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Wrestling Ideology

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6 **Wrestling Ideology**7
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9 *Jennifer Doyle*

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13 **J**ennifer Locke's video installation *Match* (2005) shows two wrestlers, filmed from
14 above as they grapple. The work is exhibited as a loop and projected onto the floor.
15 One athlete is a woman (the artist). The other is a man. For much of the duration
16 of this work, the man holds Locke down, controlling her. She escapes from his grip
17 every now and again, and they wheel around the mat, but even with her obvious
18 skill (Locke is a former champion jiu-jitsu competitor) she cannot quite gain the
19 upper hand. She yields; they start over, and she yields again. The artist wrestles
20 the heavier and more skilled opponent while wearing a microphone hidden in her
21 sports bra. We hear Locke gasping for breath, muttering curses. The location of the
22 microphone privileges the sound of her effort. Indeed, the conditions of this match
23 deliberately amplify her end of the physical struggle.

24 We can and should situate *Match* in a genealogy of American artists ref-
25 erencing sports in general and combat sports in particular. In this short essay, I
26 am interested in recovering the world to which *Match* refers, by which I mean not
27 jujitsu but something that we might call "the real," as an ideological effect accessed
28 through an engagement with combat sports. As art historical subjects, wrestling
29 and boxing have strong associations with realism by way of painters Thomas Eakins
30 and George Bellows.¹ Both produced a series of works depicting near nude, active and
31 straining masculine bodies engaged in sporting combat (e.g., Eakins's *The Wres-*
32 *tlers* [1899] and Bellows's *Stag at Sharkey's* [1909]). Their paintings fuse painterly
33 realism with physical intensity and (this is particularly true of Bellows) the world
34 of the "low" (popular, working-class, corporeal). The masculinity of their subjects

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extended into critical appreciation of their work: Sadakichi Hartmann, for example, 1
 observed in 1897 that “Eakins’ work may be, here and there, too severe to be called 2
 beautiful, but it is manly throughout—it has muscles.”² The appearance of sport in 3
 the arts often has this effect—it affirms the artist’s masculinity and allows the critic 4
 and spectator to join that artist in a homosocial appreciation of “manly” pursuits.³ 5
 This locates the artist within a world even more dominated by men than museums 6
 are and presents masculinity as the exclusive property of (cisgendered) men. Today 7
 the most visible sports-centered work by contemporary artists engages the mass 8
 sports spectacle (a reflection of mainstream sports’ movement into hypermediated 9
 zones). Paul Pfeiffer, Glenn Ligon, Keith Piper, Harun Farocki, and Douglas Gordon 10
 don, for example, have all worked with the material and context of the mediated 11
 sports spectacle and with the iconicity of athletes like Muhammad Ali and Zinadine 12
 Zidane. The quiet focus of Eakins’s rowers and the grit of Bellows’s backroom fights 13
 are replaced by a global media economy as hard to represent as is the “real” of the 14
 wrestler’s grip. The real, understood as a vanishing point around which a represen- 15
 tational system is organized, shifts from flesh to capital. 16

When mass sports media becomes the dominant lens through which critics 17
 and curators see contemporary art about sports, women athletes will make only rare 18
 appearances in sports-centered exhibitions. Between 2008 and 2014, for example, 19
 the Los Angeles County Museum of Art staged four sports-centered exhibitions.⁴ 20
 None included a single work referencing women’s sports (even as three featured 21
 work by women artists). Without an antisegregationist commitment from the insti- 22
 tution, the sports world represented inside the museum can be even more gender 23
 exclusive than that encountered on ESPN. *Match* underscores the radical differ- 24
 ence that gender makes when it comes to engaging the ideological matrices that 25
 structure (and are hardly confined to) our encounters with sports, as well as our 26
 ideas about what art about sports is about.⁵ Combat sports and martial arts practices 27
 have asserted a strong presence in contemporary feminist and queer performance- 28
 based art practice, and a good deal of these works feature the artists themselves.⁶ 29
 To describe just a few noteworthy examples: Zuzanna Janin produced a series of 30
 videos from a performance in which, after training for months, she boxed the Pol- 31
 ish heavyweight champion (and celebrity) Przemysław Saleta (*Fight*; 2001). Janin 32
 and Saleta are dramatically mismatched; Saleta hardly needs to extend himself to 33
 parry her jabs. But the intensity of Janin’s effort is unmistakable. *Fight* measures 34
 the disparity between how much effort is required for one fighter to hurt the other. 35
 Tracey Rose for her installation *TKO* (2000) filmed herself working out (nude) with a 36
 punching bag. She used four spy cameras, one of which was lodged in the bag itself. 37
 The single-channel projection cuts between her fists, her feet, her nude body, and 38
 the bag’s point of view as it whirls around the room. *TKO* is scored by the sound 39
 of Rose’s punches and her labored breath (as is also the case for Janin’s installa- 40
 tion). More recently, H. Cassils beat down a two-thousand-pound soft-clay block 41

1 in a series of performances of the live-action work *Becoming an Image* (2012–14).
 2 Cassils executes this performance in the dark, using Muay Thai technique. The
 3 audience sees the performance only as it is illuminated by flash photography. The
 4 audience, however, hears everything—the wet slap of punches and kicks as well as
 5 the artist’s heavy breathing, even wheezing, as Cassils reaches the limit of physical
 6 capacity. Each of these works is anchored by the poetics of struggle. They are all
 7 connected by breathy soundscapes that are at once erotic and frightening. We hear
 8 desire and fear, at once. The real of these works is located in that confusion.

9 Paul Bowman suggests that a heightened investment in the real shapes much
 10 writing on combat sports. This is, he argues, in part because martial arts practices
 11 make particular claims regarding their capacity to prepare a person for a “real fight”
 12 (meaning, for example, a street fight as opposed to an institutionalized sporting
 13 practice). Thus the *real* appears as an explicitly contested term within the sport,
 14 as one debates which school is more effective, for example, in a “real” situation.⁷
 15 Debate about the realness of one training technique over another, however, belies
 16 the fact that institutional structures themselves are “real” and that, in fact, the pro-
 17 duction of a space beyond that institutional framework as the real is one of ideology’s
 18 most powerful effects. Bowman observes that the relationship of combat sports to
 19 this real is always “asymptotic.” A fight (within a martial arts discipline) might feel
 20 quite close to a “real fight,” but it cannot actually be that within the practice of any
 21 individual discipline, school, or style—because all of these terms (*discipline*, *school*,
 22 and *style*) indicate training, repetition, imitation, and practices of institutionaliza-
 23 tion. He writes, “What always bubbles away beneath, around, and within—and what
 24 always threatens to erupt within and subvert—any given martial art at any time
 25 are challenging discourses, structured by the evocation of an art’s unsatisfactory
 26 position in relation to ‘reality.’”⁸ The real—“the street”—makes its appearance in
 27 combat sports and martial arts as interventions of citation and style. That citation,
 28 the problem of reference, is there, always, as the sport’s problem. Embedded within
 29 the narrative structure of this category of sport, then, is all the baggage attached
 30 to the real as an idea and as an axis organizing the sport’s values. Bowman argues,
 31 in his incisive review of scholarship on combat sports, that this problem also neces-
 32 sarily structures research on these sports (e.g., Loic Wacquant’s advocacy for “carnal
 33 sociology”).⁹

34 Discourse romancing boxing and mixed martial arts would prefer that we
 35 think of them as antisymbolic, as self-referential—as beyond language. This is one
 36 of the most often repeated statements about the “art of boxing.” Its violence oper-
 37 ates, affectively, as an indicator that the action is Real, as a reminder that the real
 38 of the body can be unlocked, experienced through physical force, as violence. Joyce
 39 Carol Oates makes a version of this claim for boxing when she asserts that where life
 40 might work as a metaphor for boxing (“for one of those bouts that go on and on,” in
 41 which “it’s impossible not to see that your opponent is you”), “boxing is only like box-

ing.”¹⁰ Boxing is not a representation of war, the saying goes; it *is* war. This kind of statement is taken as transparent, but of course it is not—we need only, for example, look at philosophical debates about the nature of war to be reminded that what war *is* is itself open to analysis and debate.¹¹ In a wonderful essay on boxing photography, the art historian Lynda Nead asks, “Is there not a deeper connection between the idealization and desecration of the body in warfare and in sport that makes this pairing intriguing and provocative?”¹² What kind of war, for example, are we looking at when we watch a man and a woman grapple? Why would a woman seek this fight out, knowing that she will surely lose it?

“Reduced to the bodies of two willing combatants,” Nead writes, a boxing match appears to “[exist] outside the moral values of victim and aggressor.”¹³ People of different genders, however, cannot fight each other in such a pure space. The image of their fight cannot escape the structures that gender both “victim” and “aggressor” and assign each a completely different value. This is to say that when women enter the frame our sense of the real referenced through fighting shifts. Displaced from the gym (where mixed-gender sparring is not unusual), presented in a contemporary art context, *Match* appears to us as an unfair fight. Locke and her partner are not “matched.” They are opponents and opposites. One wins, the other loses. One is a woman, the other is a man. The loss of one to the other feels predetermined. This, of course, is ideology’s work. And ideology doesn’t just “happen”—in sports, a commitment to radical gender separation is enforced. As the International Ski Federation explained its refusal of Lindsey Vonn’s 2012 petition to race men: “One gender is not entitled to participate in the races of the other.”¹⁴ In 2011 the International Association of Athletics Federations declared that marathon records set by women running alongside men will not count as women’s records. Every segregated sport has a rule, and none of them are acceptable unless one accepts gender segregation itself as natural and fair.

In its frank, antidramatic presentation of a woman grappling with a man, *Match* forces us to consider the depth of the prohibition against direct physical competition between men and women. That prohibition haunts all the feminist works I’ve described, insofar as each performatively enacts a gendered struggle to enter into a conversation with violence, as an agentic subject. The intense horizontality of Locke’s installation invokes the “real” scenario that structures narratives regarding women’s entry into combat sports—the base scenario invoked in self-defense training for women is that of being sexually assaulted by a man who is bigger and stronger.¹⁵ Whether or not men and women practice fighting each other within the context of rape prevention, or as part of a shared interest in specific martial arts as a discipline, the practice of men and women fighting each other does far more than instruct women in protecting themselves from sexual assault. Within the context of martial arts, people of different genders sometimes participate in retraining them-

1 selves (implicitly and explicitly) to unlearn the discursive system that defines women
2 as “rapeable.”¹⁶

3 Removed from the context of mixed-gender training in a mixed martial arts
4 gym, this contest appears to some as a kind of sexual violence. What we see, how-
5 ever, in *Match* is not rape. In fact, that reading is at profound odds with the ath-
6 letic relationship unfolding before us. For if the two grapple in relation to a “real”
7 struggle off the mat, and if that real is different for each of them, how is that dif-
8 ferent from any sparring session? Locke does not lose to her opponent; she learns
9 from him.

10 Broderick Chow’s writing on labor and professional wrestling helps elaborate
11 on *Match*’s performance scenario. Chow argues that we should see wrestling “as a
12 form of shared theatrical labor that allows for participants to model and practice
13 a political principle of friendship, regardless of difference. In doing so, wrestling
14 opens the possibility for affiliations outside of accepted structures of kinship or
15 political identity—communities of shared practice, rather than shared identity.”¹⁷
16 Although Chow is writing about the theatrical production of fighting as an enter-
17 taining spectacle, his observations regarding the labor necessary to the production
18 of that spectacle apply to the training situation for all fighters. The gym, as a space
19 of social intimacy and collaboration, is an important element of the sport, as a disci-
20 pline. Those dialogues unfold across gender. This has profound value. *Match* recov-
21 ers the labor of the gendered body from the gendered logics that mark that labor as
22 always already lost. *Match*, as well as Janin’s *Fight*, insists on the necessity of making
23 losing visible, of practicing and playing with losing—which is, in fact, what we do,
24 in sports, all the time—but almost never across gender difference. The prohibition
25 against women’s direct physical competition with men prohibits our ability to play
26 with loss, to practice it—and to de-escalate its meaning. If *Match* first appears as,
27 somehow, about rape to the spectator, it is because, in *Match*, we meet and confront
28 the limits of our vision to bear witness to a woman’s struggle.

29
30 **CURATED SPACES** provides a focus on the relationship between visual culture
31 and social, historical, or political subject matter.

32 33 Notes

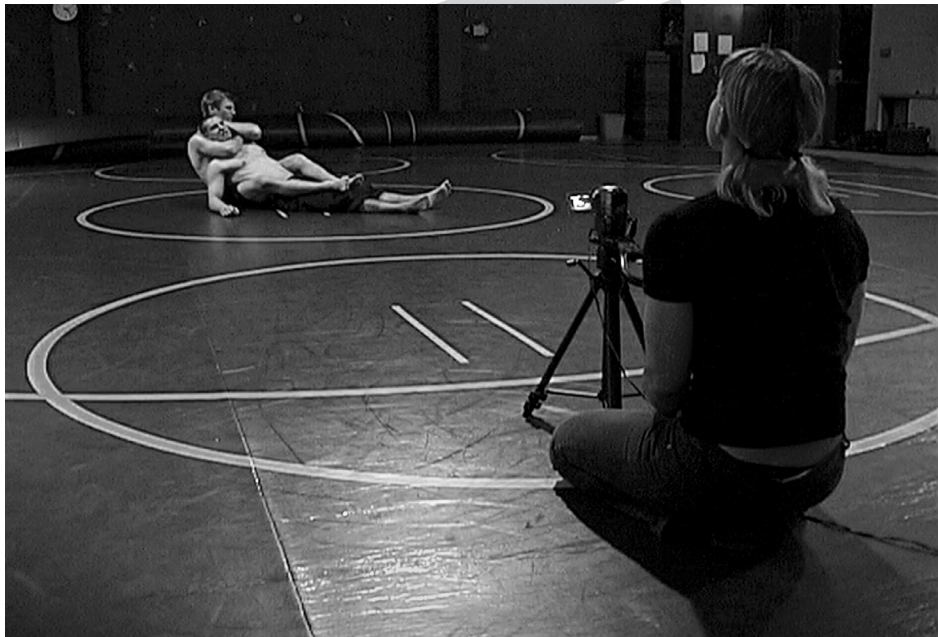
- 34 1. For a good overview of the intersection of sports and art history, see Carol Clark and Allen
35 Guttman, “Artists and Athletes,” *Journal of Sports History* 22, no. 2 (1995): 85–110.
36 2. Sadakichi Hartmann, unsigned review published in *Art News* (April 1897) and included in
37 *Sadakichi Hartmann, Critical Modernist: Collected Art Writings*, ed. Jane Calhoun Weaver
38 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 264.
39 3. Generically, this sort of realism (the “hard” realism of Bellows or, say, novelist Émile
40 Zola) belongs to the world of men—Rebecca Harding Davis (whose 1861 story “Life in
41 the Iron Mills” is considered the first example of literary realism in American literature)
was sometimes described as writing like a man (or mistaken for a male writer), given her

- penchant for grim stories about the struggles of the working poor. See Kirk Curnutt, "Direct Addresses, Narrative Authority, and Gender in Rebecca Harding Davis's 'Life in the Iron Mills,'" *Style* 28, no. 2 (1994): 146–68. 1
4. *Hard Targets: Masculinity and Sport* (2008), *Manly Pursuits: The Sporting Images of Thomas Eakins* (2010), *Catherine Opie: Figure and Landscape* (2010), and *Fútbol: The Beautiful Game* (2014). 2
5. When feminist artists engage women's athleticism, their work is, generally, very different in both form and content, if only because there is so much less mediated material with which to work. I address this in Jennifer Doyle, "Art vs. Sport: Managing Desire and the Queer Sport Spectacle," *X-TRA Contemporary Art Quarterly* 11, no. 4 (2009): 4–17. 3
6. See Christine Mennesson, "Female Boxers Depicted by Women: Revealing the Social Relations of Gender?," in *L'art est un sport de combat (Art Is a Combat Sport)*, by Jean-Marc Huitorel, Christine Mennesson, and Barbara Forest (Paris: Analogues, 2011), 77–97. 4
7. Paul Bowman, *Martial Arts Studies: Disrupting Disciplinary Boundaries* (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2015), 110–11. 5
8. *Ibid.*, 111. 6
9. See, e.g., Loïc Wacquant, *Body and Soul: Notebooks of an Apprentice Boxer* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004). 7
10. Joyce Carol Oates, *On Boxing* (Hopewell, NJ: Ecco, 1994), 4. 8
11. Howard Caygill, *On Resistance: Philosophies of Defiance* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013). 9
12. Lynda Nead, "Stilling the Punch: Boxing, Violence, and the Photographic Image," *Journal of Visual Culture* 10, no. 3 (2011): 309. 10
13. *Ibid.*, 310. 11
14. Geoff Mintz, "Vonn's Request to Race against the Men Denied by FIS Council," skiracing.com, November 3, 2012, <http://www.skiracing.com/stories/vonns-request-race-against-men-denied-fis-council>. 12
15. See, for example, the review of studies exploring the effectiveness of self-defense training in both prevention and recovery programs in Phillip M. Norrell, and Shelley H. Bradford, "Finding the Beauty in the Beast: Resistance as a Rape Prevention Strategy," *National Social Science Journal* 40, no. 2 (2013): 74–87. 13
16. For an analysis of the language and discourse of rape, see Sharon Marcus, "Fighting Bodies, Fighting Words: A Theory and Politics of Rape Prevention," in *Feminists Theorize the Political*, ed. Judith Butler and Joan W. Scott (New York: Routledge, 1992), 385–403. 14
17. Broderick Chow, "Work and Shoot: Professional Wrestling and Embodied Politics," *TDR: The Drama Review* 58, no. 2 (2014): 73. 15

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Jennifer Locke, *Match*, single-channel looping video projected onto floor, 6:16, 2005.
Image courtesy of the artist



Jennifer Locke, *Choke*, single-channel video, 2:53, 2005. Image courtesy of the artist



Jennifer Locke, *Minicam II*, single-channel looping video, 11:45, 2006. Image courtesy of the artist

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