

Profusely

Robert Prouse

Produced for Nicole Morris' solo presentation at Space In Between Art Projects – The London Art Fair, January 2014

The integration of an athletic discipline into daily life in the Soviet Union is no undocumented phenomenon, it is acknowledged rather as a fundamental facet of its outward facing image. The body of the worker was symbolised in the athlete as the pinnacle of production, a subject perfected in use value. No less was this true of fascism, epitomised by Leni Riefenstahl's formally groundbreaking documentary of the 1936 Olympics, *Olympia*. The establishing of a link with the classical Olympian, a tacit recollection of a classical conception of the body prior to a Cartesian body-mind split. The body, of the athlete, of the Aryan, as historically determined, as perfectly suited to its goal. *Olympia* found its post-war place in the history of film but does it present the body as object of history and object of perfection or an aesthetically somatic concern? Let's not forget that Riefenstahl was a dancer, but we'll return to this later.

Today athleticism is fast becoming a primary aesthetic value once again. Ostensibly a concern with physical fitness it provides a veneer of respectability, of thoughtfulness, to yesterday's narcissism. At the level of the image, Soviet athletic perfection is co-opted (fascism being resistant to ironic re-appropriation). There can be no surplus, a tautness of skin serves merely to highlight a toned musculature beneath: athleticism is not the new skinny but stands diametrically opposed to it, not a lack which speaks of a wealth but a quality honed, a quality of *actual* value. In the modern Olympian and their shadows, an economy of body mass, which is rational and productive, emerges precisely as the veil falls from a financial economy that is irrational and destructive. Why an athletic aesthetic and why now? This aesthetics negates all questions that cannot be answered through the 'quantified self'.

Athleticism is undoubtedly a celebration of perfection, but perfect for what? Certainly not national socialism or even communism, perhaps nothing at all, the idea of perfection without the perfect. Today athleticism is all about beauty, one that is heir to a tradition stretching from Kant, so let's not kid ourselves, no one lives in the Soviet Union any more, this beauty is useless. A perfect physique achieves merely arbitrary goals but its real value is aesthetic and nowhere is this clearer than in its representation. Technology makes a claim to an un-ideological, natural reality; slow motion attempts to make an experience of beauty all the more real. At the limits of the micro and the macro, in a quest for the ever larger and smaller, and perhaps the unconditioned, modern rational sciences were founded. The microscope and the telescope were foundational for their orientation towards reality and so too, in its wake, the presentation of this modern beauty is realised with ever slower motion sequences. As muscles ripple with the powerful impact of each foot on the track, we come within touching distance of beauty.

However, as is often the case, pushing something to its limits reveals instead its opposite; something strange happens as motion gets ever slower. In the modern hyper-aestheticised athletic event, frame rates rise above the frequency of the lights that illuminate the athletes. Images are captured faster than light can reach the camera; at regular intervals frames darken like lightning in negative. The footage

begins to flicker; high definition shots of physical perfection take on the quality of a simple animation. What is shattered here is a claim to reality, in a spectacle of speed, technology unveils itself and with it its direction, its 'angle', its goal. We are not watching a simple body in motion, or even a symbol of all that is beautiful in the human form, but the representation of fundamentally singular beauty. There can only be one winner and this is another ideology altogether. The camera captures *their* sweat, the labour of their fruits, but what of the profuse sweat of the others, those who *only* labour but never win?

Profusely is an adverb, often negative, that modifies only a handful of verbs – swearing, bleeding, sweating. Its Latin route is literally to pour forth, *profundere*, where *fundere*, found, has a double meaning, both to pour and to cast: what, then, of this sweating profusely, this casting of the others? Perhaps it is better to ask what is the relation between that which was cast (past) and that which is a cast (present), the original and the copy. The beauty of the athlete is undoubtedly that of the original, but it is also infinitely singular, it cannot be cast and copied but merely serves as an example for those who wish to follow. It is the contemporary ideological, individual beauty, its analogue is the entrepreneur, Riefenstahl was a dancer but Usain Bolt was Richard Branson.

Art is not immune from this purification of beauty; it may be stating the obvious to decry the – seemingly, equally artistically irresistible as it is ubiquitous – computer generated art object as Platonic. These CGI objects float free from physical laws but bring with them a material history, which defines an art that holds them as exemplary. Born of the design process, 3D digital images beget an art that shuns sweat and casting. Not simply literally, its material goes un-worked both physically and conceptually; in a reversal of art history composition re-determines construction. Here construction materials are merely piled in tasteful composition or a gloss and glaze attempt at a high definition reality.

The athlete then can have nothing to do with casting but there remains something for art in sweating profusely. There is an undeniable pathos in the race just lost but the camera turns away at the most interesting moment. As the winner crosses the finish line the others become just that, but they are no longer worthy of focus. Art then can be the impression of these others, those excluded by the totality of beauty, a cast of their sweat. In the imperfection of the cast, and its impression, another aesthetic can be found. If the hyper-real artificiality of athletic beauty becomes clear when the frames of the high-speed film make themselves apparent in their abundance, an altogether different beauty might emerge from a profuse profusion of sweat.



Space In Between
Unit 26 Regent Studios
8 Andrews Road
London E8 4QN

www.spaceinbetween.co.uk
info@spaceinbetween.co.uk