



Paul Pfeiffer

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Paul Pfeiffer Disturbing Vision

The ring is empty, but the audience is transfixed. Where there should be two boxers, there is only air, shimmering, and ducking, and jabbing. The ropes deflect with the weight of a heavyweight being pinned and pummeled. While the original audience of the event can follow every jab and every feint, we, the current audience, are blind. In Pfeiffer's video *The Long Count (Thrilla in Manila)* (2001), the background is full, while the foreground is empty, leading to the possibility that the subject of these works may not be the boxers or even their erasure—rather it is the audience. By setting up an unexpected encounter, *The Long Count* brings two types of audience face to face: the people looking at the boxing match and the people looking at the video. This comparison allows us to ask questions about the nature of audience and of spectatorship. Are all audiences the same? Does the size of the audience—whether it's made up of one or many—change the nature of that audience? Does seeing lead to, or confuse, knowing? As an examination of a number of Pfeiffer's works will demonstrate, the subject of viewing and, more importantly, of audience, is one that the artist has returned to over and over again.

"Keep your eye on the ball," is the advice all coaches give to their players in sports, whether in football, baseball, or basketball. In the video work, *John 3:16* (2000), the orange, glowing orb of the basketball is in constant motion; yet by centering it as opposed to allowing it to wander, we are able to keep an eye on it, despite its fluctuating motion of incessant spinning. In order to make this work, Pfeiffer selected dozens of video clips from televised basketball games. He then assembled these disconnected moments and motion-tracked the basketball so that it was stationary, while everything else visible moves.¹ Contrary to

our normal experience of a basketball game, Pfeiffer's work restrains the ball, allowing it to spin, but not to travel in space. What this small manipulation achieves, however, is to change the relationship of the subject to the viewer. The traditional structure of the game is reversed. The ball now seems to control the players and, by extension, the viewers. The players swarm around it trying to grasp it and throw it, but it never moves and they quickly disappear off camera. In the same way that Copernicus corrected our self-centered misunderstanding about the movement of celestial bodies, Pfeiffer, by hijacking the ball, forces us to consider the larger cultural arena in which the game is being played.²

The scenes that comprise *John 3:16* are all found footage, retrieved from broadcasts of different basketball games. By choosing to use only what already existed, as opposed to creating new imagery that might result in the same visual effect, Pfeiffer's video raises questions about the controlling ability of the media and its distribution apparatus. While we think we are viewing a game, in fact what is presented is a particular viewpoint of a game, one that is dictated by the camera. The issue of the camera's guidance over what we see and therefore what we know is highlighted by the extreme editing that Pfeiffer performs in this work. The issue of control is also alluded to in the title of the work. *John 3:16* is an obvious biblical reference that sums up the complex and positive message of Christianity in a sound bite.³ While it is tempting to read the title as an indicator of a connection between sports and religion, in this context, it suggests another attempted "hijacking," but this time by the equally media-savvy religious right.⁴ Just as a point is about to be scored, and thus in the

John 3:16, 2000
CD-Rom, LCD screen, mounting arm, and video element,
Approximately 2 minutes, looped
Installation approximately 6 x 7 x 36 inches
(15.2 x 17.8 x 91.4 cm)
Collection of the artist and courtesy of The
Project, New York, New York, and Los Angeles, California

camera's view of goalposts or basketball hoops, certain spectators contrive to hold up signs with this biblical citation. Knowing that the camera will follow the ball, especially as a basket is about to be scored, they are able to insert their message into view of the television audience. Like Pfeiffer, they too understand that the audience is a captive one, and that he who controls the camera shapes what the audience absorbs. The important difference is that in Pfeiffer's work the manipulation becomes more than a means of controlling viewers. It becomes, in a sense, the subject of the work.

In *Fragment of a Crucifixion (after Francis Bacon)* (1999/2000), the ball is gone and the player has taken its place as the center of attention. In it, a player, rendered anonymous, is constantly pacing back and forth on an empty court, his arms pinned to his sides, with biceps bulging from the strain of his physical exertion and his hands uselessly clenched. After selecting a clip of the basketball player, Larry Johnson, Pfeiffer erased all logos and other identifying references and then looped the few seconds of action so that Johnson's movements are endlessly repeated. We quickly realize we are not the only viewers of this scene of impotent rage, and in fact the audience that fills the arena to capacity is busy recording and seemingly tormenting Johnson with their camera flashes, which incessantly push and pull him from left to right. These camera flashes, which operate more like gunshots, redirect his movements as he attempts to evade them, leading one critic to describe Johnson as "a hunted animal" being pursued by the unrelenting camera shots of the crowd.⁵

As such, the audience now controls Johnson's movements, thus redirecting our attention from the center to the periphery. In other words, through a series of technical manipulations, an inversion occurs in which the spectators control the action on the court, rather than follow it.

In *The Long Count* videos, the athletes—in this case the boxers—are gone and the audience has taken its place as the center of our attention.⁶ Exploiting the full capabilities of digital technology to rewrite the truth—in a way that photography could only dream of—Pfeiffer erases the balletic movements of the most graceful of boxers, Muhammad Ali, and his lumbering opponent, Joe Frazier, in *The Long Count (Thrilla in Manila)* and replaces them with a shimmering shadow play of jabs and punches. These non-figures, however, are still perceptible as their outlines dance around the ring. Watching them ultimately offers little reward, as the figures we should be focusing on are those in the audience. Unlike the viewers of Pfeiffer's video, the recorded audience has no trouble seeing what we must strain to make out, evidenced by the rapt attention noticeable on many of their faces. In the related video, *The Long Count (Rumble in the Jungle)* (2000), when a member of the audience stands up (as they often do) it is to see over the head of a fellow spectator; when others jump out of their seats and yell and cheer, they have certainly seen the punch that we, like Ali's opponent George Foreman, never saw coming.⁷

Morning after the Deluge (2003), Pfeiffer's latest work, once again takes looking or viewing as its subject, though this time even the audience has been eliminated. The act of looking at a sunset or sunrise—something every person has done at least once—is replicated, but in neither a way

that has ever been seen before, nor that can be seen with natural vision. Pfeiffer recorded both a sunset and a sunrise from the beaches in Provincetown, Massachusetts, a location he chose because it allowed him to film both movements of the sun over water. Later in the studio, he spliced the two pieces of film, flipping one, so that the horizons met and became one. By motion-tracking the sun and keeping it centered in the frame (much like the basketball in *John 3:16*) our traditional frames of references—the landscape and the horizon—are eliminated. This sun neither sets nor rises. At first, as we view this piece, nothing seems to happen. Eventually, a glimmering, pulsating line—the two horizons spliced together—starts to descend from the top of the screen. As this line makes its way to the centered sun and then continues on down, a bird occasionally flies through the sky, appearing only long enough to startle the viewer.

In this latest work, the sun remains fixed in space, while the world circles around it: which is, of course, the way it actually is. From our vantage point—standing in one place and seeing the sunset—we are still tempted to believe, as did people for many centuries, that the sun moves and the earth is stationary.⁸ Vision and knowledge are two different things. In *Morning after the Deluge*, all the representations of looking explored in previous videos—the frozen ball, the controlled player, and the audience—have been stripped away. We are now left with only the familiar act of looking, but without the comfort that we normally expect from it.

In *Morning after the Deluge*, important questions about vision and its connection to knowledge are raised: questions that are no less pertinent today than they were in Goethe's or Copernicus' time, questions touching upon the

contemporary conditions of spectatorship. All the works discussed so far, with the important exception of *Morning after the Deluge*, are primarily images of spectacles that are normally consumed simultaneously by masses of viewers. Both basketball games and boxing matches are highly orchestrated events in which the audience, in the arenas, becomes a central component. In Pfeiffer's videos, however, where the subject is audience, an audience of one gazes upon an audience of many. This manipulation transforms a passive spectacle of mass participation into an opportunity for active viewing.

The viewing of the sun rising and setting on a daily basis is an activity normally done either by oneself or in the company of a loved one, but not in a crowd. Tellingly, however, *Morning after the Deluge* is a projection. This very large image is set up by Pfeiffer to be seen by many people at the same time. What was normally a contemplative exercise performed in isolation, is now an orchestrated event to be seen in the presence of many viewers. Once again, Pfeiffer's consistent playful inversions are evident: a sporting spectacle becomes an intimate depiction of active viewing, while the private act of watching the sun rise is rendered into an alien, yet instructive, phenomenon that can only be appreciated en masse. While the connection between vision and knowledge has been called into question before—by other artists, philosophers, and scientists—it is useful to do so repeatedly, for this uncoupling is both distressing and not obvious. This lesson, which one can glean from Pfeiffer's work, has been updated to deal with contemporary problems, such as the increasing control the media has over what we see and our distressing willingness to accept at face-value the imagery we consume.

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1. Motion-tracking is an editing process which allows the camera to focus on one detail in the image and use that detail to organize the other information in the video image. This same technique will later be used to create *Morning after the Deluge* (2003).
2. In 1530, Nicolas Copernicus published *De Revolutionibus*, which asserted "the earth rotated on its axis once daily and traveled around the sun once yearly." In other words, the Earth moved around the Sun. Internet biography search for "Copernicus," at <http://www.blupete.com/Literature/Biographies/Science/Copernicus.htm>.
3. John 3:16, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life."
4. In a conversation with the author, Pfeiffer used the word "hijacking" to describe the action of those sports viewers who held up these signs at different games.
5. Roberta Smith, "Paul Pfeiffer," *New York Times*, 15 December, 2000, E41.
6. For another reading of the significance of the removal of the main figure, see Dominic Molon "Corporealities," in *Paul Pfeiffer* (Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2003), 17.
7. Ali knocked out Foreman in the 8th round of the World Heavyweight Championship match held in Kinshasa, Zaire, in 1974. From an E-Mail correspondence with Frazer Ward, art historian and former amateur heavyweight boxer.
8. "Of all discoveries and opinions, none may have exerted a greater effect on the human spirit than the doctrine of Copernicus. The world had scarcely become known as round and complete in itself when it was asked to waive the tremendous privilege of being the center of the universe. Never, perhaps, was a greater demand made on mankind—for by this admission so many things vanished in mist and smoke! What became of our Eden, our world of innocence, piety and poetry; the testimony of the senses; the conviction of a poetic-religious faith. No wonder his contemporaries did not wish to let all this go and offered every possible resistance to a doctrine which in its converts authorized and demanded a freedom of view and greatness of thought so far unknown, indeed not even dreamed of." Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. From an Internet biography search for "Copernicus," at <http://www.blupete.com/Literature/Biographies/Science/Copernicus.htm>.