

DEEP PLAY: Sport + Experimental Media

Curated by Brett Kashmere

Films and videos by: Stan Brakhage, Nathaniel Dorsky, Kevin Jerome Everson, Ana Husman, Tara Mateik, Nam June Paik, Keith Piper, Lillian Schwartz

Tuesday, September 26th at 7:00pm

Keefe Campus Center Theater (Rm. 008), Amherst College

Free and Open to the Public

Program Description:

Spanning a half-century, this program offers a cross-sectional overview of the ways that athletics have been treated in artists' film and video; from examinations of vernacular and mass-mediated games; to interplays with their geographies, architectures, histories, and audiovisual grammar; to incisive analyses of sports' gender codes and racialized dynamics. In exploring the convergences of sports and experimental media I aim to suggest a cross-disciplinary equivalence of practice, skill, and *flow* – the state of intensified, rapturous performance known as “deep play.”

An extensive subset of media artworks use sport imagery as a springboard for formal experiments, an endeavor dating back to the pre-cinematic motion studies of Étienne-Jules Marey and Eadweard Muybridge. Lillian Schwartz's *Olympiad*, a computergraphic film based on Muybridge's photographs of man running, engages Ken Knowlton's programming language EXPLOR to simulate and ecstatically re- envision a common athletic activity. Revisiting scenes from childhood that are amended through nostalgia, Nathaniel Dorsky's *Fall Trip Home* foregrounds the poetic and aesthetic aspects of football as seasonal ritual. Stan Brakhage's *Western History* draws upon similar formal strategies in its enigmatic portrayal of a high school basketball game. Combining romantic and prosaic elements, and referencing the 17th-century city comedy *Westward Ho*, the film recasts the on-court drama as a metaphor for larger psycho-geographic constructions. Tara Mateik's performance-based video *Putting the Balls Away* disrupts the predominantly masculine representations generated and asserted in the aforementioned, earlier works. Adapting the artist's live reenactment of the famous 1973 tennis match “The Battle of the Sexes,” *Putting the Balls Away* is indicative of a shift in how sports have been treated in moving image artwork, tracking with the rise of cultural studies globally, and emphasizing sociopolitical critique and identity politics over formal investigations of bodies-in-motion. Brilliantly, Mateik retains the original broadcast audio, in which Howard Cosell condescends to guest commentator (and professional tennis player) Rosie Casals throughout (we also get the original commercials); making the piece both a time capsule and an historical intervention. In a related manner, Ana Husman's *Football* deconstructs and reanimates one of soccer's most controversial plays: Diego Maradona's “Hand of God” goal, scored during the 1986 World Cup quarterfinal in Mexico City; subtly exposing the many layers of international conflict, authority, interpersonal relations, and racial prejudices embedded in this single moment. Exploding the language of network sports television, Nam June Paik's *Lake Placid '80* marks a historical

conjunction of sports media and televisual media art. The densely-interleaved, high-speed video collage of motion on ice and snow was commissioned by the National Fine Arts Committee of the 1980 Olympic Winter Games. Keith Piper's *Nation's Finest* likewise employs the vernacular of sports television, cut through by a sharp, penetrating voiceover, to address the many contradictions and hypocrisies inherent in the celebration and commodification of black bodies. Finally, Kevin Everson's single-take *Home* distills the emotional roller-coaster of athletic competition, in which fortunes can reverse at the last second. I propose we consider these works as non-zero-sum games, which approach, in the words of Matt Hern, "Sports as a field of radical possibilities."

Screening Line-up:

(1) *A Fall Trip Home* – Nathaniel Dorsky, 1964, 16mm, 11 min

"The second in a trilogy, it is less a psychodrama and more a sad sweet song of youth and death, of boyhood and manhood and our tender earth." (N.D.)

(2) *Western History* – Stan Brakhage, 1971, 16mm, silent, 8 min

"A thumbnail History of the Western World, all centered around the basketball court." (Canyon Cinema)

(3) *Putting the Balls Away* – Tara Mateik, 2008, video, 19 min

"[A] reenactment of the historic September 21, 1973, tennis match between Billie Jean King and Bobby Riggs, created for broadcast on the 35th anniversary of the original event. The Battle of the Sexes was the most-watched live sporting event at that time, and pitted chauvinist against feminist, when women tennis players demanded equal pay to that of their male counterparts. Both players are performed by Mateik, whose work wages strategic operations to overthrow institutions of compulsory gender. After each game the competitors 'switch sides.'" (Video Data Bank)

(4) *Lake Placid '80* – Nam June Paik, 1980, video, 4 min

"In a fractured explosion of densely layered movement and action, images of Olympic sports events are mixed with Paik's recurring visual and audio motifs... Ski jumpers, skaters and hockey players are re-edited, fragmented, colored, accelerated and transformed, colliding on the screen in a frenzy of synthesized energy." (Electronic Arts Intermix)

(5) *Olympiad* – Lillian Schwartz, 1971, 16mm transferred to video, 2.5 min

"Figures of computer stylized athletes are seen in brilliant hues chasing each other across the screen. Images are then reversed and run across the screen in the other direction; then images are flopped until athletes are running in countless ways... not unlike a pack of humanity on a football field." (Bob Lehmann, *Today's Film-maker* magazine)

(6) *The Nation's Finest* — Keith Piper, 1990, video, 7 min

"This short video explores, through a collage of images, text and voice over, some of the issues raised when Black athletes are called upon to 'represent' what have been historically seen as 'White' nations, within the international sporting arena... Through referencing historical legacies of the disenfranchisement and exclusion faced by Black people, the piece goes on to examine how the transition of the Black athlete from the periphery to the centre of the nation's psyche, carries with it a network of contradictions and limitations." (LUX)

(7) *Football* – Ana Husman, 2011, 16mm film transferred to video, 15 min

“I was interested in a way the voice creates confidence and if there is at all a possibility that a female voice wins the confidence in this situation. Selected event was a goal called ‘A Hand of God,’ scored by D.A. Maradona in FIFA World Championship in 1986. That was the first game played between England and Argentina after the Falkland War. In the 51st minute, Maradona scores using his hand, the judge oversaw it and it was 1:0 for Argentina. That goal contains all I am interested in football and in the way in which it reflects social and political relations.” (A.H.)

(8) *Home* – Kevin Jerome Everson, 2008, Super 8 transferred to video, 1.5 min

“*Home* is about disappointment in northern Ohio. The scoreboard depicted is on the grounds of Mansfield Senior High. The sentiment conjures the close call.” (Video Data Bank)

Total Running Time: 70 minutes approx.

Presented in conjunction with the X (Unknown Quantity) screening series. Funded by the Amherst College English Department and Film and Media Studies Program.