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Personal Best
Matthew Biro

Since the late 1980s, there has been a marked increase in depictions of athletes, athletic games, and sports paraphernalia in contemporary art. There are a number of different reasons for this. In the first place, a concern for sports on the part of contemporary artists has been fueled by an interest in exploring ideas about the social construction of human identity and the ways in which individuals perform and transform the often gender specific roles their cultures grant them. In addition, the growth in artistic depictions of athleticism has also been encouraged by the increased use of photography and video in contemporary art (technologies through which sporting events, figures, and commodities have traditionally been disseminated to a mass audience), as well as artistic predilections for certain strategies of appropriation, specifically, the construction of assemblages from mass-produced objects (of which sports paraphernalia forms an important class). Finally, there have been institutional reasons behind the growth of sporting iconographies in the art of the past three decades, structural similarities between the spheres of sports and art that include the suitability of concepts such as “match,” “game,” “competition,” and “branding” to both realms.



Matthew Barney, *Cremaster 4*, 1994

Matthew Barney's *Cremaster 4* (1994), the first in a series of five interconnected films named for the muscle in the male body that raises and lowers the testicles, provides a good introduction to the ways in which the thematics of identity became intertwined with the artistic representation of sports in the early 1990s. Set on the Isle of Man, the film juxtaposes three distinct but related stories: a motorcycle race between two two-man sidecar teams; an arduous journey by a tap-dancing satyr (played by Barney), who burrows through land and

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sea towards the finish line where the race will end; and the collective actions of three sexually indeterminate “fairies,” who assist the satyr, take part in a picnic, and, in general, mirror the behaviors of the other main figures in the movie. As is the case with the other films in Barney’s series, *Cremaster 4* mixes biological, mythological, geological, and sports metaphors to present a vague narrative that evokes the development of sexual difference only to undermine it again at the end. Both the satyr’s journey (which appears to describe a symbolic birth) and the road race (during which the riders’ exude gelatinous, testicle-like forms) use metaphors of physical struggle and athletic competition to suggest the transformation of a human embryo from an asexual, pregendered state into a form exhibiting male characteristics. At the same time, the narratives end ambiguously (the satyr never meets the motorcycle racers at the finish line, and it is unclear which team ultimately wins the race); thus Barney’s allegory of sexual development remains inconclusive.

Barney’s earliest works from the late 1980s and early 1990s used the activities of weightlifting and climbing to explore both sexual development and artistic practice. As the *Cremaster* series developed between 1994 and 2002, Barney continued to mine the imagery of sports to explore themes of nonstable gender identity and art making. In different *Cremaster* films, he evoked football (*Cremaster 1*, 1995), rodeo (*Cremaster 2*, 1999), harness racing and the Ancient Greek pentathlon (*Cremaster 3*, 2002), and climbing and repelling (*Cremaster 3* and *Cremaster 5*, 1997). In addition, Barney’s muscular, often seminude body, depicted in the midst of concentrated physical activity, was generally central to the action. Each film, moreover, bore its own distinct logo reminiscent of the designs emblazoned on team merchandise, and forms and materials associated with professional sports—stadiums, tracks, AstroTurf, team uniforms, cheerleading sections, and regimented masses of human actors—frequently appeared. As the series developed, however, the biological narrative of sexual differentiation became less explicit, and sporting activities were used more and more as metaphors for artistic competition.

The connection between artistic identity and athleticism is made most explicitly in the final film, *Cremaster 3*, which contains a long multiscene sequence in which Barney scales the interior walls of the Guggenheim Museum in New York in a race against time to complete five symbolic tasks. A scene with the sculptor Richard Serra is repeatedly intercut with Barney’s actions, a montage that emphasizes the theme of artistic competition and also produces an undertone of homoeroticism. Situated at the top of the Guggenheim’s rotunda, Serra is depicted in the midst of an activity that recalls his own early work (actions in which he flung molten lead), now performed with Vaseline, the sculptural medium most closely associated with Barney’s art. In conjunction with the metaphor of the athletic contest created by Barney’s rotunda-climbing action as a whole, the conflation of the highly performative practices of the two sculptors suggests analogies between the struggle for recognition in sports and the struggle for recognition in art. Not only do artists employ “signature” materials (substances that are associated with their art and that over time become signs or “trademarks” of their artistic gestures and achievements), but, as the sequence suggests, they often directly refer to the great art of the past, thereby creating a dialogue with the tradition.

As suggested by Barney’s *Cremaster* series, artistic identity in the 1990s could be productively rethought through an exploration of the relationships between gender, sexuality, and sport. By mixing up the traditional signifiers of gender in their art, artists such as Barney and Robert Gober believed that potentially dangerous forms of stereotyping could perhaps be overcome. Another area central to artistic identity politics since the 1990s, however, was race, something that the *B@anded* series of Hank Willis Thomas, a series that examines race in relation to sports and sexuality, demonstrate quite well. Thomas’s *Scarred Chest* (2003) is a Lightjet print depicting the muscular physique of a black man from the top of his chest to just above his groin. Although the sensuous detail of the photograph suggests the affirmative style of fashion and product photography typical of magazine advertisements, Nike-logo-

shaped scars, which are Photoshopped onto the man's upper body, add an overtone of unreality and menace to the sexually charged image. Evoking comparisons between the history of slavery and contemporary athletic drafts by major sports franchises such as the NBA and the NFL, *Scarred Chest* explores the commodification of the black male body and raises disturbing questions about physical ability, African American identity, the media, and the economy. Thomas's image is also self-reflexive. Just like a scar, the photograph has traditionally been understood as an indexical trace of its referent, a representation that is literally caused by that which it represents. Although this understanding is now being made more complex by digital technologies such as Photoshop, it has still not been erased, and thus Thomas's photograph uses the notion of branding to make a connection between domination, advertising, professional sports, and the medium of photography itself.



Hank Willis Thomas, *Scarred Chest*, 2003

Unlike Barney's *Cremaster* series, which sought to undermine differences between male and female identity, Thomas's *Scarred Chest*, *Branded Head* (2003), and *Basketball and Chain* (2003)—as well as other works in the *B@anded* series—seem more interested in exploring the stereotypes of black identity and the mechanisms through which they are perpetuated (for example, sports, fashion, and leisure-time activities). For the most part, they do not present destabilizing alternatives to traditional stereotypes of blackness; nor does Thomas's manner of sexualizing the black male body help to eliminate the common myths that surround it. Instead, Thomas's strategy is to exaggerate the myths and stereotypes. Other contemporary artists such as Mark Bradford and Lyle Ashton Harris seem a little closer to Barney in that they present black male bodies that explore sports while undermining fixed stereotypes of gender and sexuality. Paul Pfeiffer, on the other hand, pursues a strategy similar to Thomas's in that, instead of visualizing new incarnations, his work reflexively focuses on how the media of video and photography convey stereotypes. *John 3:16* (2000) is a two-minute video continuously looping on a small LCD screen that extends from the wall; the loop depicts an eternally spinning basketball created from a montage of images appropriated from various televised NBA games. By editing out all direct representations of the human body, Pfeiffer reveals a more general form, a spatial-temporal structure underlying our specific experiences of the televised event. At the same time, the structure also clearly represents blackness and the body: it reveals itself as a form through which identity can become symbolic, commodified, and defined by manufactured objects.



Paul Pfeiffer, *John 3:16*, 2000

Pfeiffer's *Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* series (2001–2007) also focuses on how the medium constructs and perpetuates stereotypes. Large-scale chromogenic prints of game stills provided by the NBA archive were altered by Pfeiffer to lose contextual and narrative meaning, so that the photographs work against the logic of print and media photojournalism, which seeks to maintain team identity and the image's place in the narrative of the game's contest. Caught in the midst of action, yet without team insignia, score, time clock, and the players with whom they are (clearly) interacting, these awkward, often-suspended figures embody the stereotype of the black male as a mindless physical body in order to powerfully reveal the ways in which the forms and narratives of the mass media have penetrated our consciousness.



Paul Pfeiffer, *Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse (28)*, 2007

The connections between black identity politics and basketball explored by Pfeiffer, Thomas, Bradford, and others have their roots in certain key installations and monuments created by Jeff Koons and David Hammons in the 1980s. In the mid-1980s, Koons began to use new, out-of-the-box basketballs to explore the relationship between commodification and the human body through a set of complex appropriative strategies both critical of and complicit with the burgeoning international art market. Basketballs were featured prominently at Koons's *Equilibrium* show at the International with Monument Gallery in 1985, where they appeared suspended, floating in freestanding aquariums. On the walls surrounding his

basketball “suspension tanks,” Koons placed large, appropriated advertising posters depicting basketball players posed to promote products and franchises; between the tanks he situated “simulated” readymades: life-sized bronze casts of floatation and underwater breathing devices, a lifeboat, an aqualung, and a snorkel (the last two made in editions of three). As a whole, the *Equilibrium* show was pitched and received as an allegorical representation of the situation of the black male athlete in U.S. society, positioned between extreme success and untimely death. Elite achievement was implied by the image of the successful basketball player, the newness and cleanness of the basketballs and suspension tanks, and the luxurious character of the cast bronzes.

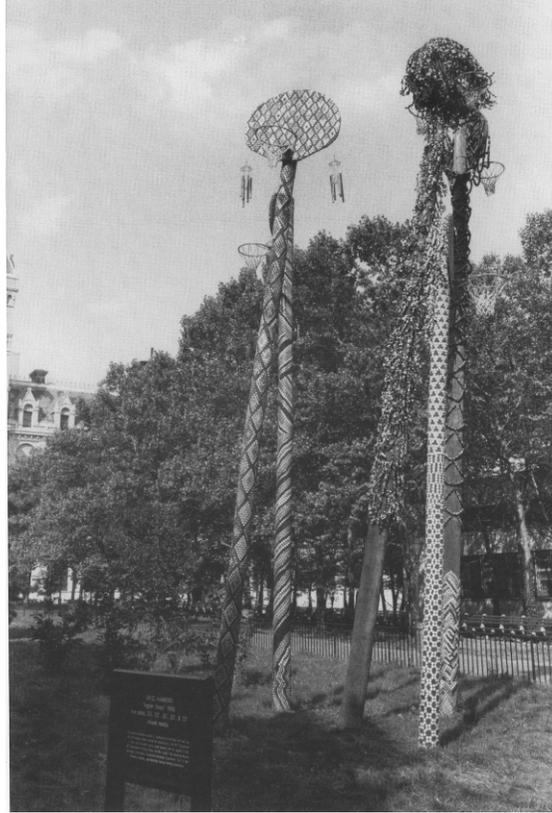


Jeff Koons, *Soccerball (Bumblebee)*, 1985

The association of death was most strongly produced by the uselessness of the cast readymades, whose pneumatic (and thus corporeal) qualities made them stand-ins for the black male body represented directly in the posters, and whose primary allegorical significance arose from the fact that they no longer functioned as pieces of life-preserving equipment, but, in fact, did precisely the opposite. By juxtaposing different types of appropriation (from the pure readymades of the basketballs and aquariums to the posters framed as art on the walls to the high-end, fabricated simulations of real amphibious technologies), Koons paid tribute to the pioneering readymade practices of Marcel Duchamp, whose conceptual recasting of avant-garde art was fundamentally surrealist and uncanny because he consistently explored the ways in which the human body and its functions could be embodied in things. At the same time, Koons’s strategies of appropriation demonstrated a profound understanding of Andy Warhol in that Koons’s choice of motifs seemed in dialogue with Warhol’s works and the interrelated themes of celebrity, technology, sexuality, and death that they explored in complex and powerful ways.

Like Koons, Hammons developed appropriation and readymade strategies that were highly aware of the precedents set by Duchamp and Warhol, and also like Koons, he used the figure of the basketball player to allegorically represent what he understood to be the fundamental crises of black identity in his contemporary moment. Unlike Koons, however, Hammons used a “messier” set of strategies to represent and explore black male identity in the 1980s, practices that were more in touch with the body, life, politics, and movement, and somewhat less focused on commodification and the mass market. Although his interest in basketball imagery goes back to 1982, Hammons’s most important basketball piece was *Higher Goals* (1986), a five-month outdoor installation in Cadman Plaza Park in Brooklyn.

Constructed out of telephone poles, thousands of nailed and strung bottle caps (mostly from beer bottles), basketball hoops and nets, and wind chimes, it depicted five, overly tall basketball backboards leaning together in two groups. As a whole, the work suggested a memorial to the young African American man.



David Hammons, *Higher Goals*, 1986

The impossibly high basketball backboards implied the futility of their “hoop dreams;” and the installation’s totemic, quasi-African form, created through the organic grouping of the poles and the hammered and strung bottle caps that delineated complex geometric and hair-like patterns, evoked a monument or a memorial because of its size and its religious or spiritual overtones. Basketball, along with alcohol and drugs, the work suggested, were ruining black American life. At the same time, the outdoor assemblage’s solidly built character, the care and time that went into applying its new and reused readymade elements, as well as its complex form and patterning, pointed to another side of the project: one that saw basketball and sports as means of creating teamwork, community, and alternative forms of existence. Hammons spent six weeks building *Higher Goals* at Cadman Park Plaza, all the while interacting with the passersby and explaining why he was repurposing the forms and detritus of everyday African American life. By mixing used and new readymades together and giving them a biomorphic configuration, Hammons emphasized the importance of everyday life and the body. Furthermore, he suggested that political change must come from organizing teams and subcultures within one’s lived environment as well as from preserving many elements of the tradition. This position seems antithetical to the one embodied by Koons’s art, which emphasizes art’s nature as a commodity and thus limits its political critique to examinations of commodity culture and the mass media. Lived experience and the black male body are also the focus of Hammons’s “basketball drawings,” abstract, process-oriented, dirt drawings, which he made by bouncing a basketball on a rectangular sheet of paper roughly the height of a regulation hoop. And by recasting abstract and gestural mark-making—a form of updated

“action painting”—as a kind of sporting event, these drawings raise general questions about the structural or institutional similarities between art and sport as practices that are simultaneously individual and collective.

As art historians have noted, there are structural similarities between trajectories in art and the games of which sporting contests form a certain type. Every artwork, in other words, can be compared to a “match” or a specific performance in a larger “game” or set of rules that players are supposed to follow. The games of art differ from those of sport in that art’s games evolve more quickly, with their rules changed by significant matches in a way that does not occur in contemporary sports. As suggested by this exhibition, contemporary art has explored an important game over the past three decades, one that, through the forms and images of athletic competition, pursued a provocative form of identity politics that engaged with issues of race, gender, class, and sexuality in powerful and disturbing ways. Given form through a variety of practices including photography, film, video, installation, performance, appropriation, the readymade, and the memorial, this game of sport in art has seen many well played matches and “game changers,” and it continues to draw the interest of many artists today.

© Matthew Biro 2010. Matthew Biro is a professor and associate chair in the Department of the History of Art at the University of Michigan; he specializes in modern and contemporary art. This essay was commissioned by the Wexner Center for the Arts to accompany its *Hard Targets* exhibition on view January 30 to April 11, 2010.

List of illustrations:

Matthew Barney

CREMASTER 4 (still), 1994
35mm film with sound, 42 mins.
Courtesy of Gladstone Gallery, New York

Hank Willis Thomas

Scarred Chest, 2003
Lightjet print
30 x 20 in.
Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman
Gallery, New York

Paul Pfeiffer

John 3:16, 2000
Digital video loop, metal armature, LCD
monitor, DVD player, 2 mins.
Overall: 7 x 7 x 36 in.
Courtesy of the artist and The Project,
New York

Paul Pfeiffer

Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse (28),
2007
Fujiflex digital chromogenic print
48 x 60 in.
Courtesy of the artist and The Project,
New York

Jeff Koons

Soccerball (Bumblebee), 1985
Bronze
7 1/2 in. diameter
Courtesy Sonnabend Collection

David Hammons

Higher Goals, 1986
Cadman Plaza, Brooklyn
Photo © Dawoud Bey.