



***Altius, Lentius***  
**by Adrian Rifkin**

***“Olympism is a philosophy of life, exalting and combining in a balanced whole the qualities of body, will and mind. Blending sport with culture and education, Olympism seeks to create a way of life based on the joy found in effort, the educational value of good example and respect for universal fundamental ethical principles.”***

**Thus the current edition of its charter enunciates the historic values of the Olympic movement, an ethic that can also be condensed in its famous devise, *citius, altius, fortius*. This was coined in 1891 by the French Dominican, and close colleague of the Games’ founder, Pierre de Coubertin, the Père Didon – a conservative theologian and educationalist who saw the budding movement as a morally rigorous, paternalistic ideal of social inclusion. The Olympics, then, like that other great, ecumenical organisation based in the Vatican, has set out to pull diverse fields of culture into its field of gravity and so to dress itself in the colours of a progressive modernity. One consequence of this is that the Musée Olympique in Lausanne has a modern art collection that easily matches the uneven and pretentious contemporary religious**

commissions of the Papacy, and a stroll round the gardens and galleries of the Museum discloses a strange perspective on some of the canonical figures of modern art; Sol Lewitt, Chillida, Tapiès, Nikki de Saint Phalle, or César. While at the Olympic Headquarters, the Château de Vidy, Hans Erni's murals – a contrived and eclectic confection of geometric and figurative modernisms – set out an immense figure of sport's aspiration to become a transcendental and bureaucratic ideology. From memories of Greek *kouroi* to post-futurist phantasms of wholeness and plenitude, from a conceptual lightness to more or less kitschy capturings of speed or strength, Olympic artists seem barely to struggle with an inexhaustible conflict of exaltation against gravity, singularity against its sublation into the mass, the here and now of modernity against the weight of history and the over-polished myth of a faded and geo-politically marginal Greek ideal.

susan pui san lok, in her almost monumental five-screen installation, has situated herself both inside and apart from this scenario of aesthetic, political and ethical manoeuvres. *Almost monumental*: if I suggest this, it is an approach to her irony as well as to her fascination with the subject, to think how she preserves the document in its historical

nakedness exactly at the point where it could become the fabric of the monumental, of the *telos* of some particular and interested historical narrative. History appears out of the changing substance of the record, but never to settle into the narrative form of an ideology – unless that ideology is the critical potential of the contemporary work of art. At once hyperbolic and critical, lok's work magnifies and disperses; a broken panorama, it holds back from sublimation.

Working from the vast Olympic archive of the past to images found in the wastelands of its immediate future, her fragmentary capturing of the construction of the 2012 London site, which is disclosed as having been always at the heart of the piece but only after about thirteen minutes have elapsed, feels like a harsh, metallic and concrete complement to Baudelaire's poem, *The Swan*. His vision of the confounding of old and new Paris, the historical timescales of the classical past and the present moment, builds allegory out of loss, anomie and misrecognition. But if between Paris of the Second Empire and Hackney of the twenty-first century, allegory has drained away and Olympic roars have replaced Andromache's tears, the construction site still takes on the form of a ruin.

This next event in Olympic history, this new stage in over a century of repetitions, punctuates and articulates the whole

of the installation as a beat that ruins the integrity of the fragments. This is to say that its sounds – the drills, the pile drivers and pumping, dull, un-tuned clanging, synthesised into a dreary, penetrating hum – are the drone, the musical constant that underlies, coheres and also undermines the virtuoso combinations of the screens. It is the drone, or the sounding, of the next event coming, as it comes into being, that makes visible the accumulations of the archive in what are at once an assertion and an elision of the present day in its vampire-demands on the past.

And this is acted out in the incommensurable dimensions of sound and image in the artist's combining of them; in which the new and greatest-ever-games-to-come are nothing more than an instrument in the fabrication of the work. On the construction site, viewed only in parts, through gaps and gates in screens and barriers, or peering over them, we see a present that is necessarily futureless for its local and historical experience, which it obliterates. In an irony of the universalist claims of Olympism, the site is first concealed as a five-screen abstraction of textured blue surfaces, sublimely floating before us, as if beautiful in and for themselves, rather than a barrier; or as a blue screen supporting a paler, blissful sky.

They are compared to snowy mountain peaks, to nature at its most abstract, chilly and ideal. Then a desolate canal-side

path snakes beside them, and we see them for what they are; what might have been the pathway's lyrical and tawdry blissfulness is humiliated by their bland brutality, which is also delicately reflected in the water. And when we see them again as abstractions, with the reflected light of water rippling on them, we know them for deceit, one invented by the artist the better to regard us.

So, when we do realise them as the surface of exclusion and of loss, then too we can understand that lok has set in motion a *fort-da* game of different visions that will never quite correspond either to themselves or to one another. Beyond the blind barriers we see metal joists and frameworks being bound together, boots, safety gear, shifting figures of machinery and labour, the prolonged moment of inhabited ruin that is the condition of the modern city's taking form. The same drudgery that lok also shows us when she cuts the slow and blinding ascent of Mount Qomolangma (Everest) into the swift patterns of calisthenics, slow breathless trudging, higher, slower in a counter flow of near stasis against the invocation of her title. I guess that lok might want us to see that sport is labour, but that labour is no sport.

It's a futureless effort too, other than in its potential, in its turn, to bear the repetition of opening ceremonies, parades, entertainments and sporting events that have piled up before it, archive and ruin; a global ruin of records smashed, sites abandoned and the always broken promises of emancipation

through sponsorship; the menace of historical exemplars, *citius, altius, fortius*, the discipline of the nine syllabic blows that are to shape bodies and our expectations of them. These are the surplus value of this furtive labour in the endless permutations of *fort* and *da*.

lok works in a space opened by the cycles of a repetition in the time of the future-perfect, which are set free from the moment of their specific origin to become the substance of the discovered forms of video art that she shows us in the multiplication of her screens. Her enunciative procedure is one of carefully constituted elision and ellipsis on the grounds of an artlessly thorough combination, and, indeed, much flows from her inaugural elision of the word *fortius* in her title. It is in this way, that she has pitched herself on the ground of a refusal, and of taking the idea of the Olympics through the net of her practice rather than submitting herself to its demands for compromise; she will face it, and will go against its nature, choose and elide, allow strange and estranged confrontations of itself broken in parts, by her very making visible of the project inherited from Didon and Coubertin.

For what on earth could it mean to go faster or get higher without having made yourself in the first place stronger; or is it getting higher and faster that makes you strong in the third place? Or, in lok's video, is *fortius* art's work in the making visible? Note well: here there are no prizes, no awards, nor triumvirates of gold, silver, bronze standing proudly on their podium. Nor medals, nor rankings; nor *fortius*; no one has ever

gone fast enough or high enough or, least of all, got strong enough to put an end to the whole grim cycle.

So what *does* lok's missing 'stronger' imply? Is it indeed the place of art, of her art, in crazily making all this visible, across the flickering frames of the archival record, in the movement of the video-frame? But surely not: there is no reason to think that if some people go faster and also ever higher that art or an artist might get stronger, unless the weakness of that flicker allows us to see the violent hand of progress and to know that the equation between faster and higher on the one hand and stronger on the other is equals. An erasure.

Around this there turns a politics of melancholy and refusal in the midst of rhythm, brute effort, explosions of visual and physical grace and astonishing skill – a skill that is also hers as the orchestrator of all of this across the five screens of her installation.

This is to say, to guess, that her work is an askesis practiced in the midst of these excesses, in which she holds them precious materials, even as she leaves them to be nothing more than the dulling routine of spectacle, and us with an anxious and ill-formed excitement in our tracking, recognising or altogether missing things.

The plight of a century of Olympism and of imperialist economics are intertwined in one immense extended and eventually unrewarded expenditure of human energies. In the real world of the Olympics, records break and medals flow, ever inflated as a currency of acknowledgement, glistening on swimmers' chests, against the hi-tec nylon shell suits. It's a story of uneven development, of competing histories for attention and commercial sponsorships, of boom or bust in the occupation of

history's stages. Here, when we can't see the medals, the better we can see these stages.

But here, at least, the work of art arrests the frenzy of sport's dynamics, or spins it through the motions of its own procedures into new and unforeseen affective charges. In a five-screen series of pole vaulting, in each set of five identical shots, one man after another swings himself into the air and over the bar, and in each sequence, in the slowness of our perception, the five screens show a person not quite the same as himself in the unfolding of his effort. Lok's editing flirts with an understated yet touching humanism, which allows surprise, wonder and sympathy even in the distances that it has opened up.

So there we are; five groups of stately Edwardian ladies in full-length dresses take aim in the Archery contest, 1904, and stroll to and from the targets. What does their quintuplication do? Does it magnify their historic achievement as women by a factor of five or does it insist on the deathly slowness of their pace, or turn it into some elaborate and redundant courtly dance from the seventeenth century? Moreover it could make us, the viewers, faster in some way, faster to see through the fallacy of inclusion, stronger in our capacity to receive a poetic charge from the off-cuts of the archive, but to do so with a detachment, a splitting of the vision that saves us from the concentration of nostalgia.

The work arrests and splits the viewer; across five screens of marching, serried flags, we begin to sense the signs of differences that are not just those of the colours, or of fluttering and jostling, but of a presentation of the self, a mass that is a sum of singularities; but these distinctions move by too fast

for us to settle upon them, to be sure that they can be made.

Birds fly up against the sky, released in masses in a conventional act of inaugural celebration, yet the soundtrack seems to bring them down, take them as targets for its rattling, explosive sharpness; runners take off from their traps as if escaping from the shot of the firing pistol, running from the competition that includes them up to the moment of coming fourth or fifth or sixth, when it lets them drop again. Is this a fatal chance of editing or ideology critique? It depends on how we receive it, on the moment of excitement from one viewing to the next.

Five screens of massed girls whirling hoops, whose simplicity becomes complexity, whose skill becomes a dispossessed virtuosity as they flow against and through themselves, yet separated by the dark spaces between the screens. Is this the longed-for illusion that art has saved us all, redeemed kitsch, turned mechanical skill into the enigmatic system or meta-structure of knowing how to move in the world, in so many different ways?

But no, not that either; now four screens, or three, or two, sometimes with the same or different images; there is a schema here, an idea, but no guiding logic, no hidden key to how we should attend or listen. Chinese workers exercise in ranks, military, energetic, precise, others stroll in half-ordered circles round a compound. I am split between the entropic energies of Leni Riefenstahl and some split-off element of an ironic and elegant choreography of Pina Bausch, revulsion and engagement, wonder and curiosity.

Is this a nightmare; a horrible, fruitless hybrid between social Darwinism and neo-liberal economics; expansion, exclusion, dropping by the wayside, a regulated war of unremitting

inhumanity that little by little, through the expansion of the Olympic games themselves, comes to engross the world of pleasure and affect and utopian dreams of human cooperation?

I keep asking questions of these screens but I find no response, other than my following question. As I watch them, I do not feel that they regard me, quite; nor do I know what to want of them, despite my absorption.

But for this: after about eighteen minutes a voice emerges from behind the scenes of the construction site. It barks, *fast, fast, come on, fast, higher, higher*, and we have heard it before, covering some of the screens of calisthenics and the walkers from Pina Bausch, but shockingly dissociated from them. Now a two-screen, disjointed and fragmented ballet of young people conjoins with it, leaping, turning, speeding, giving it a purpose, feeding from it, hurtling this way and that, as if all the preceding frenzies have been condensed; and then cheering crowds in an Olympic stadium, waving now the Union flag, now the red flag.

And this too: after some Olympic flames, there are now up to five screens of fireworks, and jewelled red Chinese lanterns hanging high on wires against a dark, grey early morning sky. These we have already seen, in daytime, being put in place, then and now as against the construction drone, and now magical, charmingly displaced, or so it seems. And then a London bus obscures one screen, and then the screens go out one by one, and a London bus slides across the lower edge of another. And then a single screen of pure video, pulsating globules of red light drained from the lanterns.

And then, I guess, once more, that 'SPSL', as the artist sometimes signs herself, might also be an acronym for such conjunctions, disjunctions, compressions, and the spaces between.

