

THE GOAL POST

## On "Men With Balls"

Tom Vanderbilt  June 16, 2010 | 3:08 pm    |  More  Print 

Don DeLillo's 2007 novel *Point Omega* begins with an anonymous man, standing in the Museum of Modern Art, watching Douglas Gordon's *24 Hour Psycho*, which stretches the Hitchcock film to diurnal length, turning mere frames into emergent stories. "Suspense is trying to build," DeLillo writes, "but the silence and stillness outlive it."


DeLillo says *Point Omega* was inspired by his own accidental encounter with Gordon's work. "The idea of time and motion and the question of what we see, what we miss when we look at things in a conventional manner — all that seemed very inviting to me to think about."

This moment from *Point Omega* kept coming to me yesterday during the Brazil versus North Korea match. Not only for the suspense that was "trying to build," but for the curious fact that I was sitting in a white-cubed art gallery, my eyes fixed mainly on the projected match but occasionally straying over to another screen, this one showing Douglas Gordon's *Zidane: A 21st Century Portrait*, the film, made with Phillipe Pareno, that famously tracked Zidane — and Zidane only — with 17 cameras over the course of a match. "Portrait" is a weighted word here, for while the film, as DeLillo describes of *24 Hour Psycho*, invites the viewer to step outside of traditional soccer space and time, and into the panopticonic gaze of the world's dominant midfielder, Zidane himself, like a DeLillo character, remains ever elusive. As Paul Myerscough wrote in the *London Review of Books*: "In Zidane, the relentless scrutiny of his face yields little in the way of an inner self, still less anything that would help us to account for his sublime skill. We feel for him, but do not identify with him; he is alone, lonely even, and distant, other."

And while I do not think anyone at ESPN had Douglas Gordon or DeLillo in mind, one striking element of this World Cup is the state of slow motion. As David Goldblatt notes in his superb history *The Ball is Round*, the appearance of slow motion replay had a massive effect on the game in the 1960s. In Italy, he writes, the "post-match analysis began its ascent from an afterthought to an integral feature of the TV package, from technological curiosity to the central journalistic tool for the creation and investigation of conspiracies, controversies and uncertainties." The current technology (Vision Research's "Phantom"), however, brings us into the space envisioned by *24 Hour Psycho*, with clips unfolding in almost geologic time, whether a thousand glittering droplets of sweat bursting from a defender's head as the ball impacts it, or Robert Green's hand stabbing at the skittering Jabulani, a moment more memorable than the game itself.

Time and motion was very much on the mind of Simon Critchley, the curator of *Men with Balls*, at Apex Art. "For an hour and a half," writes Critchley, "a different order of time unfolds and one submits oneself to it." Sometimes there will be magic and even grace; sometimes, he notes, it will be "like Beckett's *Godot*, where nothing happens twice" (an apt description of last week's France versus Uruguay match).

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For the run of the Cup, Apex has been transformed into Critchley's idea of the "perfect football environment," a place to experience this "temporal rupture with the routine of the everyday: ecstatic, evanescent, and, most importantly, shared." And so there the game itself, viewed from a set of plywood risers, shared yesterday by a smattering of Brazilians and some art kids who kept wanting to make communist-themed jokes about the DPRK. But at the half there was much to consider. Next to Gordon's well-known film, for example, a monitor was showing Hellmuth Costard's *Football As Never Before*, a 1970 film (admittedly new to me) in which eight 16mm cameras rigorously tracked the movements of George Best during a match against Coventry. The contrast intrigues: The aquiline, shaved Zidane, filmed in HD against the black night with soundtrack by Mogwai; versus the Guevaran mane of Best ("El Beatle" in Spain), on scratchy film in the pale northern sun, the only sound the shouts of spectators.

On another screen, Miguel Calderon's *Mexico vs. Brasil* (2004) was unfolding. This work, which as Critchley notes was shown without explanation at a bar during the Sao Paulo Biennial, is a careful assemblage from fragments of previous Mexico-Brazil encounters into a new match that sees Mexico triumphing over Brazil by the magically realist score of 17 to 0. Nearby, Fall frontman Mark E. Smith reads League One results, and it must be said you have not lived until you have heard the words "Tranmere Rovers" voiced in Smith's shaggy drone. So what, you might be saying, but for an Englishman of a certain age, the Saturday results on the radio is a sound as sanctified (albeit now lost to the meaningless noise of Twitter feeds and television crawls) as the muezzin call. As Terrence Davies, who plays a clip of results in his stunning film *Of Time and the City*, has described it: "At age 10, nobody talks to you so you listen all the time. So these football results at a quarter to five on a Saturday were huge. I didn't know what they meant as I didn't like sport. Like a mantra, like the one I used in the beginning of *Distant Voices, Still Lives* of the shipping forecast. I had no idea what it meant but it was like a magical mantra, like God speaking."

I had a spin through a collection of World Cup album covers (e.g., Rod Stewart's tartan embellished "Ole, Ola," the "official single" of the 1978 Scottish World Cup squad), listened for a moment to Bill Shankly, glanced at Liam Gillick's ghostly spray-painted "you'll never make it to the station" (an old Millwall F.C. supporter's threat), and then returned to the bleachers for the second half. If the first half had seemed to exemplify, for Brazil, Sartre's old maxim that "in football, everything is complicated by the presence of the other team," by the second half the North Korean defense was beginning to look like a metaphor for the regime itself; i.e., behind the vigorous and frenzied displays of martial rigor, the internal contradictions (expertly analyzed by [Zonal Marking](#)) were beginning to bleed through. And when Martin Tyler commented offhand that the North Korean fans in the stands may not be as advertised, the person seated next to me aptly summed up the wonder of the afternoon. "Here I am, an English guy watching the World Cup in a New York art gallery, and I've just been informed that Chinese actors are playing North Korean fans in South Africa."