



IT'S ALL GONE SHANE WARNE: 708 WICKETS IN ONE HOUR

Simultaneous dichotomies in the
work of Yannick Blattner

By Lisa Bryan-Brown

“This is the true art...”¹

In a fluid swinging motion the bowler pitches, sending the red ball hurtling past the opposition's batsman and right into the fragile wickets, striking the stumps and dislodging the precarious bails. The crowd erupts, the commentator proclaims, and praise pours down upon the gifted bowler, his quick wrist having outwitted the unmatched reflexes of the English batsman. Exaltation ensues; he is the man of the match, the team's secret weapon! Wearing a zincy grin, the jubilant bowler is quickly surrounded by teammates beaming joyous camaraderie, having now gained significant ground against their sporting foes all thanks to the skill of their spin bowling whizz-kid.²

It's 1993, the second day of the first Ashes test, and the bowler is none other than the now iconic Shane Warne. Relatively unknown at the time, this particular bowl has since come to be known as The Ball of the Century, and marks the beginning of the heady ascent of one of the greatest bowlers the sport of cricket has ever known. Regarded by many Australians as a true national sporting hero, Warne's notoriety for off-field antics has often overshadowed his significant on-field achievements. His exploits have persisted as a mainstay of the Australian media, his divisive character fuelling coverage of his sexual scandals in the gossip pages while his bowling triumphs were celebrated in back-cover full-page photomontages.

Although Warne retired from international first class cricket in 2007, his figure still looms large in the Australian consciousness. Successful sportspeople like Warne are revered in Australia, to the point that they become a part of our collective national identity. He can be understood as a celebrity-symbol, his persona representative of several complex and problematic ideas related to contemporary Australian masculine identities and experiences. Utilising Warne's pop-cultural currency, Yannick Blattner's *It's all gone Shane Warne: 708 wickets in one hour* considers issues



of idealised masculinity, constructed mediation, and binary dichotomies, each particularly relevant aspects in a wider discussion about the relationship between contemporary Australian masculine identities and sports, specifically cricket. An Old Boys game with firm ties to English colonisation, cricket is the vehicle through which Blattner's works operate.

Employing live and recorded performance, new media projection and installation, Blattner's *It's all gone Shane Warne* body of works see the artist successfully fail an attempt to equal Warne's career-spanning record of 708 Test wickets in just one hour. This frankly unachievable action was tried and predictably failed live in a suburban park, and subsequently provided the basis for his exhibition of the same title, which self-reflexively critiques and re-presents that initial performance. Blattner has produced three single-channel video works that combine his documentary footage with appropriated found audio, and openly exploit the editing process to construct and reveal parallel narratives where success and failure are not mutually exclusive terms and the pathetic becomes monumental.

The Great Warney: the King of Spin

“...it's a great performance”³

Imitation is said to be the highest form of flattery, and though Blattner's impersonation of Warne has a sense of homage at times, its overwhelming emphasis is on parodying and caricaturing Warne's image and persona. Dressed in an makeshift home-sourced cricket uniform replete with garish polarised sunglasses and zinc liberally applied to his lips, Blattner's Warne is unfit and out of practice, a far cry from Australia's top bowler at his peak. Interested in Warne's iconic standing and the idolatry afforded to him by cricket fans nationwide, Blattner's simple parodic impersonation becomes a much wider comment about perceptions of the ideal athletic male body; as Jennifer Bryan Wilson states, “sports can be an especially precise lens for focussing on questions of sex and gender.”⁴ This is due in part to the way organised sport codifies and amplifies hyper-masculine gender performance,⁵ providing males with a directive reference for what an idealised dominant hegemonic body should look and be like, in a similar way fashion models do for women.

Blattner's works clearly reject any notion of the Adonis-figured sportsman, and although the viewer is left with no doubt as to whether the body we are watching is masculine gendered or not, it is interesting to consider to what extent Blattner's unfit figure undermines the viewer's perception of his character's masculinity and authenticity as a believable sportsman. A body like Blattner's seems out of context even in this falsified Test match, the implication being that a body most people would class as 'normal' is rendered absurd when positioned within the realm of professional sports – a powerful reflection on contemporary issues of male body image. Considering why this might be, an assertion by Christopher Bedford, the curator of the 2009 exhibition *Mixed Signals: Artists Consider Masculinity in Sports*, that “sport, by virtue of its essentially spectacular character, concentrates the subject of masculinity in representation like almost no other images based field”⁶ is useful in understanding why Blattner's love handles seem so out of place under his crisp white polo.

Bedford's assertion also activates the inherent role spectacle plays in sport, a major theme of Blattner's *It's all gone Shane Warne* body of works. Blattner's engagement with ideas of spectacle is particularly evident in the first of his three videos, the work from which the exhibition takes its title. In 708 wickets in one hour, Blattner's Warne delivers bowl after successful bowl, skittling the wickets every time. The dramatic, panning camera shots serve to elevate the bowler's prowess, as does the charged audio of praise-filled affirmative commentary and cheering stadium crowds. The bowls are coming hard and fast and the crowd is going wild- Blattner's highly orchestrated editing allows the viewer, if only for a second, to believe that he is Warne, he has bowled it home, the team will win! But there are no teammates, no opposition to beat, and no crowd or commentators; just Blattner alone in a suburban park, playing dress up and



trying to convince an art gallery audience that he can bowl even better than the great Warne, the King of Spin.

The audience is then clued in to the ruse of Blattner's first video upon encountering his second, *Ball Drops*, positioned just around the corner. Here all pretence of athletic skill is abandoned and we see Blattner's Warne for what he really is: a guy who can hardly even catch a ball. He jumps, reaches, dives and strains, but that hard red ball just sails through his uncoordinated, grasping hands. *Ball Drops* serves to highlight the heavily constructed nature of 708 wickets in one hour, and emphasize the sheer impossibility of the performance's set goal; it took Warne over a decade to accumulate those 708 wickets, and no amateur artist-cum-cricketer could ever come near his total, let alone in the space of one short hour. By exposing the fraudulence of his own achievement, Blattner's *Ball Drops* critiques tropes of mediation and the construction of objective truths, an idea that can be applied generally to mechanisms of sporting authority as well as to notions of gender identity, and the way individuals choose to edit and self-censor their performance of gender on any given day.

The relationship between these two videos highlights another issue pertinent to the consideration of competitive sport and its functions: the binary dichotomies of win or lose, victory or defeat, exaltation or shame. The conception that sport-based competitions can act as a determinant of the 'better man/men' is widely held, deeply rooted in our subconscious, and highly problematic. Blattner's slapstick, overemphasized rendering of this dichotomy across his Warne videos occurs through his blatant and bold-faced manipulation of the documentation, and is a humorous and truly effective method of questioning and revealing the arbitrary brutality of binary definitions, forcing a consideration of the way these binary definitions engender our daily thoughts, actions and words.

Alter: The Art of Sport

"We're watching real brilliance...
We're watching genius!"⁷

Another particularly interesting aspect of Blattner's *It's all gone Shane Warne* body of work is the relationship between the two distinct cultural realms invoked: firstly art, and secondly sport. Often considered mutually exclusive disciplines with little audience crossover, the similarities between the two roles of artist and athlete are surprisingly abundant. Bedford considers the perceived divide between the two:

"There remain profound divisions between the cultural, political, and intellectual interests, imperatives, and convictions that attend the cultural sphere of artists, art historians, curators and critics on one hand, and those that anchor and define the cultural orbit of male-dominated amateur and professional sports, on the other. It is a division not so much analysed as assumed, and stronger for it...These two archetypes, in fact, form a neat dialectic: the pre-analytical male athlete, all nature; and the artist, analytical to a fault..."⁸

This assessment of the differing preoccupations of athletes and artists assumes several problematic binary dichotomies, but more importantly it touches upon a prevalent but not-articulated conception of the two industries as far-removed and dissimilar. Interested in exploring the perceived divide between the two fields within this body of work, one of Blattner's motivations in the creation of this series was a desire to reconcile these two seemingly socially opposed facets of his identity, and come to understand how, if at all, they could fit together. Primarily an artist, he found his vocation was perceived as inaccessible and outsider by the dominant hegemonic Australian public, who for the most part are well versed in the realm of sports, while conversely he found his artistic community was largely unreceptive to ideas related to sports, which were perceived as uncultured and largely futile events.⁹ Blattner located the common ground between the two in their equally fundamental reliance on performativity

of identity, and idolisation of particular individuals. Both have also become secularised quasi-religions for their devotees, and both are vocations rooted in the dedicated professional practice of an activity that is considered leisure, and not work, by many.

Although the definitions of what constitutes 'work' for either the artist or the athlete are certainly very different, their processes and functions are remarkably similar. When sportsmen compete, they are placing their bodies into the public realm and inviting comment and gaze, much like the artist when staging an exhibition; both use a format of display to demonstrate their skills to spectators, and success is afforded via subjective systems of external validation. The clearly established parallels between sports players and performers are also evident, and in this series of works Blattner is simultaneously artist and sportsman, performer and performed. In his role as Warne, neither his act of performance as an artist nor his performance of skill (or lack thereof) as an athlete is any less legitimate than the other. It is in this way Blattner's exhibition blurs the supposedly distinct line between sport and art, and challenges audiences to engage with a likely unfamiliar topic, be they audiences of art engaging with the subject matter of sport, or audiences of sport engaging with the subject matter of art.

This particular line of enquiry is best evidenced in Blattner's site-specific installation 'Hall of Fame', which consists of a series of framed found images of Warne installed throughout the gallery's bathroom facilities, accompanied by an audio track of Warne discussing himself as excerpted from various interviews. 'Hall of Fame' is the clearest example of Blattner's reconsideration of the boundaries that divide the two fields. With Duchampian gusto he presents these artefacts of sport as art, his only intervention being their irreverent recontextualisation and association.

Blattner's fourth and final work exhibited in *It's all gone Shane Warne* is a third video projection that anchors and unites the complexly interrelated themes that exist within the other works. *Ball Tampering* is a simple but potent work that defines the tone of the rest of the exhibition. A large format projection installed so as to just graze the top of the audience's heads in an area people typically gather to socialise, *Ball Tampering* is short, constant loop of Blattner shining the ball by rubbing it against his thigh before he bowls. Cheekily cropped to just the groin of the pants, the ball is rubbed up and down continuously, leaving a pink-red stain on the stark white pants. This ever-present, larger-than-life crotch is a pointed statement, a self-effacing acknowledgment of the root cause of the issues considered by the exhibition.

Funny-Serious: Simultaneous Dichotomies

Jointly, the works exhibited in *It's all gone Shane Warne: 708 wickets in one hour* consider the relationship between cricket, art and the dominant Australian masculine identity in a humorous and parodic way that engages rigorously with ideas of gender identity and performance. Irreverent and funny, these works deal with their ultimately serious themes with tongue placed firmly in cheek. Their comedic and accessible format provide an easy entry for viewers, but the longer one spends with each work the more subtle nuances emerge, clever semiotic instances that collectively critique and reveal the hegemony evident within traditional social structures like professional cricket and organised sports.

Embracing highly formal tactics of reflexivity and self-referentiality, Blattner's *It's all gone Shane Warne* works push the relationship between performance and documentation, exploiting and acknowledging the role that editing techniques play in the creation of distinct filmic constructions, which in this series are woven together to form a complex series of parallel narratives. Establishing these integral interrelationships between his own works allows Blattner to simultaneously maintain dual roles in several of his performances, giving each work a greater scope of influence and relatability across the series. While Blattner's works overtly encourage consideration of the way persistent hegemonic structures influence contemporary dominant Australian masculine gender identities, they do so through self-deprecating comedy that actually just takes the piss, so at least you can have a laugh while dismantling your own notions of socially idealised gender.

Footnotes

[1] Cricket commentator, archive audio from *It's all gone Shane Warne: 708 wickets in one hour* soundtrack

[2] Sangster, T 2006 'The Ball of the Century' *The Daily Telegraph*, November 21, accessed online at <http://www.dailytelegraph.com.au/sport/warnies-ball-of-the-century/story-e6f9xni-1111112560525>

[3] Cricket commentator, archive audio from *It's all gone Shane Warne: 708 wickets in one hour* soundtrack

[4] Wilson, J B 2009 'Unruliness, or when practice isn't perfect' in Bedford, C (ed) *Mixed Signals: Artists Consider Masculinity in Sport*, Independent Curators International, New York, p. 58

[5] *ibid*

[6] Bedford, C 2009 'Mixed Signals' in Bedford, C (ed) *Mixed Signals: Artists Consider Masculinity in Sport*, Independent Curators International, New York, p. 13

[7] Cricket commentator, archive audio from *It's all gone Shane Warne: 708 wickets in one hour* soundtrack

[8] Bedford, C 2009 'Mixed Signals' in Bedford, C (ed) *Mixed Signals: Artists Consider Masculinity in Sport*, Independent Curators International, New York, p. 9-13

[9] Conversation with the artist, March 2013

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