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PAUL PFEIFFER

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[HAMBURGER BAHNHOF](#)
 by *gregory volk*



BERLIN Paul Pfeiffer's masterful sound-and-video installation *The Saints* premiered to considerable acclaim in 2007 in an empty warehouse next to London's new Wembley Stadium. Based on the famous 1966 World Cup Final match between England and Germany, the piece now has an impressive reincarnation at Berlin's Hamburger Bahnhof. Those flush and confident days in the art world of 2007 seem far away now, but Pfeiffer's work is well suited to our much-questioning and more precarious era.

On your way to the installation, you first encounter a wall projection, Pfeiffer's video *Empire* (2004), a real-time recording over three months of wasps building their nest. Because the video is so long, you can see only fragments of the process, and are left to imagine the entire patient and elaborate effort. There are myriad connotations for humans in the collective energy on view, analogous to that required for erecting grand buildings, organizing societies or establishing far-flung empires—though those will pass. Nearby is *Vitruvian Figure* (2009), a large, exquisitely crafted model of a sports stadium. From its outside you see a half stadium interrupted by glass partitions. Peering down from above, standing on a ladder beside the model, you see the half stadium reflected in mirrored walls to become a dramatic, but also illusory, whole. The work seems curiously mobile in time, suggesting both ancient Roman amphitheaters and massive future stadia built for sports that have yet to be invented.

Beyond is a spacious white exhibition hall that seems empty at first, save for a miniature video screen on the far wall. Filling the space is the overwhelming roar of a crowd at a soccer game broadcast from 14 vertical loudspeakers set into the side walls, like serially repeated elements in Minimalist sculpture. The sound of anticipation swells into that of excitement and joy but then becomes a collective groan of disappointment. Occasionally the crowd noise reaches fever pitch, presumably when a goal is scored, but far more often there is a repeating sonic voyage from hope to frustration and back again. This raucous mass vocalization is oddly akin to a full-throated choir in a cavernous church, one of the many religious references with which Pfeiffer seeds his work.

According to Pfeiffer, and as evidenced in another video in a room beyond, the soundtrack combines a recording of the original spectators (at the old Wembley Stadium) with a hired crowd of a thousand Filipinos—cued and coached by the artist—cheering and chanting in a Manila cinema while watching footage of the match. The passion of the crowd actually present at that bygone soccer game blends with the simulated excitement of the ad hoc actors, and while there is something hilarious about this combination of authenticity and theatricality, there is also something deeply evocative in it. Europe of long ago and today's ascendant Asia, imperial powers and a colonized nation, white European soccer stars and brown-skinned Filipino onlookers, even the stark thought that England and Germany had been mortal enemies in two world wars—all fuse in Pfeiffer's highly mediated spectacle.

On the miniature screen, a snippet of the original 1966 game plays, but with all the players deleted, save for one. This solitary player (in fact a composite of players on the victorious English team) darts forward and retreats, shuffles about aimlessly, charges forward again, abruptly stops. At some times he is all purposeful action, at others seemingly vulnerable and uncertain, constantly finding and losing his way. Manipulating one of the most famous soccer games ever played, Pfeiffer's savvy work is chock full of raw, conflicted humanity. As the disembodied crowd cheers this isolated athlete on the pitch, he embodies our own hesitation and exuberance, ungainliness and grace, ambitiousness and failure.

In the room beyond, a two-channel video, playing on a large screen, pairs grainy black-and-white footage of the 1966 game with a full-color film of the enthusiastic Filipino spectators. In this nerve-racking game, which remains England's only World Cup victory, that nation took the lead in overtime on a still hotly debated shot that may or may not have actually crossed the goal line. Ambiguity, uncertainty and constant reinterpretation are fundamental to the legend of this game—prime territory for Pfeiffer, who excels at recasting well-known athletic and entertainment events with surprising, open-ended nuances. Pfeiffer's looped pageant of spectatorship, athleticism, history and historical simulation makes for riveting viewing; his show is all about process, not goals.

Photo (left) Vitruvian Figure, 2009, birch plywood, one-way mirrored glass and polished stainless steel, 191/4 by 151/2 by 8 feet.



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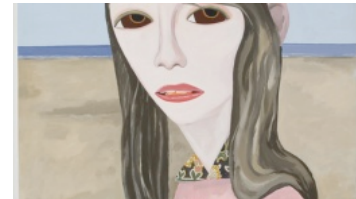
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Brian Calvin, *Alta California*, 2009

Acrylic on canvas. Courtesy Anton Kern Gallery, New York.

Currently at Anton Kern Gallery, Brian Calvin exhibits new portraits of young, sl

ALSO

Wardell Milan, *(Untitled) botanical print #4*, 2009

Brendan Fowler, *Fall 2009 (Transparency For Flower Print Order...*

Photo (right) Paul Pfeiffer: *The Saints*, 2007, video projection, 33 minutes.

Both at the Hamburger Bahnhof.



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