to reassure the spectator by forcing us to read these women via the mediated presence of the manager. This framing isolates each from the other, triangulating "us and them" through the managerial body. Lea edges the game, too, out of the frame. The athletes are off the field, still in their training outfits, caught in the semiglare, transitional space of the locker room. They are defensive portraits and overly refuse the traditional heroic, action-oriented approach to the athlete. Lea shows us that within this setting and within these subjects, the conditions of possibility for representing feminine and identity are fraught. The installation draws attention to the biggest threat to mainstream visual culture especially posed by women's football: you can't not see lesbians everywhere. The entire composition seems designed to ward off this possibility.

As much as the game is marked in England as a working-class sport, it is even more deeply coded as masculine thanks largely to the English Football Association's fifty-year ban on women from its fields, an act explicitly intended to kill off the popular women's game in the 1990s not only because the women who played it were unseemly—cigarette smoking, swearing, and hard playing (and plainly gay)—but because those women had politically organized to support striking workers. Because of this history and the sports culture that is created, in those countries where women's soccer was in essence outlawed (England, Germany, Spain, and Brazil, for example), one's lot feels like a black leather motorcycle jacket. Even as it signifies membership in a team, a collective identity, it also signals a form of rebellion. Furthermore, when the English FA banned women from its pitches, it also banned male FA members from supporting the women's game as referees, linesmen, etc. The ban was not just an attempt to regulate women footballers out of existence but an attempt to ban the rewriting of men's and women's relationships to each other that women's athleticism invisibly brings about. It was an attempt to undo the queering effects of the women's game on gender and sexuality. The manager's presence in Stand Tow Ground is contradictory—on the surface he seems to ward off the queer reading, but in fact his is a not a traditional masculine presence. Take one of these portraits, and perhaps you see a couple. Look at the installation series, however, and the male body becomes a superfluous and awkward presence. He is not a heterosexual chaperone but a queer collaborator.

The mediocrity of the spectacle of the men's game seems to provide the artist and the fan with a distance that gives him permission to adore his subject. Without that visual archive, without the spectacle of the spectacle filtering us from them, the task of representing the female athlete is more charged and more
move. The spectator is an unwelcome presence in this space, in much the same way that these women are unwelcome within the deeply patriarchal and homo
dephobic spaces of English football. The artist refuses to give us either a moving
image or an image of motion. These women do not have the luxury of disallowing
the camera’s presence and all that it implies. We are intruders, and the Belles
stand in formation against us. It is as if these women are defending their space
of play from the intrusive presence of the camera. These players are not on tele-
vision, not in the newspapers, and not in the movie theaters. And in a way, they
are not here, either, in these photographs of an antiseptic locker room.

The defensiveness of their stance in relation to the camera and the specta-
tor is not incidental to Lovell’s subjects: On January 3, 1995, BBC2 broadcast a
documentary featuring the team. Paul Picton’s The Belles was, in the words of
sports journalist Pete Davies, “a romp; it showed them playing, training, work-
ing, chippings, going tee-shot bowling, winning the FA cup, drinking and dance-
ing with the trophy, getting back to the business in the league the next Sunday
and winning that, too.”21 The women were shown to be rowdy, working class,
and certainly in terms of their relationship to feminism, queer.22 This was too
much for the English Football Association, which sent a strongly worded letter of
reproach to the club. Players who had been on the national team were dropped,
and star forward Gill Coward was stripped of her cap as the national
guard. Davies followed the team for a season and saw firsthand the impact of
the broadcast of this documentary on the team. After that broadcast the club
avoided all contact with the media—Davies described the team as suffering from
a “dread of publicity.”23

In representations of men at play, intensely homoerotic scenes flourish under
our noses, but only with the promise that we do not “see” them. The “obvious-
ess” of the queerness of women playing together means that we are barely allowed
to see them play at all—and given the threat of homophobic retaliation, women
do not necessarily look to the visual field for affirmation. The queer feminist
artists who ventures into this territory must generate a space from which media
has been exiled. Martha Bass and Wu Ling-Chun give us access to that imaginary
space and call it “soccer.” Moira Lovell gives us individual players but tells us that
the team’s field of play is beyond the camera’s reach.

NOTES
1. Judith Halberstam, *Is a Queer Thing and Place Tensegender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New
2. Rico Romain, *Graffiti Chic*: *The Than and These of Queer Fashion* (New York:
3. Hugh Francis *Masculinity and Sport* at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, October
6. That presumption is at odds with market research, as women constitute an increasingly significant percentage of the audience for nearly every major spectator sport.


10. The use of "feminine" genres of music to score heterosexual celebrations of mainstream prominence has become less surprising when one learns that women comprise at least 50 percent of the world's population. See the overview of the sport's "feminine" study in "Female First Can Boost Sponsorship during Cycles," *International Herald Tribune*, January 22, 2005.


12. Tala Badi, in contrast, openly uses popular visual culture in his ledger compilation *Rasasauil*, 2004). Badi directly appropriates clips from a series of viral videos to display his skills. The result is a mind-bending exhibition of Rasasauil's skills and craftsmanship, scored by shimmering retreads of rock, techno, pop, rap, and disco.

13. YouTube videos of the FIFA Women's World Cup and the Olympics are rare. These international competitions are the only events in women's soccer that are broadcast on mainstream network channels and that attract mainstream media attention. FIFA and the networks that contrast with the Olympics aggressively restrict the circulation of match footage.


16. In the summer of 2006, the WNBA's Washington Mystics banned "kissing cards." Kissing cards are objects that patients at baseball and basketball games to broadcast images of kissing couples in the stands. The audiences at WNBA games include many lesbian couples, so such cards would probably catch a kiss between women fans who see them to woman on a team that most likely includes lesbian players. In their statement explaining the ban, the Mystics explained that they didn't consider such displays of lesbian affection appropriate. Mimi Johnson, managing partner for the Mystics, explained to Mike Wise in *Sports Illustrated* that the ban was "just a bit too much." *Washington Post*, July 9, 2006.


18. In contrast, Fred Poulet and French national team player Vahid Djalilov documented the latter's experience in the 2006 World Cup without permission from FIFA or France's football federation. Although he had featured in the team's qualifying matches, he was not included in the World Cup itself—despite the resultant film's title, *Soccer*. Unable to use footage of training or matches, the film shows Djalilov in his hotel room, struggling with his disappointment at being benched. Many suspect Djalilov's participation in this documentary led to his being benched throughout the competition.

19. The English Football Association launched a campaign against homophobia in 2001 with a video that featured not a single player on match footage. The video shows a typical English fan (white, male) watching through his camera, a global hockey arena on the people around him (a newspaper seller, fellow passengers on the train, coworkers). The advertisement's message is, homophobia is acceptable outside the stadium, so it should not be tolerated inside. This ad does nothing, however, to raise awareness of the serious gendered associations of English football with homophobia on a cultural and institutional level—it apparently never occurred to the Football Association's себе