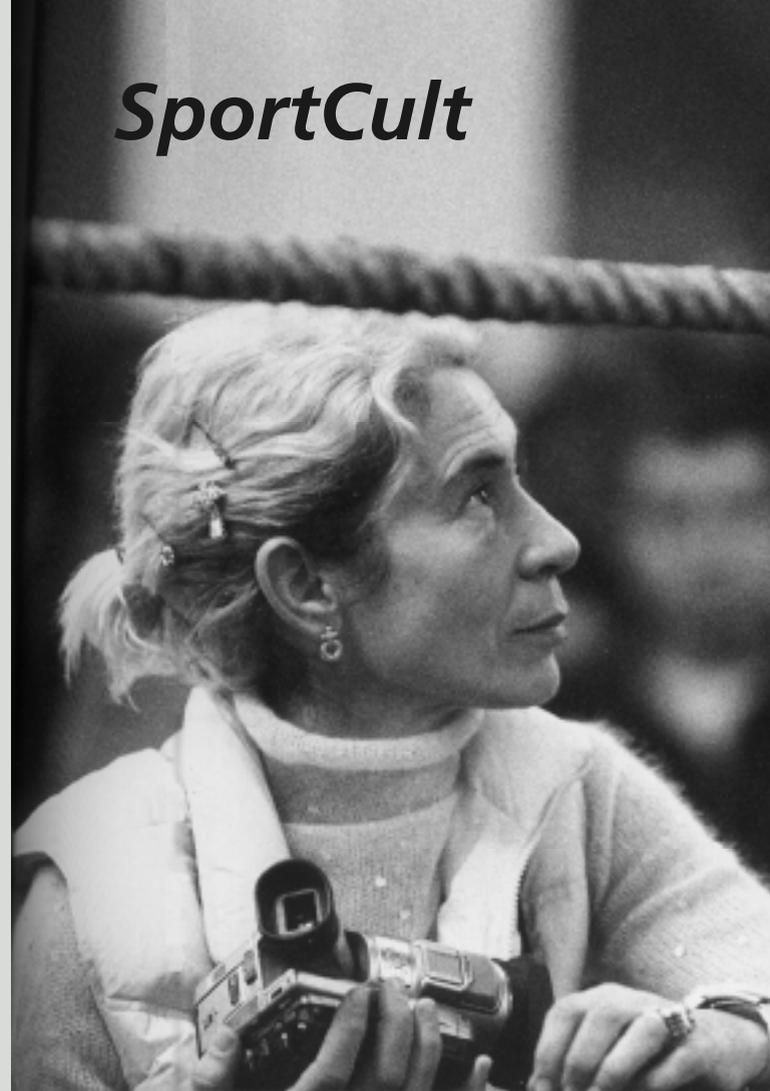


# SportCult



Curated by:  
Euridice Arratia

Carlos Amoraes  
Gustavo Artigas  
Elisabetta Benassi  
Ana Busto and Sandra Seymour  
Mónica de la Torre and Bruce Pearson  
Godfried Donkor  
Satch Hoyt  
Michaela Schweiger  
Grazia Toderi

September 7 - October 6, 2001

**apexar t** curatorial program

291 church street  
new york, ny 10013

212 431-5270 ph

212 431-4447 fx

info@apexart.org

www.apexart.org

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Cover image: Ana Busto video taping at the opening of 'Night Fights' at the Metronom gallery. Barcelona, Spain, 26 November 1999.

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## SportCult

During the last two World Cups, with soccer frenzy at its quadrennial peak, I have ritually joined the crowd at the Coffee Shop in Union Square to catch some of the games on TV. The restaurant has a reputation for drawing large contingents of South American fans to watch the weeks-long event. Watching, though, doesn't really describe what this lively crowd is up to. The first thing one notices is that the place is intricately mapped: well-defined areas with their respective markers (flags, team jerseys and songs) are set up around cultural alliances, national affiliations and international rivalries. When a game's on, it's impossible not to be swept up by the infectious energy of hyper-excited bodies, by the chorus of groans every time a player misses a shot, and especially by the ecstatic whoop when a goal is scored and Andres Cantor, the near-mythical sports commentator for the Spanish-language Univision channel, lets loose his signature rolling thunder call of "Goooooaaal."

In looking back at the soccer games, I wondered what was this heated-up fanfare and ritualized hollering all about? A quest for excitement? Sure. A search for a communal experience? No doubt. Clearly, the game's not just a game. Spectatorship, in fact, is no less exhausting and complex as actual participation. As Randy Martin and Toby Miller succinctly put it, "when participation is examined more closely and critically, one casualty will be the notion of passive spectatorship, a generalized image of social life that sidelines people's agency as the parade passes by them."<sup>1</sup>

It was my own experience of soccer fanaticism that provided my entry point in looking at how sports function with such power in society. Often it is a nation's identity itself that is sports' principal narrative. Sports recount compelling stories of individual exploits and collective yearnings, and they also act as a meeting

ground where far-ranging issues commingle, sometimes in contradiction. Side by side in the complex field of sports, one finds notions of leisure and entertainment, of bodily regimens and discipline, notions of athletes as symbols of local pride and idealism and as commodities and corporate entities.

The artists included in SportCult point to the pervasiveness of sports culture and its richness for metaphorical play. Moreover, the artists lucidly probe the different aspects of the "figural keys"—to use a term coined by the social theorist Norbert Elias—to sport: exertion, contest, rules and collective meaningfulness.<sup>2</sup> Because the experience of sports has been so intrinsically linked to the experience of TV viewing, it is only natural that a number of artists contributing to the exhibition are playfully and critically engaged with the conventions of the mediated aspect of the sports experience.

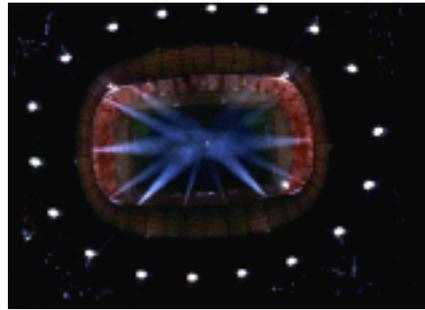
Video artists Grazia Toderi and Elisabetta Benassi both delve into the charged intersections between

the sport arena and private and collective dreams. In her video piece *You'll Never Walk Alone*, Benassi's alter ego Bettagol plays soccer in a deserted stadium with a Pier Paolo Passolini look-alike. The dream-like match (juxtaposed with *Time Code*, a video depicting a motorbike ride of Begattol and "Passolini" through Rome) oscillates between eroticism and competitiveness, and establishes a dialogue with her own cultural identity.



Elisabetta Benassi *You'll Never Walk Alone*, 2000 and *Time Code*, 2000 Video stills

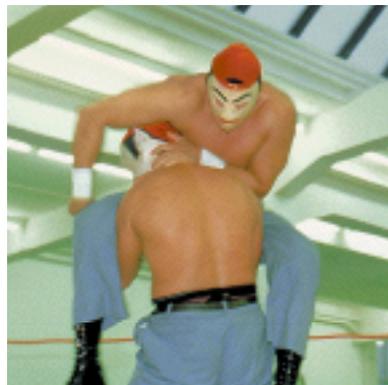
If Benassi portrays herself as the doer, the athlete in motion, Grazia Toderi explores conversely the quasi-religious experience of fandom. In *Il Decollo* (The Take-Off), Toderi isolates an aerial shot of an illuminated stadium taken from TV footage and then intervenes digitally. Otherworldly rays of light envelope the arena, which, suspended in the darkness of the night, brings to mind both a fantastic spaceship and the pattern of a mandala. Coupled with the sound of roaring fans, the image invokes the sports arena as a mythical site for mass spectacles.



Grazia Toderi *Il Decollo*, 1998 Video still

The artist Carlos Amoraes steps into the world of *lucha libre* (wrestling), a wildly popular entertainment in his native Mexico. He has created a masked alter ego also called Amoraes, whose interchangeable identity is "lent" to the professional wrestlers he hires to participate in his pieces. If *lucha libre* is

already a performance genre where the mask is paramount, what Amoraes stages are meta-performances, in which he explores the social conventions not only of popular wrestling but also of the art world. The spectacle is a chance, as the artist nonchalantly puts it, to shout "Kill Him!" in the white cube and "Kill Them!" in the wrestling arena. *Amoraes vs Amoraes* is a video installation document-



Carlos Amoraes *Amoraes vs. Amoraes*, 2000 Video stills

ing wrestling matches staged at The Migros Museum in Zurich, The Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris, The Auditorio Municipal de Tijuana and the Wyndham Plaza Hotel in San Diego.

Gustavo Artigas creates his own version of "sports events," in which he invites amateur players to play soccer, basketball, and even dominos. For this show, his sport of choice is mudwrestling staged in a topless bar. In *Geeta vs Sage* Artigas cooks the mud of the ring in a kiln and then presents it as an "abstract" ceramic sculpture, supported by video documentation and props of the mudwrestling match. The artist plays with the conventions of "high art" and mass sports spectacles where voyeurism and sex intermingle.



Gustavo Artigas *Geeta vs. Sage*, 2001 and *From the VS series #4*, 2001 Mixed media installation

In her interactive installation *Carrera* (named after a well-known German manufacturer of toy race cars coveted by boys growing up in the 60's and 70's), Michaela Schweiger dwells in the realm of childhood play, where playing often involves a child mimetically taking on the characteristics of toys. As any child or parent knows, toys are relentlessly gender-coded. The installation speaks of an ingenious way of



Michaela Schweiger *Carrera*, 2001 Mixed media installation

creating a substitute for a commodity that is much desired but usually unattainable by a little girl. Here a painted racing track and recorded voices sends us into the world of a vertiginous car race.

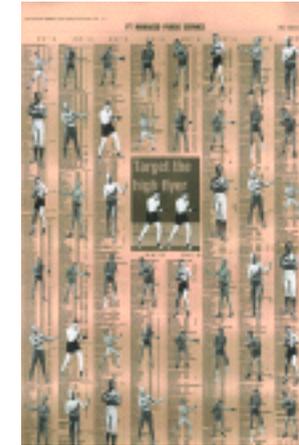
In Bruce Pearson's relief paintings the artist carves found text into styrofoam, tracing sculptural letters that in turn become the foundation for patterns and abstractions. For *SportCult*, Pearson departs from his usual practice by making a white-wall intervention with a phrase from Mónica de la Torre's poem *Golfers in the Family*. Instead of popping out to the viewer from within the painting, the phrase "An Alternate Route to the Green" is almost invisibly carved into the wall. De la Torre's poem breaks down notions associated with golf, and its excerpted phrase, like the topography of a golf course itself, is inscribed in a sinuous, non-linear path, a fusion of visual and verbal signs.



Bruce Pearson *An Alternate Route to the Green*, 2001 Based on a text by Mónica de la Torre Plaster on sheet rock 4 x 4 feet

Finally, three works included in the exhibit explore the world of boxing. The soundscape *Night Fights*, created by Ana Bustos and Sandra Seymour, is an aural excerpt of the intense life of the boxer. The raw materials are, among others, live recordings made by Bustos of training sessions at the Gleason's gym in Brooklyn and actual professional fights she has been photographing for the last four years. Structured like an actual ten round bout, the piece begins with the primal sound of boxing—the punch—and ends with the grand finale of an Oscar de la Hoya bout in Las Vegas.

Godfried Donkor and Satch Hoyt both investigate how race and corporate power mix it up in the world of



Godfried Donkor *Financial Times Wallpaper*, 2001 Wallpaper (detail)

boxing. Donkor has created wallpaper specifically for the exhibition, depicting images of boxers from the eighteenth century to the present that are superimposed on the stock exchange pages of the London Financial Times. The wallpaper's suggestion of a bourgeois domestic interior creates a *frisson* with the history of Imperial Britain and the formation of its contemporary multicultural society.

Hoyt, in his figural work, takes as a point of departure the controversial impresario Don King in creating his sculpture made entirely of Everlast baby boxing gloves. By anthropomorphizing a brand and creating a sound track which includes the voice of famous black boxers such as Muhammad Ali, Hoyt pushes to the forefront the uneasy coexistence of commodification, entertainment industries, and political and racial identities.



Satch Hoyt *The Don King Dom*, 2001 Everlast boxing gloves 25 x 17 x 12"

Euridice Arratia  
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1. Randy Martin, Toby Miller, editors, *SportCult*, page 8. Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1999. I am grateful to the authors for their generosity in allowing me to use the title of their book for this exhibition.
2. Nobert Elias, Eric Dunning, *Quest For Excitement. Sport and Leisure in the Civilizing Process*. London: Basil Blackwell Inc., 1986.