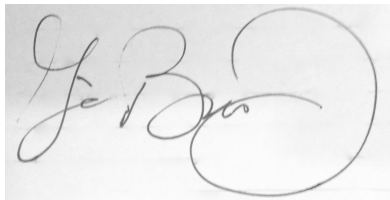


**Sting Like a Butterfly, Float Like a Bee.  
Vulnerability, Representation, and Vacillation:  
The Female Boxer in Contemporary Art**

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Goldsmiths University of London  
Art Practice-Based PhD  
2016

**Declaration:**

The work presented in this thesis is the candidate's own.

A handwritten signature in black ink on a light background. The signature is cursive and appears to read 'J. B. [unclear]'. The final part of the signature is a large, circular flourish.

**THIS PROJECT IS DEDICATED TO:**

JENNIFER SANTIAGO  
RUTH RAPER  
CHRISSY BECKLES  
RONICA 'THE QUEEN' JEFFREY  
MELISSA 'HURACANSHARK' HERNANDEZ PACHECO  
BELINDA 'BROWN SUGAR' LARACUENTE  
NIKKI RUSSELL  
ALICIA 'SLICK' ASHLEY  
ELLIE SCOTNEY  
RUTH O'SULLIVAN  
DEE HAMAGUCHI  
LEYLA LEIDECKER  
LEILA FERIOLI  
JEAN MARTIN  
SONYA 'THE SCHOLAR' LAMONAKIS  
JILL EMERY  
ANGEL BOVEE  
MISCHA MERTZ  
VANESSA GRECO  
ANNA MARANDI  
ALEXIS ASHER  
KEISHER 'FIRE' MCLEOD  
JULIE 'KID GINGER' KELLY  
ERIKA TAPIA  
PHOENIX CARNEVALE

And to the hundreds more women and girls whom I have had the honor of training with, sparring with, competing against, and boxing with in gyms around the world, exhibitions, club shows, national competitions, and international tournaments.

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## **ABSTRACT**

This PhD aims to create a reading strategy for the subject of the female boxer in order to intervene in the ways in which this figure is utilized and understood in contemporary culture. Ultimately, I am positing the limits of social constructivism and social science as a way to understand the boxing body and, specifically, the female boxer. Readings arising out of the philosophy of phenomenology, among other areas of thought, are more useful as a way to understand and capture this. Art can draw on the difference and also the intersection between these understandings, as well as add new meanings to our thinking around the subject.

I am considering the female boxer as a cipher to explore questions around the representation and vulnerability of moving bodies. My interest is in the contradictions present in the plurality of the subject; on the one hand, a political need exists to count the particular body of the female boxer as a body that matters; on the other hand, the female boxing body is an example of physicality and potentiality that is not totally captured by current semantic, cultural definition. I will discuss depictions and conceptualizations that exist both in the sociological definition of the boxing body and in methods of artistic representation, with the intention of articulating an understanding of the subject that allows for its inconclusivity as a lived body.<sup>1</sup>

Brian Massumi writes, “in motion, a body is in an immediate, unfolding relation to its own non-present potential to vary.”<sup>2</sup> The charge of indeterminacy as carried by a body is inseparable from it, as long as the body is dynamic and alive. This thesis describes, addresses, and challenges the ways in which the female boxing body is functioning and being defined as a sociological signifier, specifically the practice of gender construction as it frames the boxing body in art and theory. Via an understanding of the female boxer as vacillating, as being both irresolute *and* situated, my project engages with particular works of contemporary art that are attempting an alteration of our existing interpretations of the subject. My ultimate intention is to elucidate the *becoming* female boxer as a generative prism, and to investigate the ways in which art could be engaging with the ensuing spectrum.

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<sup>1</sup> Braidotti, Rosi. *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory*. Ithaca NY: Columbia University Press, 1994, p.161: “The concept of the lived body provides a means of enabling a situated way of seeing the subject based on the understanding that the most important location or situation is the roots of the subject in the spatial frame of the body.”

<sup>2</sup> Massumi, Brian. *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation*. Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2002, p.4.

## **Table of Contents**

### ***Sting Like a Butterfly, Float Like a Bee.***

### **Vulnerability, Representation, and Vacillation: The Female Boxer in Contemporary Art**

I.0.	Introduction	P.11
I.i.	Chapter Précis	P.17
I.ii.	Position and Transition	P.20
I.iii.	Vulnerability and Practice	P.21

### **Chapter One: The Fancy Mess:**

#### *Current Understandings of Boxing and the Female Boxer in Art and Sociology*

1.0.	Introduction	P.28
1.1.	<i>Boxing Performance</i> , Elena Kovylyna, 2005	P.30
1.2.	Realism and Reality	P.34
1.3.	Brain and Brawn	P.37
1.4.	The Authentic Object: Hard Versus Soft	P.41
1.5.	<i>Long Distance Lovers</i> , Senam Okudzeto, 2001	P.49
1.6.	Toil and Trouble	P.54

### **Chapter Two: Sure the Fight was Fixed, I Fixed it with My Right Hand:**

#### *Agency and Vacillation: The activated boxing body within contemporary art schema*

2.0.	Introduction	P.57
2.1.	Movement, Agency and the Grid	P.59
2.2.	<i>Girlfight</i> , Film by Karyn Kusama, 2001	P.62
2.3.	<i>The Long Count</i> , Paul Pfeiffer, 2001	P.74
2.4.	<i>A Sort of Shadow</i> , James Newitt, 2013	P.85
2.5.	The Active Subject	P. 94
2.6.	The Dialectical, Iconographic, and Naturalist Boxing Body	P.98

### **Chapter Three: There's More To Boxing Than Getting Hit – There's Not Getting Hit, For Instance:**

#### *Paradigms and Interventions of Form(lessness) and Vulnerability*

3.0.	Introduction	P.105
3.1.	Naming the Athlete	P.110
3.2.	<i>Zidane: A 21<sup>st</sup> Century Portrait</i> , D. Gordon & P. Parreno, 2006	P.116
3.3.	Practice Vacillation	P.126
3.4.	Pulse	P.128
3.5.	Identity, Agency, and Fracture	P.132
3.6.	Monster	P.135
3.7.	Vulnerability	P.139

<b>Chapter Four: (in)Conclus(ivity)ion: More Monsters</b>	P.143
<b>Bibliography</b>	P.154

## **List of Images**

**Figure One:** *HandWrapping Performance*. Genève Brossard, 2010-2013. Video still from live action. **P.24**

**Figure Two:** *Halation of Care Series, 4<sup>th</sup> Set*. Genève Brossard, 2016. Mixed Medium. **P.25**

**Figure Three:** *Boxing Performance*. Elena Kovylyna, 2005. Video stills of live performance. <http://current.nyfa.org/post/73238399345/conversations-elena-kovylyna>. January 25, 2006. (Accessed December 31<sup>st</sup>, 2015) **P.30**

**Figure Four:** *Studio Heavy Bag*. Genève Brossard, 2010. Still from video piece. **P.47**

**Figure Five:** *Long Distance Lovers*. Senam Okudzeto, 2001. Watercolor on paper phone bills. [http://www.theprogressoflove.com/?attachment\\_id=464](http://www.theprogressoflove.com/?attachment_id=464). December 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2012. (Accessed November 20<sup>th</sup>, 2014) **P.49**

**Figure Six:** Detail of *Long Distance Lovers*. Senam Okudzeto, 2001. Watercolor on paper phone bills. [http://www.theprogressoflove.com/?attachment\\_id=464](http://www.theprogressoflove.com/?attachment_id=464). December 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2012. (Accessed November 20<sup>th</sup>, 2014) **P.50**

**Figure Seven:** Michelle Hernandez playing Diana Guzman in *Girlfight*. Film by Karyn Kusama, 2001. Film still. <http://www.dga.org/Craft/DGAQ/All-Articles/0802-Summer-2008/Independent-Voice-Karyn-Kusama.aspx>. June, 2008. (Accessed November 4<sup>th</sup>, 2012) **P.62**

**Figure Eight:** Director Karyn Kusama with Michelle Hernandez. Photograph from set of *Girlfight*, 2001. <http://www.dga.org/Craft/DGAQ/All-Articles/0802-Summer-2008/Independent-Voice-Karyn-Kusama.aspx>. June, 2008. (Accessed November 4<sup>th</sup>, 2012) **P.62**

**Figure Nine:** *The Long Count (Thrilla in Manila, Rumble in the Jungle and I Shook up the World)*. Paul Pfeiffer, 2001. Photograph of installed piece. <http://www.art21.org/images/paul-pfeiffer/the-long-count-rumble-in-the-jungle-2001>. 2001-2015. (Accessed July 15<sup>th</sup>, 2012) **P.74**

**Figure Ten:** *The Long Count (Thrilla in Manila, Rumble in the Jungle and I Shook up the World)*. Paul Pfeiffer, 2001. Video still. <http://www.art21.org/images/paul-pfeiffer/the-long-count-rumble-in-the-jungle-2001>. 2001-2015. (Accessed June 11<sup>th</sup>, 2012) **P.76**

**Figure Eleven:** *The Long Count (Thrilla in Manila, Rumble in the Jungle and I Shook up the World)*. Paul Pfeiffer, 2001. Video still. <http://www.art21.org/images/paul->

pfeiffer/the-long-count-rumble-in-the-jungle-2001. 2001-2015. (Accessed June 11<sup>th</sup>, 2012) **P.82**

**Figure Twelve:** *A Sort of Shadow*, 'Untitled; the Sweet Science'. James Newitt, 2013. Ink drawing on paper and typed text. Images of work sent directly to Genève Brossard via email, 2014. **P.85**

**Figure Thirteen:** *A Sort of Shadow*. James Newitt, 2013. Photograph of installation. <http://jnewitt.com/work/shadow.html> 2013. (Accessed September 12<sup>th</sup>, 2014). **P.86**

**Figure Fourteen:** *A Sort of Shadow*, 'Untitled; the Sweet Science'. James Newitt, 2013. Full series of ink on paper drawings and typed text. Images of work sent directly to Genève Brossard via email, 2014. **P.88**

**Figure Fifteen:** *A Sort of Shadow*, 'Untitled; the Sweet Science', James Newitt, 2013. Ink on paper drawings and typed text. Images of work sent directly to Genève Brossard via email, 2014. **P.90**

**Figure Sixteen:** *A Sort of Shadow*. James Newitt, 2013. Foucault quote and inverse as transcribed by author in booklet of text, *A Sort of Shadow*, accompanying exhibit of the same name, p.1. **P.93**

**Figure Seventeen:** *Untitled Drawing*. Genève Brossard, 2011. Charcoal, pen, and pencil on canvas. **P.96**

**Figure Eighteen:** *Zidane: A 21<sup>st</sup> Century Portrait*. Douglas Gordon and Philippe Parreno, 2006. Film still. <http://www.myfrenchfilmfestival.com/en/movie?movie=26918>. July 2008. (Accessed October 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2015) **P.118**

**Figure Nineteen:** *Zidane: A 21<sup>st</sup> Century Portrait*, Douglas Gordon and Philippe Parreno, 2006. Film still. <http://www.myfrenchfilmfestival.com/en/movie?movie=26918>. July 2008. (Accessed October 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2015) **P.119**

**Figure Twenty:** *Corner Tape*. Genève Brossard, 2011. Video Still. **P.127**

**Figure Twenty One:** *Zidane: A 21<sup>st</sup> Century Portrait*, Douglas Gordon and Philippe Parreno, 2006. Film still. <http://www.dailymotion.com/video/x3i4c0o>. September 2008. (Accessed November 26<sup>th</sup>, 2015) **P.139**

**Figure Twenty Two:** *Untitled Sketch- Image from a studio installation*. Genève Brossard, 2009. Digital Photograph. **P.149**

**Figure Twenty Three:** *Untitled Sketch- Image from studio, art making process*, Genève Brossard, 2009. Digital Photograph. **P.150**

**Figure Twenty Four:** : *Halation of Care Series, 7<sup>th</sup> Set.* Genève Brossard, 2016.  
Mixed Medium. **P.151**

**Figure Twenty Five:** : *Halation of Care Series, 1st Set.* Genève Brossard, 2016.  
Mixed Medium. **P. 153**

***Sting Like a Butterfly, Float Like a Bee.***  
**Vulnerability, Representation, and Vacillation:**  
**The Female Boxer within Contemporary Art**

*“Might not the singular initiative be, in the end, that intimate, infinitesimal, but ultimate force on which the deconstruction of any condition depends?”*

– Julia Kristeva

*“The human is not identified with what is represented but neither is it identified with the unrepresentable; it is, rather, that which limits the success of any representational practice.”*

– Judith Butler

*“Be like water, my friend.”*

– Bruce Lee

**I.0. Introduction**

This thesis aims to create a reading strategy for the subject of the female boxer in order to intervene in the ways in which this figure is utilized and understood in contemporary culture. Ultimately, this dissertation is positing the limits of social constructivism and social science as a way to understand the boxing body and, specifically, the female boxer. Readings arising out of the philosophy of phenomenology, among other areas of thought, are more useful as a way to understand and capture this. Art can draw on the difference and also the intersection between these understandings, as well as add new meanings to our thinking around the subject.

Because the female boxer is relatively new as an acknowledged cultural figure, my subject matter cannot be narrowed down to one specific medium or approach. This open-endedness allows me to deploy an interdisciplinary perspective to explore my subject's various movements and usages. As well as attending multiple live boxing matches; watching women's boxing on television; exploring the female boxing figure's circulation in artistic and filmic productions;

and examining its appropriation in sociological and political discourse; I make artwork that attempts to expand the subject; and I also boxed on an internationally competitive level for over a decade. My methodology, therefore, makes use of and also critiques a whole range of strategies. Through my writing and my practice, I attempt to query and complicate these disciplinary conventions and my own use of them.

The basis of this research is manifold. It can be traced to my interest in the representation of female athletes, especially in contemporary art and films and, to a lesser extent, popular culture. As a female athlete, I am always looking for something that 'feels' right, and represents a calibration of my own experience and perhaps those of other women who share my commitment to competitive boxing. Thus, this project is intimately linked to my politically based desire to be holistically considered as a woman<sup>1</sup> who engages in, thinks through, and moves in a series of gestures that, for me, result in joy. Being that these gestures fall under the category of boxing, I have found that I am not, in fact, understood or represented in a way that feels right to me. Instead, it is clear that the motions that I make with my body put me in some limited places. The mismatch between

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<sup>1</sup> I identify as a cisgendered woman because my experience of my gender agrees with the sex I was assigned at birth. I am also a woman because, at age 39, I am not a girl. I started my boxing life as a legal adult when I was 23, and have always competed in the adult, rather than the junior, category. I name my subject 'female boxer' rather than 'woman boxer' because this project encompasses girls (people under the age of 18) who box, as well as women. Furthermore, my use of the word 'female' is intended for people who identify as such, regardless of their assigned sex or the categorizations of sport. That said, there are gender restrictions in the sport of professional boxing and a person who identifies as female or whose gender is fluid in other ways- transgender, gender queer, pangender, or agender- yet is male according to their sex assignment at birth, is not permitted to compete as a female, they must compete in the male category. On the Amateur/Olympic level, in January 2016 the International Olympic Committee adapted their policy on transgender athletes: The new guidelines allow female-to-male athletes to compete without restriction while male-to-female athletes must undergo hormone therapy, but are not required to undergo sexual reassignment surgery. This policy will apply to Olympic boxing as well. While these shifts in the perception of gender in sport is interesting on many levels and is certainly relevant in terms of the role embodiment has in sports discourse, and also the ways in which athletes process and share their lived experience, they do not directly affect my use of the term 'female' in this project. For further information, please see Jordan-Young, Rebecca. M; Sønksen, Peter; Karkazis, Katrina, 'Sex, Health, and Athletes'. *British Medical Journal*, April 28, 2014, p.348-355; Associated Press, The Guardian. 'IOC rules transgender athletes can take part in Olympics without surgery'. January 24<sup>th</sup>, 2016. <http://theguardian.com/sport/2016/jan/25/ioc-rules-transgender-athletes-can-take-part-in-olympics-without-surgery> (Accessed May 16<sup>th</sup>, 2016).



the fluid and open-ended joy I experience when boxing and some of the representations of female boxers I am finding, triggers an uncertainty in my own viewing and reading of the ways in which the moving body is represented in creative, theoretical, and ethnographic practices. This uncertainty has proved fruitful because I am able to challenge the existing definitional framework and, by accepting the instability of both the framework and my own positions, look for alternative means and expansions for representing the subject.

My search into alternative approaches for the depiction and understanding of the female boxer is centered on contemporary art practice, and firstly investigates certain works of art as a basis for teasing out the ways in which this particular cultural figure is articulated. Secondly, this thesis will consider unresolved qualities of the subject through further exploration into representational modes and theories that question the current, linear narrative of the athlete body; including poetics, formlessness, and vulnerability. Finally, I will clarify these multiple framings in order to support my proposition for a re-conceptualization of the female boxer that allows for continuous becoming and potentiality.<sup>2</sup>

Two of the core concepts that form the jump pad for this project are; *informe*, or formless (I will use both the French word and the English word, including the variation 'formlessness', depending on the context), a philosophical term and art practice conceived of by Bataille and further articulated by Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind E. Krauss in their book *Formless* (accompanying a 1996 Paris exhibition of the same name); and Judith Butler's development of the concept of human vulnerability, specifically via her 2004 book, *Precarious Life*. *Informe*, as both a mode of artistic practice and a subject of philosophic discourse, breaks down and declassifies the recognizable world. In terms of the role art making can play

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<sup>2</sup> "Between the things does not name any localizable relationship that goes from one to the other and back again, but rather a pendulum movement, a transversal movement, which goes in one *and* the other direction, a stream with no beginning or end, which hollows out both of its banks and flows faster and faster in the middle.... a becoming is always in the middle." Deleuze, Gilles, and Félix Guattari. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1987, p.323.

in our understanding of the female boxer as being irresolute, I am positing that the aesthetic use of blurring, hapticity, pulse, and other elements of *informe*, can get close to achieving a representation that is inconclusive. Vulnerability and *informe*, as operations of declassification, are related in regard to the permeability of our boundaries as living beings and culturally inscribed identities. We are all fragile and we all can bleed, die, feel grief and, as Judith Butler states, this vulnerability is what allows us to connect to each other.<sup>3</sup>

The above conceptualizations around non-figurative approaches to the human body directly relate to a third, supporting supposition; theorist Brian Massumi's assertion that 'abstract' is another word for 'imperceptible' in the context of movement. The abstract of Massumi means, "never present in position, only ever in passing."<sup>4</sup> This pertains to the indeterminate and imperceptible nature of a physical body's potential movement. It is abstract until the material body has realized a physical potential by moving (such as taking a step). I understand Massumi's argument to be that the indeterminacy existing before the movement is completed is inseparable from the body because the corporeal body is always in process or passage, and its potential movement is essential to its status as alive. He describes this quality of movement as imperceptible and, therefore, abstract.<sup>5</sup>

In order to engage with and contextualize the real-yet-incorporeal body's<sup>6</sup>, relationship to declassification, *informe*, and vulnerability, and to draw meaningful connections between these ideas, I am first looking at areas of knowledge that, by considering the female boxer as primarily a social or cultural figure, I posit, illuminate a paradox in the formatting of the subject. On the one

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<sup>3</sup> Butler, Judith. *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*. London: Routledge, 2004.

<sup>4</sup> Massumi, Brian. *Parables for the Virtual*. Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2002, p.5.

<sup>5</sup> I recognize that this is one of many versions of abstraction as a concept. To contextualize Massumi's version, please see Massumi's predecessor, Gilles Deleuze's ideas of the Body Without Organs and real-abstract; Maxine Sheets-Johnstone and Nikolas Rose's views on the body-in-process; Erin Manning's work on Argentinean Tango; as well as more traditional definitions of abstraction: Abstract art is unconcerned with the literal depiction of things from the visible world; abstraction in art is when the artwork is freed from objective context; abstraction is the thought process wherein ideas are distanced from objects, and so on.

<sup>6</sup> Massumi, *Parables*, p.5.

hand I would argue that a political need exists to represent this particular body and to count it as a body that matters. From a certain feminist standpoint, women and girls who box need to be recognized as having identities that are autonomous; identities that are not solely based on the figure of the male boxer. This need is apparent when considering the disparaging view mainstream society has had of female boxers over the past century.<sup>7</sup> On the other hand, there is an opportunity to move beyond the definitive grid of identification due to the very actions and position of this particular body. I am not interested in forming an argument that positions 'against'. Rather, I want to broaden the range of the subject. It is here where the complex concepts of *informe* and vulnerability lead me towards a boxing body that vacillates between the conditions of its positioning and the inconclusivity of its very motion.<sup>8</sup> This open-ended vacillation allows for conditions of becoming, which can lead to a complexity of interpretation of the living moving body that I see as undercutting the reductive figure currently being formed.

The female boxer, I argue, might only be grasped within the conditions set by this very ambiguity and contradiction. Although female boxing has been largely defined in dialectical terms, in my view, it defies easy and simple categorization. It is comprised of an ever-changing string of forms that are characterized by fluidity and improvisation, intimacy and contact, immediacy and spectacle. Female boxing could function as a space where an encounter of two bodies (or two ideas) is presented in all its unknown potentiality.

Because a boxing match is a story without words, this doesn't mean that it has no text or no language, that it is somehow 'brute', 'primitive', 'inarticulate', only that the text is improvised in action; the language a

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<sup>7</sup> For examples of media coverage of women's boxing throughout the past century, see Kasia Boddy's book *Boxing, A Cultural History*. NYC: Reaktion Books, 2008; Merz, Mischa. *The Sweetest Thing: A Boxer's Memoir*. Sydney, Australia: Seven Stories Press, 2011; Channon, Alex and Christopher Matthews. *Global Perspectives on Women in Combat Sports*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015.

<sup>8</sup> Sobchack, Vivian. *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture*. Los Angeles: UCLA Press, 2004, p.60. Sobchack makes a note on using the word 'vacillate' instead of 'oscillate' that is relevant here: "I use the term vacillate rather than oscillate purposefully, in order to distinguish between a rigid sense of alternation and one less binary and regular."

dialogue between the boxer of the most refined sort (one might say, as much neurological as psychological; a dialogue of split-second reflexes).<sup>9</sup>

This is a quote from Joyce Carol Oates' book *On Boxing* that speaks to the potentiality of the boxing body and also leads me to a core sociological concern. At the time of the writing of the book, Oates held a common view of boxing, that it is the provenance of men: "Boxing is for men, and is about men, and is men."<sup>10</sup> Although Oates wrote her book over 20 years ago, the general understanding in sociology and literature is still that the boxer is a male figure,<sup>11</sup> a position that defines the first side of my intervention – how to count women who box as bodies that matter. The existence of women who box has been consistently documented since the early 1900s<sup>12</sup>, however, has only recently been discussed as something other than a freak show. In contemporary consideration, the female boxer as social figure, while no longer understood solely as a novelty, still exists largely within the realm of male boxing; female boxers are considered an aberration. Boxing is understood and theoretically constituted through its relationship to masculinity, blood, bruises, cuts and concussion, which are popularly considered to be legitimate and even natural for men, but absolutely at odds with the essence of femininity. Loic Wacquant argues that boxing is deeply engendered, embodying and exemplifying, "a definite form of masculinity; plebian, heterosexual and heroic."<sup>13</sup> In this context, women's boxing is widely characterized as a radical activity blurring the traditional male and female images, identities and class alliances.<sup>14</sup> Notions of power are intrinsically gendered in so far as power in boxing, as well as in many other contexts, is understood to be the prerogative of men. Gender is indispensable for grasping the ways in which forms of social inequalities and

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<sup>9</sup> Oates, Joyce Carol. *On Boxing*. New York: Harper Perennial, 1995, p.11.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, p.15.

<sup>11</sup> For further elaboration on boxing as a male domain, see Messner, Michael. *Power at Play: Sports and the problem of Masculinity*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1992, pp.40-65.

<sup>12</sup> See Smith, Malissa. *A History of Women's Boxing*. New York: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2014.

<sup>13</sup> Wacquant, Loic. 'Pugs at Work: Bodily Capital and Bodily Labor Among Professional Boxers'. *Body and Society*, Vol 1, No.1 (March 1995), pp.65-94.

<sup>14</sup> Hargreaves, Jennifer. 'Bruising Peg to Boxerobics: Gendered Boxing-Images and Meanings'. *Boxer: An Anthology of Writings on Boxing and Visual Culture*. London: IVA Press, 1996, p.125.

injustices are conceived. However, gender is not the sole discourse of boxing that subordinates all the others. As sociologist Avtar Brah points out:

A discourse may be primarily about gender and, as such, it may center upon gender-based binaries (although of course, a binaried construction is not always available). But this discourse will not exist in isolation from others, such as those signifying class, sexuality, race, religion, or generation. The specificity of each is framed in and through fields of representation of the other.<sup>15</sup>

I am approaching female boxing as a subject that is currently understood via issues of gender, transgression, and violence, and I aim to complicate these understandings by sketching out future possibilities of becoming for the representation and understanding of the subject.

### **I.i. Chapter Précis**

In the first chapter of my thesis, my claim is that: **Boxing has been incompletely analyzed sociologically.** This chapter addresses the sociological depiction of the subject, as it is revealed in art, in order to describe the ways in which the boxing body is functioning as a literal signifier, an often static point on our cultural interpretive grid of subject formation – a concept that I will continue to explore throughout the thesis, via Brian Massumi's theories in *Parables for the Virtual*.

I am considering artworks by Senam Okudzeto and Elena Kovylna. I have chosen these works because they engage with the boxing body in ways that are culturally symbolic and yet, not entirely positioned within discourse. I am suggesting that these versions of the boxing body utilize and interpret the subject as a metaphoric representation of specific social constructions, while also referring to the body as possessing depths that are not entirely accounted for by these constructions. The sociological texts I am looking at are primarily the ethnographic works of Jennifer Hargreaves, Rachel Morley, Christine Mennesson, and Kath Woodward.

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<sup>15</sup> Brah, Avtar. *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting identities*. New York: Routledge, 1996, p.185.

In the first chapter, I set the stage by locating the ways in which female boxers are represented in both sociology theory and mainstream media, and how these understandings can emerge in artistic presentations of boxing and the boxing body. Throughout, I describe the ways in which the boxing body is largely functioning as shorthand for gender transgression, emotional turmoil, and marginalization. This initial inquiry establishes that these representations are not allowing for the full spectrum of relevance that the figure of the female boxer possesses. This chapter concludes with a call for an unfixing of the female boxing body, both in terms of political representation and in art making.

In the second chapter, I progress past these sociological concerns into an exploration of **boxing as an imagined site of a fluid and ambiguous understanding of the body. This is a contentious claim because it goes against the common political understanding of the boxer, especially the female.**

Additionally, I address the notion that contemporary cultural uses of boxing tend to fall into a few overlapping groupings; Dialectic, Iconographic, and Naturalist, which have been conceived of by cultural theorist and art critic Kasia Boddy. I resist these categories, articulated by Boddy, as compulsory to our understanding of the female boxer and the boxing body because they arise out of the existing sociological work that has been done on boxing, work that I posit is incomplete. Undercurrenting the arguments in this chapter is my utilization of Brian Massumi's conception of the living moving body as paradoxically containing incorporeal qualities in order to challenge Boddy's assertions. The characteristic of potential that exists in a body, the possibility of infinite trajectories of movement, questions the relevancy of a stable definition of the subject.<sup>16</sup>

Within this context, I consider Paul Pfeiffer's 2001 video work *The Long Count*, Karyn Kusama's 2000 film, *Girlfight*, and James Newitt's 2013 installation piece, *A Sort of Shadow*. These works accomplish an open-ended rendering of the body

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<sup>16</sup> Massumi, Brian: "In motion, a body is in an immediate, unfolding relation to its own non-present potential to vary." *Parables for the Virtual*. Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2002, p.4.

that also accounts for figurative positioning and cultural narrative. The formal choices made by the artists challenge the notion of a boxing subject that is totally defined by a grid of cultural positioning. In this way, the works in Chapter Two engage with Massumi's question:

How does a body perform its way out of a definitional framework that is not only responsible for its very construction, but seems to prescript every move from a limited set of predetermined terms?<sup>17</sup>

Massumi's proposition in *Parables for the Virtual* is to destabilize the grid of signification by putting corporeal matter back into the consideration of the body. I elaborate on his conception by discussing artworks that I see as expanding and complicating our existing interpretations of the boxing body.

The third chapter of my thesis is meant to establish framing paradigms of theory towards my thesis. Unlike the previous chapters, I do not discuss works of art with boxing as their subject but rather utilize Douglas Gordon and Philippe Parreno's film *Zidane: A 21<sup>st</sup> Century Portrait* (2006), in order to frame and add a fuller understanding to my proposed reading strategy, the intention for which is a poetics of the female boxer. I will progress into the ways in which concepts and practices such as *informe*, haptic visuality, and vulnerability are present in the film, and also discuss how an exploration of the film is relevant to the female boxer and my position. In Chapter Three, I am arguing that, **through the concept of *informe* and other related methodologies, as well as an engagement with vulnerability, art making can offer a knowledge of the female boxing body as moving, inconclusive, and paradoxical.**

The thesis conclusion enacts a creative opportunity for my subject, that of monstrosity. Through a positive approach towards the concept of the monster, I summarize the concepts and problematics surrounding the

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<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, p.3.

representation of the female boxer, as well as sketch out possible futures for the subject as a lived body.<sup>18</sup>

### **I.ii. Position and Transition**

In order to ground my intention for this project in the human body – its vulnerability, inconclusivity, and potential – I consider that which makes a body what it is.

When I think of my body and ask what it does to earn that name, two things stand out. It moves. It feels. In fact it does both at the same time. It moves as it feels and it feels itself moving.<sup>19</sup>

A real, tangible body is one that moves<sup>20</sup>. In this way, the moving body becomes abstract because it is never in position; it is only ever present in transition. The abstractness pertains to the relation a body has to its own borderlessness, its openness to an elsewhere and otherwise than it is; any other here and now. The charge of indeterminacy as carried by a body is inseparable from it, as long as the body is dynamic and alive. Paradoxically, this quality of the actual, living body is incorporeal. It is real, material and its inconclusiveness makes it difficult to capture and situate in defining discourse. Massumi explains that the 'real-material-but-incorporeal' is to the positioned body, as energy is to matter. Energy and matter are mutually convertible modes of the same reality. Therefore, the body's incorporeal potential to vary belongs to the same reality as the version of the body as a positioned thing.

I continuously try to avoid making a categorical separation between the social and some kind of 'raw' corporeality, although such binaries are easy to fall into when considering athletes as subjects of discourse. I am looking for a way to

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<sup>18</sup> Braidotti, R. *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory*. Ithaca NY: Columbia University Press, 1994, p.161: "The concept of the lived body provides a means of enabling a situated way of seeing the subject based on the understanding that the most important location or situation is the roots of the subject in the spatial frame of the body."

<sup>19</sup> Massumi, p.1.

<sup>20</sup> From my perspective, this includes infirm and disabled bodies, whose movements may be more subtle than completely able bodies, yet nonetheless move; the beating heart, the breath, the neural synapses.



present the female boxer as a multiplicity. Georges Bataille writes that art has the possibility to create “that which goes beyond and is perhaps more significant than meaning,”<sup>21</sup> and this informs my engagement with the problem of representation. I am attempting to deviate and declass the female boxing body by acknowledging it as a potentiality, one that can begin to be represented in art.

### **I.iii. Vulnerability and Practice**

There is a question of contradictory embodiment that is a sort of meta-vacillation<sup>22</sup>: My own body contains a double paradox because I am a boxing body *and* an intellectual who looks at and writes about bodies; I am an artist *and* I am theorizing about art and the art world. The question of my own subjectness as the author of this text embodies many of the contradictions I am addressing throughout this thesis.

I was a female boxer myself. I competed for 11 years in the international amateur circuit and was nationally ranked at number four in the United States, as well as being a two-time Golden Gloves champion in New York state, and a London ABA finalist. I was the first woman to box out of the oldest boxing gym in the United Kingdom, the Lynn AC boxing club. I include these statistics to indicate the depth to which personal knowledge forms the basis for my inquiry. That said, I have not competed in five years. I was an active boxer. I was competing when I started this project but now I am not. Being in a practice-based PhD program, I am not alone in my position of being both the theorist and the practitioner – in my case, both in boxing and in art making. I contend that the personal knowledge and problematics that arise from straddling or vacillating between two or more realms inform and are central to my concerns around representation. I embody much of the discourse that I am producing as I

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<sup>21</sup> Bataille, Georges. *Manet*. New York: Rizzoli, 1983 p.95.

<sup>22</sup> James Elkins refers to Rosalind Krauss’s writing about vacillation in the context of the *informe* in his book, *On Pictures and the Words that Fail Them*. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1998, pg. 106; “[...] there can no longer be a stable distinction between figure and ground, or any pair of alternating opposites. Nothing is secure, and forms and figures vacillate and shimmer rather than oscillate in a regular motion. The *informe* is a principle that works against the concepts of binarism, opposition, structure, and ultimately, figure itself.”

write because, even though I am no longer boxing, I am still an iteration of my subject; the movements of boxing, as well as the identity politics that come with them, are still in my body as a sort of vivid palimpsest.

My art making practice is contending with many of the same ideas as this text. I see these two aspects of my work as being part of the same project. My writing and research is also my practice, however is distinct from the processes I undertake in the studio. The three actions- writing, boxing, and art making- inform each other continuously and are part of the multi-directional spectrum of experience that is my life.

The writing and research is distinct from the studio time in part because I invariably work in the public library and listen to Bach's cello suites on my headphones while I type on my laptop and read through piles of books and printouts. The physical and auditory space in which I write tangibly defines it as separate from the rest of my life (when I am not in the library, not reading theory, and the headphones are usually out). When I am in my studio, I am always alone and lately, I spend hours using glue, tape, and acrylic paint to make marks on aluminum and paper surfaces. The specific gestures of my studio practice, and the tools I use, separate the time that I spend there from the rest of my day (when I am rarely alone and am busy with my son, my paid work, and the various quotidian activities that make up my life). However, I think about my writing when I am making art and I think about my art when I am writing. I think about all the aspects of my life in all the spaces of my life. My experience as myself, although wearing different hats at different times, is fluid.

Because this is a practice-based thesis, I have made a specific and intentional body of artwork alongside the writing of this dissertation, pieces that are born from the research and writing that I am doing. The art is by no means an illustration of the text, nor is the text a description of the art. Rather, they are distinct forms of knowledge and expression that are engaging with the same set of ideas, albeit with very different vocabularies and outcomes. For the past

seven years, my writing/research and my art making have been paired under the umbrella of expectations, developments, obligations, and explorations that is this project. In this way, these two aspects of my experience are estranged from the rest of my life because, together, they are my ' PhD thesis'.

Furthermore, while completely impossible without the support of many people, especially my supervisors, Andrea Phillips and Rachel Garfield, I am presenting this project alone and it will be my name on it at the end. In this way, the thesis work is not unlike boxing, the third practice informing this project. Training- generally in the presence and support of others, and competing- totally alone in the ring and in my own body, both form a distinct, separate space that does not blend well with the rest of my quotidian life, at least in outward appearances. However, I think about boxing often throughout the day, and the activity of my body during a training session remains a presence as I go about the rest of my day, not just in muscle soreness, but also in my interpretation of space and other people.

In my studio practice, I am addressing the subject of the female boxer as a means to represent my own experience of being human. In this context, the subject of the female boxer is part of a larger creative endeavor to expand my own understanding of the world and also reflects my commitment *to take care of this subject*. In general, my artwork reflects my investigation into the relationship between the personal, interior space of imagination, thought, or dreams, and the external landscape, both constructed and natural. In the context of this project, the 'landscape' is often discursive and the 'personal' is a re-interpretation of objects and spaces within and around the body. Central to my invented visual vocabulary is my interest in challenging the concepts of objectivity and definition.

I started this project in 2008 with a much more direct approach than what I currently utilize. Via performance pieces, videos about boxing, and also employing my own boxing equipment in photographs and drawings, I engaged

with a kind of valorization of the authentic object- an approach I will analyze in Chapter One. This work developed into an interest in the possibilities of observing, rather than proclaiming, and then further towards an engagement with the materiality, shape, color and tactile qualities of my subject; a move away from what could be considered narrative or symbolism. For the most recent series in this project (exhibited in 2016), distinct because I present these works as the practice element of my thesis, I used photographs as the basis for a series of manipulated painted and collaged works. All of the works I have made during this thesis, however different from one another in medium and concept, explore questions of authenticity, reproduction, resolution, historic and personal chronology, interpretation, instability, the human mark, and care- care of the self, of others, and the world. The concept and act of care in this project has been present from the beginning and comes from my view that there is opportunity to represent and understand the figure of the female boxer as complex and in the process of becoming. By investigating this possibility, I am also paying attention to instances of over-simplification and exploitation, and am thus, taking care of my subject. In terms of my art making, I am interested in the aspects of boxing that are not directly about violence, that are, rather, about people acknowledging and taking care of one another, themselves, as well as the functional, intimate, and precious accoutrements of the sport.



Figure One

The above image is a still from a video documentation of a piece that I performed a few times between 2010 and 2013, always in the setting of a group show. I sat in a gallery space and wrapped the hands of interested volunteer viewers with gauze, exactly as my own hands have been wrapped dozens of

times before a boxing competition. My intention was to share a common ritual from the sport of boxing that I find to be profoundly soothing and intimate. In wrapping the hands of non-boxers, I was offering them and myself an experience that, while from the lexicon of boxing, could be translated into a more common interaction, one sourced from touch and undivided attention. In re-contextualizing this action, I was blurring and questioning the boundaries between distinct cultural practices, those of the boxing tournament and those of the gallery space, as well as instigating a gentle moment of contact and connection between myself and another.

Later, as evidenced by my 2016 body of work, my interest in care and/or troubling became less direct and perhaps more formal as I investigated the ways in which I could explore concepts of objectivity, touch, vulnerability, and “truthful representation” through my own process of mark making, manipulation, and aggregation, as applied to photographs of objects and spaces. As I proceed through the written element of this thesis, I will refer to specific works and developments in my studio practice, as it is relevant.

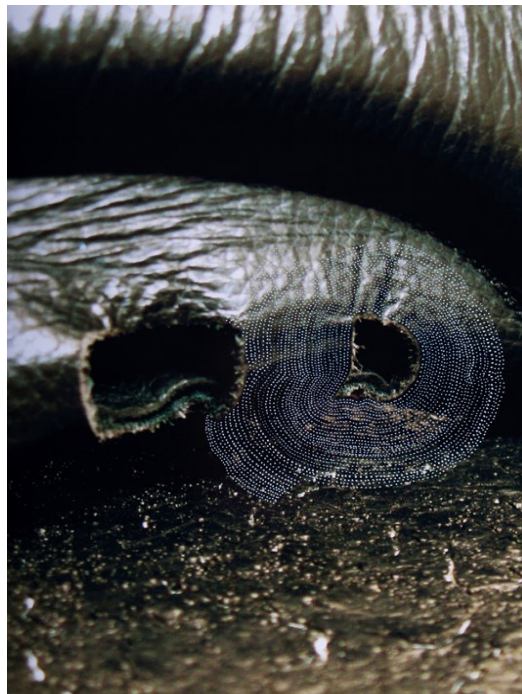


Figure Two

I will also occasionally refer to my own experience as a boxer, mostly to provide an individual, embodied reference in my identification and delineation of the boxer subject. When I boxed, I boxed as an amateur, which means that I practiced Olympic style boxing rather than professional style boxing. The main differences between the two are:

1. Professionals get paid for each fight while amateurs do not fight for money (although elite amateurs do get paid to train and to be members of national teams. I was paid a stipend to train for two US National tournaments and the US Amateur Boxing Association also paid for my accommodation, travel, and food).
2. Amateur boxers must wear head guards, while it is prohibited for professionals.
3. Amateurs fight 3 or 4 rounds in a fight, each round lasting between 1.5 to 4 minutes (depending on age and experience of fighters). Professionals fight between 4 and 12 rounds, each round lasting 2 or 3 minutes.
4. Amateurs always wear 10-ounce gloves, while professionals wear 6, 8 or 10 oz gloves, depending on the region.
5. Amateur boxing has a 'standing eight count', which is when the referee stops the fight when one fighter is having difficulty and counts to 8 to allow the fighter to recover. If it seems that the fighter is in trouble, the fight is stopped. This does not occur in professional fights.
6. The objective in an amateur match is to win on points by landing more correct scoring blows on the opponent's target area, known as "clean punching". The objective in a professional match is also to score points, but the boxers are additionally scored based on aggressiveness, ring generalmanship (meaning that the judges favor the fighter who controls the pace and style of the bout), defense, and knockdowns. The objectives of professional boxing do significantly crossover into the amateur realm, informing strategy and training methods, however the final score is much more objective in amateur bouts as they are counted by computer and do not officially include such subjective elements as ring generalmanship. That said, the number of points a boxer can score depends heavily on her defense strategy, pace, and effective aggression.

Both amateur and professional boxing have the same definition of a point; a punch is landed, using only the front knuckle plane of the glove, on the relatively limited target area of the opponent; waist up, including the face, and excluding the arms, side or back of the head, and side or back of the body.

There are 26 illegal fouls in both amateur and professional boxing, which results in warnings, point deductions, and disqualification. Fouls range from “rabbit punches”-hitting on the back of the head, to the infamous ‘low blow’, to striking with an open glove, to turning your back on your opponent. Boxing is a highly regulated sport where only very specific movements are permitted.<sup>23</sup>

I choose to compare amateur and professional boxing here because the comparison emphasizes that expertise in boxing requires time and commitment. Furthermore the comparison allows me to account for both types of boxing, to define them as distinct from one another, and also to place them in the same embodied community and economy.

I include these regulations to frame a starting point that is rooted in the corporeal movements and identifiable objectives of the boxing body. A female boxer, to my mind, is a person who boxes. She defines, practices, and executes her physical movements according to the regulations and rules of her chosen sport.

I am, as are all humans, a multiplicity that cannot be fully accounted for with a discursive system. My own story is part of the inconclusivity of my subject and adds to my position that there is no definitive ‘female boxer’ and that boxing holds the potential to convey ambiguous situations and bodies.

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<sup>23</sup> For the complete international rules and regulations of the sport of Boxing, both amateur and professional, please visit the official website: [boxrec.com/media/index.php/Rules\\_of\\_Boxing](http://boxrec.com/media/index.php/Rules_of_Boxing). 12 March 2013 (Accessed November 6<sup>th</sup>, 2015).

## Chapter One

### **The Fancy Mess:<sup>1</sup>**

Current Understandings of Boxing and the Female Boxer in Art and Sociology

*"Boxing is a rather amorphous body, though recognizable because it is headless."*

– Bob Verdi

*"The drama of 'ourselves in our situations' exists only by repressing other selves, other situations."*

– Elin Diamond

### **1.0. Introduction**

The organizing principle of this chapter is the investigation of two pieces of contemporary artwork: Elena Kovylyina's 2005 *Boxing Performance* and Senam Okudzeto's 2001 *Long Distance Lovers*. Each of these depicts the female boxing body. Parallel to each piece of art, I will look at current sociological texts that have been published on the subject of the female boxer. I hope to uncover the ways in which the two fields of knowledge construct the subject, reflect each other, and possibly point towards areas that remain unconsidered. I have found that the figure of the female boxer, as reflected in the texts and artworks in this chapter, is commonly understood via three conceptualizations; gender transgression, authenticity, and socioeconomic/emotional turmoil.

In Elena Kovylyina's piece *Boxing Performance*, there is a central emphasis on the female boxer body as transgressive. Additionally, Kovylyina presents a complicated figure, one that is both performing and also not. In these ways, the piece parallels current sociological discourse and thus, *Boxing Performance* permits me to utilize the piece as a platform from which to consider the concepts of transgression and authenticity as they affect our understanding of the female boxer. A crucial element of my approach is that I do not consider the sport of women's (and girls) boxing to be feminist performance, although I do

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<sup>1</sup> Lee, Bruce. *The Tao of Jeet Kun Do*. Santa Clarita: Chara Publications, 1975, p.14: "Real combat is not fixed and is very much alive. The fancy mess (a form of paralysis) solidifies and conditions what was once fluid, and when you look at it realistically, it is nothing but a blind devotion to the systematic uselessness of practicing routines or stunts that go nowhere."



posit that understanding it as such is part of a dominant discursive perception, as demonstrated in the sociological texts analyzed in this chapter.

The construct of gender transgression is problematic here because it implies that a female boxer is not 'acting like' a female. When the notion of gender transgression forms the basis of understanding of the female boxer, I suggest that what often follows this understanding is a perception that when a female boxes, she is 1. Performing a piece of theatre because she is not behaving genuinely and, 2. It is often acceptable to require proof of and also question her motivation, skill, and authenticity. In addition to the framework of gender transgression, 'authenticity' is a conception that, to my mind, informs common perceptions of the female boxer. The notion of authenticity weaves throughout my investigation of the represented boxing body and it is intertwined with gender. As I progress through the works, I will clarify the ways in which the concept of authenticity is deployed. Finally, I am addressing the notion that the female boxer is in a state of turmoil. This understanding is present in both in sociological studies and contemporary artworks. I will address this third conceptualization more in my investigation into Senam Okudzeto's *Long Distance Lovers*.

### 1.1. Boxing Performance, Elena Kovylyina, 2005

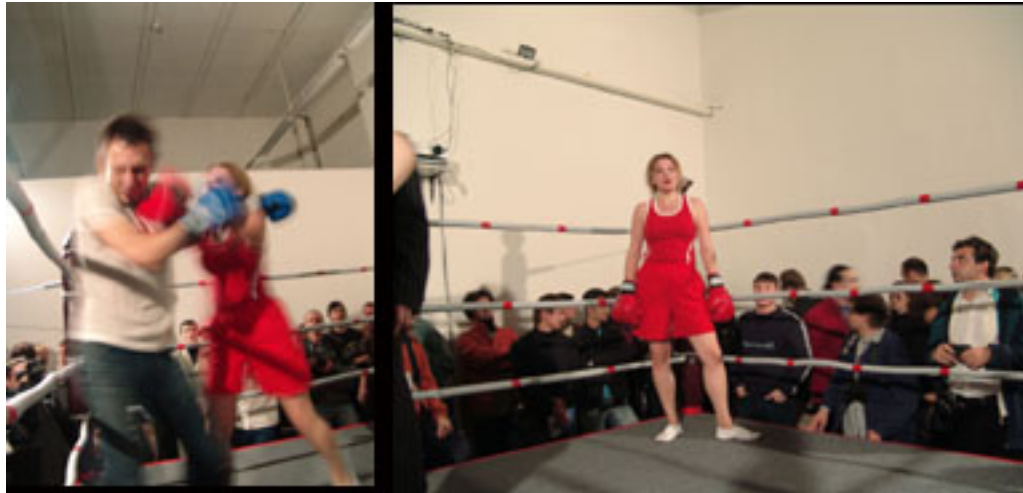


Figure Three

Kovylyina's performance piece was staged in a regulation size (20' x 20') boxing ring installed in XL Gallery in Moscow, a white-cube style gallery exhibition space. During the performances, the artist got in the ring wearing red boxing trunks, a red vest, and boxing gloves and remained there for the duration of the hour-long performance. She did not have head, mouth or breast protection, nor was she wearing boxing boots. She challenged only men from the audience to don gloves (the men did not have head, mouth or groin protection) and box her. The artist had no boxing training and the experience of the participating men was random.

There are obvious differences between the overall action in *Boxing Performance* and an actual boxing match; boxing matches usually do not happen in galleries and men and women do not compete against each other in the sport of boxing. But perhaps the more significant differences occur in the details. Neither Kovylyina nor her opponent had anyone in his or her corners to assist them, nor did the referee do anything other than declare a winner at the end of an untimed session. In an actual boxing match, the rounds are timed and the boxers return to their corners for water, instruction, and to be cleaned up, if necessary. The referee makes sure that the rules of the sport are being followed and will stop the

match if one of the boxers gets injured or is unable to defend themselves. In *Boxing Performance*, the end of the session was determined when the referee decided to stop the action and declare a winner, a decision that was not based on the amount of time the two people had spent in the ring, nor on points scored, but rather on his opinion. Because of these factors, the action had a worrisome momentum, one that was determined and perpetuated only by the two people fighting and, therefore, could lead to serious injury.

There were other significant deviations from what typically happens at a boxing match in the movements of the bodies in the piece as well. The men invariably made pawing, slapping motions towards Kovylyna, with their gloves open and their arms extended to keep her at bay. When she got close to them or made contact in some way, they turned away from her with their arms covering their face or used their feet to get out of range. Kovylyna was never punched in the face with a closed fist, although a few men did make fisted contact with her stomach area. Kovylyna also did not make many movements or gestures that take place in the sport of boxing. Her stance was square, with the front of her body parallel facing the front of her opponent's body. From this position, she threw punches that originated in force from her shoulders or elbows, not rotating her waist or hips, and she lifted her feet off the ground when she reached in with her torso to attempt to connect with her opponent. Her face was left exposed throughout every session. The piece was performed only a few times before it was determined to have too high a risk for injury.

From my perspective, no one was boxing in *Boxing Performance*. While I acknowledge and support that questioning intention and enactment is the prerogative of the artist, I find that the physical motions of the performers in Kovylyna's piece could perpetuate the understanding of the female boxer as existing primarily as a transgressor and enactor, rather than as a genuine athlete. If Kovylyna's boxer is not a genuine athlete, then she is, in many ways, pretending. Although it is entirely valid for Kovylyna to perform and move her body in any way that she requires to make her art or be a person in the world, *Boxing*

*Performance*, because it is not a boxing match yet incorporates aspects of the actual sport, allows me to shine a light on uncertainties around authenticity and its relationship to the female boxer. From this essentially formal perspective, I am suggesting that Kovylyna is reinscribing gender prejudice; that of women “needing attention directed upon our bodies to make sure they are doing what we wish them to do, rather than paying attention to what we want to do through our bodies.”<sup>2</sup>

Kovylyna claims, despite the title, that *Boxing Performance* is *not* a performance but rather a “real life situation.”<sup>3</sup> This claim is verified by the fact that the participants in the piece are actually punching each other, not performing stunt tricks that mimic fighting. Although the use of her body is explicit in the piece, Kovylyna's intentions for *Boxing Performance* are not directly about the physical body.

Kovylyna is an artist whose confrontational performances concern the political significance of a woman's experience in Russia today... In her show *Boxing Performance* (2005) Kovylyna appropriates the image of a macho woman by challenging a male volunteer from the audience to spar with her in the boxing ring. The artist could intend to let herself be defeated by a man. Through the act of a fair fight Kovylyna challenges the contemporary status of Russian men who lost their previous superiority and are now having to compete against the strengthening position of women.<sup>4</sup>

The artist elaborates on this description:

I was trying to minimize acting and maximize the so-called ‘presence’, which leads us to the notion of reality. I am modeling real situations and constructing specific relations between myself and the spectator within these situations. It wasn't until my last performance, *Boxing Performance*, that I introduced a clear arbitrator. In this performance, a referee differentiates between winners and losers. The spectator can win over the artist, and the opposite is also true.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Young, Iris Marion. ‘Throwing Like A Girl’. *On Female Body Experience: “Throwing like a Girl” and Other Essays*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2005, pp.146-7.

<sup>3</sup> Sorokina, Elena. *Conversations with the Artist Elena Kovylyna*. [www.nyfa.org/elena-kovylyna](http://www.nyfa.org/elena-kovylyna), January 2006. (Accessed October 4<sup>th</sup>, 2013)

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

Kovylina is using boxing to create a performance that represents a political situation and, by actually hitting her participating audience/ fellow performers, to also have an authentic, 'real-time' experience. Thus, Kovylina's boxing body is both a real body enacting and receiving violence and is *also a model* of a body enacting and receiving violence. The division between the 'modeling' and the 'real', and the possibility, in the piece, that they are one and the same, is where I am focusing my analysis in order to raise the following questions: Why is she, as an artist using boxing? What is she hoping to say with it and does she say it? Does she make a valid point?

A final question that I am asking myself is; why does it matter if the boxing is convincing? And if the boxing just a sign, in which case it need not be convincing at all, then why has she gone to the lengths she has to make it even as convincing as she has? Perhaps the notion of convincing is in fact more important than real or authentic. It is certainly the point where I find myself doubting and unraveling Kovylina's work. The answer that I come to, in it's essential form is; if the boxing is not convincing as an image then the metaphor or message is not either.

By stating that the event is real and by titling the piece "*Boxing Performance*", Kovylina is implying that she is 'really' boxing. She is presenting herself as a boxer, however, while her body may be enacting a series of gestures that are sourced from the sport of boxing, she is not in fact a boxer. I am not attempting to create a hierarchy of authenticity, but rather emphasize the importance and effect of intention and naming. Kovylina is dressing up as a boxer, yet does not acknowledge that she is dressing up. From one perspective, Kovylina is exploiting the female boxing body for its dramatic effect and instant association with the act of transgression and dissonance with what she thinks people perceive women, and boxing, to be.

Life is like boxing in many unsettling respects. But boxing is only like boxing.<sup>6</sup>

If Kovylnina had not dressed up as a boxer and performed the piece in a ring, there would be little means with which to discern *Boxing Performance* from a spontaneous act of violence. In this sense, perhaps *Boxing Performance* is a real situation about real violence in the guise of a dramatized presentation of boxing, a possibility that questions the stability of boxing bodies, and also raises some concerns around the components of a 'real situation'. From this angle, Kovylnina's intention and gestures allow the piece to be considered in the context of feminist performance art.

### **1.2. Realism and Reality**

Here I am looking at *Boxing Performance* in the context of realism and performance, via the work of theorist Elin Diamond and also Rebecca Schneider's *The Explicit Body in Performance*, in order to elaborate on my questions about the piece.

Elin Diamond, in her book *Unmaking Mimesis*, posits that a performance including the female body can be resistant because, in collapsing the space of distinction between the literal and the symbolic, the theatrical properties of that space are revealed. The literalization of symbolic equivalences is thus a spatialization as well. She describes realism as having the objective of a truthful representation of social experience within a recognizable moment and, through the unpacking of the specifics of the discourse that has formed around realism, addresses this objective as problematic.

Realism is more than an interpretation of reality passing as reality; it produces 'reality' by positioning its spectator to recognize and verify its truths. The actor/signifier is laminated to her character/signified.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Oates, Joyce Carol. *On Boxing*. New York: Harper Perennial, 1985, p.5.

<sup>7</sup> Diamond, Elin. *Unmaking Mimesis*. London: Routledge, 1997, p.4.

Because realism depends on the existence of a stable reference, an objective world that is the source of knowledge, it supports the arrangements of this world.

Although Kovylyna states that her boxing body is representing a political situation in Russia and, therefore, acknowledges that the piece is about something other than boxing, I am not convinced that the performance allows for space between the signified and the real. Beyond Kovylyna's statement that Boxing Performance is a "real life situation rather than a piece of acting,"<sup>8</sup> she wants to communicate, via her body, a political situation in Russia having to do with power shifts between men and women. In her performance as a boxer challenging men in the audience to fight her, her actual movements are meant to correspond with the movement between culturally constructed situations and the physical body. However, I find that the primary reason that there is not space between the signified and the real is because there is actual violence taking place in the performance. Violence is violence. Therefore, the piece also *must be about boxing*. Kovylyna could have used another form, but she chose boxing and her enactment of the sport, however unconvincing to me, has real effects on the physical body, and thus fuses the real and the act.

The need for essential self-conscious commentary by the female performer is articulated by Diamond in regard to the historical figuration of the female body, as both crude materiality and irreparable lack in Western metaphysics.<sup>9</sup> Due to this defining narrative, she asserts that in their historical experience, "women are burdened with an extra duplicity. Doubling the appearance of every woman, whether in a bar or a performance space, is some version of the heterosexist fantasy – lure and prop to masculine mastery."<sup>10</sup> Therefore, she proposes, "a critical practice based on this body...in which an actor's body is trained to

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<sup>8</sup> Sorokina, Elena. *Conversations with the Artist Elena Kovylyna*. [www.nyfa.org/elena-kovylyna](http://www.nyfa.org/elena-kovylyna), January 2006. (Accessed June 14th, 2016)

<sup>9</sup> Phelan, Peggy. *Unmarked*. London: Routledge, 1993; and Dolan, Jill. *Presence and Desire: Essays on Gender, Sexuality, and Performance*. Ann Arbor, MN: University of Michigan Press, 1992, for in-depth examination and analysis of the female body as it exists in Western theory and discourse in the context of performance.

<sup>10</sup> Diamond, p.152.

encode historical resistance."<sup>11</sup> Diamond's assertion is that the signified is *precisely taken for the real*. The possibility for resistance against the imposition of signification on the female body is in the revelation of the space of distinction between the symbolic and the real.

Schneider focuses on the paradigm of nineteenth-century female hysteria<sup>12</sup>, as it is addressed in performance art, to exemplify 'explosive literality', a term she introduces in her book *The Explicit Body in Performance*. The trick, as Schneider describes it, is for the performer to simultaneously speak the symptomatology explicitly and escape the very signification of which her body speaks. The performer would have to comment on the hysteria at the same time as she exhibits it. Her physical actions, as demonstrations of the ways in which intangible systems are literally impacting the corporeal realm, would have to be clearly communicative of their status as demonstrations and, paramount to fruitful understanding, offer a commentary on the origins of their (or her) own movement. Diamond chimes with this demand by articulating the need for feminist performance to frame the ways systems of meaning are marked upon literal bodies and expose the 'reality effects' of those engenderments upon those who live in and wield patriarchally marked, engendered bodies.<sup>13</sup>

The version of boxing that Kovylyna gives us, to my mind, illustrates Joyce Carol Oates' opinion that "raw aggression is thought to be the peculiar province of men...the female boxer violates this stereotype and cannot be taken seriously – she is a parody, she is a cartoon, she is monstrous."<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, p.39.

<sup>12</sup> Schneider, Rebecca. *The Explicit Body in Performance*. London: Routledge. 1997

Also see: Maines, Rachel. *The Technology of the Orgasm: 'Hysteria', the Vibrator, and Women's sexual satisfaction*. Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1998; Showalter, Elaine. *Feminism and Hysteria: The Female Malady*. New York: Penguin Books, 1985, pp.159-64; Schutzman, Mady. *The Aesthetics of Hysteria: Performance, Pathology, and Advertising*. Ann Arbor, Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1994.

<sup>13</sup> Diamond, 'Mimesis, Mimicry, and the True-Real.' *Modern Drama*, 32 No.1, 1989, pp.58-72.

<sup>14</sup> Oates, p.73.



Furthermore, if the mechanisms of realism can be applied to the role given by Kovylyna to the spectator as truth-seeker, she does not need to know how to box in the way that boxing happens within the sport of boxing in order to be deemed a 'real' boxer. Realism's audience is "assured of completing the narrative, of judging the truth."<sup>15</sup> Kovylyna's male audience/co-performers are also invited to discover the truth, to confirm that the reflection in the mirror that she is holding up is 'real life'. They are invited to physically verify the artist's body by hitting her. From this position, she is presenting a female body that, in order to be seen, must provide touchable proof of her legitimacy. In this piece Kovylyna is standing in for all women, and she, problematically from my perspective, is using boxing as the cipher.

### **1.3. Brain and Brawn**

I am considering the possibility that, in indicating the male/female gender binary via an enactment of a 'gendered' activity using 'switched' gender roles, the notion of gender transgression itself becomes absorbed into the very construction it is presumably meant to be challenging. Inherent in the enactment of any activity as a gendered one, is an acceptance of the system that assigns the category 'male' or 'female' to individual actions. Kovylyna challenges this system. However, her stated intention to, "partake in a masculine activity,"<sup>16</sup> indicates an intention to transgress a perceived gender barrier, which re-inscribes gender stereotypes.

Christine Mennesson writes: "The categories of sexual identity in sport are structured according to a binary logic of athleticism=masculinity. Female boxers threaten this dualistic gender regime because they display strength, violence, and control – characteristics that have usually epitomized hegemonic masculinity."<sup>17</sup> While most sociologists involved in the discourse around the female boxer are critical of this regime, they, nonetheless, present their subject

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<sup>15</sup> Diamond, 1997.

<sup>16</sup> Sorokina, 2006.

<sup>17</sup> Mennesson, p.22.

as a transgressive one, thus re-inscribing the boundaries that form a gender binary, as is Kovylna by aiming to partake in a “masculine activity.”

An example of this approach is in the work of Jennifer Hargreaves, an esteemed sports sociologist and theorist. She explains her interest in the female boxer as being firmly based in the subject's capacity to challenge historical gender enactments: “One of the reasons that I looked at women's boxing in the first place is because it appears to deconstruct the ‘normal’ symbolic boundaries between male and female in sport – the opposition between masculine and feminine, based on the body, argued by Pierre Bourdieu to constitute ‘the fundamental principle of division of the social and symbolic world.’”<sup>18</sup> Hargreaves articulates the gendered body as the primary stumbling block for female athletes in her book, *Sporting Females: Critical issues in the History and Sociology of Women's Sports*. The assumptions that form the spine of her position are that: a) muscles are for men, b) athletes are exceptionally muscular, and c) it is unwomanly to be too muscular. Hargreaves concludes that the ways in which a female athlete's body compares to that of a male body must be identified in order for her to be understood. Although Hargreaves's argument seems to be about the female athlete's physiognomy, it is important to note that she focuses on features that do not necessarily have any connection to athletics. Her analysis of the female athlete is based in the female athlete's methods of dealing with conventional perceptions and prejudices. Hargreaves implies that these methods, which really do not have anything to do with athletic ability, practice, or experience, are the subject's most important characteristic.

The idealized male sporting body has been a popular symbol of masculinity against which women, characterized as inferior and less powerful, have been measured. The bodily sense of masculinity is used to enforce hegemonic masculinity and its exaltation over women. The female athlete is defined by how she overcomes or accepts these ideological barriers.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Hargreaves, p.33.

<sup>19</sup> Hargreaves, p.153; Boutilier & SanGiovanni. *The Sporting Woman*. London: Human Kinetics Books, 1983, p.xiii: Billy Jean King's defeat of Bobby Riggs in singles tennis is cited as a milestone in the debate over women's place in sports.

Hargreaves's is presenting the ideal male sporting body as a threatening symbol, one that is central to the experience of the female athlete, both as a tool of patriarchal oppression and as an aesthetic to be avoided. While Hargreaves's point is valid and continues to be concerning, I would also argue that the daily creative practice of improving performance, speed, strength, agility, and originality is, in fact, the primary center of a female athlete's experience of herself.

Mary A. Boutilier and Lucinda SanGiovanni articulate another theme under the umbrella of the gender binary in sports feminism in their 1984 book *The Sporting Woman*. This is the suggestion that females can contribute an emphasis on fairness and integrity in sport as opposed to the existing male-oriented emphasis on competition and productivity, that a feminine model of sports would be different from a masculine one. "Feminine qualities"; cooperative, nurturing, intuitive, process-oriented, yielding, compassionate, are described in their text as a defining difference between men and women.<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, it is asserted that, by carrying these qualities into sporting roles, women could transform sport itself: "Women could very well succeed in developing a social model in which the younger generation can be socialized with values stressing cooperation rather than antagonism, participation and self-actualization rather than confrontation and domination."<sup>21</sup> By polarizing the above terms as either masculine or feminine and suggesting that women are in some way responsible for bringing warmer, more 'female' values into sports (assuming that sport could use these values in the first place, which is a different discussion but in need of mentioning), 'other' characteristics, such as competitiveness, goal-orientation, aggression, even the will to dominate and antagonize are elided in favor of an ultimately essentialising focus that emphasizes a gendered system of categorization. I am arguing that the attempt to empower women by endowing

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<sup>20</sup> Boutilier, Mary and SanGiovanni, p.67.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*, p.20.

them with 'positive' transformative qualities is, in fact, disempowering and deeply frustrating.

In recent years, some sociological texts on female boxing have started to question the validity of the masculine/feminine binary and also look at the concept of gender transgression with a more critical eye. In an analysis on the 'sexual equality' versus 'sexual difference' debate, in an article titled *Boxed In: Muscling in on Masculine Identities*, Rachel Morley writes that both positions, "cannot and do not escape the paradigm which understands the body as a given biological entity which either has or does not have particular historical capacities and characteristics."<sup>22</sup> Much of Morley's article is focused on factual information and proof that, "women's exclusion from boxing is largely based on archaic notions of what constitutes male and female identities."<sup>23</sup> She argues that these archaic notions fail to take into account the historical evolution of both male and female bodies and the evolving and diverse modes of gendered experience. She concludes by stating that the relevant question is actually not 'why' women box, but 'why not' (she also clarifies that she, for one, "cannot understand the physical attraction").<sup>24</sup> In some ways, she is calling for the concepts of gender construction to be questioned and the subsequent de-prioritization of 'appropriate' feminine and masculine behavior. This direction of thought is related to a supposition of Judith Butler; "gender would be a kind of cultural/corporeal action requiring a new vocabulary that institutes and proliferates present principles of various kinds, re-signifiable and expansive categories that resist both the binary and substantialising grammatical restrictions of gender."<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Morley, Rachel. 'Boxed In: Muscling in on Masculine Identities'. *Journal of Australian Studies*, 2004, p.7.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*, p.12.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid*, p.1.

<sup>25</sup> This concept of Butler's influences my next chapter, which is centered on theories of embodied identity construction and I have included it not only to give Morley's suggestions a frame of reference, but also as an indicator of the greater context I hope this thesis is engaged with. Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and Subversion of Identity*. London: Routledge, 1990, p.112.

I posit that Kovyulina's *Boxing Performance* is presenting the female boxer from three angles. First, the artwork shows the female boxer to be a transgressor. Second, Kovyulina's female boxer is a theatrical performer. Third, the artist requires her audience to witness the physical proof of her boxing body. Within these representations, Kovyulina is both making the female boxer irresolute and also re-inscribing cultural norms. What does this mean for the female boxer, rather than the artist, who would not experience herself as transgressing, performing, or asking to be touched?

#### **1.4. The Authentic Object: Hard vs. Soft**

In ethnographic research as well as more diverse cultural usages – such as literature, media promotions and contemporary art – there is often a dualistic approach to male boxers that divides the subjects into two camps: Good vs. Bad.<sup>26</sup> In ethnographic work, there is a parallel pair of boundaries being constructed for the female boxer: Hard vs. Soft. This grouping process is generally bolstered by an emphasis on 'authenticity', which is achieved through the use of interviews and verbatim quoting, thus providing what I see to be an often simplified sound bite of the subjects' imagined voice. What is the authentic voice of the female boxer? How does one person support their own agenda by activating the voice of another? Can the female boxer's voice be heard clearly in the context of an ethnographic study that is authored by someone else? This entire thesis is my voice, that of a boxer, and I consider it to be an expression of my intention to shape my own creative destiny. I am using Nikolas Coupland's explanation of 'authentic object' from his book *Style: Language Variation and Identity*:

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<sup>26</sup> Woodward, Kath. 'Rumbles in the Jungle: Boxing, Racialization and the Performance of Masculinity', *Leisure Studies*, 2004, 23:1, pp.5-17; Piper, Keith, 'Four Corners: A Contest of Opposites', *Boxer; An anthology of writings on Boxing and Visual Culture*. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1996, pp.71-80; Jeffrey, Sammons.T. 'Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass: An American Slave.' *Beyond the Ring: The Role of Boxing in American Society*. New York: Signet Press, 1968, p.31; Marqusee, Mike. 'Sport and Stereotype: From role model to Muhammad Ali', *Race and Class*, Volume 36. London: Institute of Race Relations, 1995, p.3; Berube, Maurice. 'Defeat of the Great Black Hope', *CommonWealth*, 1971; Henessey, John. *Mike Tyson*. NY: Magna Books, 1990; Watson, Elwood. *Pimps, Wimps, Studs, Thugs and Gentlemen: Essays on Media Images of Masculinity*. NY: McFarland Press, 2009; Malcolm X. Breitman, George (ed). *Selected Speeches and Statements of Malcolm X*. New York: Grove Press, 1994.

The things we consider authentic have a real existence, as opposed to a spurious or derived existence. The significance of declaring something to be an authentic object is to put its identity beyond challenge. An authentic object has value. Because authentic things are ratified in a culture, they have definite cultural value. They are anchoring points – things one can hold on to.<sup>27</sup>

I focus in particular on Christine Mennesson's article '*Hard' Women and 'Soft' Women: The Social Construction of Identities Among Female Boxers*, as well as considering other related articles. Mennesson aims to identify how, through an ethnographic study of 12 female boxers in France, women enter and stay involved in boxing, and the types of identities they forge in the process. She concludes that women occupy an ambivalent position; "on the one hand, by definition, they challenged the existing gender order; on the other hand they also reinforced the status quo by displaying traditional modes of femininity. This tension was related to modalities of boxer's practice ('hard' or 'soft') and their social histories."<sup>28</sup> This type of dichotomy is present throughout the history of female boxing and has been consistently relied upon in the presentation of female boxing as either a frivolous novelty (soft) or as a violent aberration (hard).<sup>29</sup>

Mennesson uses Bourdieu's concept of *habitus* theory in her research. The *habitus* is not defined as a system of definitively acquired tendencies, but rather as a group of partial predispositions that are subject to modification and are strongly influenced by the confirmation of other people.<sup>30</sup> Mennesson asserts that the social backgrounds and personal history of the female boxers in her study determine whether they will be 'hard' or 'soft' boxers. The findings of her study of 12 individuals support her expectation; women who have educational difficulties

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<sup>27</sup> Coupland, Nikolas. *Style: Language variation and Identity*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007, p.181.

<sup>28</sup> Mennesson, Christine. "'Hard' Women and 'Soft' Women: The Social Construction of Identities among Female Boxers', *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, Vol 35, 2000, pp.21-33.

<sup>29</sup> Hargreaves, Jennifer. 'Women's Boxing and Related Activities: Introducing Images and Meanings', *InYo: Journal of Alternative Perspectives*, Sept 2001.

<sup>30</sup> Bourdieu, Pierre. *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977.

and who come from working class backgrounds are more likely to be 'hard' boxers, where participants only wear mouth and groin protection, employ full force blows, can suffer severe injury, and also have a better chance of being paid to fight. Those who succeed in school and come from middle-class backgrounds are more likely to be 'soft' boxers, where the emphasis is on point scoring, and the participants rarely fight for money, as well as wearing helmets and padded protectors over much of their bodies.

Coupland explains the power of labeling something 'authentic object' as granting that something "an identity beyond challenge."<sup>31</sup> I am suggesting that Mennesson's interviews with her subjects are intended to be read as authentic objects.

Mennesson asserts that women coming to boxing invariably find themselves in a lonely and unfamiliar position yet persevere in the sport because of their predisposition to "engage in a rough physical activity such as boxing"<sup>32</sup> as part of their confirmation of a counter-identity. She is trying to prove that only certain types of women are drawn to the sport of boxing and the common denominator is that they have experienced adversity in their lives. According to Mennesson's study, this is true for both 'hard' boxers and 'soft' boxers. Apparently, the more difficult their initial identity formation, the harder or more violent they become as boxers. In support of this position, she includes quotes from boxers such as this one:

In the beginning I didn't want to punch, I found it ugly...I couldn't manage to throw punches, I told myself in my head, it's because you're a girl. I regard myself as someone who is intellectual. I was not a mean fighter in the ring. (Julie)<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Coupland, Nikolas. *Style: Language Variation and Identity*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007, p.181.

<sup>32</sup> Mennesson, Christine. 'Hard' Women and 'Soft' Women: The Social Construction of Identities Among Female Boxers'. *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*. March 2000, pp.21-33.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid. p.25

This is a quote taken from one of the 'soft' boxers who, as an educated 'intellectual' has more cultural capital than one of her less educated peers. There is nothing inherently problematic about using this quote to illustrate a point, however, Mennesson presents it as proof that "all the boxers are faced with reassessing their identities."<sup>34</sup>

Another example of this valorization of subject quoting is in Yvonne Lafferty and Jim McKay's 2004 study, *Suffragettes in Satin Shorts? Gender and Competitive Boxing*. One of the main arguments of this study is that in Australian boxing gyms, male boxers are given priority over female boxers by the trainers. This is an important point because it addresses a need for the female boxer to be counted as well as drawing attention to a sexist situation. However, without the addition of in-depth examination, Lafferty and McKay's utilization of verbatim quoting functions as a problematic resolving element, one that resists questioning or analysis by virtue of the words having come directly from the subjects;

The session was highly segregated along gender lines. During the first hour, men monopolized the centrally located punching bags and speedballs, meaning that the women had to scramble for the bags at the far end of the room:

Q: I noticed you and your (female) partner tend to use the bags towards the back of the room. Is there a reason for this?

Holly: We have a better chance to get them. Sometimes it's a bit of a fight to get a bag so we always position ourselves in the line so by the time the half hour of air boxing is up we'll be near the back towards the most number of boxing bags. We've got strategies; there's only two or three up front near the ring so we've got less of a chance if we're positioned near one, so we kind of split up, so that hopefully one of us will be near one of those bags and we'll just grab it.<sup>35</sup>

The issue I have with utilizing 'verbatim' interviews as proof of fact is that this method can serve to misrepresent the subjects as well as reducing them to

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Lafferty, Yvonne & Jim McKay, 'Suffragettes in Satin Shorts? Gender and Competitive Boxing.' *Qualitative Sociology* Vol. 27 No.3, 2004, p.11.



theoretical buttresses. As a female boxer, I do not identify with the categories in Mennesson's study and I do not hear my own voice in these quotes.

In terms of the 'hard' and 'soft' categories that firmly place the female boxer in a gender-based category of understanding, quotes by the subject reinforces the framework of masculinity versus femininity, rather than adding nuance to the experience of the subject as seen by the researcher.

I have to say that in the ring you must not be too feminine. The ring is war; to be efficient I'd almost say that you have to be a man, have a man's psychology."

"In the beginning my coach disapproved of my masculine walk and swearing. Now, I watch myself, I play at taking care of my appearance. I'm glad now to be identified as a woman.<sup>36</sup>

These quotes from female boxers are included in Mennesson's text as proof of the importance of gender signification among boxers and also to solidify her position that there are two types of female boxers. Mennesson contends that primary socialization in the form of activities such as 'masculine' games during childhood as well as some history of familial or economic turbulence interacts with the two styles of boxing in the clubs – hard or soft – to produce two distinct modes of femininity. The decision these women make to join the boxing clubs and then to either be hard or soft is based on their upbringing and is only "socially acceptable when it is accompanied by attitudes and behavior that normalized such potentially deviant action."<sup>37</sup> Mennesson is acknowledging that 'new modes' of identity are formed when women box, yet, she is stating that traditional patterns of sexual differentiation are also perpetuated. She, along with Lafferty and McKay, provide proof for her argument by utilizing interviews from her subjects as authentic objects rather than as subjective expressions existing in a specific and often ephemeral context.

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<sup>36</sup> Mennesson, p.28.

<sup>37</sup> Mennesson, p.32.

In a 2010 video piece, I attempted to address the possibility of myself as an authentic object. At the time, I was discovering that many of my peers in the PhD program were interested in seeing me box. I never invited anyone from Goldsmiths to come and see me compete because I could not afford to be distracted and I was reluctant to be in the position of 'performing', especially in a moment when it was crucial that I be completely focused on boxing to the best of my ability. Additionally, I felt that I would be betraying the trust of my trainer, teammates, and opponents by somehow putting them on display. This is not to say that the intentions of my academic and artist friends were not good and supportive. They were genuinely interested in the sport and in me. It is more that I could not reconcile the two worlds without putting my own body at risk. In response to this complicated experience, I made *Studio Heavybag*. I had a heavy bag<sup>38</sup> in my studio and was using it to make a sculpture by covering it in a mosaic of tiny mirror tiles. When it was complete, I was not satisfied with it as an object (I was not angry at it, just unexcited). So one night, in an effort to make better art, I mounted a video camera high in one corner of my studio, which was an 8" by 12" room. I then recorded myself hitting the heavy bag for three minutes, the standard time for a training round. I did not edit the video. I exhibited the piece by projecting the video during a group show that was organized within the program symposium series. The projection took up the entire wall of a small room that was approximately the size of my studio. Viewers could hear the sound of my breathing and hitting the bag through auxiliary speakers.

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<sup>38</sup> A 'heavy bag' is a piece of boxing training equipment, a large cylindrical bag weighing approximately 80 pounds that hangs either from the ceiling or a support. It is used to practice striking and dodging, punch combinations, and for conditioning.



Figure Four

The piece was an effort to share a solitary experience and expand it to include others, to include my cohort of artists and academics. My intention was to present the projected video with no editing, no sound effects, no special lighting, or interpretation- as a kind of offering of vulnerability. I do not consider *Studio HeavyBag* to be a performance piece or a video of a performance. The video itself, ideally projected onto a wall, is the completed work.

Earlier that year, one of the professors on the program asked me; "When is the female boxer? In the kitchen, driving a car, or only in the ring?" It was a bit mocking, but through considering his question, I did clarify to myself that *I am always a boxer* even if I am not actively boxing. Through *Studio HeavyBag*, I was attempting to present the female boxer as an individual with agency rather than as a symbol or as always being representative of a group; as myself on a weeknight, alone in my studio, making a piece of video art for the first time. Once others viewed the piece, multiple interpretations came into play around self-image, violence, destruction, gender, etc. While these readings were interesting and to be expected, my intention- to humanize, diffuse, and variegate the glamour of my "boxing personae" by recording myself in a low-

tech, real (time), and actually quite awkward moment- I felt was not conveyed successfully.

I wanted to reach a deeper connection with other people through my art making, one that did not rely so heavily on the literal story of boxing. After making this piece, I began to consider and experiment with using indirect approaches, mediated/altered imagery and video, and other non-figurative artistic methods for representing the boxing body, in order to make space between my work and the cultural narrative around boxing.

The use of the 'authentic object' occurs in contemporary art about the boxing body<sup>39</sup>, however, it generally has a more multi-directional function than when it is utilized ethnographically. Often artists are on a search for elements that could throw assumptions about the subject into question. In the context of my grappling with the use of 'authentic' images and interviews, ethnography uses empirical evidence to make claims while artists use the empirical to open up debate, re-frame the subject, or to give visual pleasure, among other possibilities. The former has a singular aim, the latter, multiple aims.

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<sup>39</sup> Examples of contemporary art about boxing that utilizes the authentic object: Keith Piper, *Four Corners: A Contest of Opposites* (mixed media), 1995; Ellington Robinson, *We're in this Fight Together* (acrylic, found objects, latex), 2008; Satch Hoyt, *Donkingdom* (mixed medium, boxing gloves, boxing ring), 1999; Gary Simmons, *Everforward* (boxing gloves, embroidery), 1993; Carlos Rolon, *My Father's Wishes* (wallpaper, wood, mirror, bronzed boxing gloves, laces, metal sunglasses, quartz crystals), 2014.

**1.5. Long Distance Lovers, Senam Okudzeto, 2001**



Figure Five



Figure Six

*Long Distance Lovers* is a series of paired female figures painted in watercolor on a 120" x 60" flat background comprised of computer generated A4 British Telecom phone bills. I consider the piece to be an example of artistic deployment of the authentic object as fruitfully inconclusive rather than determining. In every pairing, the figures are wearing boxing gloves and are in a variety of fighting postures. The piece resembles a scroll because of its shape and unframed position on the wall, and also because it seems to tell a story via the calligraphic forms of the figures. Because the figures are all the same size and repeat in a regular linear formation, yet also vary in form, they are like letters or characters. The sequential placement of the figures within the grid format of the background lends themselves to being read, either left to right or top to bottom, as a narrative. Delicate, clear colors are used for the bodies, which are precisely outlined yet have areas of overlap where the hues mix. In addition to the scroll-like chronology of the piece, I am also reminded of early American twentieth-century drawn animation.<sup>40</sup> In the simplest animation technique, a form is drawn repeatedly with slight positional variations on a long roll of looped

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<sup>40</sup> Example of an early American drawn animation film is *The Enchanted Drawing* (Edison, 1900). Actor/Animator J. Stuart Blackton.

paper on a rotating wheel, so that when filmed, the form appears to move. However, it is also clear that the story being illustrated by the figures is not moving beyond the corporate framework implied by the British Telecom background surface. The geometrical composition of the piece implies potential movement yet is also static. The gridded background is composed of pages of generic computer type, each one confining one set of bodies. The sense of imprisonment comes from the formal aspects of the piece. For example, the lines of printed text seem to reference bars and the rows of figures do not disrupt the edges of the pages; each page is its own composition with defined borders and, thus, the bodies, with their avian colors and lines, appear to be caged in. *Long Distant Lovers* shows that the boxing body can be fixed in place and also filled with potential movement.

*Long Distance Lovers* was first shown at the Studio Museum in Harlem in *Freestyle* (2001). The curator Thelma Golden, in an interview, discusses how Okudzeto's material choices reflect a cultural narrative; "the materials of the piece as well as the use of layering are insisting that the space of the body is socialized, always in context, layered by histories personal and international."<sup>41</sup>

Via specific formal choices, Okudzeto indicates the possibilities of her painted bodies in a number of ways. The delicacy of her watercolor rendering shifts the emphasis away from the corporeal experience of fighting and towards a less tangible historical narrative<sup>42</sup>. Okudzeto's political, yet very personalized, female figures indicate a complex function, one that is different from Kovylnina's boxing bodies. The symbolism that the boxing bodies are performing is described by the artist in an interview; "I hope that the viewer sees the piece as a world map that describes both the trajectory of the transatlantic slave trade and the movements of its progeny... The phone calls and figures in *Long Distance Lovers* represent

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<sup>41</sup> Saltz, Jerry. 'Post Black'. *The Village Voice*. May 2001. <http://www.villagevoice.com/news/post-black-6415619>. (Accessed December 16<sup>th</sup>, 2011)

<sup>42</sup> For research on watercolor as a gendered medium, please see Stott, Annette. *Gender Politics of American Watercolor Painting*. Denver, Colorado, University of Denver Press. 2016; Denney, Colleen. *At the Temple of Art: The Grosvenor Gallery, 1877-1890*. London, Associated University Press, 2000. Chapter 4.

the physical movements of my family...also a broader cultural history in the context of the Black Diaspora experience."<sup>43</sup>

The struggling figures represent a challenging personal experience, that of a long distance relationship, a chapter in an intimate history. Okudzeto's material choices reflect her intention to depict this relationship in the much larger problematics of a particular triangulation in the Black Diaspora: Britain, the United States, and Africa. The material signifiers in the artwork for this situation are the authentic phone bills detailing calls between Africa, Britain and the USA, the background of the piece. Okudzeto emphasizes the ways in which the long distance relationship depicted in the piece is informed by an older personal history of hers, one that exists in a similar space of geography and emotion:

The estrangement and abjection (of the figures in the work) come out of the trauma of being forced to move as a political refugee to the West in an alien and sometimes hostile culture... I think my paintings describe the trauma of being trapped between cultures with little hope of rescue.<sup>44</sup>

The documentation of hundreds of long distance phone calls between two people is a tangible manifestation of the ways in which relationships can play out over geographical space and time. The invisible lines of communication created by phone conversations between Africa, Britain, and the USA, trace over slave trade routes; both series of paths share geographical points of origin and departure. A conversation between the artist and Thelma Golden articulates this vacillation:

TG: ...it is significant that you have depicted two women fighting in your episodes, as you have located the place of conflict squarely on the female body. The two figures represent conflicting opinions, ideologies and identities within the same psyche.

S.O: I first developed these figures to function in place of language...the female body is always a core site in the development of language, but usually in quite a violent and traumatic way.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Schoonmaker, T. 'Interview with Senam Okudzeto'. *Freestyle Exhibition Catalogue*. New York, NY: The Studio Museum in Harlem, 2001, p.67.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.



The artist is using her female figures to indicate that boxing holds the potential to convey ambiguous situations containing violence. Because the bodies are boxing, they are meant to indicate emotional upset. Golden describes the piece as having layers of meaning obligating the viewer to, "negotiate with our own consciences, libidos, and identities." She names Okudzeto's figures as, "powerful, sensual, self-destructive females trapped in a love affair that is framed by an automated grid of numbers, times and places that reference biography, geography, and cultural specificity."<sup>46</sup> *Long Distance Lovers* is meant to raise questions about how our bodies are contextualized by systems of society and history. Okudzeto's use of female boxers creates a cross-referencing between the constructions of boxing, individual emotional life, and broader geo-political issues around the Black Diaspora and communication capitalism, thus opening the female-boxer figure up to multiple interpretations that go beyond gender transgression and the fixed system of hard/soft.

Additionally, *Long Distance Lovers* is an example of how the boxing body is used as short hand for socio-historical situations and personal turmoil. Okudzeto has placed her boxing figures in a kind of visual alphabet, where they become a simplified sign. However, this problematic usage is tempered by Okudzeto's nuanced visualization of the geo-political, historical and intimately personal dynamics that can exist in the ether of phone conversation.

At all levels this piece is about communication and language. What better signifier than the telephone... It's really about the idea that a relationship is always a mirror, of yourself, and that you discover more about yourself. And that in the end you can only speak for yourself in that relationship, even if it's two people... So you'll always see my body....<sup>47</sup>

*Long Distance Lovers* presents a dual function of the female boxer; to be both a symbolic identity that stands for conflict *and* to be an example of represented

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<sup>46</sup> Saltz, Jerry. 'Post Black'. *The Village Voice*. May 2001. <http://www.villagevoice.com/news/post-black-6415619>. (Accessed December 16<sup>th</sup>, 2011)

<sup>47</sup> Schoonmaker, T. 'Interview with Senam Okudzeto'. *Freestyle Exhibition Catalogue*. New York, NY: The Studio Museum in Harlem, 2001, p.68

corporeality that, through associations with inconclusive histories, unresolves the identity and disrupts interpretation of the subject.

### **1.6. Toil and Trouble**

The condition of turmoil is also present in many published sociological texts written on the cultural subject of women who box, yet rarely with the space for multiple interpretations.

The notion of emotional turmoil connects to the political and historical position that sport is a masculine domain and the female athlete is primarily considered in terms of her navigation of this domain.<sup>48</sup> Here, I am focusing on instances when the personal difficulties in the lives of the women being studied are offered up as the reason that they choose to box. In Rachel Morley's previously mentioned article, she identifies how the gender line contributes to the perception of the female boxer subject:

In contemporary terminology, the sexual division between men and women is partly defined by the notion that 'aggression' is 'male' and 'passivity' is 'female', two notions that lend themselves to a policing, and as a consequence, disciplining of bodies. However, as boxer Mischa Merz argues, women can be as aggressive and violent in their behavior as men. It is equally true that from an early age, women are made aware of obstacles to, and the confinement of, their corporeal specificity and the expression of their own desires, based on the basic modalities of feminine body comportment.<sup>49</sup>

Morley is emphasizing the polarizing power of the either/or of 'masculine and feminine' and is naming it as a troubling presence for women who are experiencing the desire to behave in ways that are typically male. Therefore, it is implied that when women participate in activities that are typically for men, such as boxing, certain social pressures are built into their experience and they must contend with them. Morley is also asserting that a disruption of accepted

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<sup>48</sup> Fausto-Sterling, *Sexing the Body: Gender Politics and the Construction of Sexuality*. New York, NY: Basic Books, 2000. Coventry, B. 'On the Sidelines: Sex and Racial Segregation in Television Sports Broadcasting'. *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 21, 2004, pp.322-341.

<sup>49</sup> Morley, p.4.

modalities is required for female boxers to engage in an activity labeled as 'male'. Thus the identity narrative of the female boxer again begins with essentializing gender as well as conflict and subversion.

Christine Mennesson agrees with Morley that boxing, when undertaken by females, is in direct correlation to difficulty in their personal lives. In a findings section titled 'Becoming a Female Boxer' in her previously addressed text, *'Hard' Women and 'Soft' Women: The Social Construction of Identities Among Female Boxers*, Mennesson investigates the social backgrounds of her subject group in the context of what she describes as a 'competitive sports habitus' in order to understand the identity formation process that leads her subjects to box. In her introduction, Mennesson writes: "habitus is not defined as a system of necessarily homogenous tendencies that are definitively acquired, but rather as a constellation of 'torn', or 'fragmented' predispositions that are subject to modification. Thus this complex has a 'generative capacity' and allows for the development of 'makeshift identities'."<sup>50</sup> Mennesson's findings are presented as revealing the common events in the lives of her subjects that result in the 'counter-identification' that takes place in order for these females to participate in the male activity of boxing. Mennesson's claim is that the process of sexual differentiation among her subjects is indicative of a break in the traditional pattern usually followed by girls, and this claim is supported in the article via the description of common features in the subjects' lives that fall into the category of personal upset. Mennesson states:

Extra-familial features also helped to explain the 'counter-identification' process. Girls who have educational difficulties and who come from working-class backgrounds are more likely to participate in combative sports than are girls who are successful in school. Entry into boxing occurs at a time when females encounter difficulties in school or university. Six of the boxers indicated that they had educational problems; of these, four went on to fail their first year at university...it seems that the educational difficulties the respondents experienced were accompanied by the confirmation of a 'counter-identity'. Thus, perhaps through their sports-specific socialization experiences and their working class origins, the

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<sup>50</sup> Mennesson, p.21.

respondents were predisposed to engage in a rough physical activity such as boxing... Suggest(ing) a successful encounter between their socio-physical tendencies and the technical and symbolic characteristics of boxing.<sup>51</sup>

Both Mennesson and Morley present this perspective in the context of gender identity processes. The female boxer is understood by both theorists as being difficult and 'in trouble' and therefore predisposed to enact their emotional and social experiences with their bodies, thus implying that the only reason a woman would use her body to box is because she needs to process or respond to her social or historical troubles. This view is also manifested in *Long Distance Lovers*, which relies on the acceptance of internal social or emotional hardship as an inherent component of the collective understanding of the female boxer.

Okudzeto's female boxers and the subjects described by Morley and Mennesson are similar because they both represent a generality. The very outlines of their bodies are presumed to contain disruption because the cultural character of the female boxer body is accepted as being an avatar of transgression and disturbance. In some ways, *Long Distance Lovers* is in harmony with sociological uses of the female boxing body. Yet, this artwork (and to a degree, *Boxing Performance* as well) also challenges certain assumptions about the subject that are present in sports sociology, thus creating a space of necessary irresolution and revealing pathways into further investigation into the delineations of the boxing body. Ultimately, the gender binary is not necessarily something to be overcome per se. Rather, I am interested in questioning the boundaries that define this binary and exploring the ways in which art-making can contribute to the development and fluidity of our understanding of the female boxer. Furthermore, the perspective and physical reality of the boxer him or herself must be thoroughly considered in discourse about boxing.

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<sup>51</sup> Mennesson, Christine. "Hard' Women and 'Soft' Women: The Social Construction of Identities Among Female Boxers'. *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*. March 2000, p.26.

## Chapter Two

### **Sure the Fight was Fixed. I Fixed it with my Right Hand.<sup>1</sup>**

Agency and Vacillation: The activated boxing body within contemporary art  
schema

*“How does a body perform its way out of a definitional framework that is not only responsible for its very construction, but seems to prescript every possible signifying and counter signifying move as a selection from a repertoire of possible permutations on a limited set of predetermined terms?” - Brian Massumi*

#### **2. 0. Introduction**

George Foreman, a famous champion heavyweight boxer who fought during the 1970s, '80s and '90s, won a championship bout against Michael Moorer and was later asked by an announcer if the match had a pre-determined result (meaning that one or both of the fighters were paid to guarantee a specific outcome; in this case, it implies that Moorer took a dive, or purposefully lost<sup>2</sup>). Foreman replied: “Sure the fight was fixed. I fixed it with my right hand.” Foreman's statement speaks to the relationship between the rigid structure of the boxing match and the corporeal experience of the person boxing; “sure the fight was fixed” refers to the boundaries of the sport and the ring itself, as well as the systems of capitalist economy and corruption that surround the fight. Most importantly, he names the boxer's agency as being within his own body and as containing the force to upend the paradigm that contains him: “**I** fixed it with **my** right **hand**.” The boxer is aware of the colossal complexity of the system and nonetheless knows that his or her own hand is what gives it meaning and power.

George Foreman is a man. However, his statement also applies to issues around female boxers and gender. In this chapter I am continuing to challenge the dominant understanding of boxing that holds it in the realm of masculine identity and life by exploring approaches to representation that reflect less positioned

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<sup>1</sup> George Foreman after his 1994 bout with Michael Moorer.

<sup>2</sup> Dufresne, Chris. 'Boxing: Don't Question Foreman's Great Victory by Crying Fix'. *Los Angeles Times*, November 12<sup>th</sup>, 1994.

understandings. As Foreman implies, boxing is a constructed piece of society, one that is held together in large part by our cultural definitional mechanisms. Chapter One's examination of the role that gender plays in this system of understanding inevitably leads us to the corporeal body, much in the same way that Foreman's right hand is the inescapable answer to the question of the fixed fight.

Following from Chapter One, where I critiqued the gender assumptions around boxing and women boxers particularly, I will now discuss the potential of Brian Massumi's grid.

### **2.1. Movement, Agency, and The Grid**

In *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Sensation, and Affect*, Brian Massumi posits that cultural theory in the past several decades has essentially 'left out' the consideration of movement and sensation in discourse about the body and change. According to Massumi, this is because attention to the literality of movement was deflected by a fear of the 'dumbness' of matter and its subsequent effect on the specificity of the cultural domain. Therefore, the body became thoroughly mediated by a complex system of signification, an oppositional framework that positioned every human body onto its grid of overlapping terms; child, adult, Hispanic, Muslim, straight, lesbian, etc. The result of this discursive understanding of the body is that bodies, as they are connected to subjects, are not understood by the qualities of their movements but rather by their positioning. Massumi refers to this process as a conceptual displacement that ignores the movement and sensation of the body; a sort of freeze-frame that prioritizes an infinite set of possible positioning over the literal movement of the body. What defines the body within this system of pre-determined identity sites is not the movement a body may make within the system, but rather where it started and where it ends up; a tracked jump from one box to another. This means that the transformative quality of movement is lacking.

The quality of movement, a moving body, is that it is indeterminate. It is in a realm of variation. To explain this concept, Massumi uses Bergson's analysis of Zeno's arrow: When Zeno shoots his arrow, he thinks of its flight path as a linear trajectory made up of a sequence of points that the arrow occupies one after the other. However, between one point and the next, there is an infinity of intervening points. If the arrow occupies the first point on its path, it will never reach the next without occupying each of the infinity of points in between and, therefore, will never actually move because its flight path has imploded. The message here is that the arrow did move because it was never *in* any point. It was in *passage* across them all. It is only when the arrow hits its target that its trajectory may be plotted. A body is always moving, therefore, can only be positioned after its movement. This positioning is derived from the movement. Positionality is an emergent quality of movement. That said, the grid does happen and social and cultural determinations feed back into the process. Indeterminacy and determinacy, change and freeze-framing, go together.<sup>3</sup>

Massumi's concepts of the definitional framework and the moving body is an essential reference for my position, detailed in Chapter One, that the boxing body is often a freeze-framed body standing in for other stories. For this chapter, I am continuing to utilize Massumi's grid and will also cite his articulation of the incorporeal element of the human body; that which is in a constant state of variation yet also moves in tandem with the more staked-in determinations of the boxing body as a positioned figure. In order to clarify the role representation has in the vacillation of the subject from fixed to open, I am considering three instances of contemporary art: Karyn Kusama's 2000 independent film *Girlfight*; Paul Pfeiffer's 2001 video work *The Long Count*; James Newitt's 2013 installation *A Sort of Shadow*. These works question the boundaries between the body in action and the body as image, yet also overcome the opposition between the two. Additionally, they attempt to represent the boxer's individual, physical agency and do so from very different approaches.

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<sup>3</sup> Massumi, Brian. *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Sensation, and Affect*. Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2002, 'Introduction'.

The meaning of the word 'agency' in this context is the capacity to act of one's accord, the expression of intelligence in needful or useful action. I contextualize this primary understanding by utilizing a version of agency that comes from Judith Butler's analysis of the intersubjective constitution of subjects in her 2002 *Kritik der ethischen Gewalt* lectures in honor of Theodor Adorno. As discussed by Kathy Dow Magnus in her 2006 article *The Unaccountable Subject: Judith Butler and the Social Conditions of Intersubjective Agency*, these lectures provide a more positive conception of agency than the one implied in some of Butler's earlier works, which I also refer to throughout this project (*Gender Trouble*, *Undoing Gender*, *Bodies that Matter*). In brief, her previously elaborated theory of performativity shows how subjects can gain a kind of liberation through resistance, but it also implies a notion of agency limited to the performance of subversive speech acts. In her Adorno Lectures, however, Butler expands her notion of agency considerably.<sup>4</sup> Butler presents a subject who is brought into being in and through her encounter with others and who also brings other subjects into being through her own acts of questioning and calling. Thus, Butler demonstrates that genuine intersubjectivity cannot arise from either the self-centered search of personal satisfaction or from the endless confirmation of one's own idea of oneself. Quite to the contrary, she reminds us that recognition is not simply an object to be pursued; it is also a practice to be performed. The granting of recognition must be mutual if it is to be at all. In order to be represented, one must be recognized and the role of the subject's agency is crucial in both processes, yet seems to be missing in many practices of representation around the female boxer. Butler also emphasizes that discursive norms transcend the personal existence of each potential subject and that these norms determine the specific ways in which the intersubjective encounter can take place. At the same time, Butler's discursive structures are produced by the

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<sup>4</sup> This lecture series culminates Butler's developing conceptions of agency after *Bodies that Matter* and *Gender Trouble*, ideas that she worked through in *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative*. London: Routledge, 1997.



collective action of concrete subjective agents.<sup>5</sup>

I am deploying this understanding of agency in my focus on the body itself. In the artworks that I am examining, the gestures produced by the boxing body are prioritized, both aesthetically and also in terms of their political and discursive power and place. I am suggesting that, while these gestures are in some ways part of the subject's enactment of cultural norms, they are- as they engage in expansive relationships with diverse elements within these artworks- also inconclusive. They contain Massumi's endless potential to vary.

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<sup>5</sup> Magnus, Kathy Dow. 'The Unaccountable Subject: Judith Butler and the Social Conditions of intersubjective Agency'. *Hypatia*, Volume 21, Number 2, Spring 2006, pp.100-101.

## 2.2. *Girlfight*. Film by Karyn Kusama, 2001



Figure Seven



Figure Eight

I am starting with Karyn Kusama's 2001 feature film *Girlfight* because, unique of the case studies, it tackles the normative assumption that boxing equals masculinity by representing a female boxer. Conversely, because this work is a feature film, it is from a far more conventional medium and much more aggressively funded industry than *The Long Count* or *A Sort of Shadow*.

Diana (Michelle Hernandez), the main character, is painted with often simplistic strokes that mirror much of the ethnographic work on female boxers; she comes from a troubled background and struggles with violent tendencies as well as the social taboo of being a woman who boxes. Within this somewhat clichéd storyline, however, there are many instances of subtlety, in terms of character development and also cinematography. The traditional story progression and

the often simplistic contention the main character has with gender norms, combined with almost surreal, abstracted boxing sequences, allow the female boxer to be both a part of an essentially oppressive cultural framework *and* to be an irresolute body with agency.

It is understood in sociology and mainstream culture that a male boxer must invest in 'masculine' stakes. As Kath Woodward argues in her 2007 book *Boxing, Masculinity, and Identity: The 'I' of the Tiger*, masculine identities are forged in the sport of boxing through training regimes that are discursively regulated by narratives of courage, honor, and heroism.<sup>6</sup> Because these hegemonic understandings are deeply traditional and tied up with other notions of maleness, it is still common for female boxers to be seen as 'doing masculinity'. In *Girlfight*, Diana is part of a conventional narrative yet also embodies a polysemous existence.

The first few scenes of *Girlfight* establish the basic facts of Diana's temperament and her circumstances. She's quick with her fists, getting in fights at school and also having raging arguments with her father. Diana lives in the Red Hook, Brooklyn housing projects with her father, Sandro (Paul Calderon). Sandro is a sullen bully. He forbids his daughter to box and walks out in disgust when he sees her in the ring. The movie's main locus of unresolved pain is in this relationship, between two people who fail utterly to reach each other.<sup>7</sup> The gaze, the importance of looking and being seen, is emphasized throughout the movie, and perhaps most dramatically when Diana confronts her father in a scene towards the end of the movie after she has been training in the gym for months. She stands up for herself for the first time; she chokes him almost to death before collapsing against the wall and saying: "All these years, you just looked right through me...." It is interesting to consider this scene in combination with Pfeiffer's piece, where the boxing bodies of Muhammad Ali and his opponents are literally

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<sup>6</sup> Woodward, Kathy. *Boxing, Masculinity and Identity: the 'I' of the Tiger*. London: Routledge, 2007.

<sup>7</sup> A.O Scott, 'Floating Like a Butterfly, Stinging Like a Bee.' *New York Times*, September 29<sup>th</sup>, 2000.

erased, and also in terms of my claim that the boxing body is chronically oversimplified: The elided boxing body needs to be seen.

*Girlfight* follows a standard sports drama story line; we see a lot of hard training, a few triumphs and setbacks, all on the way to the big fight at the end. Diana is grudgingly admitted to the macho subculture of NYC amateur boxing of the 1990s. Her big break comes when the state declares that amateur bouts and tournaments must henceforth include men and women fighting each other.<sup>8</sup> Diana's character develops: In addition to getting into great shape and finding joy in daily physical achievements, she also becomes more emotionally balanced (no longer getting in fistfights with cheerleaders) and seems to be more at ease and relaxed in general. At the gym, Diana meets Adrian<sup>9</sup>, a young featherweight male and they begin a romance. Eventually they're scheduled to meet in the ring. The bout between Adrian (Santiago Douglas) and Diana happens. Diana wins. Adrian assumes that she no longer wants to be his girlfriend but she convinces him that by fighting her in the ring, he actually gave her true respect and acknowledgement.<sup>10</sup> They stay together and the movie ends.

What follows is a look at the ways in which the final fight forefronts the moving body as a site of potential unfixing and the destabilization of the self/other boundaries. The scene starts out with a fairly standard presentation, seen in both boxing movies and documentary videos. The edge of the frame is determined by the edge of the boxing ring, allowing a little extra room for the audience to be seen. The camera cuts between full body shots of the figures and close-ups of

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<sup>8</sup> Mixed-gender boxing would never happen under any of the regulating bodies that currently govern professional and amateur boxing because of the traditions of the game and also for liability reasons. See Jennings, L.A. 'A Feminist Scholar on Tomorrow Night's possible Mixed-Gender Fight'. *Fightland*, December 19, 2013. [fightland.vice.com/blog/a-feminist-scholar-on-tomorrow-night's-possible-mixed-gender-fight](http://fightland.vice.com/blog/a-feminist-scholar-on-tomorrow-night's-possible-mixed-gender-fight). (Accessed November 18<sup>th</sup>, 2015).

<sup>9</sup> This was also the name of the female love interest in the *Rocky* movies.

<sup>10</sup> A.O Scott in his September 29<sup>th</sup>, 2000 *NY Times* review of this film, describes Rodriguez as "redefining gender." He references athletes like Venus Williams, Rebecca Lobo and Marion Jones as having "given the world a new, intoxicating image of female beauty rooted in power and confidence as well as grace." He states that, "Ms. Rodriguez is the first movie star to embody this new ideal." The problematics around concepts of muscular feminine beauty are many and profound and it is important to note the urgency with which the critic reassures the potential movie-goer that Rodriguez's appearance has an accepted place in the category of beauty.

the fighters' faces. This is a familiar presentation and I found myself watching the scene as I would any other boxing match, trying to figure out the fighters' strategies, assessing skill, creativity, and power.<sup>11</sup>

Slow echo-y piano music is loudly playing. In combination with the markedly different way that this section is presented cinematically, the music underscores its separate-ness because the rest of the film's soundtrack is largely Hip Hop and Reggaeton. As the scene progresses, the music fades out and all that can be heard is an amplified heartbeat, slowed to distortion. The close-ups of the faces begin to intersperse with whiteout screens, a switch too slow to have a strobe effect, but quick enough to be jarring. The cropping of the long shots changes and, instead of being presented with clear shots of the ring and the action, our view is now framed by the ring ropes; big, blurry, askew lines that bisect the action in such a way to imply landscape; strips of unrecognizable shapes moving between two uneven borders. Watching the film in these moments is similar to looking out of the window of a fast moving train.

The perspective in this dream-like scene goes back and forth between that of Diana and her opponent, Adrian. The brief glimpses of Diana and Adrian's faces and bodies are broken up by a blotting-out effect of the boxing glove as it comes near the camera/face or the whiteouts. The result of this editing is that there is no cohesion or integrity to the portrait of Diana or the other fighter. Instead, we experience a rapid-fire breaking up of a clear figure. This mixing effect troubles the solidity of the other as an understandable opposite. As the scene progresses, the heartbeat sound becomes more amplified and even more distorted as the film speed is slowed down and then sped up repeatedly. This altering of 'real-time' motion and sound results in a disruption of sequential time that serves to foreground the corporeality of the figures on screen, through the sensory experience of the viewer.

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<sup>11</sup> The sparring in the film is not staged; Rodriguez actually sparred with professional and amateur fighters at Gleason's gym and many of these sparring matches are included in the film. The boxing in the film is realistic because the actor actually was a beginning boxer, although only during the filming of the movie.

My heart rate quickened in reaction to the double time and slow motion in the boxing sequence, and triggered a curiosity about the effect representation can have on a viewer's body.<sup>12</sup> I find that, as the timing in the scene gets less and less based in real time, the more corporeal my experience of the film becomes. I am no longer trying to 'understand' what is going on. Instead, I am having an intermittent sense-based counteraction.

'Haptic' refers to the sense of touch (from Greek *ἅπτω*: I fasten onto, I touch). It is a form of nonverbal communication and film theorist Vivian Sobchack (and Laura Marks, whose theories I will return to in Chapter Three) has expanded its conceptualization in her book *Carnal Thoughts*, where she refers to the lived body as both providing and enacting a back and forth between subjective feeling and objective knowledge, or the senses and their conscious meaning. She references Steven Shaviro's description of this continuity:

The important distinction is not the hierarchical, binary one between bodies and images, or between the real and its representations. It is rather a question of discerning multiple and continually varying interactions among what can be defined indifferently as bodies and as images; degrees of stillness and motion...The image cannot be opposed to the body, as representation is opposed to its unattainable referent. The flesh is intrinsic to the cinematic apparatus, at once its subject, its substance, and its limit.<sup>13</sup>

In this context, Diana's body becomes a viscerally sympathetic one yet also becomes increasingly difficult to discern as singular. Massumi states: "Sensation is never simple. It is always doubled by the feeling of having a feeling."<sup>14</sup> Although we know that the sequences are depicting a female boxing body, their look and sound allow the subject to be sporadically unmoored from the definitional framework. The scene jumps between a straightforward presentation of a boxing bout and the visually abstract, off-center, blurry, and slow/ fast motion segments detailed above. As the scene progresses, the fighters are framed less

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<sup>12</sup> Gunning, Tom, 'The Cinema of Attractions: Early Film, its Spectator, and the Avant-Garde' in *Early Cinema: Space, Frame and Narrative*. Ed. Thomas Elsaesser, London: BFI, 1990.

<sup>13</sup> Sobchack, Vivian. *Carnal Thoughts*. Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2004, p.61; Shaviro, Steven. *The Cinematic Body*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993, p.255.

<sup>14</sup> Massumi, Brian. *Parables for the Virtual*. Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2002, p.13.

while the referee is focused on more, a dream-like figure in all white, shot from near ground level to create a strange, towering column of stillness around which the motion of the fight swirls. The 'normal' framing of the boxing match gets shorter with each switch and, by the end of the scene, there is just the referee interchanged with the jumbled, ambiguous motion of Diana's experience. Perhaps Kusama is critiquing the notion that the lived experience of boxing can be represented in the usual cinematic framing, a framing that is an accepted fiction in itself. I am taking this proposition a step further by positing that, not only is the cinematic framing a fiction, but the cultural structure where popular understanding holds the sport and its athletes, is also an apologue, one that becomes increasingly attenuated the closer one gets to being inside of the ring.

Diana and Adrian's bodies become interchangeable and the final boxing scene represents an inconclusive and nebulous boxing body, one that could contain more than one person. This depiction of a boxing match dissolves the boundary of 'other' by showing the fight as a singular experience, an energetic merging of individual form. Neither Diana nor Adrian are presented as whole or defined. Rather, their borders merge and it becomes difficult to tell who is who and, therefore, it does not particularly matter who is female or male or winning or losing. This de-prioritization of positioned identity is very far from the perspective of fight fans. To know exactly who a fighter is, who the opponent is, who the champion is, where the fighters are from, is central to the structure of the sport. We need to know if the fighter is female or male, Puerto Rican or Italian, we even need to know exactly how much they weigh, down to the last ounce. This is why the pre-bout weigh-ins, that occur the day before professional matches, are always televised. If a fighter is even an ounce overweight, the fight can be cancelled. Additionally, the cultural identity of a fighter determines their promoted personae and amps up the conflict between opponents. If a fighter has Irish ancestry, they almost always have a shamrock on their boxing clothes, or if a fighter is Mexican, they generally enter the ring in a sombrero. If both fighters are from the Dominican Republic, then their hometowns are the major part of their show biz promotion, and if they are both from the same city, then

their neighborhoods are emphasized- anything to create a cultural or social opposition.

However, in the *Girlfight* boxing scene, these descriptive positionings are impossible to make out and, therefore, the cultural pinpoints in Masumi's interpretational grid, become mixed up.<sup>15</sup> The action of boxing is often one of combination because, in any bout, physical matter such as sweat and blood get mixed and transferred. Via the technical framing of the sequences in the film, the subjective experiences and the cultural positioning of the two people are also combined/blurred.

Any time you start showing a lot of slow motion, you're deciding to create an expressive space, but not show an interest in real time....<sup>16</sup> It was the decision that worked best with the footage I had, to give a sense of something happening that was bigger than what we call reality.<sup>17</sup>

Karyn Kusama's artistic choices as the director of the film allow the boxing body to be a site where identity tropes can be undone. Her methods engage in the baffling that the body acts out upon that which represents it:

Representations...cease to have a settled relationship of symbolic distance from matter and particularly from human bodies. The way bodies are understood to function, the difference between men and women, the nature of passions, the experience of illness, the border line between life and death, are all closely bound up with particular cultural representations, the bodily functions as a kind of 'spoiler', always baffling or exceeding the ways in which it is represented.<sup>18</sup>

The ambiguity of the final boxing scene blurs the lines between Adrian and Diana, between Diana and the viewer, between self and other. I am exploring

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<sup>15</sup> Masumi, Brian. *Parables for the Virtual*. Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2002, p.3.

<sup>16</sup> An intrinsic characteristic of film is that it is never in real time. It seems Kusama was referring to 'real time' in film as occurring when a sequence is presented exactly as it occurs, without any edits or jumps in time.

<sup>17</sup> Fuchs, Cynthia. 'Girlfight', Popmatters.com, <http://www.popmatters.com/review/girlfight/>. (Accessed September 10<sup>th</sup>, 2010)

<sup>18</sup> Gallagher, Catherine and Stephen Greenblatt, *Practising New Historicism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000, p.15.



the paradox that, via this temporary indeterminacy, Diana's unbounded subjectivity and agency emerge as being sited in her body.<sup>19</sup>

Katharina Lindner has a very different response, as articulated in her 2009 essay, *Fighting for Subjectivity: Articulations of Physicality in 'Girlfight'*. Lindner couches her argument in the proposal that the boxing sequences in the film function as a disturbing but powerful articulation of the boxing character's subjectivity, an articulation that is centered on the representation of the boxer's subjective bodily experience in the ring. Lindner asserts that an exploration of the boxing character's subjectivity through the representation of physicality and the subjective, bodily experience of this physicality is productive, however, ultimately disempowers Diana's character.<sup>20</sup> Lindner acknowledges the film's attempt to construct a sense of the protagonist's struggle for a unified gender identity as concentrated on the body in the boxing/training scenes that lead up to the final sequence. She draws parallels between the boxing film and the musical, suggesting, via Rick Altman,<sup>21</sup> that, as the music track during the song and dance 'number' in the musical lifts the image into a "realm above the world of flesh and blood," the climactic boxing sequence in *Girlfight* also renounces the significance of the material body<sup>22</sup>, specifically Diana's "non-normative, ambiguously gendered body." For Lindner, this is highly problematic.

I will argue that the boxing 'numbers' largely function as a (bodily) articulation of Diana's struggle for a unified sense of identity and the embodiment of subjectivity. However, the emphasis on the materiality of the body in earlier 'numbers' is replaced in the final boxing sequence by a sense of abstraction and generic integration. The significance of the physicality of the body in relation to the embodiment of subjectivity is therefore strangely disavowed and the (bodily) agency of Diana's

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<sup>19</sup> Kristeva, Julia. *Colette (European Perspectives: A Series in Social Thought and Cultural Criticism)*. NYC: Columbia University Press, 2005, p.407: "Might not the singular initiative be, in the end, that intimate, infinitesimal, but ultimate force on which the deconstruction of any condition depends?"

<sup>20</sup> Lindner, Katharina, 'Fighting for Subjectivity: Articulations of Physicality in *Girlfight*'. *Journal for International Women's Studies* 10, 2009, pp.4-17

<sup>21</sup> Altman, R. *The American Film Musical*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987.

<sup>22</sup> Grindon, L. 'Body and Soul: The Structure of Meaning in the Boxing Film Genre'. *Cinema Journal* 35 (1996), p.23f; Also see the work of Carolee Schneeman and Ana Mendieta on the embodiment of subjectivity.

character undermined.<sup>23</sup>

Lindner and I agree that the most intense articulation of the protagonist's subjectivity occurs in the final fight sequence and that this sequence is abstract. The depiction of the boxers is removed from the articulation of a 'specific' identity – from the representation of the materiality of the sexed, gendered, raced, and classed body. The socio-economic body is one of separateness and otherness because it is created by a complex series of classifications that identify people as different from one another. In this final sequence, the social positionality of the boxing bodies (male/female, Hispanic/White, winner/loser, etc) is integrated in a blur of movement.

Is it possible for the unidentified or abstract or even erased body to have agency? Lindner does not think so. Where I find the abstraction in the final boxing sequence to be an important and positive move out of Massumi's definitional grid of identity, whose "determinations preexisted the bodies they constructed or to which they were applied,"<sup>24</sup> Lindner finds that this is a 'solution' that "disavows the significance of the body in the context of the socio-cultural problems and conflicts addressed through the interaction between narrative and boxing numbers in the film."<sup>25</sup>

Without categorically denying Lindner's assertion that Diana becomes absorbed into mainstream identity, I argue that this absorption does not occur in the boxing sequences, but rather in the narrative arc of the movie and the ways in which Diana is costumed and how her character is filmed. Additionally, I do not consider Diana, a muscular, athletic woman, as non-normative, despite challenges that she faces throughout the film. Nor do I agree that she qualifies as ambiguously gendered because she does not act like a 'typical girl'. Labeling Diana in this way is more problematic than the possibility that, in her ultimate

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<sup>23</sup> Lindner, pp.4-17

<sup>24</sup> Massumi, Brian, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation*. Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2002, p.4.

<sup>25</sup> Lindner, pp.4-17.

moment of subjectivity, of non-otherness, it is difficult to tell that she is Hispanic, female, and working class. She is undecidable but undecideability is not non-normative. In accepting 'non-normative', one must accept 'normative', yet neither concept holds a fixed position. Judith Butler speaks to the relationship between the concept of the norm and abstraction in her book *Undoing Gender*:

It is no longer possible to think of the norm itself in advance of the consequences of its action, as being in some way independent of them.... The norm produces itself in the production of that field (of application). The norm is actively conferring reality; indeed only by virtue of its repeated power to confer reality is the norm constituted as a norm.<sup>26</sup>

Lindner is invested in the relationship between Diana's physicality and the moments of embodied subjectivity she experiences, as presented in the film's boxing sequences. From Lindner's perspective, the abstraction and ambiguity of the final boxing sequence do not acknowledge this relationship because Diana's corporeal individuation and socio-economic identity is difficult to discern. I question this stance by identifying the abstraction of the subject as relaying a physicality that challenges the validity and finality of the socio-economic identity structure. I find that Kusama's representation of the female boxing body allows for a fruitful commoning; Diana does not need to be overdetermined by race and class in order to be a subject with agency. This leads me back to the idea that the corporeal subject is developing, is actively contributing, rather than being a finalized, silent shape. As Sobchack writes,

As 'lived bodies' (to use a phenomenological term that insists on 'the' objective body as always also lived subjectively as 'my' body, diacritically invested and active in making sense and meaning in and of the world), our vision is always already 'fleshed out'. Even at the movies our vision and hearing are informed and given meaning by our other modes of sensory access to the world: Our capacity to not only see and hear but also to touch, to smell, to taste, and always to proprioceptively feel our weight, dimension, gravity, and movement in the world. In sum, the film experience is meaningful not to the side of our bodies, but because of our

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<sup>26</sup> Butler, Judith. *Undoing Gender*. New York, NY: Routledge Press, 2004, p.52.

bodies. Which is to say that movies provoke in us the 'carnal thoughts' that ground and inform more conscious analysis.<sup>27</sup>

Sobchack is positing that our conscious understanding is grounded in sensate experience. The specific nature of the relationship between the body and cinematic representation, between the literal and figural is still unresolved because of the unclear sense of 'as if real'. We don't actually feel ourselves dripping in sweat when Diana does. So, when I can relate to what Diana may be feeling, I am having two experiences: I am having the 'real' experience of seeing ambiguous colors and shapes and possibly feeling my heart rate increase as a result of this visual contact; I am also having an 'as-if-real' sensual experience. Sobchack argues that this ambivalence is both a carnal matter and a conscious meaning that emerge simultaneously from the single system of flesh and consciousness that is the lived body.<sup>28</sup> In short, the body and language do not simply oppose or reflect each other. Rather, they inform each other in a reversible relationship that can manifest itself as vacillating and often ambiguously undifferentiated, and, as Judith Butler proposes in her conceptualization of agency, exists in continuous relationship with other bodies.

The mainstream construction of boxing, specifically via sociology discourse, is one that depends heavily on binary opposites, especially between men and women. This view supports essentialist claims to exclusivity and focuses on what Judith Butler calls anatomical sex.<sup>29</sup> While theories of identity, especially the theorizing of gender politics, become ever more concerned with intersectionality and the interrelationships between different dimensions of identity,<sup>30</sup> the representations and understandings of boxing are still mostly entrenched in a logic that relies on the either/or of 'masculine and feminine' behavior. This

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<sup>27</sup> Sobchack, Vivian. *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture*. Los Angeles: UCLA Press, 2004, p.60.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid*, p.73.

<sup>29</sup> Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. London: Routledge, 1990.

<sup>30</sup> For a full explanation of intersectionality, see Lutz, Helma. 'Intersectionality's (brilliant) Career – How to Understand the Attraction of the Concept'. *Working Paper Series: Gender, Diversity, and Migration*. No.1, 2014 and Crenshaw, K. 'Gender-Related Aspects of Gender Discrimination' Background Paper for Expert Meeting on the Gender-Related Aspects of Race Discrimination. November 21- 24,2000, Zagreb, Croatia.

dualistic thinking pervades the rhetoric of boxing in the field of sociology, the media, and in traditional as well as current artistic representations of boxing and boxers. I contend that intersectional discourse, so to speak, has passed female boxers by. As a result, female boxers are invariably seen through the same sociological frame; one that does not account for the differences among women who box, both within the already problematic and questionable category of 'women' but also in terms of the gender binary. Subsequently, there are only a few, very limiting molds for female boxers in ethnographic study, sociological cultural theory, and in many cases, in art and literature.

Although *Girlfight* is a part of mainstream media by virtue of being a feature film produced in Hollywood and New York City, it does challenge the specific paradigm of maleness that exists in the construction of boxing.

Kusama troubles and begins to abstract the boxing body in *Girlfight*. In my analysis of Diana, I posit that an 'un-positioned' body can maintain agency within its status as corporeally generic. What would happen if this approach were developed to its conclusion of negation? What happens if a body is completely obscured? Can an erased body have agency?

**2.3. The Long Count (Thrilla in Manila, Rumble in the Jungle and I Shook up the World), Paul Pfeiffer, 2001**



Figure Nine

The 2001 video artwork *The Long Count (Thrilla in Manila, Rumble in the Jungle and I Shook up the World)* comprises a series of looped videos that Pfeiffer has meticulously edited to erase the figures of Mohammed Ali and his opponents in the following fights: Sonny Liston in the United States in 1964 (*I Shook up the World*), George Foreman in Zaire in 1974 (*Rumble in the Jungle*), and Joe Frazier in the Philippines in 1975 (*Thrilla in Manila*).<sup>31</sup> The footage was taken from an

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<sup>31</sup> The materials used for the piece are digital video and small LCD monitors mounted on metal armatures (6" x 7" x 60") that are attached at eye height to the wall. These monitors are installed in the corners of the exhibiting galleries.

existing video box set that Pfeiffer bought.<sup>32</sup> The central action of this piece is one of erasure or disappearing; the focus in this video work is not on the recognizable figure but, rather, on the movement of the body, both as a fluid energetic force and also as a series of culturally constructed freeze-frames. Although Pfeiffer technical takes the figure away via a digital grafting process, his removal allows us to pay a heightened attention to the (absent) boxing body that he is presenting. This intense attention creates the conditions for an amorphous yet distinctly powerful moving boxing body, and functions as a visual counterpart to Massumi's conceptions of the predetermined moves available to a body functioning within the definitional framework.<sup>33</sup> The presence of vacillation in the piece is dominant; for the duration, we switch our attention between the diffused flashing figures in the ring and the positioned and positioning audience.

For the erasure, Pfeiffer uses a digital technique that entails grafting small pieces of the background onto the figures, frame by frame, in order to render their specific forms unseen. However this camouflaging process is not seamless, the background does not match up perfectly with the bits that have been used to cover the bodies in the ring. What results from this mismatch is a sort of shimmer that looks like heat when it visibly rises off of a road in the distance. The shimmer is contained within the indistinct shapes of the boxing bodies.

Through this process, Pfeiffer intensifies a potential in the boxers that is only perceivable when the tangible form is erased and made amorphous. His act of erasure reveals Ali and his opponents' real-yet-incorporeal agency.<sup>34</sup> The figures' impact is through negation. It is my aim to investigate what this impact is, in such a way that accounts for more than the intellectual maneuver of filling in the gaps and, rather, accounts for the ways in which the shift from specific form to physical energy affects our perception of the boxers and their context.

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<sup>32</sup> Basilico, Stephano. *Cut: Film as Found Object In Contemporary Video*. Milwaukee: Milwaukee Art Museum Press, 2005, pp.100-105.

<sup>33</sup> Massumi, p.3.

<sup>34</sup> Massumi, Brian. *Parables for the Virtual*. Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2002, p.5.

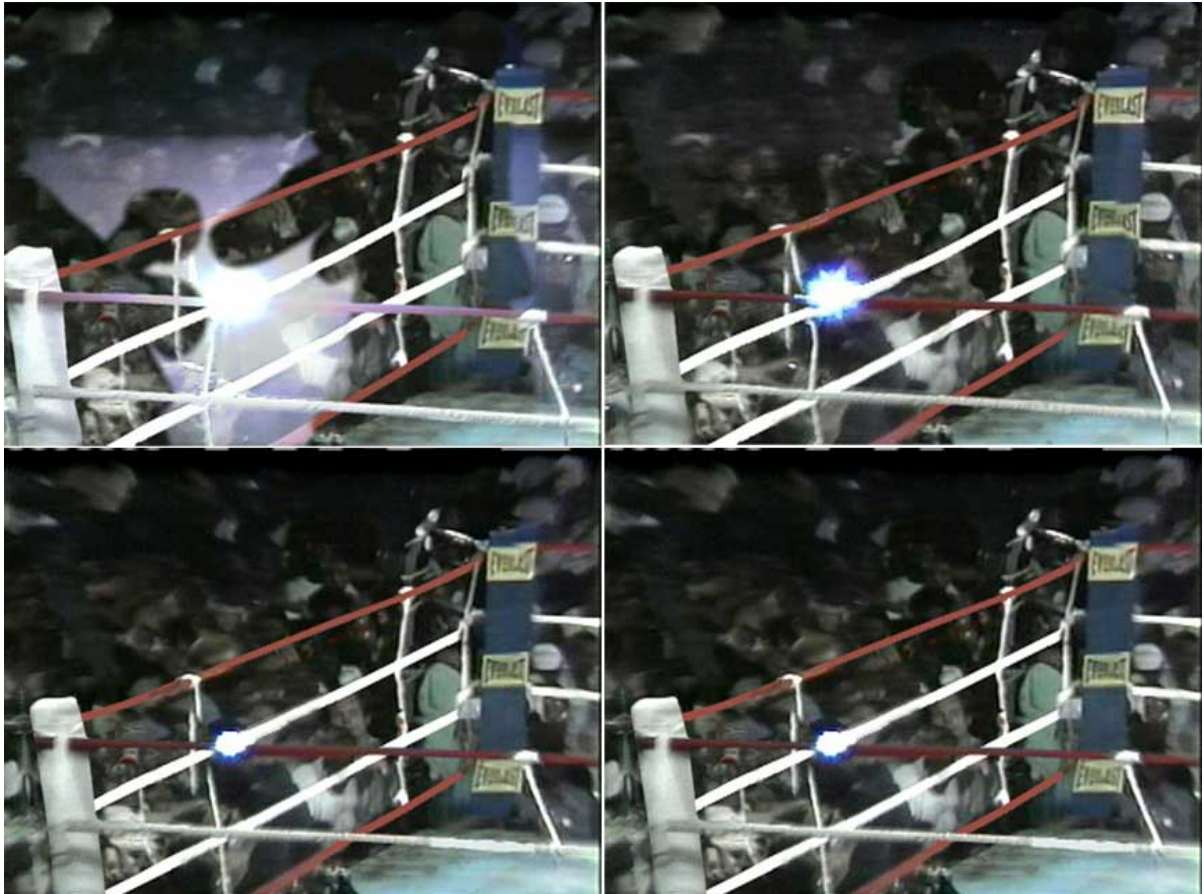


Figure Ten

One aspect of the subjects' agency is clear in the exchange between the spectators and the movement in the ring. The pair of ghostlike, barely discernible presences flicker across the surface of the crowd like wind moving over water and the dim outlines of the moving forms remain as ghostly traces; ropes stretch and shudder with the impact of unseen bodies; the ringside crowd ripples and gleams as if seen through vapor clouds. By disappearing its boundaries, Pfeiffer is marking the consequences of the boxing body.

If all of the defining cultural and tangible features of Ali and Foreman's bodies are erased – their blackness, their maleness, and their celebrity – then, what are we responding to when we watch Pfeiffer's videos? To explore this question, I return to Judith Butler's conception of agency; she posits that, in order to be represented, one must be recognized and the role of the subject's agency is



crucial in both processes.<sup>35</sup> Essentially, agency is an individual's capacity for intelligent action; action that can create change. However, agency is contingent upon the subject's context.

The bouts in *The Long Count* are indisputably iconic, a characteristic that adds power to the videos and also emphasizes the symbolic weight of Ali, Frazier, Foreman, and Liston's bodies. Kasia Boddy, in her book *Boxing: A Cultural History*, refers to this circumstance in the context of Walter Benjamin's work on image reproduction:

Today much of the visual representation of boxing capitalizes on, or interrogates, the symbolic resonance of specific individuals, objects and events. Certain fights have a particularly powerful resonance or aura – a 'uniqueness' that can only be understood by saying 'I was there', or 'I knew someone who was there', or, at the very least, 'I remember where I was when it happened.'<sup>36</sup>

By marking the singularity of the real-time event, a sharp distinction between the thing itself and that of its mechanical reproduction is marked. Really being there trumps seeing it later on TV, and this is because of our sensory awareness. Being in the same space as the fights and being able to see, smell, and hear them as they happen is a 'more' embodied experience than watching the fights from the remove of the television screen, and this phenomenological understanding of subjectivity points to the difference between an embodied experience of an action and the diffuse, curated, and multi-sourced vision that the television makes of a live event. But it may also be possible to think of the kind of aura that did not only survive mechanical reproduction but flourished because of it, through the technologies of film, television, video and DVD. These mediums can convey an after-aura. Historical events create an echo in the present moment when we return to them. This would imply that *The Long Count* is re-invigorating and re-examining the power of Ali's seminal fights by presenting the pre-

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<sup>35</sup> Magnus, Kathy Dow. 'The Unaccountable Subject: Judith Butler and the Social Conditions of intersubjective Agency'. *Hypatia*, Volume 21, Number 2, Spring 2006, pp.100-101.

<sup>36</sup> Boddy, Kasia. *Boxing: A Cultural History*. London: Reaktion Books, 2008, p.8536 (kindle); Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn, London: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform 1970, p.225.

packaged boxed set as containing knowledge that the fights themselves did not.

This (deliberate manual editing) is what makes me feel like what I'm doing is more related to the tactility of painting as opposed to the weightlessness of advertising or mere spectacle. The way I would define that ring after Mohammed Ali—for me, it has very much to do with what is left over after the figure's been removed.<sup>37</sup>

The technical process of erasing the boxing bodies must have brought Pfeiffer into very intimate connection with the bodies of Ali and his opponents. This virtual palpating, direct yet also significantly removed from the materiality of the subjects themselves, is both artistic methodology and also a layer in the chronology that continues to erase/add on to the bodies participating in the live moment of the fight itself. The transformation from live event to televised action and narrative, to recorded VHS- both as video and also as object, to Pfeiffer's creative manipulation, are all part of a chronology of irresolution, of altering perspective, and of movement. To substantiate this cultural process, Pfeiffer's methodology is intended to allow us to see the erasure itself rather than accept a polished, seamless product.

There's always this trace of where the figure was, and in a way you're seeing the failure of my hand and the failure of the medium, and that's kind of the ghost that's left. And it's that point of failure that I'm really interested in.<sup>38</sup>

The lack of seamlessness offers a subversive power of negation that exists alongside Ali's direct physical power, which can only be perceived by actually watching *The Long Count*. The physical power of negation emphasizes the cultural problematics surrounding the bodies of these black male heavyweight boxers. In order to achieve this representation, Pfeiffer contends with the

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<sup>37</sup> Pfeiffer, Paul quoted in Hilton Als-Hammer. *About the Exhibition Catalogue*. Los Angeles: UCLA Museum of Art, August 2001.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

historical meaning of the fights and also the celebrity of Liston, Frazier, Foreman, and Ali's boxing bodies.

At the time I was really quite focused on the process itself and the historical resonance and the emotional resonance that I felt working on these images. I've been asked after the fact how I would describe that, and I've thought that it's a bit like what people describe as far as ghost limbs among soldiers. In a war people lose a limb and will have this continuing feeling like they still have that limb. Like a ghost limb. Another kind of dramatic example is when the World Trade Center went down. For long afterwards you sort of looked up and expected to see something there.<sup>39</sup>

Pfeiffer is giving us a boxing body that moves past the immediate icon that exists largely in the realms of our cultural past. This artwork articulates a complexity of power and acceptance that is part of the social dynamic that places certain people in a subaltern position. The boxers, Mohammed Ali, George Foreman, Joe Frazier, Sonny Liston – all black – are both magnetic and not really there.<sup>40</sup> The deletion of these black athletes suggests that they are anonymous and expendable players in a centuries-old ritual; the faces that remain (the audience) are predominantly white, and their avidity, spectatorship and even blood lust seems to be the focus of the work. But the faces might also be the cast-out, watching the forces of good and evil battle for their souls.<sup>41</sup> Pfeiffer states:

A special relationship exists between black bodies and spectacle. It's almost as though the spectacle could not exist without them. Think of the colonial condition. Frantz Fanon writes about the former child of the colony who goes to the metropolis and finds himself on the subway and has the distinct feeling that he is outside himself, that he is watching himself. Whenever he lights a cigarette, he sees himself do it. This hovering sense of alienation, being outside and not centered in your own body, is a very strange thing.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Paul Pfeiffer PBS Art21 interview <http://www.art21.org/texts/paul-pfeiffer/interview-paul-pfeiffer-erasure-camouflage-and-four-horsemen-of-the-apocalypse>. (Accessed December 17th, 2015)

<sup>40</sup> Pfeiffer is of Filipino descent and was born in Manila and then moved to the USA at a young age, where he has lived since. This is relevant because in some ways it removes him from the white male/black male American binary.

<sup>41</sup> Smith, Roberta. 'Art In Review; Paul Pfeiffer.' *New York Times*. December 15<sup>th</sup>, 2000. <http://www.nytimes.com/2000/12/15/arts/art-in-review-paul-pfeiffer.html> (Accessed January 3rd, 2016)

<sup>42</sup> Gonzalez, Jennifer, 'Interview with Paul Pfeiffer'. *Bomb Magazine*, Volume 83, Spring 2003.

Disappearing a body could be the ultimate act of marginalization, however, Pfeiffer is not actually marginalizing the bodies in *The Long Count*. On the contrary, by erasing them, he is foregrounding them, *via negative*, in the imagination of the viewer as it compensates for the visual absence. As a soundtrack, Pfeiffer has edited taped interviews with the fighters, eliminating the words and leaving only an arrhythmic staccato of breathing. The sound of breathing invokes a singularly visceral presence; a living body that is very close by. In this way, Pfeiffer unequivocally references the corporeal body and its functions, even as he erases it.

We are being asked to consider the energy that exists in the physical matter of the human body and we are also being asked to consider the ways in which the bodies of these black male athletes are erased or subjugated in a historical, discursive sense. Furthermore, as a direct result of Pfeiffer's ghosting, we are being asked to consider our own contribution to the formation of the subject in self-reflexive and active participation. Fanon's subject describes feeling alienated from his own body specifically because he is aware, due to his blackness, of being watched without respite. He is marginalized, even from his own bodily center, and also relentlessly spot lit. He is erased and his subjecthood is replaced by a condition of spectacle. To my mind, *The Long Count* is visualizing this phenomenon of injustice as it is played out in the narrative of Ali, Foreman, Frazier, and Liston. The translucent figures in *The Long Count* look like ghosts and, in this way, reference the flesh and blood bodies that have been disappeared throughout the same cultural history that boxing is a part of. The sport of boxing has the capacity to bring a dramatic mythology (good/evil, black/white, etc) into physical reality and, at the same time, shine a light onto the circumstances that create these dualistic cultural legends and the often-horrible cost we pay for maintaining them. As Mohammed Ali himself said after defeating George Foreman in Zaire:

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<http://bombmagazine.org/article/2543/paul-pfeiffer> (Accessed January 3rd, 2016)

I could never truly avoid thinking about the relationship between slavery and boxing...there was this nightmarish image I always had of two slaves in the ring. Like the old slave days in the plantation, with two of us big, black slaves fighting, on the verge of annihilating each other while the masters are smoking cigars and urging us on, looking for blood.<sup>43</sup>

Through Pfeiffer's technicalities, we are able to both see and not see Ali's boxing body; an occurrence that becomes especially meaningful in light of Ali's internal monologue. Our vacillation between clear perception and what we imagine in the space of his erased yet moving body, leads to an unpacking of the sport of boxing as a discursive and culturally fraught site, as well as questioning the resolution of an iconic body that we think we understand.

Jennifer Gonzalez of *Bomb* magazine finds *The Long Count* to be significant because it draws attention to the ways in which we instantaneously fill in the gaps of what we see with what we believe to be true.

Canonical events or figures that stand for a particular historical shift or formation become part of the mythology that defines what it means to exist—as, for example, a U.S. citizen in the present. Even when the bodies are erased from the scene both in the videos themselves and from the visual culture of the present, we carry with us this 'afterimage' of history. We insert the bodies back into our immediate space.<sup>44</sup>

Gonzales is suggesting that we carry fully formed stories with us in order to maintain our collective cultural and interpersonal reality. I agree that Mohammed Ali is certainly a part of these stories for some people. However, I am not convinced that these stories are so firm or comprehensive that our re-insertion process, between "what we see and what we believe to be true," as Gonzalez phrases it, can be instantaneous, nor do I find that the bodies that we 'reinsert' are the same ones that we hold in our historical archive; I assert that the gap has more importance than the reinsertion. As viewers experiencing the artwork, we are actively grappling with absence and presence; we both re-insert

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<sup>43</sup> Ali, M and Richard Durham. *The Greatest: My Own Story*. New York: Random House, 1976, p.247.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

Ali back into the Ali-shaped absence and we are able to stay with the shimmering ghost-figure as a new presence. Through the piece, Pfeiffer accounts for these invisible cultural and personal processes and also finds meaning in the ways in which the boxer physically moves while under extreme pressure. In an interview with Gonzalez, Pfeiffer says:

What I see in the footage of Ali's fights is a body attempting to operate in an intense perceptual condition; bright lights, screaming crowds, popping flashbulbs. The pressure is intense. The boxer is there, practically naked, with everything written on his body, everything depending on his body. To me, being there, living inside the spectacle or inside the arena, in this moment of perceptual overload, is the archetypal seed of current times. I am really fascinated by how athletes manage to function in that situation, partially because I know it's really about training all your faculties.<sup>45</sup>

Pfeiffer is acknowledging and giving credit to the boxer as having a singular capacity in that moment, a capacity that possibly outstrips all the noise and is almost entirely corporeal: Oates' dialogue of split-second reflexes.<sup>46</sup> The physical movements and gestures of the boxer constitute the engine that is powering the whole system – the lights, the audience, the promoters, the media, the novelists, even the blood and sweat.



Figure Eleven

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<sup>45</sup> Gonzalez, Jennifer, 'Interview with Paul Pfeiffer'. *Bomb Magazine*, Volume 83, Spring 2003, <http://bombmagazine.org/article/2543/paul-pfeiffer> (Accessed January 3rd, 2016)

<sup>46</sup> Oates, Joyce Carol. *On Boxing*. New York: Harper Perennial, 1987, p.72.

Via the complex presence/absence of the boxers' bodies in *The Long Count*, the primary effect of the piece is a disruption of identities. In an interview with Stefano Basilico, Pfeiffer says: "Identity is what gets in the way of the dialogue you're attempting to have with the viewer through the work of art."<sup>47</sup> His work uncovers and displays a cultural identity that is there and at the same time not there, represented yet absent, perpetually on the verge of mirroring itself and/or its surroundings, implicating alternate perspectives.<sup>48</sup> Pfeiffer's contemplation of an uneasy dialectic of presence and absence,<sup>49</sup> rather than being a stylized shorthand, is referring to the interchange between multiple points; the boxers, the video version of the boxers, the audience – both the ringside audience in Zaire, and also the current, larger and more prolific media-based audience – as well as the viewer in the gallery. As we watch the nearly invisible forms inside the ring in the *Long Count* series, the faces in the audience staring into the fight prompt the question of what we are looking at when we notice ourselves watching. I am suggesting that we are seeing the historical bodies of Muhammad Ali, Sonny Liston, George Foreman, and Joe Frazier, both enacting their presence as icons and also revealing the erasure of black identity, a tradition that is entwined with their visibility as heavyweight champions of the world. Furthermore, we are seeing their agency in this complex, shadowy, and endlessly transfiguring system of culture and definition. Their agency is in their bodies, their bodies as transformed by artistic process into an ever-changing material. Their corporeal outlines are made up of mercurial, glassy, glinting matter that is both a source of light and is also a reflective surface; a sort of tesserae created by the faces and movements of the audience watching the boxers in the ring. It is more difficult to see another body, another person as conclusively 'other', when we also recognize ourselves as participating in the same action as this separate person, as actually being part of their movements. We are reminded of our own agency when we are enabled to question the

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<sup>47</sup> Basilico, Stefano. 'Paul Pfeiffer: Disturbing Visions'. *Documents Journal*. New York: Art In General Press, 2003.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>49</sup> Gronemeyer, Wiebke. 'PAUL PFEIFFER: THE SAINTS'. *Whitehot Magazine*, October 2007.

validity or boundary of the 'other'.

*The Long Count* responds to George Foreman by trying to differentiate between the physical (my right hand) and its representation as a completed identity (the fight was fixed) existing in a capitalist economy. The capitalist economy here is the fight economy; the hierarchy of trainer, boxer, manager, promoter, venue, television networks, and the paying audience, i.e. show business. Pfeiffer gives us another possibility for representation in *The Long Count* by creating a multi-directional body. Although the art world is unavoidably part of a market economy, I suggest that *The Long Count*, by presenting the boxer as being at variance with the cultural framework that defines him/her, is taking part in a moral economy – one that assigns value based on morality and humanity. *The Long Count* illuminates the value of George Foreman's actual body and individual agency as being more than his weight as an icon in the sociological, market economy of typical understanding.



## 2.4. A Sort of Shadow. James Newitt, 2013

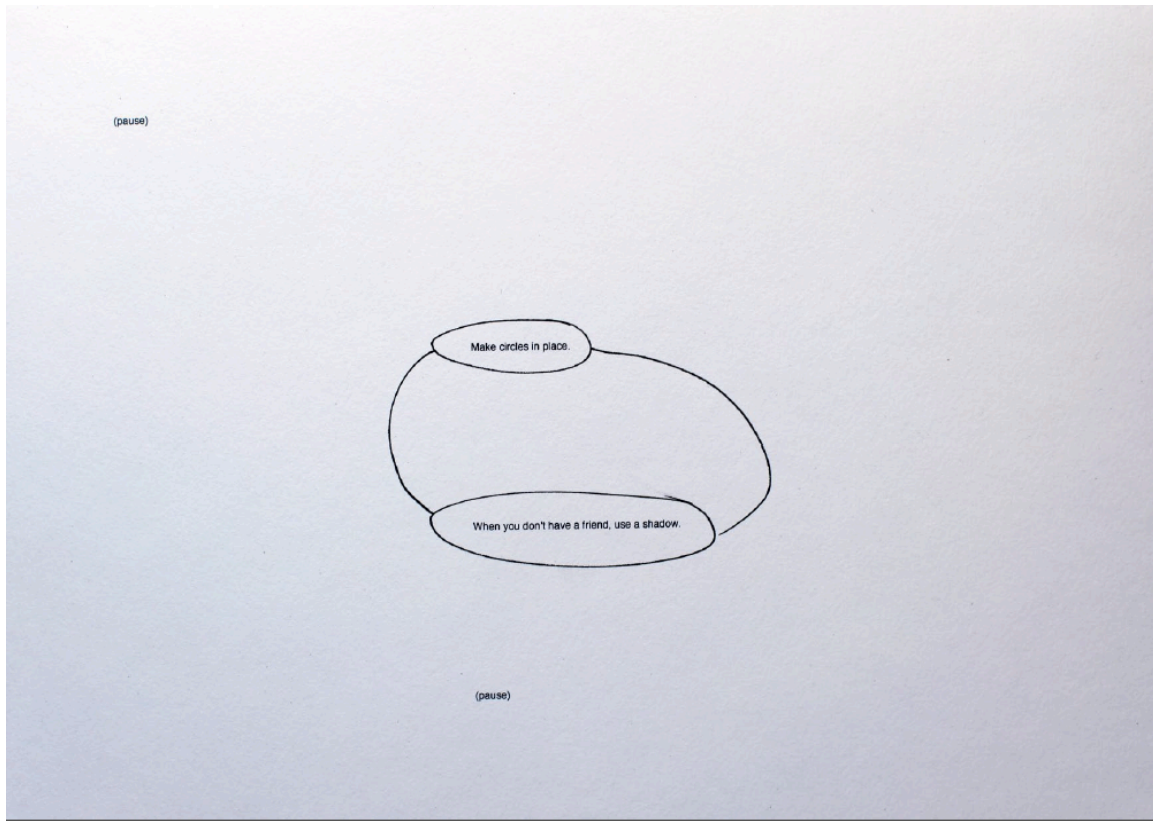


Figure Twelve

*A Sort of Shadow* is an installation piece by James Newitt that was set in Lisbon, Portugal in November-December of 2013 at Lumier Cité and produced by Maumaus. It was installed throughout a two-story exhibition space and contained several multi-media areas for the viewer to consider. The element of the installation that I am primarily addressing is a series of text-based drawings, *Untitled: The Sweet Science*, which the artist created to accompany the central video in the installation.<sup>50</sup> I also refer to the video itself and a booklet, written by

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<sup>50</sup> The video is playing on a large two-sided screen that hangs in the middle of the second story room. Each side of the screen is playing a 40-minute looped video of two men shadowboxing. The men progress towards and finally reach total exhaustion in the video. The screen is suspended in front of a large window to which the artist applied a reflective film in order to create a two-way mirror effect; the viewer can see their own body reflected in the window as well as a reflection of the video, and still see people moving

Newitt in a screenplay format, that is also a part of the installation. My exploration of *A Sort of Shadow* builds on the relationship between agency and positionality, however, is more focused on a related yet distinct concept; that of the boxing gym as a space of moral economy. I also discuss the attention Newitt pays to the “head space” of the boxers he is working with and also his own chronology of thought, emotion and philosophical associations as he developed this artwork.



Figure Thirteen

The 12 drawings are 14" x 17" and are a combination of Arial font typed phrases and ink line drawing. The phrases are single sentences, sometimes punctuated by commas. They are arranged on the page in irregular constellations and most are encircled and connected by simple ink lines. Some are outside of the ink line encirclements and some are in parenthesis. The series brings astrological drawings to mind, where an artistic image is superimposed over a relatively

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outside of the gallery through the window. It is this video that the text work is often responding and referring to.

scientific diagram of an astronomical star and planet system in order to guide the viewer towards seeing mythological lions and centaurs in the stars' positioning. After looking at Newitt's drawings, it becomes clear that the figures they are pointing towards are boxing bodies and the actions being described are part of the experience of the boxer in a bout or training as well as those of the artist himself in his own creative practice.

Fragmentary phrases, rather than recognizable outlines, make up Newitt's boxing body and acknowledge an inner, thoughtful life as existing within and in relationship to this body. Additionally, Newitt articulates a multiplicity of references as being sited in the subjective moving body. The work is not a pointed search for what the boxing body means *per se*, but rather functions as a mind map, revealing the artist's process of making connections as he developed a work of art about a boxing gym. The introspective quality of this work makes a self-aware narrator of the artist and visualizes connections between the interior world of the renderer (the artist) and that of the rendered (the boxer).

There are no bodies in the work although the work is about enacting the corporeal experience of boxing, and is also about thinking about the corporeal experience of boxing; *"when you don't have a friend, use a shadow," "glorious fits of melancholy," "one-two-three will help very much with the beating of time,"* (one-two-three indicates the classic 'jab, right cross, and hook' punch combination) are some examples of the text in the drawings.

Far from regaining concreteness, to think the body in movement thus means accepting the paradox that there is an incorporeal dimension of the body. Of it but not it...the body's potential to vary belongs to the same reality as the body as positioned thing but partakes of it in a different mode.<sup>51</sup>

Newitt is presenting a de-positioned body, one that is conceptual rather than figurative, yet he is constantly referring to the corporeal reality of having a

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<sup>51</sup> Massumi, Brian. *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation*. Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2002, p.5.

boxing body. I find that Newitt is questioning the conclusive form of the boxing body and blurring the borders between corporeal and intangible, positioned and in-motion.

Specifically in the text drawing, Newitt is representing incorporeal dimensions of the boxing body, dimensions that occur in the space of thoughts, conceptual associations, and emotional reactions. In the booklet text and in the video piece, Newitt approaches the alternative spaces that exist around and are made possible by the boxing body more politically. This aspect of *A Sort of Shadow* supports the understanding that a system of moral economy exists in the boxing gym and that this system is activated and embodied by the boxers.



Figure Fourteen

Moral economy is a concept developed by E.P. Thompson in his 1961 essay *The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century*. The concept derives from Thompson's treatment of bread riots in eighteenth-century England. Thompson writes:

The looting of shops (was) legitimized by the assumptions of an older moral economy, which taught the immorality of any unfair method of

forcing up the price of provisions by profiteering upon the necessities of the people. By the notion of legitimation I mean that the men and women of the crowd were informed by the notion that they were defending traditional rights or customs; and that they were supported by the wider consensus of the community.... The consensus was so strong that it overrode motives of fear or deference.<sup>52</sup>

Newitt engages with moral economy as a system of value that is based in the traditions and understandings of a common political culture rather than a capitalist market system, i.e. a normative and mainstream set of valuation. Of course, boxing bodies do also take part in a capitalist system and are influenced by a monetary paradigm. On the most basic level, professional boxers fight/work for money and amateur boxers compete in ticketed events and are often sponsored. However, as detailed by Lucia Trimbur, an ethnographer and sociologist, post-industrialism's social and economic arrangements have produced new subjects, objects, and spaces of commodification that have added nuances to the fact that people have been fighting for money for centuries. For example, black male authenticity is a new site of cultural capital and is used to sell fitness products and gym memberships to men, and advertising firms capitalize on the concepts of female empowerment, bodily strength, and self-defense.<sup>53</sup> Additionally, to follow Thompson's conceptualizations, while social and economic conditions certainly create the conditions for boxing, social practices, social relations and physical action can occur both *within* and *in response* to the capitalist market, and can illuminate the ways that boxing can be used to answer back to systems of inequality, such as gender inequality, racism, and class stratification. Through various enactments and representations of boxing, value is produced in ways different from the market economy, with not all forms of value defined by the demand for profit and not all interactions motivated by the desire to make money.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Thompson, E.P. 'The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century'. *Customs in Common: Studies in Traditional Popular Culture*. New York City: The New Press, 1993, p.188.

<sup>53</sup> Trimbur, Lucia. *Come Out Swinging: The Changing World of Boxing in Gleason's Gym*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013, p.xx.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid*, p. xxi; Bailey, Thomas, and Roger Waldinger. 'The Changing Ethnic/Racial Division of Labor'. In *Dual City: Restructuring New York*, edited by John Mollenkopf and Manuel Castell. New York: Russell Sage

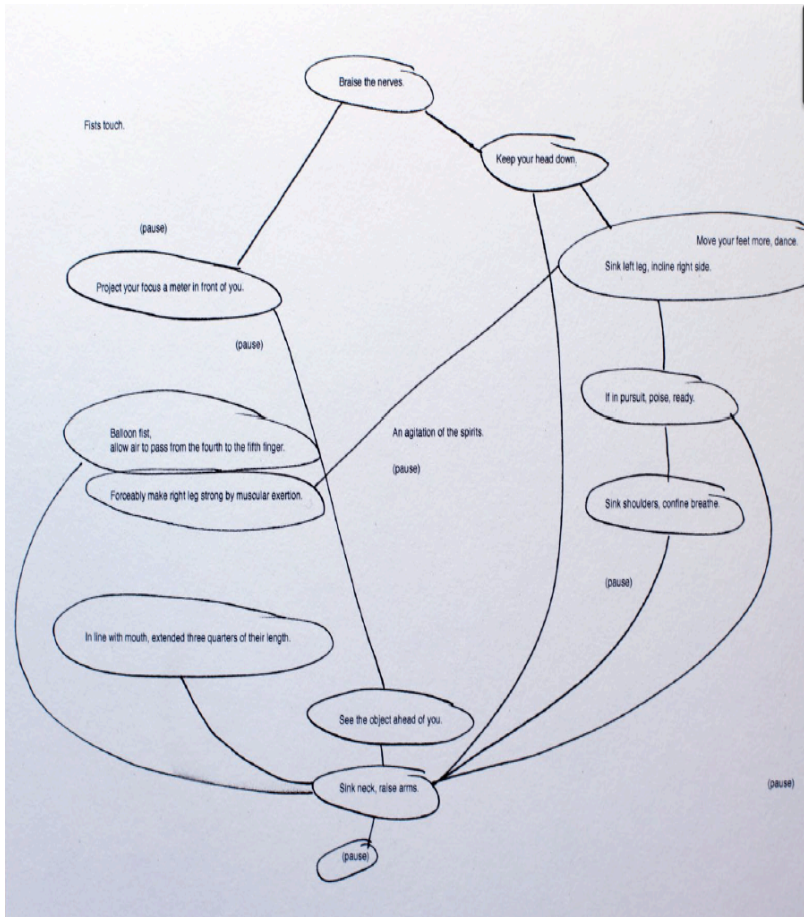


Figure Fifteen

Trimbur gave a speech at the opening of *A Sort of Shadow* and her description and contextualization of moral economy is excellent:

(James and I) realized we shared the same curiosity about what lies between representation and marginality, or what I've been arguing is lived experience. And though our processes and methods were different, we also shared a commitment to considering how communities under stress and under-resourced still make it a priority to improvise arrangements for members' wellbeing as well as to admire and enact reciprocity and redistribution. We saw a similarity in how value is produced in ways different from the market economy, with not all interactions motivated by the desire to make money and not all forms of value defined by the demand for profit. In this urban gym, the social practices and social relations of our institutions show that actions can occur both

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Foundation, 1991; Sassen, Saskia. *The Global City: New York, London, Tokyo*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001.



*within and in response to the market; a system referred to as a 'moral economy'.*<sup>55</sup> What I mean by a moral economy of the gym is a collective, though not uncontested, sense of what the community considers fair and just. A moral economy of the gym claims and actualizes a set of rights unavailable outside of the gym and sets and enforces social norms, obligations, and behavior.... Men and women of the gym assert and defend certain customs. I see the gym's moral economy as both an answer to postindustrial capitalism and unique in its own right; an anti-capitalist indictment and a system of morality.<sup>56</sup>

Both moral economy – a scheme that claims and actualizes a set of rights unavailable outside of the gym – and Newitt's text drawings, as they describe the artist's personal head space as he experienced being in the boxing gym, representing boxers as they trained- can be considered within Foucault's concept of heterotopias. Heterotopias are real sites, although often intangible, that can be found within the culture and are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted. Places of this kind are outside of all places, even

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<sup>55</sup> Trimbur, Lucia. *Between Representation and Marginality*. Read at Lumiar Cité, Lisbon, Portugal, 2013. Trimbur further explained moral economy as such: "These collections of principles, practices and relations constitute what E.P. Thompson calls a 'moral economy'. In his work on the eighteenth-century bread riots, Thompson analyzes the *mentalité* that led to mass action and argues that in this *mentalité* was an underlying notion of rights. In *The Making of the English Working Class*, he writes: "In eighteenth-century Britain riotous actions assumed two different forms: that of more or less spontaneous popular direct action; and that of the deliberate use of the crowd as an instrument of pressure, by persons 'above' or apart from the crowd. The first form has not received the attention, which it merits. It rested upon more articulate popular sanctions and was validated by more sophisticated traditions than the word 'riot' suggests. The most common example is the bread or food riot, repeated cases of which can be found in almost every town and county until the 1840s. This was rarely a mere uproar, which culminated in the breaking open of barns or the looting of shops. It was legitimized by the assumptions of an older moral economy, which taught the immorality of any unfair method of forcing up the price of provisions by profiteering upon the necessities of the people." Thompson draws a distinction between political economy, or the development of the free market, and the existence of an older paternalistic order and argues, "Actions on such a scale...indicate an extraordinarily deep-rooted pattern of behavior and belief...these popular actions were legitimized by the old paternalist moral economy" (p.66). He continues, "(i)n considering only this one form of 'mob' action we have come upon unsuspected complexities, for behind every such form of popular direct action some legitimizing notion of right is to be found" (p.68). In *Customs in Common*, Thompson contends: "It is possible to detect in almost every eighteenth-century crowd action some legitimizing notion. By the notion of legitimation I mean that the men and women in the crowd were informed by the belief that they were defending traditional rights or customs; and, in general, that they were supported by the wider consensus of the community. On occasion this popular consensus was endorsed by some measure of license afforded by the authorities. More commonly, the consensus was so strong that it overrode motives of fear or deference." "

Please see Paul Gilroy's book, *Darker Than Blue* for further elaboration on the concept of moral economy as it exists in present-day Britain.

<sup>56</sup> Trimbur, Lucia. *Between Representation and Marginality: Lived Experience*. Lumiar Cité, JAMES NEWITT - Uma Espécie de Sombra. 2013

though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality.<sup>57</sup> Heterotopias are simultaneously physical and mental, such as the space of a 'phone call or the moment when you see yourself in the mirror.<sup>58</sup> In *A Sort Of Shadow*, Newitt elaborates on the idea that the boxing body can delineate alternative meaning, by bringing it to an internal, or personal space, one that is connected to the social world, yet remains distinct. Throughout the installation, he explores Foucault's concept of heterotopia, which I contend, is similar to the concept of moral economy, a kind of space or structure that is parallel to the ones that we define as normal. Foucault's concept of heterotopias is essentially that they are cultural, institutional, and discursive spaces that are somehow incompatible and transforming – spaces that function in non-hegemonic conditions:

The mirror functions as a heterotopia in this respect; it makes this place that I occupy at the moment when I look at myself in the glass at once absolutely real, connected with all the space that surrounds it, and absolutely unreal, since in order to be perceived it has to pass through this virtual point which is over there...as a sort of simultaneously mythic and real contestation of the space in which we live.<sup>59</sup>

Newitt points to heterotopias by presenting the movements/gestures of the boxing body as having historical and personal archives that interact with physical space, as well as with the intimate space of the artist or boxer's own mind. Via his formal choices, Newitt fragments and expands the meaning of the boxing body.

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<sup>57</sup> Foucault, M. 'Of Other Spaces: Heterotopias and Utopias'. *Architecture /Mouvement/Continuité*. Trans by Jay Miskowiec. October, 1984; ("Des Espaces Autres,") March 1967.

<sup>58</sup> Blair, Eric. 'A Further Education College as Heterotopia'. *Research in Post-Compulsory Education* Vol 14, Issue 1 (2009), p.94.

<sup>59</sup> Foucault, Michel. *The Order of Things*. New York: Vintage Books, 1971, p.6.



*The mirror is, after all, a utopia, since it is a placeless place. In the mirror, I see myself there where I am not, in an unreal, virtual space that opens up behind the surface; I am over there, there where I am not, a sort of shadow that gives my own visibility to myself, that enables me to see myself there where I am absent; such is the utopia of the mirror. But it is also a heterotopia in so far as the mirror does exist in reality, where it exerts a sort of counteraction on the position that I occupy. From the standpoint of the mirror I discover my absence from the place where I am since I see myself over there. Starting from this gaze that is, as it were, directed toward me, from the ground of this virtual space that is on the other side of the glass, I come back toward myself; I begin again to direct my eyes toward myself and to reconstitute myself there where I am. The mirror functions as a heterotopia in this respect: it makes this place that I occupy at the moment when I look at myself in the glass at once absolutely real, connected with all the space that surrounds it, and absolutely unreal, since in order to be perceived it has to pass through this virtual point which is over there.<sup>60</sup>*

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Figure Sixteen

In the exhibit text booklet of *A Sort of Shadow*, Newitt uses the above excerpt from Foucault's 'Of Other Spaces: Heterotopias and Utopias', and its mirror opposite, as a bridge between the semiotic, the conceptual, and the aesthetic elements being considered. In the video components for *A Sort of Shadow*, Newitt does not aim his camera at the boxers themselves, but rather at the mirror

<sup>60</sup> Foucault, M. 'Of Other Spaces: Heterotopias and Utopias'. *Architecture /Mouvement/Continuité*. Trans by Jay Miskowiec. October, 1984; ("Des Espaces Autres,") March 1967.

that they were in front of and records their movements as they are reflected in the mirror. The text drawings were created alongside the video as a means to re-approach and disseminate Newitt's work and residency in the boxing gym.<sup>61</sup>

## **2.5. The Active Subject**

Newitt is making art to present the boxing body as being in a heterotopia, the heterotopia of the mirror, which is, in turn, a part of the heterotopia that is created by the moral economy of the boxing gym. The reason the alternative space of the boxing gym is necessary here is that the existing Portuguese economy has created an inhospitable and dangerous environment; the gym Newitt worked with is located a poor, crime-ridden residential neighborhood with defeated infrastructure. As Lucia Trimbur explains, the boxing gym functions in a moral economy, one that is based in the care of the body. Trimbur offers a version of lived experience in the realm of boxing that is actualized between the political poles of representation and marginality. Both Trimbur and Newitt are articulating the idea that, in boxing gyms, value is produced in ways different from the market economy. Trimbur states that she is interested in illuminating how new spaces for the formation and performance of identity and morality are created through the use of the body. She also identifies herself as advocating for a boxing body that is not merely the object of discourse or a passive agent onto which social relations are mapped and inscribed but is rather an active subject. This raises the question of how the boxing body, through self-disciplining and self-regulation, can serve as the material basis for new expressions of identity, new arrangements of social relations, and new social and political ideologies.<sup>62</sup>

The body can no longer be the receptacle of social relations but must be considered material through which social relations are shaped, created, reproduced, and resisted. Subjects, then, use the body in more inventive capacities than merely being the material onto which social relations are

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<sup>61</sup> James Newitt. *Artist's Statement*. jnewitt.com, jnewitt.com/artist-statement. (Accessed August 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2014)

<sup>62</sup> Trimbur, Lucia. *Sport and The Body Field Statement*. New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, May 2003.

mapped and inscribed.<sup>63</sup> This call for revised understanding of the boxing body as various, translates equally for amateur and pro women who box.

The inscribed, mapped, and also active boxing body is a possibility that I am also navigating in my studio practice. In the first few years of this project, I approached the concept of multiple bodies and identities as contained in one form, specifically the female boxer, through an illustrative technique. Before I moved onto making the more abstract images mentioned in the introduction and elaborated upon in the final chapter of thesis, I was developing my manipulation of the “real” thing by working with existing media images of women boxers. I collected hundreds of images of women boxers and then, in parallel to Pfeiffer’s work, became interested in the relationships between the outlines or borders of the material body as well as the concepts of ‘opponent’ and ‘symmetry’. This development resulted in a series of figurative drawings. I needed to see how it would actually *look* to layer the outlines of multiple bodies, sourced from media images of women boxers from the 1800’s up to the present day, on top of one another to form a single image. Thus, in my studio practice, I was contending with the same concerns that I was writing and researching. At the time, I explored and asked questions about the boundaries of the female boxer by tracing the very outlines of the boxing bodies that came before mine—from a time when women boxed in petticoats, to the professional female boxers of the 1980’s and today. As I will continue to describe, I soon departed from these more figurative and, for my process, limiting representations in favor of less literal, perhaps more formal explorations. However, working initially with the “actual” artifacts and existing imagery surrounding my subject, allowed me to orient my own physical body within the cultural landscape I was navigating.

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

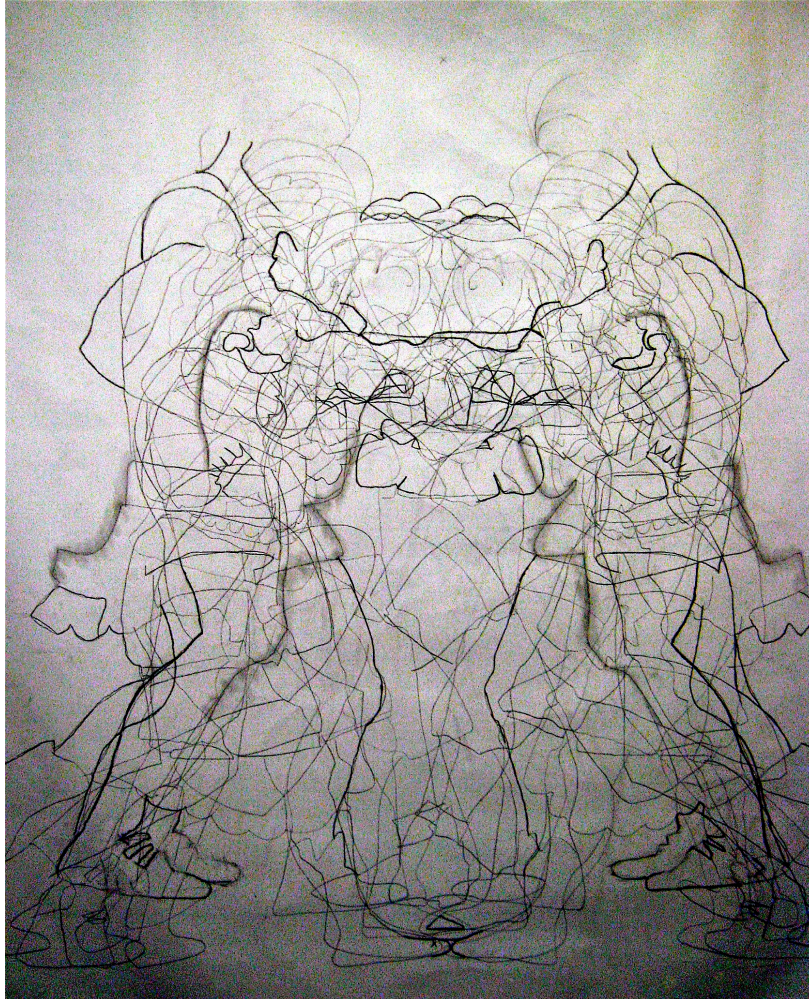


Figure Seventeen

The core principles that make up a moral economy as a system of understanding that prioritizes 'what is right', surely originate from the experience of the human body. E.P. Thompson's bread riots originate from the sensation of hunger. Trimbur's boxing gym moral economy, supported by Newitt's artistic work, originates from the need a boxing body has to be taken care of; to be trained to a point of split-second muscle memory, to be fed and wiped down, to be massaged, transported to venues where she/he are able to box, and to be witnessed as valid. These somewhat secondary bodily needs stem from a far more basic one; the need to survive and be free. As Trimbur explicates and Newitt references, many boxers are in the margins of society and the specter of prison is always looming above them. The boxing gym could be seen as being

part of a safer system than the system of the streets. I am not focusing on these particular issues for this project, in part because the connection between the boxing gym and prison/poverty/hunger is a significant subsection of sports theory and is being considered thoroughly in a number of forums,<sup>64</sup> but also because my reason for referring to this disturbing social paradigm is not to tease out the particular relationship between marginalization and boxing but rather to return to the body as a site of agency, one that is capable of expanding its discursive delineations.

In *A Sort Of Shadow*, both in the central film, the accompanying screenplay and the drawings, Newitt pays close attention to the functions that make the body corporeal; sweat, saliva, etc. These bodily excretions not only baffle the ways in which the body itself is symbolized, but also actually change the physical form; skin is not static, sometimes it is dry and smooth and sometimes it is bubbling with sweat. Through this focus on the materiality of the boxing body, Newitt is expanding it: "*During the struggle, the character extends themselves beyond their own form.*"<sup>65</sup> Newitt presents a contemplation of the physical limitations of the body, by filming a boxer becoming sweaty and exhausted, and also considers the limits of representing the body, and by drawing and writing about his own relationship to the body of the boxer he was filming:

I knew what it felt like to sweat (a lot) and to feel absolute exhaustion like I've never felt where it seemed I had reached the limit of my physical capacity. So I tried to think beyond this capacity and beyond a passive representation of someone else under that physical strain. That's part of the reason I wrote the text from the perspective of a camera – so it could traverse space in a very fluid way and I was trying to also write the 'reality' of the gym, the neighborhood and the boxing in a fluid way.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> For further consideration of the cultural theory and social justice issues surrounding the boxing gym, please see: *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* by Catherine Bell; 'Program for a Sociology of Sport' by Pierre Bourdieu; *The Manly Art* by Elliot Gorn; *Black Culture and Black Consciousness* by Lawrence W. Levine; *The Culture of Bruising* by Gerald Early; *No One Likes Us, We Don't Care: The Myth and Reality of Millwall Fandom* by Garry Robson; and the work of Loic Wacquant, Norbert Elias, and Michel Foucault.

<sup>65</sup> Newitt, James. *A Sort of Shadow*. Booklet of text to accompany exhibit of same name. 2013. P.17

<sup>66</sup> Newitt, James. From private email correspondence between Genève Brossard and James Newitt. June 18<sup>th</sup>, 2014.

Newitt's text diagrams engage with the dilemma posed by the limits of representation and, as a result, they subtly expand the boxing body by reconfiguring it as a site of open-ended possibilities. Newitt's boxing body does not have a definite border and is thus an abstracted form, similar to Kusama's Diana and Pfeiffer's Ali. In *A Sort Of Shadow*, the boxing body is characterized via descriptions of the ever-changing quality of skin and the endless sweating that is proof of its labor, yet this deeply corporeal representation is only seen through a mirror, a virtual space. The sweating, breathing boxing body as a reflection becomes a sort of inverse of Massumi's real-yet-incorporeal; it is unreal-yet-corporeal. Massumi's explanation for his real-yet-incorporeal aspect of the body centers around the relationship energy has to matter:

...energy and matter are mutually convertible modes of the same reality. This would make the incorporeal something like a phase-shift of the body in the usual sense, but not one that comes after it in time. It would be an unfolding of the body contemporary to its every move. Always accompanying. Fellow-traveling dimension of the same reality.<sup>67</sup>

Rather than attempting to resolve the tension of irresolution between real and unreal, corporeal and textual, fact and fiction, Newitt seems to celebrate irresolution as a perpetual tension. This state of negotiation allows the boxing body to expand. *A Sort of Shadow* seeks to engage and incorporate the viewer within these problematics and open a space for further interpretation and debate.

## **2.6. The Dialectical, Iconographic, and Naturalist Boxing Body**

While these three pieces are being exhibited, viewed and considered as contemporary, literary and cultural theorist Kasia Boddy's book *Boxing: A Cultural History* (2008) was published. I am including a section on her theories here because this is one of the few books that tackles the relationship between art and boxing, as well as aiming to offer a taxonomy of sorts. According to Boddy, artists have used boxing in one of three broad overlapping categories:

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<sup>67</sup> Massumi, p.5.



Dialectical, Iconographic, and Naturalist.<sup>68</sup>

Artists who use boxing **dialectically** are most interested in the sport as a metaphor for opposition; the performed fight between two people dramatizes an interaction between points of view or ideas. Those who use boxing **iconographically** are more interested in considering the symbolism of boxing's personnel and paraphernalia – interpreting the meaning and exploiting the aura, of the ring, gloves and mouth guards as well as individual boxers and fights. Finally boxing lends itself to the **naturalist's** desire to imagine formlessness, decline, damage, and mortality. The naturalist boxer is not an icon but a piece of matter – his authenticity evident in his sweat, bruises, and blood.<sup>69</sup>

Accordingly, art about boxing that falls into one or more of these categories could be considered typical; an important word because it establishes some formal and theoretical boundaries, and because it allows us to see the ways in which Kusama, Pfeiffer, and Newitt trouble Boddy's categories by offering alternatives.

Boddy argues that within the dialectical category of art about boxing, boxing is evoked, "simply as an assertively masculine way of expressing competition or even collaboration."<sup>70</sup> She refers to famous cultural examples such as Andy Warhol and Jean-Michel Basquiat's joint exhibition posters, the literary rivalry between Hemingway and Mailer, and many other instances in the modern cultural arena where prize-fighting imagery is used as a way to describe and emphasize rivalry and opposition. She continues by stating that the dialectics of boxing functions to express duality and conflict; boxing is a symbol for a multitude of relationships where the balance of power is at stake.<sup>71</sup> From this position, she is articulating ideas that are similar to the one that I interrogated in Chapter One; essentially that the boxing body is often used as a metaphor for conflict on a number of cultural levels:

The ideology of boxing is always masculine, even when adopted by

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<sup>68</sup> Boddy, Kasia, *Boxing: A Cultural History*. London: Reaktion Books, 2008.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid*, p.321.

<sup>70</sup> Boddy, p.371.

<sup>71</sup> Boddy, p.375.

women. To evoke boxing is always to disassociate oneself from the sentimental, the refined and the feminine...art about boxing thrives on the back and forth of the dialectic: naturalism vs. iconography; the raw vs. the cooked. And while this binary opposition is itself an 'artificial creation of culture', it is one which culture cannot resolve.<sup>72</sup> At its most cooked, boxing remains raw; at its most bloody, it can still tell a story. Although, as Sonny Liston pointed out, it's always the same story – the good guy versus the bad guy – new versions of good and bad are forever forthcoming.<sup>73</sup>

I strongly disagree with this assertion: Boxing is polymorphous and, when adopted by women, becomes about women. I also disagree with Sonny Liston – boxing does not always tell the same story. The artworks that I explore in this project tell different stories; stories that allow for sophisticated endings.

For example, Karyn Kusama's *Girlfight* was made with the explicit intention of challenging a sexist definition of boxing:

Somehow we assume that (violence) is the province of men, and in many ways it is. But there's another kind of underlying violence in this assumption, which is that women don't have that rage and capability for violence in themselves.... I wanted to start – making the audience ask questions of her (Diana's – the main character in the film) behavior.... It is disturbing when people have a problem with women boxing but don't have a problem with boxing in general.<sup>74</sup>

Pfeiffer also tells a story that is not dialectic; He erases the boxing body altogether, leaving a shimmering space that challenges the taxonomy that exists around the black male heavyweight champion of the world by generating questions about identity, form, audience, and beauty.

Boddy moves on to describe the iconography of boxing by stating, "the visual representation of boxing capitalizes on, or interrogates, the symbolic resonance of specific individuals, objects, or events."<sup>75</sup> She fills this section with a number of examples that support this claim; including, Spike Lee's use of the Black

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<sup>72</sup> Boddy, Kasia, *Boxing: A Cultural History*. London: Reaktion Books, 2008 p. xix; Levi-Strauss, Claude, *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1969.

<sup>73</sup> Boddy, p.391.

<sup>74</sup> Fucha, Cindy. 'Punch It Up – Interview with Karyn Kusama'. Movies Section, *Philadelphia CityPaper*, September 2000.

<sup>75</sup> Boddy, p.281.



Nationalist rhetoric, Don DeLillo's *Underworld*, L.L. Cool J's rap lyrics, and some contemporary art examples that explore the nature of commemoration (Carrie Mae Weem's 1991 *Commemorating*, Emma Amo's 1998 *Muhammad Ali*, Robert Graham's 1986 *Monument to Joe Louis*). This section of Boddy's text essentially outlines the ways in which artists and writers have engaged with the boxing body, the boxing gym and boxing equipment as metaphors for cultural memory and fetishism.

The final category, naturalism, is framed by Boddy's assertion that, "since the 1890s, the life of the boxer has been taken to exemplify the span or trajectory of a human life. Both might be expressed in terms of 'the distance'."<sup>76</sup> The naturalist approach to boxing and the boxing body is one that is characterized by shattered bodies, broken dreams, and hopeless futures. She details the instances in the art world where the punch, "provides a metaphor for unmediated address; it represents that which cannot be faked, and as such, is the obverse of the 'society of spectacle'."<sup>77</sup>

As I stated in regard to Kovylyna's performance piece, violence is violence. I have never experienced a punch that was a metaphor for anything else.

This does not mean that it cannot be approached from a variety of angles in art, especially as something that is not resolved by metaphor. I find that Boddy is being casual about the effect of the punch, both giving and receiving it, and, by reducing it to a metaphor, is missing the capacity that art making has for providing new perspectives on the punch, the boxing body, and boxing. Somewhat conversely, Boddy states that, "the difference between the downward trajectory of biology and that of boxing is simply speed."<sup>78</sup> She writes that naturalist artists and writers are fascinated with the decline and damage to the material of the boxer's body itself. Boddy describes the "twitching body on

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<sup>76</sup> Boddy, p.388.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

the stretcher”<sup>79</sup> to be what boxing is all about and any other offering is a temporary construct, and further states that a “carnal ethnography must be opted for in place of an abstract sociology”<sup>80</sup> when it comes to the representation of boxing. It seems that, while Boddy wants to account for the “intricate conceptual constructions”<sup>81</sup> that surround boxing, she accepts that the ‘essence’ of boxing is the ‘abject’ fact of “meat and body hitting meat and bone.”<sup>82</sup> So at the end, she, too, is a naturalist.

Julia Kristeva’s interpretation of the state of abjection includes a realization that “there is a breakdown between self and other.”<sup>83</sup> The implication is that the other has been previously rejected as intolerable for cultural, social, biological or physical reasons. In the case of Boddy’s boxer, the abject functions as 1) profoundly visceral – the body turned inside out<sup>84</sup> is both horrifying and is also an ultimate proof of mortality (the boxer’s body is not actually turned inside out but she does bleed and sweat more than most people), and 2) a culturally marginalized place where the boxing body resides.

Abjection, in the context of visual art, is usually approached through discourses that emphasize the attraction and repulsion evoked by artworks that contain the aesthetics of filth, obscenity, and decay. I propose that by considering the abject<sup>85</sup> beyond Boddy’s claims about ‘rawness’ and “the twitching body on the stretcher”<sup>86</sup>, a certain other way of seeing bodies and other aspects of ‘the world’ can occur, through the disruption the object-subject relation. This other way of seeing could be understood as a process of debasing standardized conceptions of how things are or should be. As Kristeva writes: “abjection is

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Boddy quotes Rotella, Carlo. *Cut Time: An Education at the Fights*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003, pp.13, 207.

<sup>82</sup> Boddy, p.391.

<sup>83</sup> Fletcher, John and Andrew Benjamin. *Abjection, Melancholia, and Love: The work of Julia Kristeva*. London: Routledge, 2012, p.93.

<sup>84</sup> Foster, Hal. *The Return of Real*. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1996, p.146.

<sup>85</sup> Kristeva, Julia. *The Powers Of Horror*, tran. Leon S. Roudiez. New York: Columbia University Press, 1982.

<sup>86</sup> Boddy, p.391.

above all ambiguity.... What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite.”<sup>87</sup> More specifically, I propose that abjection in the boxing body can be theorized alongside the notion of *informe*. Both notions point to an operation of debasing and declassifying, although I ultimately look towards *informe*, because its application can be broader and thus, sustains more relevance to this project.

*Informe*, as stated in the introduction, comes from Bataille via Rosalind Krauss and Yve-Alain Bois, who re-conceived it in their book *Formless: A User's Guide*. Krauss and Bois present *informe* as a way to (dis)order categories of modern art<sup>88</sup>. It chimes neatly with postmodern politics where identity and power are seen more as processes than fixed entities to be accepted or rejected. In his brief article *Informe*, Bataille sought to define a concept that, as it was being defined, would come apart and become indefinite, indefinable and, ultimately, an expression of the undefined. It has been argued that the term *informe/formless* ultimately allows all form, as it organizes all that is without form into one formless form. In Bataille's original article, he refers to “something like” a spider or spit as being the *informe*. However, the spider does have a form and the spit described by Bataille is a *crachat*, which is French for a gob of spit as opposed to spit in general. So he refers to two forms yet undermines their solidity in the “something like.” In my view, this signals the arbitrariness of forms, and the *informe* is the way in which formlessness is present (or absent?) in all form.<sup>89</sup>

Boddy's Naturalist grouping brings forth a contradiction; on the one hand, the notion behind this category – the boxer is a piece of matter, his/her decline evident in her sweat, bruises and blood – serves to underline the sociological conception of the female boxer and the boxing body as examples of abjection existing in a cultural margin. On the other hand, contemporary art (and subsequent cultural understanding) that approaches the *informe* and

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<sup>87</sup> Kristeva, p.18.

<sup>88</sup> Krauss, Rosalind. 'Informe: Without Conclusion'. MIT Press. *October*, Volume 78, 1998, p.98.

<sup>89</sup> Hegarty, Paul. 'Formal Insistence: Review of *Formless*'. *The Semiotic Review of Books*. Volume 13, no. 2. 2003, pp.6-9.

vulnerability of the body can unmoor the very sociological and cultural conceits that are functioning to fix the female boxer and the boxing body on the discursive framework as abject emblems of transgression and the problematics of race, money, and gender.

While both Boddy and I are interested in the effort some artists are making to unwrap the "slippery, naked, near-formless fact of hitting swaddled in layers of sense and form,"<sup>90</sup> I disagree with her assertion that the artistic effort to get near formlessness only serves the purpose of trying to remove the aestheticizing layer between reality and image and, therefore, achieve authenticity. Boddy and I both conceive of authenticity as a fantasy, however, I find that artists engaged with the formlessness of boxing and the human body could have more complex intentions than merely to represent the carnal without the middlemen of academia and theory. The use of *informe* in representation can also allow us the opportunity to consider the vulnerability of being human.

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<sup>90</sup> Rotella, p.14.

## Chapter 3

### **There's More to Boxing than getting Hit – There's Not Getting Hit, for Instance<sup>1</sup>**

Paradigms and Interventions of Form(lessness) and Vulnerability

*“We forget where the movements come from. They are born from life. When you create a new work, the point of departure must be contemporary life – not existing forms...”*

– Pina Baush

*“Art is a technique for acquiring liberty.”*

– Bruce Lee

### **3. 0. Introduction**

This chapter will establish paradigms of theory towards my thesis, the heart of which is my intervention into practices of representation around the female boxer. My intervention is the use of an alternative reading strategy to explore artistic and discursive representations of the female boxer. I intend to diversify the understanding of this figure, by drawing connections to interdisciplinary theories and art methodologies that complicate clear-cut narratives of positionality.<sup>2</sup> I

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<sup>1</sup> George Foreman. I recognize that most of my chapter titles and epigraphs are quotes are from male boxers or martial artists. I think that their content applies to not just men or male realms but to everyone, which is why I include them. That said, I did search for good quotes from female fighters but did not find any that were relevant. This is not because female fighters don't say quotable things, it is because women talking about boxing does not get recorded as much as men talking about boxing, nor is there as long a history of post-fight interviews for women, which is where all of these quotes come from (with the exception of Bruce Lee's quote, which comes from his published book, *The Tao of Jeet Kun Do*). Perhaps I will revisit post-bout interview archives in a decade and, if so, I'm sure I will find a plethora of quotes by female fighters. One notable quote, that did not fit as a chapter title for this particular text, comes from six-time world boxing champion, Melissa 'HuracanShark' Pacheco Hernandez : "I am womyns boxing." My reason for including this quote here is to give direct credit to at least one female boxer who has dedicated her life to the sport and is truly talented and accomplished. If she were a man, her hard work and repeated victories over challenging and varied opponents would have earned her many millions of dollars, however, being a woman, she currently works two jobs as well as training for championship bouts. In addition to this, she is charismatic, genuine, and funny (as evidenced by her fantastic ring name) and well aware of the second-wave feminism her oft repeated phrase references. Despite her efforts to take herself out of the male context of boxing, she nonetheless experiences the economic inequality of the gender binary that still pervades the sport of boxing as a cultural operation. Yet, HuracanShark is aware of her own agency and has no trouble articulating her position and confidence.

<sup>2</sup> As detailed in previous chapters, I am using Brian Massumi's definition of positionality as being a procedure of signifying subject formation according to the dominant structure. He elaborates by claiming that this process of normatization is only feasible when "movement is subtracted," thus resulting in a

am working to develop a structural realignment of the way the human subject is deployed within the 'category' of the female boxer.

What I am trying to establish here is a poetics of the female boxer. The importance of poetics, as I view it, is expressed by Tom Gunning in his introduction to Abigail Child's book, *This is called Moving: A Critical Poetics of Film*. He describes Child's filmic poetics as going beyond her use of words – often broken down and fragmented into phonemes – and encompassing a creative treatment of all of the matter she is working with, including the actual film itself, words, and sounds.

...sound and words are all treated as plastic matter, open to re-arrangement, liberated from predetermined meanings, and embarked on adventures in ambiguity and discovery.<sup>3</sup>

This approach of Child's<sup>4</sup> speaks to my argument for inconclusive representation and points to the materiality of gestures and words; a transversal blurring that supports my exploration of the relationship artistic practice has to living bodies.

Gunning also references Maya Deren's definition of poetics. Her articulation goes beyond the relationship poetry has to film, by applying poetic form to a larger creative approach, thus intersecting with my push for the female boxer to be represented as in a state of transition and transformation.

The distinction of poetry is its construction (what I mean by 'a poetic structure'), and the poetic construct arises from the fact, if you will, that it is a 'vertical' investigation of a situation, in that it probes the ramifications of the moment, and is concerned with its qualities and its depth, so that you have poetry concerned...not with what is occurring but with what it feels like or what it means...its attack is what I would call the 'vertical'

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predefined system of cultural gridlock. Massumi, Brian. *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation*. Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2002.

<sup>3</sup> Gunning, Tom. 'Poetry in Motion: Make Movies, not just Meaning'. Foreword to *This is Called Moving: Critical Poetics of Film*. Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 2005, p.i.

<sup>4</sup> While Child's work is relevant to my project, it is in Gunning's foreword to *This is Called Moving* that I found a succinct and useful description of the function of poetry.

attack and this may be a little clearer if you will contrast it to what I would call the 'horizontal' attack of drama.<sup>5</sup>

The difference between poetry and poetics is a crucial one. Deren and Gunning both speak of poetry and poetics. I am engaging with the theory of poetics rather than poetry. By poetry, I refer to a varied form of literature, or a descriptor to indicate an emotional or aesthetic sensibility/approach/reasoning, or as a way to indicate a deviation from conventional or academic form. Although poetry is obviously the dominant form of poetics, in that poetry is meant to evoke meanings that are in addition to or in place of the obvious, poetics as a theory is different from poetry. 'Poetics' originally comes from Aristotle's 4<sup>th</sup> century BC philosophical treatise on dramatic and literary theory within the branch of thought known as 'Aesthetics', and is thus historically and structurally different from poetry because it is a system of understanding and analysis rather than an expression of experience or observation. Since Aristotle, poetics has been used in a variety of contexts, including Gaston Bachelard's book *The Poetics Of Space*, which is relevant here because of his approach to the image: "...the reader of poems is asked to consider an image not as an object and even less as the substitute for an object, but to seize its specific reality. For this, the act of the creative consciousness must be systematically associated with the most fleeting product of that consciousness, the poetic image. At the level of the poetic image, the duality of subject and object is iridescent, shimmering, unceasingly active in its inversions."<sup>6</sup> This quote captures the ways in which I believe poetics can be used to understand the female boxer; as a source of movement both conceptual and physical, a multi-directional vacillation.

Deren's contrast between the 'horizontal' approach of narrative and the 'vertical' approach of poetics positions poetics as an alternative to narrative.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Ed. P. Adams Sitney. 'Poetry and Film: A Symposium with Maya Deren, Arthur Miller, Dylan Thomas, Parker Tyler, Chairman Willard Maas, Organized by Amos Vogel'. *Film Culture Reader*. New York: Praeger Publishers, 1970, p.174.

<sup>6</sup> Bachelard, Gaston. *The Poetics Of Space*. Boston, Beacon Press, 1964, p.xix (trans Marie Jolas).

<sup>7</sup> Ed. P. Adams Sitney. 'Poetry and Film: A Symposium with Maya Deren, Arthur Miller, Dylan Thomas, Parker Tyler, Chairman Willard Maas, Organized by Amos Vogel'. *Film Culture Reader*. New York: Praeger Publishers, 1970, p.iii.

By imagining a poetics around the image and subject of women who box, I am linking my subject to transversality and also investigating artistic methods that approach the subject via formal and conceptual inconclusivity. I hope to piece together a lens through which the female boxer can be seen as vulnerable; a state that could destabilize the reductive cultural framework that is fixing this subject. I am conceptualizing a change in direction, a movement through transverse meanings and artistic approaches that challenge narrative and secure form.

By 'transverse meanings', I am referring to transversality, a mode or movement that explicitly sets out to deterritorialize the disciplines, fields, and institutions it works across.<sup>8</sup> A transverse approach supports my intention to not straighten out differences between various figures, aspects, and ideas but instead to leave space for these contradictions to play out as webbed, multilayered, and overlapping. It is important to acknowledge transversality as not being a form into which one steps but, rather, as being in a permanent condition of taking place and, thus, cannot be defined as a positive thing or entity, but is rather a production that retains organizational structures in a state of becoming. Transversality is also linked to the production of subjectivity and practices that seek to create their own signifiers and systems of value.<sup>9</sup> What do the practices of transversality have to do with the poetics of the female boxer? As theorist Susan Kelly argues:

...for practices to be operating transversally, it is important not to solidify into recognizable forms, but attempt instead to render themselves in a particular consistency. The term consistency connotes both the regularity of an activity, and the level of thickness of a substance (think cooking lessons). Deleuze and Guattari have used the term consistency to describe a plane of immanence that can never 'pre-exist the becomings that compose it' and that resists re-constitution into forms or subjects of

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<sup>8</sup> Kelly, Susan. *The Transversal and the Invisible: How do you make a work of art that is not a work of art?* RepublicArt.net, January 2005, [http://www.republicart.net/disc/mundial/kelly01\\_en.htm](http://www.republicart.net/disc/mundial/kelly01_en.htm). (Accessed October 3rd, 2015)

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.



depth.<sup>10</sup> Consistency refers to movement and a material substance that holds heterogeneities together without resorting to a structure that would impose form upon matter. Agamben has also used the term suggestively to describe a state in which the condition of potentiality must suspend itself in order to remain between the virtual and the actual.<sup>11</sup> A practice might be said to retain a certain potentiality through this consistency. And so in these terms, the attempt to retain practices in a certain consistency crucially works to open out different, as yet unknown futures for the ideas, concepts and activities described.<sup>12</sup>

Transversal practices must often negotiate a double and sometimes paradoxical move, similar to the one I am both unpicking and trying to put into motion for my subject; a logic of refusing to take on recognizable or existing forms that both runs the risk of becoming inoperable because it is not visible *and* becomes a condition for the opening out of another logic or system of valorization.<sup>13</sup> In my attempt to move vertically through and also across the deployment of the female boxer, I do not want to start out from given spaces of negotiation and approved methods of representation but, rather, want to explore artistic modes that can “hold together the heterogeneities” that exist within the body “without resorting to a structure that would impose form upon matter.” This realm of ‘consistency’ relates to particular artistic avenues such as formlessness and the

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<sup>10</sup> Deleuze, Gilles and Félix Guattari. *A Thousand Plateaus* (trans. Brian Massumi). London: Athlone Press, 1988, p.270.

<sup>11</sup> Agamben, Giorgio. *Homo Sacer*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998, p.45.

<sup>12</sup> Kelly, Susan. *The Transversal and the Invisible: How do you make a work of art that is not a work of art?* RepublicArt.net, January 2005, [http://www.republicart.net/disc/mundial/kelly01\\_en.htm](http://www.republicart.net/disc/mundial/kelly01_en.htm). (Accessed October 3rd, 2015)

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*. The term transversal is often associated with Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s *A Thousand Plateaus*. However, it was first developed by Guattari as a tool for the re-organization of institutional practices of psychiatry that were conventionally based on processes of transference between the analyst and the analysand. Guattari sought to displace the transference processes that produce, what he called, institutional objects and introduce open collective practices that worked across the confines of the institution itself. Guattari used the term transversality as a conceptual tool to open hitherto closed logics and hierarchies and to experiment with relations of interdependency in order to produce new assemblages and alliances. In his activist work, Guattari used transversality as a critique and rupture with inherited forms of political organization. Later, he focused more on how modes of transversality might produce different forms of (collective) subjectivity that break down oppositions between the individual and the group. Recently critics such as Gerald Raunig have used the term to describe new terrains of open co-operation between different activist, artistic, social, and political practices. For Raunig, these modes of co-operation are not forms of solidarity between neither actors nor areas of inter-disciplinarity between fields, but rather signal a non-representational and additive form of alliance. See, in particular, Félix Guattari ‘Transversality’ in *Molecular Revolution: Psychiatry and Politics* (trans, Rosemary Sheed), Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1984.

haptic. Through a poetics of the female boxer, the condition of potentiality can remain intact. However, my approach must retain active and mobile relationships to known fields and systems of value.

Through my investigation into the visualizations that take place in Douglas Gordon and Philippe Parreno's 2006 film, *Zidane: A 21<sup>st</sup> Century Portrait*, I aim to illuminate the ways in which art can create a condition of potentiality. I am not suggesting that *Zidane* contains an ideal kind of representation that should be used for the female boxer, rather, I am using the film as a way to ask questions about *informe*, vulnerability, and transversality, among other related uncertainties, as they apply to my subject.

### **3.1. Naming the Athlete**

In order to locate instances of poetics and places where Kelly's consistency is at play in the film *Zidane: A 21<sup>st</sup> Century Portrait*, it is important to establish the ways in which the subject is currently functioning as a cultural figure. Zinedine Yazid Zidane, the subject of Gordon and Parreno's documentary film, is a French Algerian football player. He is widely regarded as one of the greatest players in the history of the game. The most obvious relationship Zidane the man and *Zidane* the film have to the female boxer as living subject and as image, is the title of 'athlete'.

The athlete body is distinct from other bodies. From a definitional perspective, the athlete is deeply couched in the complex societal operation of sport, an operation that functions in cultural processes of identity formation. Some examples of the identity formation I am referring to are; male/female, masculine/feminine, winner/loser, strong/weak, etc. These identity formations are usually diametric, a positioning that is laminated to the competitive origin of sports and disseminates outwards into non-sports life.

The role of sport in society and the body's intervention in sporting processes has been the object of study for many scholars in a number of disciplines. In this section, I am addressing sport theory briefly and specifically; in the context of the

athlete body as a subject, as well as the relationship sport has to the art film *Zidane*, and my concerns around the relationship between the film and the figure of the female boxer. I am not providing a survey of sports theory.<sup>14</sup> I am using the following selected theories as a methodological tool for contextualizing the ways in which *Zidane*, through a depiction of an athlete that comes from an aesthetic and theoretical poetics, disrupts conceptualizations of sport, both in terms of societal expectations and also in relation to sports sociology theory.

In sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's terminology, sport is a field, a site of struggles in which the capacity to impose the legitimate definition of sporting practice and activity, such as, "amateurism vs. professionalism, participant sport vs. spectator sport, distinctive (elite) sport vs. popular (mass) sport," is at stake. Bourdieu points out that, "this field is itself part of the larger field of struggles over the definition of the legitimate body and the legitimate use of the body."<sup>15</sup>

When considered in juxtaposition with *Zidane*, a perhaps conflicting scenario appears around the concept of legitimacy and the female boxer; is this artwork only possible because *Zidane* the male, celebrity footballer is securely rooted as legitimate and Gordon and Parreno are male, Turner-prize winning artists with massive budgets; also profoundly legitimate? The piece itself is produced using some of the most exclusive resources available; with sound engineered by the mixer for the remakes of *King Kong* and *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*; a camera crew that works regularly with Almodóvar and Scorsese, including two

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<sup>14</sup> Trimbur Lucia. 'Sport and the Body Exam'. *Field Statement*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003. From history to sociology, medicine to psychology, and American and African American studies to art, drama, and dance history, sport and the sporting body have produced thoughtful scholarship and provoked heated debate. Attending to the significance of sport for units as specific as 'the individual' and as general as 'the culture,' studies of sport have engaged topics as diverse as the role of sport in aggression management and catharsis conditions; the relationship between sports participation and socioeconomic circumstance; the function of sport in myth, ritual, and meaning-making systems; the deployment of sport to debunk and reinforce gender and racial stereotypes; and the use of sports to promote expressions of nationalism. There are multiple, often conflicting definitions of 'sport', and a huge amount of work is written on the many facets of sports ontology, for example: *Man, Play, Games* by Roger Caillois; *From Ritual to Record: The Nature of Modern Sports*, Alain Guttman; *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, Catherine Bell; *The Quest for Excitement: Sport and Leisure in the Civilizing Process*, Elias and Dunning.

<sup>15</sup> Bourdieu, Pierre. 'Sport and Social Class'. In *Social Science Information*, 17, 1978, p.826.

National Football League specialists, under the direction of Darius Khondji, who is currently working with Wong Kar-wai; graphic design by M/M Paris; and a sound track performed by Mogwai. Furthermore, the cameras used to record the film are only available to a very few people and are extraordinary, most notably the two Panavision HD telelenses with specially modified zoom, courtesy of the US Department of Defense, which developed the technology.<sup>16</sup>

This artwork comes from a very privileged place, and this positioning raises some important questions about legitimacy. My goal is to illuminate these complex questions rather than provide a definitive answer, and also to recognize the role gender plays in the understanding of a legitimate athlete.

Jennifer Hargreaves argues that sport can work against dominant representations of femininity and produce alternative constructs of gender, thereby challenging male supremacy. Framing modern sport as a site of gender struggle, Hargreaves illuminates the history of men and women's sports and of women's quest for inclusion in sporting activities. Hargreaves contends that athletics help construct alternative representations of womanhood. Thus, to Hargreaves, women deserve their own sociology of sport that disrupts the traditional tendency to compare perpetually women's sports with those of men.<sup>17</sup> I include this particular argument because it denotes a struggle with definition, a problematic struggle that points to the political precariousness of the female boxer as well as being a distinct position on gender that is held in the field of sports sociology. It is a useful structure to acknowledge and also to challenge.

The third contextualization I am using is the relationship between capitalism and sport, an intertwinement that speaks directly to concepts of legitimacy and also

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<sup>16</sup> As Paul Virilio has argued, cinema and war are irremediably coupled through the elaboration, testing and production of the optical technology that was key to the evolution of both. Virilio, 'A travelling shot over twenty years', *War and Cinema*, London: Verso, 1991.

<sup>17</sup> Hargreaves, Jennifer. *Sporting Females: Critical Issues in the History and Sociology of Sport*. London: Routledge, 1994.

gender. As understood by a certain school of sports sociologists:<sup>18</sup>

The athlete is fabricated in the image of the worker, and the track in the image of the factory. Athletic activity has become a form of production, and takes on the characteristics of industrial production.<sup>19</sup>

David L. Andrews complicates this statement by clarifying that contemporary sport culture must be considered as both a product, and producer, of the social formation in which it is situated. Andrews is concerned with “forging connections” between sport and the multiplicity of forces, relations, and effects (economic, political, social, cultural, and technological) associated with the contemporary Western context, described as the moment, or condition, of “late capitalism.”<sup>20</sup> The concept of the athlete as worker takes on different meanings when considered in regard to either the female boxer or Zinedine Yazid Zidane. I am looking at the relationship capitalism has to the cultural figure of the female boxer within the specific context of gender politics and the valuations placed upon the female athlete in terms of her difference to the male athlete; ideas I have covered in Chapters One and Two. In terms of Zidane, however, the phenomenon of celebrity comes into play in a way that is distinct from my concerns around the female boxer yet, nonetheless, leads me to relevant imaginings when deconstructed via my analysis of the film *Zidane*. To briefly contextualize the ways in which capitalism and sport interact in the film, I am looking at Tony Collins’ analysis of the development of this relationship:

In 1996 Australian newspaper baron Rupert Murdoch addressed shareholders of his News Corporation at an annual meeting in Adelaide. ‘Sport absolutely overpowers film and everything else in the entertainment genre,’ he told the gathering, adding that he intended to ‘use sports as a

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<sup>18</sup> Lasch, C. *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations*. London: Abacus, 1980; Tatz, C. ‘The Corruption of Sport’, *Current Affairs Bulletin* 59,4, September 1982; Nixon, H. ‘The Commercialisation and Organisational Development of Modern Sport’, *International Review of Sports Sociology* 2, 1974; Lawrence, G and D. Rowe. *Playpower: The Commercialisation of Australian Sport*. Sydney: Hale and Iremonger, 1986; Hargreaves, J., *Sport Power and Culture*. Oxford: Polity Press, 1986; Hoch, P. *Rip Off the Big Games - The Exploitation of Sports by the Power Elite*. New York: Doubleday and Co., 1972; Brohm, J. *Sport – A Prison of Measured Time*. London: Ink Link Books, 1978.

<sup>19</sup> Guttman, A. *From Ritual to Record, the Nature of Modern Sport*. New York City: Columbia University Press, 1978, p.66.

<sup>20</sup> Andrews, David. L. *Sport, Commerce, Culture: Essays on Sport in Late Capitalist America*. Baltimore: University of Maryland Press, 2006.

battering ram and a lead offering in all our pay television operations'...he was acknowledging the historical importance of sport to media companies of all technologies since the eighteenth century.... As part of his battering ram strategy, Murdoch paid the English Football Association £304 million to televise the newly created Premier League in 1992. The following year his US Fox Network paid \$1.58 billion American dollars to broadcast the NFL. In 1995 he established his own Super League rugby league competitions in Australia and England.<sup>21</sup>

Similarly lucrative deals took place in American baseball and European football and this massive increase in exposure allowed sport to attract new sponsors, eager to tie their brands to the popularity of clubs and the mightily enhanced celebrity status of sports stars. The pairing of sport and capitalism is a marriage that directly and quickly created the athlete celebrity, as this figure exists now, as a sort of millionaire superhero tattooed with logos. The quickest way to corporate riches in the era of televised sports is to sell every conceivable space and service to corporate donors and their brands, and this includes the very body of the athlete.<sup>22</sup> I find that the film *Zidane* engages with the materiality of the visual effects of the market economy and, in doing so, opens up a space for alternative interpretations of both the athlete as a moving body and the space of the stadium, possibilities I will unpack below.

I recognize that there are many more interpretations of sport and also that there are a number of different configurations that one could see emerging from these texts. I intend these three understandings of sports; Bourdieu's concepts of legitimacy, Andrews and Collins' articulations of the twinned processes of sport and capitalism, and Hargreaves' analysis of gender in sports, to be suggestive of the much larger and more complex field of sports sociology and have chosen these three out of the multitudes based on my intentions for this project.

Additionally, I note that there are many precedents, set by many scholars, for

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<sup>21</sup> Collins, Tony. *Sport in Capitalist Society: A Short History*. Taylor and Francis. 2013. Kindle Edition. Kindle Locations 4762-4765.

Sources: USA: TV by the numbers.com, <http://tvbythenumbers.zap2it.com/2009/01/18/historical-super-bowl-tv-ratings/11044/>. (Accessed August 5<sup>th</sup>, 2011); UK: Broadcasters Audience Research Board.com, <http://www.barb.co.uk/facts/since1981>. (Accessed August 5<sup>th</sup>, 2011).

<sup>22</sup> Barney, Robert K., Stephen R. Wenn and Scott G. Martyn. *Selling the Five Rings: The International Olympic Committee and the Rise of Olympic Commercialism*, Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2004.

considering the material sporting body as an agent of change.<sup>23</sup>

I name the female boxer as an athlete and therefore also classify this subject as being part of 'sport'. I recognize the complexities of naming and categorizing. Naming, be it a classification or emphasis, draws a border and therefore in/excludes. "It is at once the setting of a boundary, and also the represented inculcation of a norm."<sup>24</sup> Judith Butler explains further that, "the name mobilizes an identity at the same time that it confirms its fundamental alterability. The name orders and institutes a variety of free floating signifiers into an 'identity'. The name effectively 'sutures' the object."<sup>25</sup> Naming can also be a way of bringing into visibility that which is not, cannot, or has not been recognized. Naming can make intelligible that which was previously unacknowledged or not understandable. Naming, therefore, can be understood here in two ways; both as the re-iteration and possible re-signification of names that already exist and a proposition of the possibility that thus far unknown positions and forms of identity may appear in the social space. I am suggesting that these two ways of thinking, in both the realm of sport and also in other non-sports realities, are intentionally manifested in the film *Zidane* and can also be carried over into how the female boxer is represented as both an image and a living body. The interaction between these ways of thinking is important to both my imagining of the position of the female boxer as open, and recognition that the fixed position remains as a sort of locating device. As theorist Trinh T. Minh-Ha articulates:

The question as to when one should 'mark' oneself (in terms of age, class, ethnicity, gender, or sexuality, for example) and when one should adamantly refuse such markings continues to be a challenge. For answers to this query remain bound to the specific context, circumstance, and history of the subject at a given moment. Here, positionings are radically

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<sup>23</sup> For some examples of work about the intersection between sport, the body, and agency, please see Toepfer, Karl. *Empire of Ecstasy: Nudity and Movement in German Body Culture 1910-1935*; Budd, Michael Anton. *Sculpture Machine: Physical Culture and Bodily Politics in the Age of Empire*; Robson, Gary. *No One Likes Us, We Don't Care: The Myth and Reality of Millwall Fandom*.

<sup>24</sup> Butler, Judith. *Bodies That Matter: On The Discursive Limits of Sex*. New York: Routledge Press, 1993, p.8.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid*, p.208.

transitional and mobile. They constitute the necessary but arbitrary closures that make political actions and cultural practices possible.<sup>26</sup>

Without a doubt, there is contradiction and ambiguity around the positionalities at stake, especially when the positionalities shift and function on multiple planes, such as I am suggesting are present in *Zidane*; capitalism, celebrity, physical limitation, mastery, spectacle, work, vulnerability, etc. My goal is not to locate all of the ways in which naming functions or even to make it a central philosophical term for this section of my thesis. Rather, I acknowledge the instability of naming that occurs through the impossibility of precision, and include myself in this instability. Several meanings continue to overlap and are grappled within the transformative processes of art making, viewing, practicing, and writing. Naming is another form of representation and my hope is that by recognizing these multiple framings, I may be able to grasp the female boxer's conditions, conditions set by her very own ambiguity and contradiction. Throughout my examination of this filmic portrait of Zinedine Yazid Zidane, a man heavily marked by cultural references, I intend to keep alive the challenge of naming and its instability.

### **3.2. Zidane: A 21<sup>st</sup> Century Portrait. Douglas Gordon and Philippe Parreno, 2006**

Gordon and Parreno set up 17 cameras to follow Real Madrid footballer Zinedine Yazid Zidane through the course of an average 2006 La Liga game. They follow Zidane the player, not the match. With very few inserts of an outside camera showing the movement of the game, the film comprises mainly tight close-ups of Zidane, rendering what happens on the rest of the pitch irrelevant. As, in this particular game, Zidane is with the ball for only three minutes, we are left with watching an unrelenting portrait – the player waiting, walking, running and creating a few very precise plays. The cameras follow Zidane in 'real time' for the full 90 minutes of a football game. Because there are so many cameras, all focused solely on Zidane, and the footage is edited to move between angles and distances, not a second of Zidane is lost. Unlike a televised football match,

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<sup>26</sup> Minh-ha, Trinh T., *Elsewhere Within Here: Immigration, Refugeeism and the Boundary Event*. London: Routledge Press, 2011, p.51.



which includes the rest of the game, the other players and the ball, in the film there is nothing to watch but Zidane<sup>27</sup>. As a result, we become intimate with him, we do not take our eyes off of his face, mostly his face, but also his feet, hands and entire body. We see him dripping and pouring sweat, staring into space, and breathing for a full hour and a half. We only see Zidane and with this focus his vulnerability becomes primarily apparent.

When one body touches another in boxing there are dramatic interpretations and reverberations. In *Zidane: A 21<sup>st</sup> Century Portrait*, Zidane never really touches another body, except in the last few minutes of film when he engages briefly in a brawl; an episode that, while remarkable, does not overpower the sense of his isolation. This piece is a close-cropped portrait of a single man. Although there are plenty of lines to be drawn connecting the portrait to outside concerns, the primary focus and experience of this piece is about a singular, visually de-contextualized observance of one person. It could be said that we are waiting for him to make a very specific connection throughout the film, a connection with the ball. However, even this expectation fades away by the end of the game-length film (90 minutes). What remains is just the one man. I am contending that the technical and creative modes Gordon and Parreno chose to represent Zidane, in singular focus, complicate and even deconstruct notions of identity positioning and form.

In Zidane's almost nonsensical movements – the pacing, the brow wiping, the occasional muttering – we see the athletic icon, an anonymous sweaty man, and, via the technicalities of the work itself, someone with whose face, body, and subtle movements we become intimate and have a near constant hold on.

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<sup>27</sup> Gordon and Parreno list Andy Warhol's 1965 *13 Most Beautiful Women*, part of his Screen Test series, and Robert Bresson's 1966 dramatic film *Au Hasard Balthazar*, as being included in their influences. The Warhol reference is clear because his Screen Tests were single shot filmic portraits. Bresson's work is an influence most likely because of his textural and photographic use of the matter of film. It is also important to mention *Futball wie noch nie*, a 1971 documentary that focused solely on George Best; the work of Abigail Child who has been referenced in this chapter; the work of Frederick Wiseman who specializes in a sort of unrelenting yet non-hierarchical recording (fly-on-the-wall) both of people (portraits) and spaces (institutional structures for the most part); and finally, *Doin Work*, a 2000 Spike Lee film that was inspired by *Zidane* and followed basketball star Kobe Bryant for the full length of a Lakers game.

These differing positions; icon, any-man, and intimate, are experienced sometimes simultaneously and sometimes in rapid or slow sequence. The breakdown of the subject in the eyes of the viewer is the direct effect of the representational choices the artists have made. Of course, there is no denying that much of allure of the film and perhaps the reason we watch it for the duration is Zidane himself, a star and extraordinary athlete. I am not claiming that the film deconstructs Zidane's image as a football star, but it does do two things that question notions of positionality and narrative. First, the film performs an act of abstraction, formally and conceptually, by opening the cultural figure of a celebrity footballer up for a proliferation of understandings, transforming the object of consumption into a matter of collective daydreaming.<sup>28</sup> Secondly, this blurring happens alongside a political set of questions that are raised by the film around what exactly makes this particular figure 'legitimate'.



Figure Eighteen

Resemblance is a conformity, but to what? To an identity. Now this identity is imprecise, even imaginary to the point where I can continue to speak of a likeness without ever having seen the model.... For resemblance refers to identity, an absurd, purely legal, even penal affair; likeness gives out an

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<sup>28</sup> Neyrat, Cyril. 'Critique: Zidane, the daydreaming of a Loner.' *Cahiers du Cinema*. English version, no. 638 (2008), [www.cahiersducinema.com/article804.html](http://www.cahiersducinema.com/article804.html) (Accessed February 14<sup>th</sup>, 2015)

identity 'as itself' whereas I want a subject as into itself eternity transforms it.<sup>29</sup>

Due to the remarkable sound track and sound production, in combination with the cameras' exclusive focus on Zidane himself, Zidane's environment is primarily an aural depiction. I was constantly aware of the honking, whistling, cheering wall of humanity circling the subject. Zidane's figure seems to be floating in front of this vast background of spectators, which feels infinite and could be seen as a version of Masumi's grid of definition and identity, perhaps with each spectator representing a pinpoint on the grid. In the film, Zidane is a body that is both separate from the identity grid yet is also in an ongoing process of being contextualized by this very system of cultural definition, visually manifested in the film by the sea of spectators.



Figure Nineteen

Additionally, I find that the film's sound releases the heroic figure by reinterpreting the image through Zidane's subjectivity, taking the viewer to where the camera can't reach. Sometimes, the soundtrack appears to cut to another time and place altogether, layering the sound of kids playing street football and dogs barking over that of the match. At other times, it crosscuts rapidly from the compressed sound of TV coverage to the rich detail of the sound at the middle of the pitch. And at other times, there is only silence. As a

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<sup>29</sup> Barthes, Roland. *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*. New York: Hill and Wang, 2010, p.102.

way to portray the subjectivity of Zidane, when the camera is fixed on him, the sound emulates what he could be hearing in a crowded stadium. During extreme close-ups, the river of noise coming from the stadium is pooled and only specific sounds pass into the viewer's ears. For example, we hear the sound of a woman laughing, a cell phone ring, and the close and distinct sound of a percussion group playing their drums. This auditory interpretation of a subjective experience is supported by Zidane's own description of playing in a game:

When you are immersed in the game, you don't really hear the crowd. You can almost decide for yourself what you want to hear. You are never alone. I can hear someone shift in their chair. I can hear someone whisper in the ear of the person next to them. I can imagine that I can hear the ticking of a watch.<sup>30</sup>

In juxtaposition with the collage of background/foreground noise, we hear the intimately close sounds of Zidane's physical body and movement; the sound of him inhaling and exhaling becomes profoundly prominent at times. Other detailed sounds are heard, such as Zidane's constant rolling up of his socks, his cleats kicking the grass, the minute rustling of his fingers adjusting his shorts. Small sounds are often heard distinctly and emphatically while other sounds are totally muted. One of the more interesting breaks in the sound happens during the most dramatic moment of the film; Zidane runs towards and collides into an altercation with players from the other team. In this moment, the figure of Zidane is left in front of an almost silent stadium, accompanied by a drone-like ambient soundtrack.

The soundtrack in *Zidane* is representing an aspect of subjective experience that is intangible. As art theorist and critic Michael Fried writes in his 2006 ArtForum article, *Absorbed in the Action*:

...there is (also) the question of how exactly to understand Zidane's account of his own double consciousness, if that is what it is: On the one hand, immersed in the game, he doesn't really hear the crowd; on the other, at the same time, he can almost choose what he wants to hear and indeed can go so far as to imagine—extraordinary thought—the

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<sup>30</sup> Zidane, Yazid Zinedine. *Zidane: A 21<sup>st</sup> Century Portrait*. Artificial Eye 2006. DVD Special Feature: Interview with Zinedine Zidane.

ticking of a watch.<sup>31</sup>

Fried refers to Zidane's surprising and strange assertion that when he is playing football, his perceptive capacities go so far as to invent sounds. We are imagining Zidane and he is imagining us. The sound and the framing of the film make it clear that the dominant regime of the film is to be as close as possible to Zidane, at his height, plunged in the ambiance of the stadium. Cyril Neyrat, in his 2014 essay, *Critique: Zidane, the daydreaming of a Loner*, describes this cinematographic device as an "entry into the depth of the image, the abandonment to daydreaming."<sup>32</sup> But who is dreaming, and from where? These questions bring me back to the notion of poetics as being able to operate in a kind of timeless non-logic, where 'reality' can bend and invert and an alternate space of potentiality is created.

Within the close-cropped focus of the portrait, there is a relation to boxing that exists in two closely related ways. Firstly, the kind of tunnel vision presented by *Zidane* is also present in boxing and touches on some of the same forces of identity, such as intimacy and defining oneself in the presence of the other. Although we are observing Zidane, a charismatic super star, the intensity of focus does not come solely from the need to watch his celebrity. It also comes from the technical choices of the filmmakers, choices that are about portraiture and the effects of shot framing. We are intimate with Zidane because the film focuses exclusively on him, thus allowing us to be immersed solely in the locus of another person's movements. This is an experience that is described by Mischa Merz, an Australian writer and champion boxer, as transcending gender identity or other social identities:

The addictive forces are as strong for women as they are for men because they are so fundamentally human that they seem to defy conditioning. The engagement in this sport is intimate, sometimes profoundly so. Your focus on the other is as unwavering as it would be if you were in love. Your eyes are never off each other. There are emotions you feel as a consequence of boxing that you can't even get close to in

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<sup>31</sup> Fried, Michael. 'Absorbed in the Action'. *Artforum*, Vol. 45 #1 2006, p.333.

<sup>32</sup> Neyrat, Cyril. 'Critique: Zidane, the daydreaming of a Loner.' *Cahiers du Cinema* 06 July 2014.

day-to-day life.<sup>33</sup>

Secondly, the ceaseless convergence on Zidane's person that is provided by the film makes him not just the subject of our attention but also a kind of mirror: We largely perceive the game through his expressions (his unmoving face, beaky nose and hooded eyes give him the aspect of a hawk) and his more animated movements.<sup>34</sup> It has been said about the film that this emphatic attention can make it seem as if we *are* Zidane.<sup>35</sup> The experience of 'becoming'/viewing another person as/through a mirror parallels the role the mirror plays in boxing. The opponent in boxing is indeed a sort of mirror because you can see yourself in their responses, you are constantly facing them and, for every movement they make, you make a corresponding one. The mirror is also used in training for shadow boxing: Your own reflection is meant to create an imagined opponent. From a Foucauldian standpoint, the mirror is a heterotopic space and can be an object that complicates identity and form, a concept addressed by Newitt in *A Sort of Shadow*. I am using the notion of the mirror here because the mirror brings up the possibilities of blurring; blurring the lines of self and other; blurring defined forms, bodies and spaces; and, ultimately, blurring the legitimacy of a linear narrative. The mirror, as articulated by Foucault, stands for an alternate vision, one that reflects our world but also has the capacity to alter, flip, and confuse. Foucault stresses that we live in an 'ensemble of relations', a thoroughly 'heterogeneous space', and not a bounded total entity. Difference is produced through a play of relations or resemblances rather than through sharing common or essential elements or features. Heterotopias are not separate from society; they are distinct emplacements that are 'embedded' in all cultures and mirror, distort, react to the remaining space.<sup>36</sup> The mirror, like the cinema screen through which we watch the film *Zidane*, is a flat surface that has its own textures and irregularities: "the mirror creates a very slight distortion of objects reflected – at

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<sup>33</sup> Merz, Mischa. 'Body Blows: Femininity and the threat of Muscularity'. Sydney, Australia: *Overland Journal*, 2002.

<sup>34</sup> Dargis, Manolha. 'Portrait of the artist as a global soccer star'. *New York Times*, October 23, 2008.

<sup>35</sup> Hill, Dan. 'Zidane: A 21<sup>st</sup> Century Portrait'. *City Of Sound blog*. [Cityofsound.com/zidane-a-21<sup>st</sup>-century-portrait/](http://Cityofsound.com/zidane-a-21st-century-portrait/), March 4, 2007. (Accessed June 20<sup>th</sup>, 2015)

<sup>36</sup> Foucault, M. 'Different Spaces', in J. D. Faubion (ed.), *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology: Essential Works of Foucault Volume 2*, London: Penguin, (1998) [1967] 175-185.

times a mark on the glass highlights the mirror's surface."<sup>37</sup> It also provides a portal into another dimensional space: "In the mirror, I see myself there where I am not, in an unreal, virtual space that opens up behind the surface; I am over there, there where I am not, a sort of shadow that gives my own visibility to myself, that enables me to see myself there where I am absent."<sup>38</sup>

Gordon, Parreno and Mogwai offer us a subject that is both precarious and legitimate, that both acknowledges and re-weaves the very positioning that enables the film to be made. This paradoxical figure is possible because of the artists' visual and aural manipulation of the materiality of film; an idea that connects to Gunning and Deren's thoughts on poetics and matter. As Martine Beugnet and Elizabeth Ezra wrote in their 2009 essay *A Portrait of the Twenty-First Century*: "(Gordon and Parreno) have relied on the resources of modern-day technology and the breadth of possibilities that such technology affords artists and film directors concerned with the development of poetic forms of modern audiovisual expression."<sup>39</sup>

The result is an elaborate series of close-up shots and fluid pans from varying angles that shift in and out of focus, edited together to create a dynamic and entrancing composition of movements, color fields and textures. The familiar linear narrative offered in traditional broadcasts is thus abandoned, the initial audiovisual rendition of the match's temporal frame redeployed, unfolded as it were, to form "a kind of spatiotemporal sculpture – an ensemble of fluid blocks of duration brought together through intricate editing."<sup>40</sup> The film's visual field is in constant flux, shifting between long shots in clear-cut and detail-saturated photography to images caught by the telelenses, where forefront and background alternate between precision and shallowness, to extreme close-ups that sometimes give way to complete abstraction. The textural qualities of the

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<sup>37</sup> Newitt, James, *A Sort of Shadow*. Booklet of text to accompany exhibit of the same name. 2013. p.9

<sup>38</sup> Foucault, M. 'Of Other Spaces: Heterotopias and Utopias'. *Architecture /Mouvement/ Continuité*. Trans by Jay Miskowiec. October, 1984; ("Des Espaces Autres,") March 1967.

<sup>39</sup> Beugnet, Martine and Elizabeth Ezra. 'A portrait of the twenty-first century'. *Screen 50:1* Spring 2009.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

film create an overall effect of “a formidable exercise in haptic visuality.”<sup>41</sup> Haptic visuality is a term developed primarily by film theorist, curator, and critic Laura U. Marks in her 2000 book, *The Skin of the Film*,<sup>42</sup> and essentially means, “the way vision itself can be tactile, as though one were touching the film with one’s eyes.”<sup>43</sup> The title of the book is meant to emphasize the way film as a medium signifies through its materiality, through a contact between the viewer and the subject being represented. Marks thinks of film as a kind of skin that is both “impressionable and conducive” and is, in fact, something that viewers “brush up against like another body.”<sup>44</sup> Marks’s haptic visuality is a continuation of Vivian Sobchack’s conceptualization of the haptic in cinema (addressed in Chapter Two), however, manifests with a different specificity in that Marks’s suppositions delineate the substance of film itself in the context of intercultural cinema whereas Sobchack is more concerned with the embodied experience of the viewer.<sup>45</sup> But how does cinema appeal to the senses it cannot technically represent, such as touch and smell; that is, what does haptic visuality look like? Marks has developed a set of formal and textural qualities to define haptic visuality, including; grainy, unclear images; close-to-the body camera positions; panning across the surface of objects (or bodies); changes in focus; under and over exposure; densely textured images, effects, and formats; and alternating between film and video. Haptic visuality could lead to a closer form of looking

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<sup>41</sup> Recalling Gilles Deleuze’s use of the term, Laura Marks describes haptic visuality as “a kind of seeing that uses the eye like an organ of touch.” Marks, ‘Haptic visuality: touching with the eyes’, *Framework: the Finnish Art Review*, no. 2 (2004), [http://www.framework.fi/2\\_2004/visitor/artikkelit/marks2.html](http://www.framework.fi/2_2004/visitor/artikkelit/marks2.html) (Accessed August 10<sup>th</sup>, 2015).

<sup>42</sup> Marks, Laura U. *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses*. Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2000. Although I am only referring to certain, mostly material, aspects of haptic visuality, Marks conceived of the term in a complex context, having to do with much more than the formal materiality of the film. She specifically writes about these sense-based qualities in the context of intercultural cinema because, according to her, “the condition of being in-between cultures initiates a search for new forms of visual expression and many of these works call upon memories of the senses in order to represent the experiences of people living in the Diaspora” (p.24). Furthermore, Marks borrows her methodology heavily from Deleuze and Henri Bergson to understand the role of the senses in cinematic representation and spectatorship: “Deleuze’s theory of time-image cinema permits a discussion of the multisensory quality of cinema, given its basis in Bergson’s theory that memory is embedded in the senses” (p.xiv).

<sup>43</sup> Marks, Laura U. *The Skin of the Film*. Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2000, p.xi.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid*, p.xii.

<sup>45</sup> *Color and The Moving Image: History, Theory, Aesthetics, Archive*. Edited by Brown, Simon, Sarah Street, Liz Watkins, London: Routledge, 2012.



that tends not to distinguish form so much as to discern texture.<sup>46</sup> The haptic image is, in a sense, less complete, requiring the viewer to contemplate the image as a material presence rather than an “easily identifiable representational cog in a narrative wheel.”<sup>47</sup> Because there is a lack of sustained distinction, haptic visuality refers to a viewing that draws upon other forms of sense experience. Thus, it is a ‘tactile’ way of seeing and knowing which more directly involves the viewer’s body.

The soundtrack operates similar variations as the visual imagery of the film, overlapping or contrasting the “elegiac, mournful tones”<sup>48</sup> of Glasgow-based band Mogwai, up close sounds of Zidane’s body as he move around the pitch, the drone of the crowd, and the voice of the Spanish television commentator. The film thus switches from one form of hapticity to another; from low resolution and grainy appearance to fine texture and photographic exactitude, from melancholic musical tune to a sustained drone, to the precise enunciation of a television commentator to the pounding noise of the multitude. In the opening credit sequence, for instance, the camera draws so close to the screen of a television showing a broadcast of the match that the image turns into an abstract composition, a shimmering surface of interwoven, colorful threads, ultimately getting so close that the entire screen is filled with the close-up of a single, blurry pixel, before it abruptly cuts to a high definition image of the pitch. From the very beginning, the film thus discourages “an omniscient, masterly mode of viewing, calling instead for a ‘tactile’ relation to the image,”<sup>49</sup> an identification with the changing appearance of the audiovisual field as much as with its figurative content.

In the context of my reading strategy, the poetics of the female boxer, *Zidane* opens a space for multiple ‘becomings’ and performs as a ‘body’; a moving

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<sup>46</sup> Marks, Laura U. *The Skin of the Film*. Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2000, p.162.

<sup>47</sup> Totaro, Donato. ‘Deleuzian Film Analysis: The Skin of The Film’. *OffScreen OnLine Film Journal*, Volume 6, Issue 6/June 2002. [offscreen.com/view/skin\\_of\\_film](http://offscreen.com/view/skin_of_film), (Accessed September 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2015)

<sup>48</sup> Beugnet, M. and E. Ezra. ‘A portrait of the twenty-first century’. *Screen* 50:1 Spring 2009.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

sculpture of audio-visual matter.<sup>50</sup> Gordon and Parreno use the multiple-angle audio-visual material like sculpting matter, literally shaping the film as a body of changing textures and intensities, “full of oddities, of holes, of obscure regions.”<sup>51</sup> The affective power of the film is not the drama of the narrative but rather the film’s material transformation. The passage from formless to near-abstract compositions to clear-cut perception, from extreme close-up to wide angle vision, from inchoate roaring of the crowd to the sound of an isolated voice or that of Zidane’s breathing, allows for a vacillation of the figure. The disappearance and reappearance of the figure generates a thrill of endless potential for ‘becoming’ that is encapsulated in these fluctuations of focus and sound mixing,<sup>52</sup> similar to, yet more sustained than the final fight sequence in *Girlfight*.

### **3.4. Practice Vacillation**

The navigation of my project through the switch or vacillation between literal and tactile manifested in my studio practice near the time that I started using video. As mentioned previously, I explored the understanding and representation of myself as the authentic object with a video piece, made drawings to illustrate the multiplicity and history in the boxing body, and performed actions that engaged with touch and care. I also made videos of other boxers during competition, focusing my attention on the corners of the boxing ring. The corner in boxing is where the idea of “being in someone’s corner” comes from. Each boxer returns to opposite corners of the ring in between rounds. Here, their trainer and cut person wait for them. The boxer usually sits down and receives strategic instruction, their mouthpiece is removed, they are given water, and they get wiped down. If they are bleeding, the cut person attempts to stop the bleeding so that the bout can continue. Notably, the boxer cannot do these things for themselves, largely because they are wearing large padded gloves with

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<sup>50</sup> Beugnet, Martine. *Cinema and Sensation: French film and the Art of Transgression*: Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007, p.172.

<sup>51</sup><sup>51</sup> Colard, Jean-Max. ‘Zidane, Un Portrait du XXIème Siecle de Douglas Gordon et Phillipe Parreno’. *Les Inrockuptibles* 547, 2006, p.54.

<sup>52</sup> Beugnet, p.174.

attached thumbs, which serve only one purpose- to protect the hands. The corner is where the boxer is essentially helpless and is thus taken care of. I am interested in it as a space of intimate connection, especially as one that exists in a zone sanctioned for violence. During my work with these videos, I became more interested in the material and textural possibilities of my subject, rather than the narrative. I found that by focusing on the tactile and formal aspects of the work, yet not erasing or obfuscating the figurative element, I could represent the boxing body in ways that departed from the storyline understanding that I find to be laminated to the boxing body. Methodologically, I experimented with cycling very short clips in order to de-contextualize the movements, and I changed the focus, sound quality, and speed of the videos in order to introduce an element of abstraction. In this way, I was attempting to reach a 'becoming', an open-ended image or video that, while difficult to identify immediately, nonetheless originated with the boxing body. What I am interested in representing, or at least paying close attention to, is the practice of taking care of the body, the emergence of vulnerability from this act, and the effect taking care has on the relationship between self and other.

...the thrall in which our relations with others hold us, in ways that often interrupt the self-conscious account of ourselves we may try to provide, in ways that challenge the very notion of ourselves as autonomous and in control.... Let's face it. We are undone by each other.... It can only be so because it was already the case with desire.<sup>53</sup>

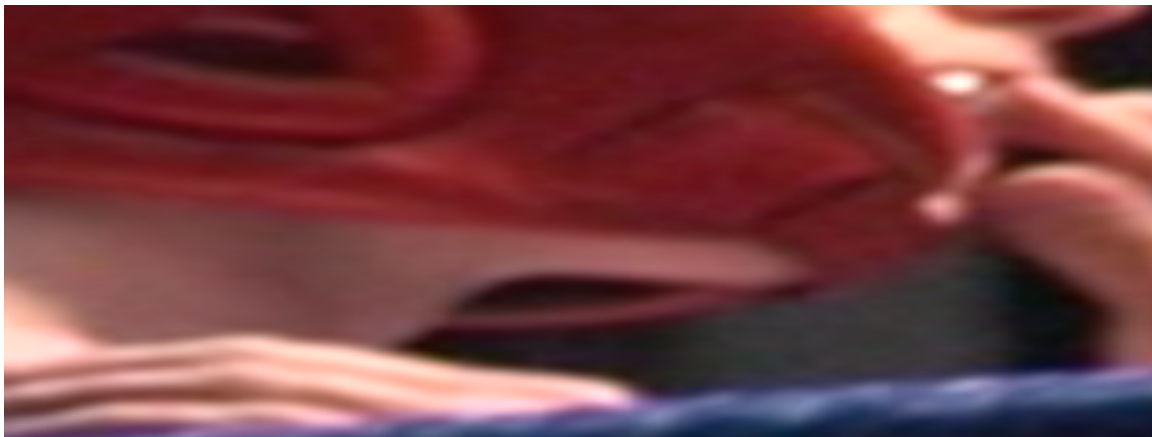


Figure Twenty

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<sup>53</sup> Butler, Judith. *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*. London: Verso, 2004, p.23.

Despite the montage format and play on scale and textures, *Zidane* does not affect a fragmentation of the body, but constructs distinctive new assemblages that combine the body as flesh (individual and collective, on screen and off screen) and as abstract entity (viewer, player, team and crowd as cultural, social, historical constructs). This variety of meaning leads me briefly to Deleuze and Guattari's description of the body as a set of various speeds and intensities.<sup>54</sup> According to them, it is conceived in relation to other bodies, particles of other bodies or entities...body and mind are 'modifications' of the same substance.<sup>55</sup> Thus, all of life, in a sense, becomes 'body' in material and molecular connection. Bodies, then, are not stable units, but become elements in assemblage, fluid and mutable, constituting life through 'becoming'. I contend that here, this 'becoming' is illuminated and achieved by the technicalities, including the use of montage as an avenue of haptic visuality, applied by the artists. As Tom Gunning writes in reference to the poetics of film: "(Montage is) also a method of interruption. Montage means breaking down, giving words and sound in bursts that transform meaning and association, braking the velocity of a gesture or action to allow a contemplation of its force and contradictions, before it has become sealed in a finalized intention."<sup>56</sup>

### **3.5. Pulse**

To my mind, the haptic visuality, montage, and sculptural quality of *Zidane* have a fruitful relationship to pulse, an element of *informe*. Pulse is not part of Bataille's vocabulary yet, according to Rosalind Krauss, it is related to the formless operation because pulsation involves an endless beat that punctures the disembodied self-closure of pure visuality and incites an eruption of the carnal. This eruption, in turn, has a direct relationship with the repetitive physical movements of boxers. Krauss analyzes the artist James Coleman's 1977 artwork,

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<sup>54</sup> Deleuze, Gilles, and Félix Guattari. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi. London: Athlone Press, 1987.

<sup>55</sup> Kennedy, Barbara. *Deleuze and Cinema: The Aesthetics of Sensation*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000, p.99.

<sup>56</sup> Gunning, p.viii.

*Box (ahhareturnabout)* as an instance of how pulse can function in art as a rhythmic beat that challenges our comprehension of a coherent situation through its effect on our senses. An example of such an occurrence is the effect a strobe light can have on our bodily experience of a space. Krauss's analysis of *Box* contains a use of the boxing body both as a signifying symbol and also as a means to convey a kind of vulnerable abstraction and, therefore, is a useful tool to connect my version of the female boxer with the pulse in *Zidane*.

Coleman's piece is a filmed boxing match, cut into three short bursts of three to ten frames, interrupted by equally short spurts of black. The film is a pulsing movement that both breaks apart and flows together. This field of representation is doubled aurally by a voice-over that emphasizes both the drive of repetition ("go on, go on, again, again, return, return") and the ever-waiting possibility of nothingness ("break it, break it, stop, s-t-o-p-i-t, regressive, to win, or to die"). Krauss articulates the fact that the viewer's own body, in the guise of its perceptual system and the projected retinal afterimages it registers, is automatically contributing to the filmic fabric. The fact that the viewer's body is also being woven into the work means that *Box*'s subject matter is somehow displaced away from the representational plane of the sporting event and into the field of two sets of beats or pulses; the viewer's and the boxers'. It also means that the frequent projections of the sound of breathing, expressed in the soundtrack as "ah/ah, ah/ah" and "p-a-m/p-u-m," is giving voice not only to the boxers' bodily rhythms but to those of the viewer as well.<sup>57</sup> The decision to isolate the sound of breathing through meticulous editing of post-fight interviews, collar-microphone audio recordings and footage from Super 35 Cameras, is one that Coleman, Pfeiffer, and Gordon and Parreno have all made in order to allow for a corporeal connection between the viewer and the artwork. The effect of this decision is that the subject matter becomes physically intimate to us through an embodied disruption of dramatic narrative.

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<sup>57</sup> Krauss, Rosalind and Yve-Alain Bois. *Formless: A User's Guide*. New York: Zone Books/MIT Press, 1997.

Krauss, although she thinks of Coleman's piece as an effort to "record the industrialization of sport,"<sup>58</sup> contends that, "pulse is important within the context of formless as its vector, which is to say its reaching upward toward the sublimated condition of form in order to undo that order, and to de-sublimate that vision through the shock effect of the beat."<sup>59</sup>

In *Zidane*, the pulse is present in a different way; the sound of the stadium is a sort of pre-existing pulse that is layered over with the pulse of the subject, the human we are watching. Through pulse, *Zidane* breaks away from the representational plane even more and, perhaps, can be suspended in the consistency of a transversal kind of representation, one that holds space for continued potentiality. Surely, continued potentiality is a 'becoming'. Deleuze and Guattari's 'becoming' offers a radical alternative to dual and fixed notions of the subjective body. It suggests that bodies and identities change through 'contamination' in an ongoing process of exchange that takes place at the level of the 'molecular'; that is, at the micro level of perception – of visual and sound matter in movement and the way these interact and change – as opposed to the macro or 'molar' level of organization concerned with ideological, social and psychological frameworks.<sup>60</sup>

There is, however, a deep ambivalence embedded in the inclusiveness and connectivity both depicted in and elicited by the film. On the one hand, the 'macro' level always resurfaces, inevitably bringing to mind the great paradox that underpins Gordon and Parreno's film; in a contemporary Europe where much of the media is obsessed by xenophobic fears, the most famous and admired man is a footballer of Algerian Kabyle origins. On the other hand, in its treatment of the Zidane figure and of the event of the match in connection with imaging and media globalization, the film raises the issue of technology's impact on subjective perception, the relation of subjective experience to historical and

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<sup>58</sup> *Ibid*, p.164.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid*, p.165.

<sup>60</sup> Deleuze, Gilles and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Robert Hurley et al. London: Athlone Press, 1984, p.8.

mediated time and, by extension, the commodification of the relation of the subject to the objective world.

The stadium seems a matchless *mise-en-scène*.<sup>61</sup> Nowhere else is the intensely corporeal in such intimate proximity with the abstract, immaterial flows of commerce. Zidane's body is literally enmeshed within and against a backdrop of advertising; he passes a ball effortlessly as an M3 Power Razor by Gillette floats across a screen in the distance behind him; as exhaustion begins to register in his awkward gait, the sweat on his chest is soaked up by a jersey advertising Siemens mobile services. And this entanglement between the body and capitalism is not only a visual effect; it reverberates through all of the bodies involved in and connected to the film.

As Martine Beugnet and Elizabeth Ezra point out, the onlooker may wear a Zidane shirt, but Zidane himself wears a Siemens Mobile shirt.<sup>62</sup> The international makeup of both the filmmakers (Gordon is Scottish and Parreno is French-Algerian), the football team, and the film's eponymous emphasis on the French-Algerian-Kabyle star footballer's playing for Real Madrid, mirror the global advertising slogans that traverse the pitch and the screen. Like the team itself, an *über équipe*, the advertisements are transnational, attempting to transcend national boundaries, while inevitably drawing attention to them; Siemens is German, Movistar and Fortuna are Spanish, Kellogg's is American, and BP is British-Dutch. The presence of the 'outside' world, a larger, becoming-globalized world, is further evoked in the babel of languages spoken by the players and commentators (Spanish, French and English) and by the advertising logos, which constitute a kind of multinational hieroglyphics. All of these sign systems converge on the illuminated advertising panel that adorns the film like a frieze on which slogans appear in flat space, in contrast to the rounded depth of the playing field. The messages move across the panel to form a 'graphic

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<sup>61</sup> Griffin, Tom. 'The Job Changes You'. *Artforum*, Vol 45 #1, 2006, p.334.

<sup>62</sup> Beugnet, Martine and Elizabeth Ezra. 'A portrait of the twenty-first century'. *Screen* 50:1 Spring 2009.

unconscious,<sup>63</sup> the products advertised inevitably rubbing off on Zidane himself in a kind of sympathetic magic.

But the frieze is also swallowed into the overall sensory space as a moving strip of abstract motifs and fields of color, thus, the viewer's experience of the frieze shifts from an 'optical' reading position to a more haptic encounter. Here lies the major ambiguity of Gordon and Parreno's project, one that hovers between an aesthetic of connectivity and an aestheticization of language that inevitably invokes the aestheticization of politics,<sup>64</sup> and of Zidane himself.

### **3.6. Identity, Agency, and Fracture**

Zidane is a preeminent example of what has been described as an 'emblematic individual'. Theorist Leo Braudy has described how celebrities cannot avoid implication in the image-creating systems that define them; to be talked about is to be part of a story, and to be part of a story is to be at the mercy of storytellers – the media and their audiences. The famous person is, thus, not so much a person as a story about a person.<sup>65</sup> Conflicting meanings are constantly projected onto Zidane-as-cipher<sup>66</sup>. Zidane seems to be a complex example of what sports theorist George Whannel – in a discussion of race and its intersections with identity, nationality and masculinity – summarizes as 'hybridity'.<sup>67</sup> Whannel quotes Stuart Hall's description of the experience of being black and British as a 'hyphenated sense of belonging', and Zidane's identity can be considered as a kind of double-hybridity and double-hyphenation. Not only is Zidane a French citizen of Algerian descent, and therefore a member of an 'ethnic minority' in France but, additionally, his Berber origins make him a minority even within the subset of his *beur* identity (as French citizens of Maghreb descent are called) within France. Zidane's ethnic identity is constantly open to

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<sup>63</sup> See Conley, Tom. *The Graphic Unconscious in Early Modern French Writing*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992.

<sup>64</sup> Beugnet, Martine and Elizabeth Ezra. 'A portrait of the twenty-first century'. *Screen* 50:1 Spring 2009.

<sup>65</sup> Braudy, L. *The Frenzy of Renown: Fame and its History*. New York: Vintage, 1997.

<sup>66</sup> Le Vaillant, L. 'Zinedine Zidane, 27 ans, champion du monde de foot caché derrière ses silences', *Libération*, 15 November, 1997.

<sup>67</sup> Whannel, George. *Media Sport Stars: Masculinities and Moralities*. London: Routledge. 2002.



both well meaning and hostile interpretation, and the ethnic fault lines of his hybrid nationality/identity are further complicated by the politics of France's painful decolonization of Algeria in the 1950s and 1960s. During France's attempts to defeat the Algerian military uprising, a minority of Muslim Algerians – known as the Harkis – fought for the French against the nationalist insurrection, gaining the gratitude of France but the enmity of Algeria. As discussed by Hugh Dauncey, Zidane's fractured identity has periodically been shaken by claims that his Algerian father was a Harki. He has actively refuted these accusations, thus defending his father's integrity as a 'true' Algerian but underscoring his own status as the son, not of a Harki loyal to France, but of an Algerian 'nationalist'.<sup>68</sup>

In a 2008 essay, Hugh Dauncey relates Zidane's troubled/troubling identity to the film's title presentation by articulating how it seems to further evince this tangle of identity positioning; each letter of Zidane's name appears one at a time, each accompanied by a chimed note played by Mogwai on the soundtrack, before all six letters are printed over each other. Dauncey describes the resultant hieroglyph as appearing as some sort of a mystical pentagram, seeming to contain forms like an X and an O, or a five pointed star, all of them contained within a box. The title typography thus implies that Zidane himself, as a celebrity and public figure, is a sort of written-over text or palimpsest of competing discourses that threatens ultimately to render him illegible.<sup>69</sup>

In some ways, this inscrutability<sup>70</sup> could equal a kind of agency or power for Zidane, the cultural figure as well as the body. However, I find the role of agency in the film to be problematic because Zidane is also a piece of material for the artists to manipulate. Gordon and Parreno do not exactly provide Zidane with agency, rather taking him out of one set of definitions and placing him into their own set of high-production art-film values. One of Zidane's subtitled thoughts reads:

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<sup>68</sup> Dauncey, Hugh. 'Quiet Contradictions of Celebrity: Zinedine Zidane, image, sound, silence and fury.' *International Journal of Cultural Studies* Volume 11, 2008, pp.301-320.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Gordon, D. and P. Parreno. 'Zizou en oeuvre d'art'. *Les Inrockuptibles*. 9 May, 2006.

Sometimes, when you arrive on the pitch, you have the impression that everything has been decided in advance and there is nothing you can do; the script has already been written.<sup>71</sup>

Of course, in a very prosaic sense, football is often scripted in advance: teams will typically have a game plan based upon their analysis of their opponents' strengths and weaknesses. As Charles Tesson has argued, football is at its most boring when the advance script matches perfectly to the game that is played. On the other hand, a match becomes truly interesting when this advance script is disrupted by another, unexpected narrative, constructed upon the ruins of the first.<sup>72</sup> Zidane's comment, however, would seem to imply something more radical, a more metaphysical sense of predestination. What becomes of Zidane's unpredictable individual agency if he is, by his own admission and within the narrative logic of Gordon and Parreno's film, subject to some mysterious, over-arching plan?<sup>73</sup> The aesthetic regime of Gordon and Parreno's portrait, by focusing on just one player, paradoxically seems to detract from the sense of that individual's agency, since Zidane's actions are largely divorced from their consequences, existing in a kind of vacuum, sufficient unto themselves. Gordon and Parreno describe their film as "a document about a live event,"<sup>74</sup> rather than a documentary. But this status of the film, as a retrospective organization of a live event, places the work in an ambiguous position with respect to the structuring of narrative; for, in a live broadcast, the outcome of an encounter is necessarily uncertain, whereas, in a retroactively edited film, whether documentary or fiction, the end of the story is known in advance and will frequently determine the shape of the overall narrative structure. Thus, as further accounted by Hugh Dauncey, *Zidane*, while seeking to maintain some of

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<sup>71</sup> Zidane, Yazid Zinedine. *Zidane: A 21<sup>st</sup> Century Portrait*. Artificial Eye 2006, DVD subtitles.

<sup>72</sup> Tesson, Charles. 'Le Ballon dans la lucarne', *Cahiers du cinema* 386, July-August 1986, pp.41-7.

<sup>73</sup> In regard to agency, a few months after the game that was filmed for Gordon and Parreno's film, Zidane ended his career with a red card with ten minutes left of a crucial game. Jean Philippe Toussaint, in his 2006 essay 'Zidane's Melancholy' (*La Melancholie de Zidane*), writes that when Zidane realized that "he did not have the means to pull off a final act of pure form," he resolved to short-circuit his existence, resisting the symbolic death (or resolution) of lifting the World Cup and instead, left his prospects open, unknown, and alive with a gesture that would "score minds."

<sup>74</sup> *Zidane: A 21<sup>st</sup> Century Portrait*. Artificial Eye 2006. DVD. Special Feature interview with Douglas Gordon and Phillippe Parreno.

the suspense of a live football match, also contains elements of narrative prolepsis, knowing gestures toward what will be the outcome of the game.<sup>75</sup>

Gordon and Parreno's work is fundamentally about interconnectedness – with the world as well as with other subjects – and about cinema's ability to recreate such a sense of interconnectedness. In Deleuzian terms, *Zidane*, as a study of the fluidity of identity, is a film of multiple 'becomings'. Equally, in its vivid evocation of how embodied subjectivities and the objective world are "passionately intertwined,"<sup>76</sup> it recalls the oceanic feeling described by Freud, or Merleau-Ponty's description of the world as flesh; that is, as the unsettling and exhilarating experience of the lack of distinction between inside and outside, oneself and others.<sup>77</sup>

### **3.7. Monster**

The delicate connection between potentiality and limitation brings me to a term that I will return to in my conclusion and, despite its traditional and mythic connotations, I conceive of as positive; the monstrous. Gerald Raunig writes about 'disruptive monsters' and I refer to a kind of representation that embraces the monstrous as being a heterotopic manifestation, one that "does not stop moving and that does not come from dreaming."<sup>78</sup> To me, the monster enacts the poetics of the female boxer because it comes from an indeterminate location and continues to move in realms that have not been homogenized or

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<sup>75</sup> Dauncey, Hugh. 'Quiet Contradictions of Celebrity: Zinedine Zidane, image, sound, silence and fury.' *International Journal of Cultural Studies* Volume 11, 2008, pp.301-320.

<sup>76</sup> Sobchack, Vivian. *The Address of the Eye: a Phenomenology of Film Experience*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992, p.286.

<sup>77</sup> Freud, Sigmund. 'Civilization and its discontents' (1929), in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works*, Volume XXI, ed. and trans. James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press, 1961), pp.57-145; Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *The Visible and the Invisible*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1968), p.138.

<sup>78</sup> Raunig, Gerald. *Art and Revolution: Transversal Activism in the Long Twenty First Century*. Boston: MIT Press, 2007, p.134. Raunig writes about disruptive monsters as a way to approach Hegel's aesthetics. I am considering Raunig's re-presentation of the monster as generative, rather than as the undesired ugly part of a Hegelian dialectical system that ultimately desires to return to uniformity. The monster is movement and Hegel "consistently describes movement as a reterritorializing movement of identity, in which difference remains cursed and deficient." ( Raunig, p.137)

fully articulated:

...there is danger in permanent disruption, in the moving relation of different to different, something explosive that eludes determination, description, representation. The corresponding tendency of the dialectical movement...where determinacy finds a collision in opposition to something else, the situation in its specific character is differentiated into oppositions, hindrances, complications and transgressions, so that the heart, moved by circumstances, feels itself induced to react of necessity against what disturbs it and what is a barrier against its aims and passions.... What would happen if we specifically do not take this incited movement as an instrument for establishing peace and quiet, but rather as one that is potentially impossible to conclude, infinite? What if the differences, in constant exchange, refuse to be subordinated to the rule of identity and representation?<sup>79</sup>

The ways in which Zidane is represented in the film, as inconclusive and also singular go against what I am calling 'need for proof' as a determining protocol. I discuss this convention as it applies to female boxers in Chapter One and have been challenging it throughout the thesis as essentially sexist, however it is also deployed in relation to all athletes in some sense, due to the physical operation of competitive sport. Excitingly, I find that *Zidane*, because of its focus on Zidane's humanity, reveals the singular initiative or body as having the capacity to deconstruct even the condition of celebrity. The film represents the figure of the athlete without a comprehensible context of 'the game' and, thus, creates a gap in the system of understanding that requires enacted proof from the positioned cultural figure of Zidane, a figure that usually responds by inherently providing/performing the proof that we ask for (playing immaculate football for the most part). Rather, through Gordon and Parreno's poetic modes of representation the subject is allowed to exceed his own form and to be seen through a variety of strange and transforming lenses; Zidane becomes a monster:

When representation discovers the infinite within itself, it no longer appears as organic representation but as orgiastic representation; it discovers within itself the limits of the organized; tumult, restlessness and passion

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

underneath apparent calm. It rediscovers monstrosity.<sup>80</sup>

Yet, even this empowering conception of the monstrous has its uncertainty. Although I am deploying Bataille's explanation of the monster as positive, "each individual form escapes this common measure and is, to a certain degree, a monster,"<sup>81</sup> the historical appearance of the monster and the monstrous in literature and theory is more complex, especially in the context of Zidane's Algerian ethnicity and narratives around colonialism. Much of the problematics around the idea of Zidane as a monster can be observed through a brief exploration into Shakespeare's character Caliban, who appears in the play 'The Tempest'. Caliban lives alone on an island until the play's protagonist Prospero, the Duke of Milan, washes up onshore after a shipwreck. Prospero ultimately enslaves Caliban. Caliban is described as a freckled monster, a *cambion* (offspring of a succubus and a human),<sup>82</sup> and the son of a witch; "Hag-born...not honored with human shape...poor credulous monster."<sup>83</sup> His mother, Sycorax, is an exiled Algerian, and his father is the devil. Caliban is in many ways a pathetic figure, however, he does have agency and he does rebel against Prospero at one point. This character has been analyzed prolifically in a variety of contexts.<sup>84</sup> In terms of the connection I am drawing between Zidane and the concept of the monstrous, I am aware of the risk in calling Zidane a monster, both in terms of

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<sup>80</sup> Deleuze, Gilles. *Difference and Repetition*, translated by Paul Patton, New York: Columbia University Press, 1994, p.42.

<sup>81</sup> Bataille, Georges. 'The Deviations of Nature'. *Visions of Excess*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985, p.48.

<sup>82</sup> Lewis, Spence. 'Cambions', *Encyclopedia of Occultism and Parapsychology*. London: Dover Occult, 2000, p.148.

<sup>83</sup> Shakespeare, William. (1611) *The Tempest*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998, Act 2, Scene 2 p.6.

<sup>84</sup> Caliban, 'the savage and deformed slave' has been portrayed in theatre and literary criticism as, among other things, a fish, a tortoise, the missing link, an American Indian, and an African slave. He has appeared in poems by Browning, Auden, and Braithwaite, among others, and has appeared in illustrations by Hogarth, Fuseli, Walter Crane, and other major artists. In the twentieth century, he has been widely adopted as a cultural icon, first as a symbol of imperialist North America and more recently, as an emblem of colonized native populations. According to Alden and Virginia Vaughan in their book *Shakespeare's Caliban: A Cultural History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), Shakespearean Caliban's changing incarnations relate to the cultural and intellectual forces, including Romanticism, Darwinism, the late nineteenth century Anglo-American rapprochement, and the Third World liberation movements after World War II.

aligning with colonist or racist attitudes towards non-white athletes in particular,<sup>85</sup> and also in regard to ideas around Caliban as a complex symbol of injustice. On the one hand, Caliban stands for countless victims of European imperialism and colonization because he is disinherited (of the power to rule the island), subjugated, forced to learn a conqueror's language, endures contempt and abuse, and eventually rebels.<sup>86</sup> On the other hand, Caliban represents both the anti-colonial rebel whose struggle still resonates in contemporary Caribbean literature, and is also a symbol for the world proletariat and, more specifically, for the proletarian body as a terrain and instrument of resistance to the logic of capitalism.<sup>87</sup>

These framings complicate my naming of Zidane a monster and do need to be acknowledged as elements of my reading, however, my specific interest is in the possibility that the monster's power is in his or her singularity; that, by breaking the structure that produces notions of the average/the ideal form, the monster reveals both the conditions of his or her own representation and his or her own vulnerability. In 2013, Zidane himself (now a coach for Real Madrid) expressed a version of the 'monster' that I am using here when he praised ex-teammate Cristiano Ronaldo's professionalism and athleticism: "He does not need to talk much. Much has been said of him, but what he does on the pitch is monstrous, he is wonderful.... The way he won the match...he carried the team on his back."<sup>88</sup> By monstrous, Zidane means wonderful and exceptional. He is noting Ronaldo's ability to exceed form, a possibility that questions standard

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<sup>85</sup> Edwards, Harry. *The Revolt of the Black Athlete*. Arkansas: Free Press. 1966; Martin, Lori Latrice. *Out of Bounds: Racism and the Black Athlete*. New York City: Praeger Press, 2014; Murphy, Sara and Alex Tschumi. *The Social and Political Aspects of Zidane's image*. Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2013; Rowe, David. 'Stages of the Global: Media, Sports, Racialization and the Last temptation of Zinedine Zidane.' *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*. September 2010, vol 45 no.3, pp.355-371.

<sup>86</sup> Vaughan, Alden and Virginia. *Shakespeare's Caliban: A Cultural History*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993, p.145.

<sup>87</sup> Federici, Silvia. *Caliban and the Witch*. LibOrg.com, 2004, <https://libcom.org/files/Caliban%20and%20the%20Witch.pdf>, p.10.

<sup>88</sup> Football Espana, *Zidane: Cristiano is Monstrous*. (press conference report). football-espana.net, Friday, December 6<sup>th</sup>, 2013. <http://www.football-espana.net/38524/zidane-cristiano-monstrous>. (Accessed November 28<sup>th</sup>, 2015)

representation of the subject. Through the physical actions of Ronaldo or Zidane,<sup>89</sup> a gap in the positioning process is revealed: "Might not the singular initiative be, in the end, that intimate, infinitesimal, but ultimate force on which the deconstruction of any condition depends?"<sup>90</sup> The monstrous, as the result of individual form taken to its potential, is accepted as positive. Through our recognition of Zidane's exceeded form and singularity, we also become aware of Zidane's vulnerability.

### **3.8. Vulnerability**

As Darius Khondji says in an interview about the film: "...with all the cameras pointed at Zidane, he was very fragile, he was really like a thin film or a leaf...he really travelled from one space to another, from a sort of blurry space, almost fluid like water, to a very clear, sharp image and the result was something very beautiful which represents Zidane's own fragility."<sup>91</sup>



Figure Twenty One

To ground my belief that vulnerability (to which I perceive Khondji's fragility to be a materially-based allusion) can be revealed through a representation that operates from a poetics, a vertical attack of the present moment, rather than

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<sup>89</sup> Brazil coach, Carlos Alberto, has called Zidane himself a monster and that the term was used to acclaim Zidane's performance and abilities. Stevenson, John. *Zidane's Lasting Legacy*, BBC Sport, July 10, 2006. [bbc.co.uk](http://bbc.co.uk). (Accessed May 12<sup>th</sup>, 2015)

<sup>90</sup> Kristeva, Julia. *Colette* (European Perspectives: A Series in Social Thought and Cultural Criticism). NYC: Columbia University Press, 2005, p.407.

<sup>91</sup> *Zidane: A 21<sup>st</sup> Century Portrait*. Artificial Eye 2006. DVD. Special Feature interview with Darius Khondji.

operating out of loyalty to a dramatic narrative arc, I am turning to Judith Butler's work on vulnerability and its role in social activism. Judith Butler's emphasis on vulnerability is primarily in regard to its capacity to allow us to connect to the other:

Unknowingness about the Other in the face of the Other that undoes us. Emotions such as desire, mourning, and rage allow people to relate to others, as they enact an undoing of the self, and allow for an apprehension of the social dimensions of embodied life. Grief and rage, therefore, have implications for activism, as they allow people to return to a source of vulnerability, to a collective responsibility for our physical lives.<sup>92</sup>

Butler proposes the political concept of vulnerability to emphasize ways in which the self/other binary is not simple and clean, but rather that we are given over to one another and are vulnerable to the touch and emotional effects of violence by, or loss of, the other.<sup>93</sup> For Butler, vulnerability is a pathway towards equality.

By registering the vulnerability of Zinedine Yazid Zidane, we can discover a kind of common embodiment, one that is inherently vulnerable. By understanding another human body as vulnerable and, therefore, singular, allows us to also see that it continuously defies and makes gaps in the problematic system of categorizing. Furthermore, as Butler articulates, to acknowledge that a body is vulnerable, or a group of bodies are vulnerable, is to agree that these bodies are human and, therefore, is a resistance to the operation that produces and maintains certain exclusionary conceptions of who is normatively human. "The dominant forms of representation must be disrupted for the precariousness of life to be apprehended."<sup>94</sup>

In terms of art making and also wider political systems, the observations on vulnerability of Brazilian psychoanalyst, curator and cultural critic Suely Rolnik are very useful to me because they fruitfully complicate Butler's vulnerability by

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<sup>92</sup> Butler, Judith. *Undoing Gender*. New York, NY: Routledge Press, 2004, p.35.

<sup>93</sup> Butler, Judith. *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*. London: Routledge, 2004. pp.31-32, 42-43.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid*, p.XVIII.



bringing it into an artistic and even intimate context:

One of the problems of the politics of subjectivation that artistic practices face has been the anesthesia of our vulnerability to the other. An anesthesia all the more devastating when the other is represented by the ruling cartography as hierarchically inferior, because of his or her economic, social or racial condition, or on any other basis.<sup>95</sup>

For Rolnik, vulnerability is the precondition for the other to cease being a simple object for the projection of pre-established images. Vulnerability allows the other to become a living presence. Without vulnerability, she argues, it is not possible to construct the territories of our existence and the changing configurations of our subjectivity.<sup>96</sup> How, then, to cultivate vulnerability, not just as an essentially political angle from which to consider my subject, but also in my own artistic and research practice?<sup>97</sup> Without a doubt, vulnerability describes the potential to be harmed but it also has the capacity to transform the relationship in which we work and represent into one that recognizes the importance of human interdependency.

Vulnerability can be about connecting rather than controlling, a sometimes contradictory back and forth that, I contend, is uniquely enacted and produced in female boxing. Vulnerability, as it is relevant to my project and to me, is often not a clearly identifiable state of being (although it often truly is clearly identifiable as one can determine simply by turning on the news) and is often linked to a complex interdependence and, as such, influences the visions and

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<sup>95</sup> Rolnik, Suely. 'The Geopolitics of Pimping.' October 2006. European Institute for Progressive Cultural Politics. Eipcp.net. /transversal/1106/rolnik. (Accessed Oct 27, 2015).

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> Höchtel, Nina. 2012. *If only for the length of a lucha: queer/ing, mask/ing, gender/ing and gesture in lucha libre*. Doctoral thesis, Goldsmiths, University of London. [Thesis]: Goldsmiths Research Online. Available at: <http://research.gold.ac.uk/8056/>. I owe the inclusion of Rolnik (and the resource of Hal Foster, 'The Artist as Ethnographer' in *The Return of the Real: Art and Theory at the End of the Century*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996, p.173 and Kosuth, Joseph. 'The Artist as Anthropologist' in *Art After Philosophy and After, Collected Writings, 1966-1990*, ed. Gabriele Guercio. London and Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1975), certain conceptualizations of vulnerability and reflexivity in this thesis to Nina Höchtel's careful research. In addition to cluing me in to these theorists, the ways in which Höchtel combined these theories in her dissertation allowed me to complicate my own usage and application of the concept of vulnerability, which had previously come exclusively from Judith Butler's version of the term and had not included a consideration of my own vulnerability as an artist and a boxer and a researcher.

the changing configurations of my subjectivity. If acknowledged and practiced, vulnerability is a state that may allow me to avoid simplifying my subject (myself as well as Zidane, Diana Guzman, Senam Okudzento, etc) and, rather, grant the relationships in which I work a living, careful and vulnerable presence.

## Chapter 4

### **(In)Conclusi(vity)on: More Monsters**

Monstrousness debunks the category of the normal and has the capacity to alter the interpretive grid, the structure that has long “permitted us to assimilate the registers of any particular object – semantic and morphological.”<sup>1</sup> This brings me back to Bataille’s concepts of deviation where “each individual form escapes this common measure and is, to a certain degree, a monster.”<sup>2</sup>

Rosalind Krauss writes about this process and its relationship to the *informe* in reference to the work of artist Mike Kelly, specifically *Craft Morphology Flow Chart* (1991) and *Lumpenprol* (1991). *Lumpenprol* is a large Afghan rug spread out on the floor with various objects underneath it. Kelly’s lumps are monstrous because they are heterological, meaning they can’t be compared to anything. They are subversive, and I would argue, poetic, because they are operating as transgressive and invasive, as being below the surface and not part of a visible space, yet still erupting within the horizontal field.<sup>3</sup> In *Craft Morphology Flow Chart*, Kelly laid out sixty found handmade stuffed animals on tables. They are arranged and grouped according to pattern, texture and size. There are also groupings that hold no obvious similarity within the group, and there are a few groupings of just one stuffed animal. To “reinforce the crazed taxonomic drift of this process of organization, each doll is photographed lying separately next to a ruler, thereby producing as an ‘individual’ within a statistical set that is being established by means of measurement in order to produce a norm.”<sup>4</sup> It seems that Kelley is commenting on the statistical operations that form the conditions of social control and is rendering them absurd.

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<sup>1</sup> Krauss, Rosalind and Yve-Alain Bois. *Formless: A Users Guide*. New York: Zone Books, 1997, p.21.

<sup>2</sup> Bataille, Georges. ‘The Deviations of Nature’, in *Visions of Excess*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985, p.48.

<sup>3</sup> Krauss, Rosalind. *Informe: Without Conclusion*. MIT Press. *October*, Volume 78, 1998, p.103.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

In terms of the female boxer, the concept of the monstrous is one that has certainly been applied with regularity, however, not with positive intention; the female boxer is “a parody, she is a cartoon, she is monstrous.”<sup>5</sup> Perhaps the primary concept that connects the female boxer to the monstrous is abjection. Abjection, an idea I worked with in Chapter Two in regard to naturalist representations of boxing, is essentially that which cannot be assimilated, always within us, forcing an eternal repetition of repulsing and expelling that is doomed to fail.<sup>6</sup> Julia Kristeva furthers the abject in her seminal text *Powers of Horror* by asserting that, without it, we would have no way to understand ourselves as fully formed subjects in the symbolic order.<sup>7</sup> There are also a series of connecting conceptualizations around the monstrous feminine that inform my reading of the monstrous as expansive and are beneficial to my subject.<sup>8</sup> Representations of the monstrous-feminine, as conceptualized by Barbara Creed, illustrate the ways in which femininity is feared and made abject in contemporary society. As Jayne Ussher notes, this positioning of women's bodies as abject has important implications for women's lived experience.<sup>9</sup>

Creed has traced a direct connection between the monstrous woman and Kristeva's concept of the abject, noting that, “all human societies have a conception of the monstrous-feminine, of what it is about woman that is shocking, terrifying, horrific, abject.”<sup>10</sup> As articulated by Creed, it is the femininity itself that is monstrous. This monstrosity in difference can be traced as far back as Aristotle, who stated that, “woman is literally a monster; a failed and botched

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<sup>5</sup> Oates, p.73.

<sup>6</sup> Karius, Meghan. Understanding Abjection: An analysis of the Monstrous-Feminine in the Art of Cindy Sherman. 2011. megankarius.com. (Accessed November 16, 2015)

<sup>7</sup> Kristeva, Julia. *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. Trans. Leon S. Roudiez. New York: Columbia University Press, 1982.

<sup>8</sup> A term conceived of by Barbara Creed in her published doctoral thesis *The Monstrous Feminine: Film, Feminism, and Psychoanalysis*. London: Routledge, 1993; The ‘Monstrous Regiment Theater Company is also worth nothing here: an all-woman company with feminist subject matter. Goodman, Lizbeth and Jane de Gay, (1997) 'Interview with Gillian Hanna', in Goodman, Lizbeth and Jane de Gay. *Feminist Stages: Interviews with Women in Contemporary British Theatre*. London: Routledge, pp.32-39. Hanna, Gillian et al., ed. (1991) *Monstrous Regiment: A Collective Celebration*, London: Nick Hern Books.

<sup>9</sup> Ussher, Jane. *Managing the Monstrous Feminine: Regulating the Reproductive Body*. London: Routledge, 2006.

<sup>10</sup> Creed, p.1.

male who is only born female due to an excess of moisture and of coldness during the process of conception.”<sup>11</sup> As Creed argues, “the concept of the monstrous-feminine, as constructed within/by a patriarchal and phallogentric ideology, is related intimately to the problem of sexual difference and castration.”<sup>12</sup> In this sense, the monstrous-feminine is about the lines between male and female genders and also the boundary between self and other, which link it closely to the abject. Abjection allows one to separate oneself from what one is not. Kristeva asks, “How can I be without border?”<sup>13</sup> She contends that we cannot exist without using the abject to draw a border. The abject is what must be repulsed because it cannot be assimilated.<sup>14</sup> Kristeva also refers to the abject as an ambiguity and the necessity of repulsion is described thus: “we may call it a border; abjection is above all ambiguity.”<sup>15</sup> So, the abject is both a border and an ambiguity because we cannot approach the repugnant abject, yet, we cannot be without it; it is the border that defines us. Using this explanation, the abject is also connected to Susan Kelly’s conception of consistency as being a condition that maintains potential. The act of naming is essential to this process. Kristeva calls this possibility sublimation: I name the abject in order to keep it under control.<sup>16</sup> In regard to the relationship abjection, the monstrous-feminine and the process of naming have with the female boxer as a depicted figure, Jane Ussher mentions Karen Horney’s argument that the idealized vision of woman we see in art (or film) is not a glorification of woman, but a reflection of man’s “desire to conceal his dread.”<sup>17</sup>

Griselda Pollock’s essay for the Museum of Modern Art in New York City, *The Missing Future: MoMA and Modern Women*, sketches out a possible progressive

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<sup>11</sup> Ussher, p.1.

<sup>12</sup> Creed, p.6.

<sup>13</sup> Kristeva, p.4.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, p.3.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, p.6

<sup>16</sup> Kristeva, p.11: “When the starry sky, a vista of open seas or a stained glass window shedding purple beams fascinate me, there is a cluster of meaning, of colors, of words, of caresses, there are light touches, scents, sighs, cadences that arise, shroud me, carry me away, and sweep me beyond the things that I see, hear, or think . . . As soon as I perceive it, as soon as I name it, the sublime triggers – it has always already triggered – a spree of perceptions and words that expands memory boundlessly.”

<sup>17</sup> Ussher, pp.2-3.

future for the complex constellation of represented women and artists who are women. She begins her essay by referring to art critics Carol Duncan and Alan Wallach's 1999 critique of the museum's main gallery installations, in order to point to the paradoxical presence of the feminine in the museum; the feminine was everywhere as image, but not as artists:

MoMA can be read as a form akin to ancient, ceremonial architecture in which the viewer undergoes not merely instruction in the history of art but a transformation of his or her consciousness and self-perception through orchestrated encounters with symbolically and affectively charged images.... The interior spaces are laid out in a series of interlocking rooms, passage through which becomes an ordeal similar to classical adventures in the labyrinth, where the hero was challenged to survive an encounter with a monstrous other. In the case of MoMA, the monstrous other the viewer encounters through art is almost always represented by a female figure, prime among which are the staring prostitutes of Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R. M.)* (1911-12), which is always placed prominently in the Museum's art-historical narrative. If the hero of the adventure is confronting the monstrous feminine as its other, irrespective of his or her actual gender or orientation, the experience of this adventure masculinizes the spectator.<sup>18</sup>

Pollock is describing the monstrous-feminine in the context of the museum institution not only to critique practices of representation that frame women as solely images that point to abjection, but also to introduce other possibilities for representation. She writes about a 1996 curatorial project by Catherine de Zegher at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston, as a possible antidote to MoMA's labyrinth. The project was titled *Inside the Visible: An Elliptical Traverse of 20th Century Art, in, of and from the Feminine*. According to Pollock, De Zegher made important interventions in the curation, exhibition and interpretation of twentieth-century art created by women. The significance of this was implied by the subtitle and its phrase "in, of, and from the feminine." The exhibition was focused around a temporal concept – the twentieth century – rather than an art historical category. This is important because it means that the curator "refused the directional telos of a developmental, formalist schema for the unidirectional

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<sup>18</sup> Pollock, Griselda. 'The Missing Future: MOMA and Modern Women'. *Modern Women: Women Artists at The Museum of Modern Art*. Edited by Cornelia Butler, Alexandra Schwartz. The Museum of Modern Art: New York, 2010

advance of modern art that makes it structurally impossible for art history to recognize the contributions and interventions made by creative women in the twentieth century that do not conform to this ahistorical chronological evolution of styles and movements."<sup>19</sup> De Zegher traversed, circled, and crisscrossed backwards and forwards across the terrain of aesthetic practices by not focusing on the "generalizing and unenlightened difference"<sup>20</sup> indicated by the gender of the artists but, rather, by allowing the singularity of each artist to emerge through the significant diversity – age, culture, sexuality, ethnicity, historical experience, and aesthetic choices and strategies – of the show. Pollock writes:

The artists demonstrated what Julia Kristeva has defined as the potential of aesthetic practices to bring forth 'the singularity of each person...and...the multiplicity of every person's possible identifications...the relativity of his/her symbolic as well as biological existence, according to the variations in his/her specific symbolic capacities.'<sup>21</sup>

Pollock is offering a transition from the limiting generalizations of the monstrous-feminine, which both negatively represent and exclude women, towards a Butlerian deconstruction of the tendency to "generalize these artists as merely exemplars of a gendered collective; women, a sexualizing nomination by which they are, as a category, lumped together, their singularity annulled."<sup>22</sup> She calls for a recognition of women as "diverse and unpredictable" in order "to find out, for the first time, what in fact each woman in her artistically signified yet gendered/sexual singularity is offering to the world, to us all, to attain more complete knowledge of that world as it is lived and thought from multiple positions over time and space."<sup>23</sup> Pollock's move away from the negativity of the monstrous-feminine is powered by her vision for a generative singularity to be acknowledged. This connects to Rosalind Krauss's writing on the monster as being a declassifying force. The notion that the average produces the ideal only

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<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, p.52

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid*, p.53

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*, Julia Kristeva, 'Le Temps des femmes,' 33/44: *Cahiers de recherche de sciences des textes et documents*, no. 5 (Winter 1979): 19; translated by Alice Jardine and Harry Blake in Toril Moi, ed., *The Kristeva Reader* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), p.210.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*.

holds for as long as the individuals who make up the average are not examined.

The inevitable production of the monstrous or the heterogeneous by the very process that is constructed to exclude the nongeneralizable, this is the force that creates nonlogical difference out of the categories that are constructed to manage difference logically.<sup>24</sup>

Kelley's *Craft Morphology Flow Chart* is an arrangement of individuals (handmade and found in varying circumstances rather than coming straight from the factory). The piece invites inspection and also defies the creation of an average or an ideal. Although the stuffed animals are laid out in a way that mimics a kind of physical anthropology and thus points towards categorization and taxonomy, there is no assimilated form to his set; rather, form can only be applied to each individual stuffed animal, thus making each one a monster. Each individual is a monster who is opening up the category of normal from within, which is an interesting way to consider both Pollock's artists who are women and Gordon and Parreno's representation of Zidane. *Zidane* as a portrait re-calibrates the "structure that allows us to assimilate the registers" of Zidane's iconic identity.<sup>25</sup> I contend that, via artistic choices, the film reveals formlessness and vacillation in the represented subject, and thus maintains a consistency to support declassification and potential rather than resolved movement. By acknowledging the monster, I am supporting the idea that 'true form' can only come from the individual, rather than originating from a fixed system of definition. Massumi's conception of abstraction as being "never present in position, only ever in passing"<sup>26</sup> could be applied here as a recognition of individual human form as always being in a process of becoming, and therefore, like Kelly's subversive Afghan rug lumps in *Lumpenprol*, heterological and monstrous.

In the summer and fall of 2009, my studio floor was covered with a large sumi ink puddle resulting from a previous installation that involved the repeated dipping,

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<sup>24</sup> Krauss, Rosalind. 'Informe: Without Conclusion'. MIT Press. *October*, Volume 78, 1998, p.103.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid*, p.21

<sup>26</sup> Massumi, Brian. *Parables for the Virtual*. Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2002, p.5.



in a gallon of ink, of the boxing boots that I had worn to win 15 consecutive matches. The boots endured the ink treatment after I lost the 16<sup>th</sup> bout. My ink-dipping transformed the boots into a kind of pen; writing a viscous story onto the floor, in the form of a large ink lagoon. I never publically exhibited this piece although it formed the essential source for my final thesis work -the photographs that I subsequently took of my boxing equipment on and near the dripped ink, serve as the basis for the series of mixed media art pieces that I currently (2016) exhibit as the 'practice' element of this thesis.

The puddle, which covered most of my studio floor, remained liquid at its center and then dried into splatters at its edges. The combination of two elements – my sports equipment (mouth guard and head protector) and the varied ink surface of the puddle left by my dripping boxing boots, formed the composition for an initial series of photographs, which I worked on actively during 2009 and 2010.



Figure Twenty Two



Figure Twenty Three

Please note that the above photographs of my hanging boots and boxing headgear on the ink-splattered floor of my studio are not finished artworks. Rather I include them as sketches to clarify my studio practice and the creative process I went through in order to manifest the artwork that I include in the practice exhibition for this thesis.

These earlier endeavors came, in part, from my interest at the time in accounting for the “real thing” and in the notion of representing authenticity. As discussed in the introduction, my practice moved away from this particular focus. I returned to these ink and equipment photographs in 2015 and 2016, when I went through a process of collaging and painting on top of them, as well as re-photographing

the new compositions, utilizing a wide range of existing imagery and also a variety of mark-making techniques.



Figure Twenty Four

This current series of images, the practice portion of my thesis project, is titled *Halation of Care*, and results from technical methodologies that are engaged with multiple layers and versions, revision, repetition, and alteration; a methodology that is in sync with the written theoretical perspective of this thesis. My intention as an artist can perhaps be understood via Bachelard's poetic image, which is not an object or a substitute for an object, but is an attempt to seize a specific reality; "the duality of subject and object is iridescent,

shimmering, unceasingly active in its inversions."<sup>27</sup> Generally speaking, through my artistic process, I hope to expand and continuously question the meaning of seemingly resolved objects, experience, and space to create an opening for potential, movement, and becoming. Specific to this project, and in terms of the shimmering relationship between subject and object, I aim to site this practice of questioning in my own physical, mental, and creative experience of being a female boxer.

Thus my own equipment, which my body inhabited and which was regularly smudged with my sweat and blood, forms the black, leathery architectural structures and spaces for my artistic compositions. The strange terrain in these images was formed by a chronological series of messy and arduous events that occurred in my own studio, using the boots that I actually boxed in for years. The non-figurative lexicon of colors and form that I apply, as the "last " layer, to alter my photographs of potentially objective landscapes, objects, and spaces, is native to my inward sensibility, interpretations, and uncertainties; my subjective habits of image-making. Through this series, I am using a visual and quite personal vocabulary to question hegemonic notions of resolution and actuality in terms of the boxing body, especially my own understanding and uncertainty of what it means to be a boxer.

The poetics of the female boxer, or boxers who are female, that I am constructing is multi-directional; it includes Deren's vertical attack, Krauss's conception of *informe* as an artistic approach, blurring, and the across movement of transversality: It leads to a kind of permanent disruption. As a boxer I prefer to be a monster rather than be held accountable to the statistical operations of gender taxonomy. As a monster I can be vulnerable and becoming. Apporacing my subject via poetics allows for an empowering kind of representation because linear, narrative, definitional boundaries are consistently questioned, debunked, remade, and questioned again. The result of this poetics

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<sup>27</sup> Bachelard, Gaston. *The Poetics Of Space*. Boston, Beacon Press, 1964, p.xix (trans Marie Jolas).



is a positive monstrousness, a body that exceeds form in all directions and as such, is radically vulnerable.



Figure Twenty Five

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