

# BOOKS

ART AND CULTURE ARTISTS

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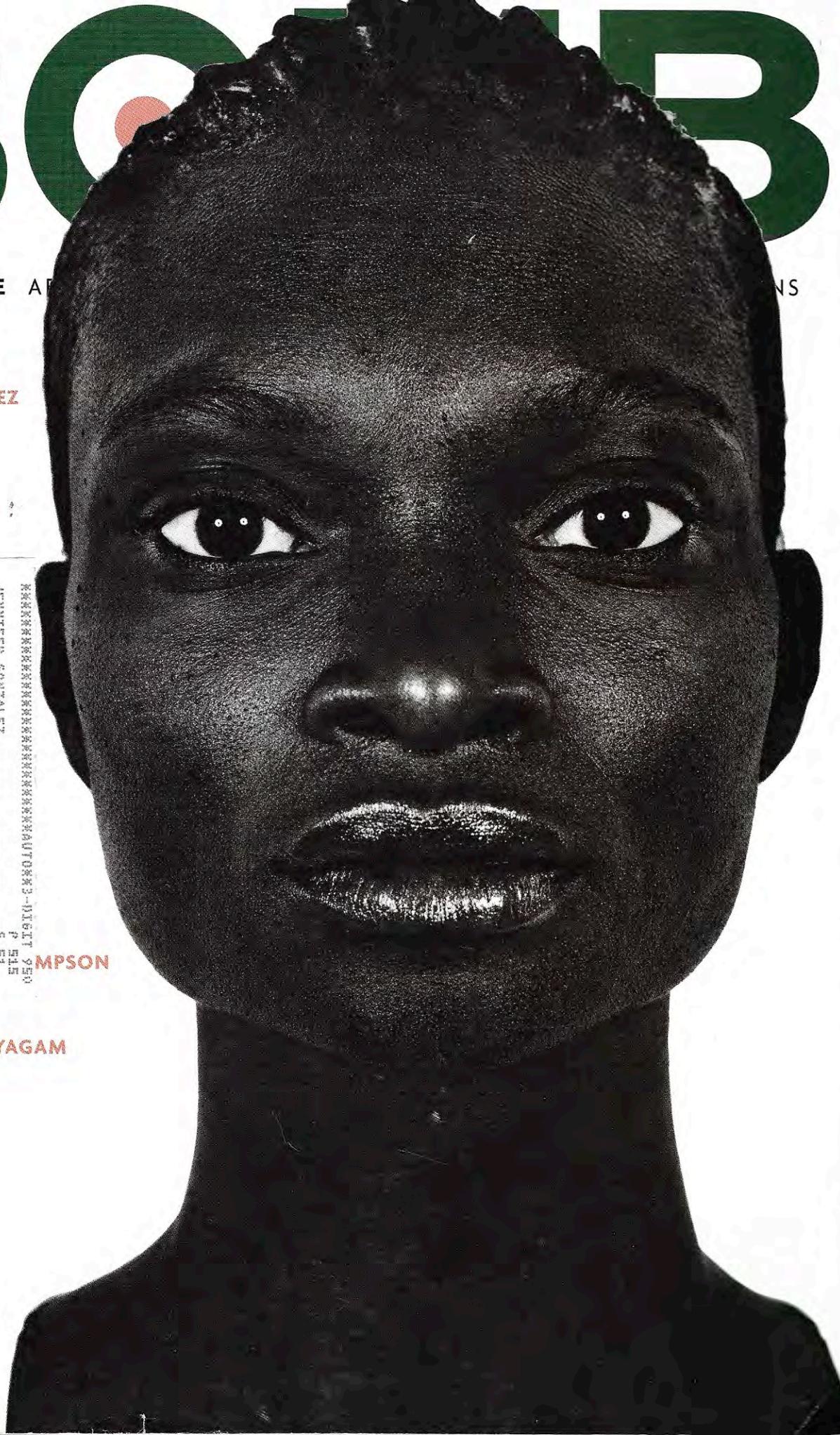
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WINNER OF THE Whitney Museum's first Bucksbaum award in 2000, Paul Pfeiffer has received attention over the last few years for his provocative digital video production. I first became interested in Pfeiffer's work when I saw *John 3:16*, a mesmerizing image of a basketball floating in the center of the screen while the court, spectators and the hands of the players seem to spin around its fixed center. As an unending loop, the work anchors the title's biblical connotations of eternal life, while the cropped and spliced NBA footage makes reference to the almost religious spectacle of professional sports. Many of Pfeiffer's works use found footage and images from popular culture to explore the relations among race, religion, art and human thought. They also link practices of

# Paul Pfeiffer

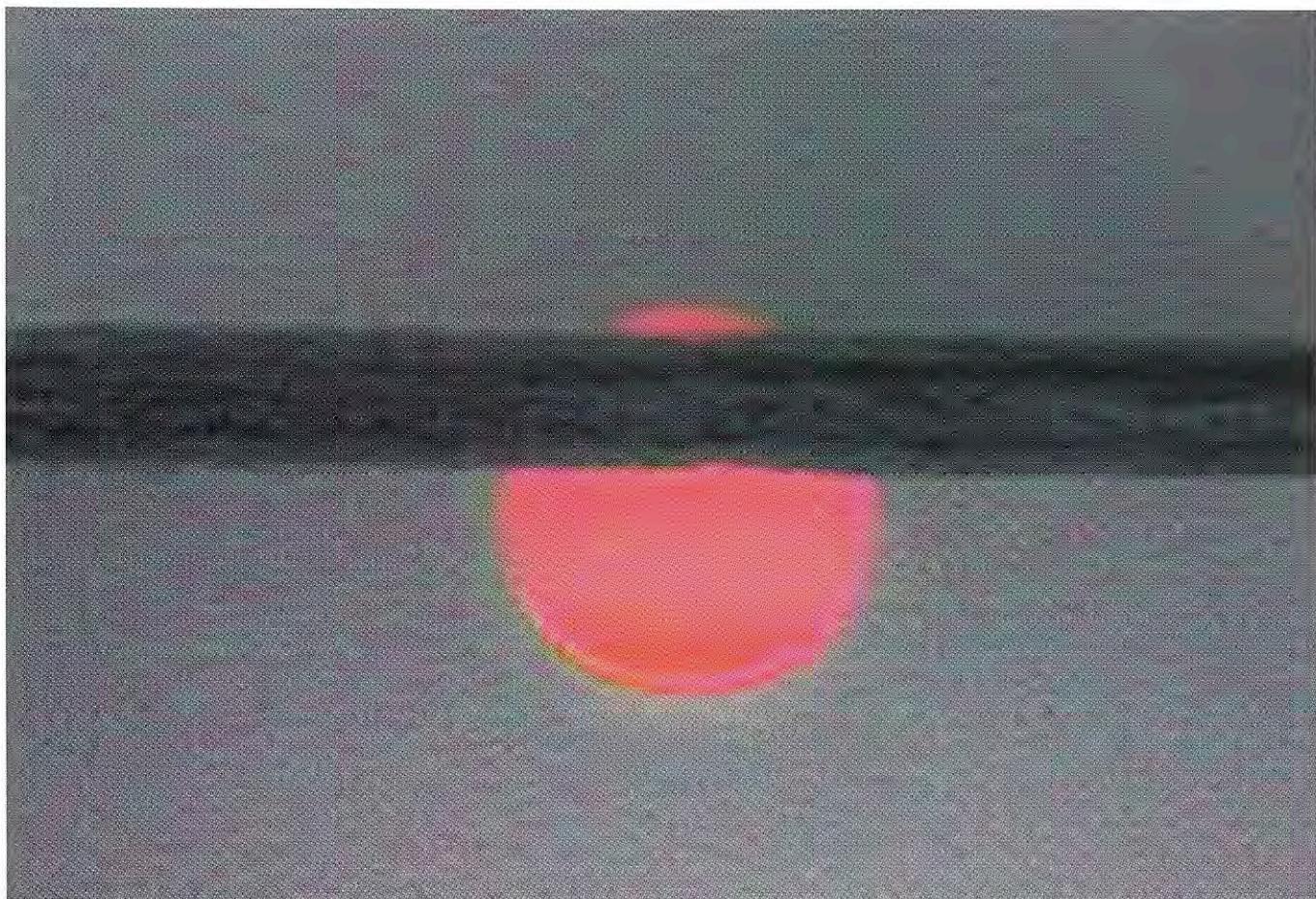
JENNIFER GONZÁLEZ

image-making across historical periods, from painting and theater to cinema and television, inviting the audience to reflect on the conditions that delimit or define both spectacle and spectator. One such work, *Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse*, consists of four photographs of Marilyn Monroe from which the movie star's image has been digitally removed, leaving only a monochrome background. A different kind of erasure is at play in *The Long Count*, in which the original television broadcasts of Muhammad Ali's major championship fights are digitally edited so that the bodies of both boxers are removed from the ring, leaving only ghostly outlines to dance across the screen. Both works use digital editing to address the question of historical visibility or invisibility, emphasizing the power of image culture to confer the status of the "real" onto the past or onto human bodies in the present. Last fall Paul asked if I would like to have a dialogue with him about our mutual interests in image production, digital media and race politics for *Bomb*. The resulting transcript is less an interview than a conversation inspired by critical themes in Pfeiffer's work.

**jennifer gonzález** Your work deals with both erasure and the disappearance of iconic visual tropes, by which I mean these famous figures like Marilyn Monroe and Muhammad Ali. It is also about remembrance and forgetting, raising the question of the afterimage of history and how that inevitably shapes the vision and consciousness of the present—in particular the

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. It seems that

can be filled with almost anything. Think of the idea of love. In a glossy magazine advertisement or on an electronic billboard in Times Square, the word “love” can be juxtaposed with almost any image or product to make a compelling visual statement—because what you are really looking at, what you are really affected by, is nothing more than the spectacle itself.



Paul Pfeiffer, *Study for Morning After the Deluge*, 2001, LCD monitor, metal armature, DVD player and digital video loop, 5 ½ x 6 ½ x 60".  
Opposite: *Red Background #1*, 2000, digital chromogenic development prints, 17 x 11". All images courtesy of the artist and The Project, New York.

discourse of the visual that itself structures conceptions of race. Can you say more about these ideas?

**paul pfeiffer** The “afterimage of history” makes me think on a more psychological register about personal patterns. The present conditions one lives in are repetitions, some of which go back to other very early traumatic moments.

**jg** I was thinking about how historical events create an echo in the present moment when we return to them. Canonical events or figures (such as Monroe and Ali) that stand

with these works you are asking us to call on that imaginary history that is already reproduced as part of contemporary popular culture. I’m interested in the slippage between popular culture and what it produces—history as a canonization of the past.

**pp** Pop culture erases history as well. I think of the spectacle as a kind of forgetting. With computers, history actually *can* be erased. The limits of historical memory shrink. The spectacle, what Guy Debord called the “relationship between people that is mediated by images,” propels itself by its own visual effect. It is empty, but it

**jg** Which empties categories systematically. **pp** And fills them with its own unified image.

**jg** Your work reflects on a collective set of psychological states that have to do with the history of image production. The function that Marilyn Monroe or Muhammad Ali has in the present is as an element of our past.

**pp** Well, certainly the *Long Count* pieces trace the history of the medium through the three fights of Muhammad Ali. These are very important fights at the beginning, middle and toward the end of Ali’s career—Clay versus Liston, in Miami in 1964; Ali



Paul Pfeiffer, three stills from *Study for Morning After the Deluge*, 2001, LCD monitor, metal armature, DVD player and digital video loop, 5 1/2 x 6 1/2 x 60".

versus Foreman, in Kinshasa in 1974; and Ali versus Frazier, in Manila in 1975. What drew me to the images of those fights was really that history. These were some of the first sporting events formatted for television. The Rumble in the Jungle, Ali versus Foreman, was one of the very first attempts at a live, global broadcast, and it happens to have originated in Africa. Those three fights are sold today as a boxed set by HBO, so they exist in the archive already as a prepackaged statement.

**ig** Tell me about the significance of the three locations: the U.S., Zaire and the Philippines.

**pp** Yes, that's very interesting. To be honest, the three fights really came to me as a found object. I happen to have grown up in the Philippines. To this day, when people hear about me, "born in Hawaii," "raised in the Philippines" and "went to high school on a Navajo reservation," they tend to respond with "Wow, a perfect multicultural upbringing." Yet it makes sense to me in a very different way. Those pieces trace a trajectory of colonial outposts. My parents were teachers who moved around with money from the Methodist Church, so it wasn't arbitrary that I ended up in those places. There certainly was a logic to it. And the logic had less to do with multicultural ideals than with the history of colonialism. I think that the selection of fight sites is probably a very similar thing.

**ig** It seems to me that your choice of the boxing ring as subject matter also can't be arbitrary, given that it is a condition of struggle that you are interested in raising around the location of colonialism.

**pp** Sure.

**ig** In that sense I think about struggle when I see *The Long Count* as much as I think about the history of boxing or particular iconic figures. The erasure of the subjects also allows me to insert other subjects.

**pp** 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.

As a visual artist I am interested in the conditions of perception. Even though television is far from the laboratory conditions of the painter's studio, I think it's a very interesting model to study: it deals with overwhelming situations. I remember a basketball game that was decided on one point scored in the last three seconds of the game. It was totally unexpected; somebody passed the ball to the wrong guy, who then took a shot and scored. An interviewer came up to him afterward and said, "So what's going through your mind at this moment?" And the player said something like, "All I'm trying to do out there is take aim and make my shot. Everything else is a distraction." I'm fascinated with how people do that.

**ig** Your description makes me think about the power of the arena and people in the center of the spectacle. Your work *Fragment of a Crucifixion* explicitly articulates that space as a trap as well, as the ecstasy or agony of the moment. The basketball player Larry Johnson was exulting over a great shot, but when you isolate that action and show it in a loop, he looks like he's in endless contortions of pain. It makes me think about the Coliseum in Rome—all these big sports events as a condition of entrapment.

**pp** 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.

**ig** It is part of a process of becoming self-aware as a subject who is an object for others. Fanon does a beautiful job of articulating the complexity of desire for power and the desire for acceptance that is formative for those who are placed in a subaltern position. A large part of the process of identification is folded into everyday life as well; it's a rather complex psychic structure.

**pp** Debord writes about the proletarianization of the world; *Society of the Spectacle* introduces the proletariat as the one who is alienated from his or her labor. In a similar way, colonial subjects are alienated not just from their labor but from their sense of who they are, as something more than a spectacle for other people.

We now have a 24-hour-a-day fashion show on cable television. There seems to be a fascination with simply watching people walk down the runway. You begin to identify with them; the scene becomes a projection onto the scene of oneself. Or, to take another example, we have lifestyle magazines that are devoted to pornography, so now you can also imagine going through your day as a porn star. In a sense there is an uncanny similarity between the colonial subject seeing himself from the perspective of the people around him and the actor who stands in front of the camera and comes to exist only for the audience.

**ig** Indeed, there seems to be no possible



Paul Pfeiffer, three stills from *John 3:16*, 2000, LCD monitor, metal armature, DVD player and digital video loop, 5 1/2 x 6 1/2 x 36".

separation of consciousness from the media environment insofar as it stages our everyday lives. We think about identity or a political self in terms of certain media forms. And there is an infinite loop between media spectacle and private spectacle. I think this relates to your work in a number of ways.

**pp** Yes, to me the spectacle is not simply visual, it's psychological: it conditions what you can imagine as a possibility. Looking at film or video loops is like looking into a fireplace or watching a moth return again and again to the flame. A loop of anything can be endlessly fascinating.

**jg** For me that fascination has to do with temporality and the psychological condition of repetition. Most forms of structured learning in education emphasize memorization, that is, repetition. We learn language, complex behaviors and psychological structures or manual skills through repetition. I don't mean mimesis or copying; I mean repeating something over and over and over again. There is a psychological component of repetition that is very attractive. It is a form of comfort. It produces a familiar image or gesture that we count on recurring. The other aspect is temporal. We're intrigued by the infinity of the loop because it doesn't follow other temporal structures of our lives, like the diurnal.

**pp** Well, diurnal time is a little loop as well. You come back to morning again, the next day.

**jg** That's true.

**pp** The loop you are talking about is something that happens quickly. The difference is one of scale, or duration. You see the repetition happen before your eyes and so you are *forced* to deal with it as repetition.

**jg** I would like to tie this observation to the larger question of the historical conditions of human consciousness that are formed in relation to different media. It is possible to

say that the film era, the television era and the digital era produce overlapping and interdependent "consciousness effects." Your work asks questions about media shifts in consciousness or in even larger social formations, such as Debord's notion of the spectacle. How do you address visual histories in your work?

**pp** I tend to imagine the continuities between something as old as painting and something as new as a live broadcast of a basketball game. The way a basketball game is shot owes a lot to painting. The game itself has been transformed by its formatting for television: certain boundary lines have been moved to create more action near the goalposts; the camera is set up so

lar racial discourse that underlies the conception of the idealized body.

**pp** Is it arbitrary that the bodies defined in pop culture and images turn out to be very white or very black? I don't think so, but I think this has more to do with the kinds of fantasies that particular bodies produce in today's pop culture. I've been researching the image of Bruce Lee. He interests me in the way that images of basketball or boxing interest me. His body is supposed to function in an environment that seems quite hostile. Bruce Lee did so much in a field that is rife with stereotypes and offers such a small range for Asian actors. At the same time, he espoused a philosophy that runs counter to the nature of the image-oriented



Paul Pfeiffer, two stills from *Fragment of a Crucifixion (after Francis Bacon)*, 1999, miniature projector, armature, DVD player and digital video loop, 15 x 5 x 20".

there can be star shots; and so on.

**jg** It makes me think of the heroism of the figure in painting, the muscular detail, the body in extreme displays of prowess and grace. Historical archetypes of the human form are brought into a temporal moment of onscreen movement.

**pp** An important marker between the two would be Leni Riefenstahl's films, in which the tropes of classical sculpture and geometry provide the context for these perfect bodies. Sports videography owes a debt to those films as well.

**jg** Yes, and those films also have a particu-

culture he was working in. Think of that final scene in *Enter the Dragon*, when he is in the room of mirrors and his image is reproduced and fragmented. It feels like such an interesting metaphor for the position he held in Hollywood.

**jg** Yes, the cinematic state.

**pp** A beautiful, frightening representation of that.

**jg** You raised the question of geometry. The geometry of your own work is rarely discussed, despite the fact that a number of your pieces seem to take it up explicitly. You have also mentioned your interest in

Leonardo's Vitruvian Man. Can you say more about this?

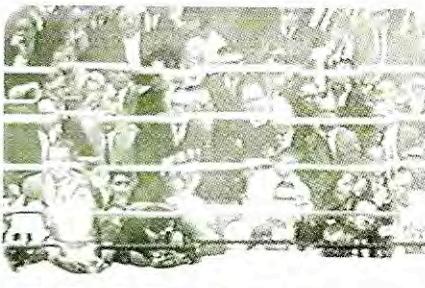
**pp** It interested me that at the very beginning of Western architecture the body was the primary metaphor for a well-designed space and perfect proportions. And yet the social structures we inhabit today are so vastly different. I was interested in the basilica because it presents a statement about the relation of individual bodies to the larger social and cosmic bodies. I wanted to reconfigure this older body as something closer to the bodies we might have today. The other thing is how mesmerizing the perspectival vanishing point is. In the image of the Vitruvian Man the body of the man covers the vanishing point. This strange double movement happens: your eye is drawn to the center, to the place where everything comes together and is unified, but that space is the vanishing point, which isn't there. I love the fact that when you look

other mediated through a central source. The relation to mass-media culture is that sense that you are talking to other people, but always indirectly, through a third source.

**jjg** Insofar as we are already in media culture, or we are already imbedded in language, there really is no unmediated communication. The question really is, what form of mediation is it? And what does that mediation require you to *enact* when you enunciate? A variety of domains are presented as new forms of mediation, but they don't necessarily take up a critical position vis-à-vis old media forms; instead of a rupture, they are seen to create an opening, a portal, a set of opportunities. This is the way most commodity cultures present new media forms, as a set of opportunities to satisfy desires. But while the political concerns, desires, fantasies and stereotypes that appear online are nothing new on the level

is very little new in the *form* of digital media, which is where a lot of people are focusing their interest. What is new are rather the *forms of attention* that the digital medium requires. A friend of mine was talking recently about how web browsing produces a new kind of wasted time—the time you spend waiting for the screen to load. I think attention to new media is about learning what to do with time spent waiting, which is often frustrating. We want faster and faster connections so there is more immediacy, but there are always pauses and gaps, and I think in that sense temporality always plays a role.

**pp** Talking about downloading and waiting makes me think of what everybody says about the average time that is spent in front of an artwork, which is very brief. Art becomes a kind of endurance, in terms of your experience of it. In the case of art professionals it seems like a snap judgment. (laughter) Or the frustration people feel



Paul Pfeiffer, *The Long Count*, 2001, metal armature, LCD monitor and digital video loop, 5 1/2 x 6 1/2 x 60".  
From left: *Rumble in the Jungle*, *I Shook Up the World*, *Thrilla in Manila*.

into that void you are confronted with something that looks back at you.

**jjg** A gaze that becomes an infinite circuit?

**pp** Yes. In some of Palladio's architectural renderings the vanishing point is situated high up. The same geometry that confirms the unity and the existence of you, the subject, can also imply that there is something else, something outside you, looking back.

**jjg** The viewer is often interpellated as a unified subject able to stand in front of an image and make sense of it as a single viewer, as the addressee. Different artworks at different historical moments fragment that addressee into different collective forms. How do these issues tie into media production in the present?

**pp** There is a shift between one person talking to another person and people talking to each

of content, the form of their communication may be quite different. And if one believes, as I do, that to some degree the form *is* the content, then we have to ask, What is the content of that form? How does the digital medium offer a mediation that we haven't considered in detail yet? How does it shift the tropes of identity that have been established in the past?

**pp** I question what the differences are between visual and digital mediums. I guess it's a question of the atomization of visual elements.

**jjg** It also has to do with forms of attention. Humans have a lot of different kinds of attention, some for reading or for conversation, others for creative activity, still others for artistic practice, dance, meditation, music and so on. Film requires a form of attention that is different from that of television. There

when they walk into an exhibition space and find themselves in a movie theater. People say, "Oh, I don't have the patience to stay and watch." Video seems to require too much of the viewer, as opposed to painting. I'm working on a piece now, *Morning After the Deluge*, that consists of an image of the sunrise and the sunset, shot in real time.

**jjg** Yes, it's lovely. The title is after a painting by Turner.

**pp** Yes. In the version I am making now, the two halves of the sun are cropped together to make one whole sun. The horizon line, usually the point of stability in the landscape, wanders down the frame. It will be projected on a screen that's about 12 by 16 feet. At first it looks like a still image because the horizon line is scrolling through the image very, very slowly, almost beyond the human eye's ability to perceive motion. You

really only see the movement in the details. In some cases the action is literally no bigger than a pixel, when, say, a bird or a plane flies across the horizon very far off in the distance. You wouldn't be able to see it with your naked eye, but the camera catches it. The loop itself is 22 minutes long; the piece asks the viewer to stay with it for 22 minutes.

**jg** About as long as a sunset or sunrise actually takes.

**pp** Exactly. And nothing happens except on the level of this infinitesimal detail. It's really about this tension between the speed of movement and the scale shift, as well as the lushness and the resolution of the image. Your immediate impression is of the square screen with the sun in it, but because it doesn't go anywhere your attention really shifts to the detail. That's the entry point.

**jg** You are providing a space for a contemplative attention, which is a different kind of mesmerizing practice from your quick digital video-loop projects—which are also mesmerizing. People will stay and look at those even though it's the same image coming back again and again and again, whether from the hope of seeing something change or simply the fascination with that repetition. I'm specifically thinking of *The Pure Products Go Crazy*, in which Tom Cruise in *Risky Business* ceaselessly flails on the couch, and *Prologue to the Story of the Birth of Freedom*, in which Cecil B. DeMille almost seems to tap dance his way onto and off the stage, as if to demonstrate that the birth of freedom has yet to arrive, that it is caught in an endless beginning.

**pp** To me what's fascinating about that image is its place in a history of developments in the media from the proscenium stage to the film screen to video. For me that trajectory is about that possibility of speaking freedom, about the question of whether things really progress as we become more technologically advanced and as the image becomes clearer and more overwhelming and more stunning. If so, what is that point at which you can do something with the medium that has the potential for liberation?

**jg** Your *Orpheus Descending* seems to be one step in the direction of liberation, by

showing life emerging in a realist mode. You recorded the actual number of hours it took for an egg to hatch and made that the structure of the work. By exhibiting the work in a public space of pedestrian transit, in the commuter passageway under the World Trade Center, you allowed daily passersby to

the liberation politics of that piece.

**pp** To me, that piece is about a gradual shift in the perception of time.

**jg** For the viewer who saw maybe 30 seconds of the project every day, there must have been a slow transformation, which led to an emer-



Paul Pfeiffer, *Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse*, 2000, digital duraflex print, 60 x 48".

see the chick emerging from the egg in real time. In the number of weeks that they were going to work following your video, life emerged somewhere else. It just might have enabled them to think beyond the spaces that they inhabit on a daily basis. To me that's

genence of some kind. The title, *Orpheus Descending*, gave it a conceptual frame. Descending into the subway? Into the darkness?

**pp** Yes. That station is one of the southernmost links to or points of access into Manhattan. I wanted to set up a very simple



Above and below: Paul Pfeiffer, *Prologue to the Story of the Birth of Freedom*, 2000, digital video loop with sound, twin miniature LCD monitors and metal armatures, 5 1/2 x 15 x 60".

apparatus that in conjunction with the existing daily ritual would change one's consciousness of time. I think of it as a political project, setting up a space for a transgression or liberation or a change in consciousness.

It seems to me a different space than the one advertising makes. I am curious about the distinction between artmaking and something like advertising, something more associated with entertainment. You've mentioned that it might be fruitful to distinguish between the collapse of these different categories versus a borrowing that goes on between them. Borrowing implies a difference in content. I am curious about your thoughts on what that difference is.

**ig** I would say that it is an artificial categorical difference. But it is a categorical difference that's worth interrogating and sustaining. If art is understood as having a set of properties that allow it to enunciate critical discourses differently from advertising, for example, then it offers the conceptual possibility of *alternative* enunciation, even if that enunciation is always already embedded in a mass-culture context.

At this point it is not so much a question of form, since we certainly have works of art that look like advertising and we have forms of advertising that present themselves as works of art. It's really a question of what role in a social context or in human history these categorical distinctions play. If you look at twentieth-century shifts in the conception of art, you see an effort to continually distinguish art from entertainment. At the same time, each generation of young artists maintains an interest in mass-culture forms. Artists understand that the power that accrues to those images actually shapes human relations in the present. To be an artist in the present, one has to address what those forms are. It's a modern



project in Baudelaire's sense of the term. For Baudelaire, to be modern is to be of your time, to understand what is of importance in your own time. Art has a social function insofar as it is a distinct category. We might ask, Well, why be bothered with making the distinction between art and other forms of mass culture, other forms of social practice? Why should art be in its own category? I think there is a political answer to these questions. The category of art and its multiple subcategories such as public art, community art and avant-garde art prevent a certain closing down of semiotic options. Why should we limit ourselves to "entertainment" when we can create spaces for new or alternative kinds of communication? The category of art has made this production of new spaces of enunciation possible in a way that other concepts, such as entertainment, have not.

**pp** Yet there is always the tendency for the artwork to be degraded into a commodity structure.

**ig** Along those lines, do you feel that the pressure to make your work sellable has an



Paul Pfeiffer, *The Pure Products Go Crazy*, 1998, miniature projector, armature, DVD player and digital video loop, 5 x 15 x 20".

impact on your conceptual process?

**pp** To begin with, there's an alienating effect. I'd like to think that artmaking has a certain sensitivity to perception. Craft is not just making a beautiful object; it's about a deeper, more sophisticated relationship with the material that you work with on a very practical level. Functioning in the art world becomes about rates of production. It's hard to get critical attention unless you are on the radar in a market-oriented situation. You have to be willing to go through this amplification process.

**jg** When you're working critically in response to questions of spectacle or questions of the market and your work is taken up within that system, it must become a difficult dance to figure out precisely how to practically and productively engage the very system that you're interested in critiquing.

**pp** Right.

**jg** The politics of opposition is often viewed as naively corruptible by any system that requires an opposition in order to define itself. Nevertheless, it is certainly possible to produce critical artwork that offers an opening or escape route that is, at the same time, not simply oppositional. Do you see your work operating in that way?

**pp** Absolutely.

**jg** Can you describe how that affects your production?

**pp** It becomes a bit like a geometric figure that embodies a contradiction between a unified self and something that is actually not so unified. Within that contradiction is an opening. For me it's been a fruitful way to proceed, to look at how liberation or creativity might lie in the very materials that you have in front of you and recognize the contradictions that exist within them. Especially if those materials are connected to a larger world or a larger conversation that other people are having. So there's the potential for communication and a way to use language transgressively that is not necessarily defined by its prevailing, socially acceptable usage.

**jg** Pop art used media spectacle as a means of addressing the condition of art's production. Do you see your work doing something similar to that project, but going in a different direction?

**pp** Warhol definitely informs my work. His work embodies a contradiction by taking the logic of the commodity to its extreme, which is different from a kind of simple opposition. It speaks to a condition that doesn't stop with the '60s. Warhol is as interesting a contradiction as the Vitruvian Man. I'm interested in the endurance of these contradictions in the visual tradition, in thinking through a very long time span

and that legacy in terms of the tools I'm attempting to use.

**jg** But it does seem to me to be a qualitatively different era now from the '60s, at least in terms of an international set of economic relations that have to do with global resources and global power structures that have expanded the reach of capital and its image culture.

**pp** Definitely. We're in a stage of capital that is no longer sustainable, yet this only increases people's urgency to maintain the illusion that things are going on as they always have.

**jg** And that they always will.

**pp** Naturally, and obviously, it's a sad thing to insist on repressing what's happening to you. It's like not being able to accept the fact that you're dying. Embodied in that condition are important possibilities that shouldn't be overlooked. That's something I see when I look at images on TV and in the movies. I feel very aware of these things as representations of an urgency to feel like things are okay. But it's clear that they're not.

**jg** I agree, there is a tragedy to it, to the compulsive repetition. Why do we have to watch John Wayne killing the Indians again and again and again, for example? It seems that this desire to make the past heroic is a symptom of what you were talking about. The panic of a cultural paradigm that doesn't want to move, that insists on its own permanence. There is a sort of sadness to the contemporary moment. I feel it profoundly in terms of ecological devastation, which is the great unspoken reservoir of repressed information. I think what we're seeing in the mass media are actually competing images of the future *in the form of* competing images of the past. Even your *Morning After the Deluge* has postapocalyptic connotations of starting over.

**pp** In the logic of capitalism, untransformed excess leads eventually to self-destruction. It's either transform or self-destruct: the pure products go crazy. *(laugher)*

**jg** I think you're right. It's either transform or self-destruct. That's a good place to end. ◊