

ON PERFECTION

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# ON PERFECTION

AN ARTISTS' SYMPOSIUM

EDITED BY JO LONGHURST



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# INTRODUCTION

This publication celebrates a two-day symposium, ‘On Perfection’, which took place at the Whitechapel Gallery, London on 2nd–3rd February 2012. Staged as a cultural response to the Olympics, the event provided a timely opportunity to question how an idea of perfection informs both historical and contemporary practices in photography and film; and how these in turn shape our experience of being in the world.

When I originally conceived this project, I was keen to explore how we engage with ideas of perfection, and also to identify what those ideas might be – the term perfection having many connotations: physical, moral, practical and aesthetic. To this end, I invited a group of artists and writers whose eclectic lens-based practices engage or disrupt ideas of perfection to question how these ideas shape our personal identities and our social and political systems.

During programming, numerous other questions surfaced, including a central conundrum around the relation of the notion of perfection to a work of art. Indeed, is there such a thing as a perfect work of art? And, if such a thing exists, how might we recognize it? Might it involve immaculate construction, perfect technique, a capturing of the decisive moment? Or is a perfect artwork something more elusive, intangible, sublime? Are perfectionist tendencies in the maker a necessary prerequisite for a perfect artwork? Or, conversely, is the idea of perfection sterile? Do contemporary artists prefer to embrace chance happenings, accidents, imperfections in form or technique to grasp the essence of an idea, or to open up new ways of thinking?

Attempts to grapple with such fundamental questions on ideas of perfection in contemporary practice, and in the context of our cultural and political heritage, provided a starting point for the magnificently diverse contributions to this volume.

Although there was a sporting thread to the symposium – original footage of Riefenstahl’s *Olympia* and her discussion with director Ray Müller of both her innovative filming techniques, and her relationship with the Nazi elite; Douglas Gordon and Philippe Parreno’s sublime anti-heroic portrait of Zidane, ‘the total footballer’;

Jane and Louise Wilson's study of the legacy of a eugenic fitness regime; and my own work with elite gymnasts in training and competition – the programme embraced a much broader variety of subject matter and interpretation, which encouraged lively debate around key issues of relevance to contemporary lens-based practices.

The symposium included papers, screenings, artist talks, performances, conversation, new works by emerging artists, and presentations from international guests. Unlike many events of this kind, the emphasis was on contributions which foregrounded the voice of the artist, rather than that of the theorist or art historian. Observations and ideas provoked by the presentations were skilfully opened up to debate by specially invited chairs, who made their own connections between the presentations and initiated discussion with our lively audience – some of which is reproduced here. The contributions in this volume are presented in the same order as the original programme, with each pairing crafted to bring out a particular aspect of this multifaceted and complex concept. The rich variety of original imagery is complimented by both formal and informal texts to best reflect the eclectic mix of the live event. The symposium concluded with a panel discussion with all participants led by Charlotte Cotton, to whom I am most grateful for helping us to draw out new thinking, and for imbuing the event with such emotionally intelligent humour, spirit and energy.

It is almost impossible to replicate such a rich experience in a book. The event had an invigorating atmosphere of openness and of genuine enquiry, a particular energy which is inevitably diluted as words and images are committed to a page. However, this volume offers a taster of the ideas and discussions initiated at the symposium 'On Perfection', which I hope will continue to resonate through future artworks, writing and debate.

Jo Longhurst, editor





# THE SPACE IN THE MIDDLE

## THE (SERIES) EDITOR TO THE READER

A somersault is obviously not the end of a process. It's not even the beginning of the end. It's a spatial-temporal state in between. Much like a film, lecture, or artwork, it's the beginning of an experiment in continuous jumps between past, present and future, connecting different spaces at the same time. Abstracting it further, it may be considered a physical and visual metaphor for a non-linear concept of history.

As cultural producers, athletes as well as artists (and those working along with them) have to think of a way to produce a collective experience that allows for different histories. An idea of history that doesn't command me to follow the line, and that allows me to start from the middle, like in a perfect, virtual somersault. It's not uncommon for athletes and artists to construct space-time 'realities' in that undefined realm where spectators, and participants can experience the dialogue with different 'systems' (of sport or cultural disciplines), time structures (when time seems *really* to slow down to a standstill) and mechanisms of representation (like the Olympics, or a biennial).

It is as if they work to keep humanity in a state of permanent reformulation.

Alfredo Cramerotti, editor, 'Critical Photography' series



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