

Loneliness and the Modern Pentathlon

by Daria Martin

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The project

This 20 minute, 16mm film creates a utopian fiction around the Modern Pentathlon discipline (running, swimming, shooting, fencing, and horseback riding), springboarding from this arcane Olympic sport to an investigation of Modernity, Romanticism, and the struggle for wholeness. Folding sport, dance, painting, sculpture, architecture, and music into the medium of film, it lightly strives to become a contemporary "Gesamtkunstwerk" (total artwork) - an updated Bauhaus experiment informed by 60's New Wave filmmaking.

Film data

Year:

2005

Original format:

16mm

Duration:

20 minutes

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Artist's statement

Building on my previous films' concerns, "Loneliness and the Modern Pentathlon" will heighten and then diffuse tensions between the intimately linked poles of aspiration and its limits in exhaustion, between forward-looking modernity and backward-looking romanticism.

The film takes as its starting point the discipline of the Modern Pentathlon, an arcane but still surviving Olympic sport comprised of running, swimming, shooting, horseback riding, and fencing. Its five formalized events were chosen by Baron de Coubertin, founder of the Modern Olympics, to encapsulate the romantic adventures of a gentleman liaison officer who fights his way on horseback, foot, and finally through water, to deliver an urgent message.

"Loneliness and the Modern Pentathlon" archly hangs this rarified sporting discipline on the general structure of the British Angry Young Man film classic "The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner" (1962). This newly imagined version will also be set in an isolated school in rural England and will likewise plumb themes of individualism versus collectivity. Yet, crucially, elements have changed . . . In "Loneliness and the Modern Pentathlon," a charismatic headmistress (rather than headmaster), played by an iconic film star, presides over the daily life of her charges, a group of young Modern Pentathletes. The surveying gaze of this authoritarian but sensual coach puts into perspective the athletes' communal activities. Her regard –sometimes tender, sometimes cool– is echoed by the observations of a roving camera in a flowing series of vignettes which accumulate in a loose and poetic rhythm rather than a strict narrative.

The film subtly plays up the performative, formal qualities of the existing Modern Pentathlon discipline, bending them from truth to fiction. The green place where the youths of this film reside resembles a strange combination of military academy, hippy commune, and early modern utopian community. Despite the fact

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that the athletes seem to be imprisoned in rigorous routine, they also appear to enjoy a surprisingly loose camaraderie, a hopeful spirit. Practicing their five sports together in a rippling choreography and –unexpectedly- sitting peacefully side by side at their daily activity of weaving at the loom, they appear to make up an odd kind of ideal civilization, simultaneously unfettered yet disciplined, their emotions intense but contained.

“Loneliness and the Modern Pentathlon” humorously attempts an optimistic, slightly awkward, artistic syncretism, weaving together and fusing genres and disciplines in a playful way. Portrayed by dancers as well as Olympic hopefuls, the athletes in the film meld sport with dance, so that their activities create a new genre of experimental physical movement. The film is saturated with painterly color and shot through with visual references to hopeful avant-garde moments as diverse as Bauhaus director Oskar Schlemmer’s fantastical theater and Joan Jonas’ tactile performance art. Gracing the athletes’ costumes are woven bands of color; these five colors, close to the Olympic signature, appear also in eccentric additions to sporting gear . . . the athletes paint white lines on a lawn to mark out a fencing field; the lines become drawing . . . a row of ascending and descending arms at the shooting range becomes dance. In a sense, the film lightly strives towards a kind of ‘artistic pentathlon,’ a humorous 21st century embodiment of what Sonia Delaunay called, in the 1920’s, “Simultaneous Art” or what the Bauhaus idealized as “Gesamtkunstwerk: “ Total Artwork.

This struggle of the early avant-garde for wholeness –its passionate urgency and its ultimate disappointment- is reflected in the history of the Modern Pentathlon discipline itself. Invented in 1909 by Baron de Coubertin, a French aristocrat whose father was an artist, the Modern Pentathlon was meant to test the metal of the ultimate “complete athlete”–its five events echoing the five Olympic rings, creating a circle of total realization

that enclosed mental as well as physical prowess. The Modern Pentathlon today strips itself of sentimental associations and strives to remain ‘the ultimate Olympic event,’ yet relentlessly fails to escape its marginal status. Its position as a ‘minority’ sport seemed insured already at its inception, as even in 1909 it was anachronistic to model a contemporary sport on an aristocratic archetype. From the beginning, the Modern Pentathlon was paradoxically tinged with both a flush of ambition and a grayish cast of loss.

“Loneliness and the Modern Pentathlon” will embody this special irony, toying with the delightful absurdity and, indeed, the loneliness inherent in a single person’s aspiration to master five disciplines, to expand into a “modern” super-person. Each athlete, changing costume, equipment, and action for every sport, creates distinct identities throughout the film; personas subtly change with attire and attitude, and this process is highlighted by brief “locker room” scenes depicting physical transformations and barely discernible psychological shifts. Particular athletes are highlighted across transitions –shedding old skins and adopting new ones– to make bodily and psychic transformations more theatrically visible.

The notion of chameleon-like role-playing, or splitting of identity, will be further deepened by the casting of the headmistress’s role. Played by a recognizable star of avant-garde film, her presence will evoke a life of multiple identities and journeys through many roles –an ego simultaneously imperious and highly flexible. In focusing on this singular, recognizably unique individual who remains distinct from a miniature army of masterful individuals, the film hints at questions of collective versus individual identities, and how these are each formed through layered role-playing. Moreover, this actress, an Olympian of the screen, a goddess of a golden age, bears a curious, preexisting, relationship to time and to collective culture: the mark of experience etched in her face, she nevertheless remains timeless in the cumulative

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memories of countless individuals. Like the Modern Pentathlon discipline itself, she folds time.

In "Loneliness and the Modern Pentathlon," this actress's iconic yet vulnerable quality in a sense subtly stands in as a metaphor for our contemporary relationship to Modernism itself—Modernism is resilient aristocrat, a star who refuses to grow old gracefully. The young athletes of the film provide a counterpoint, representing the blindly striving naiveté, only slightly darkened by teen angst and worry. These two faces, one innocent and one experienced, are each sides of a coin, a paradox that begins to encapsulate our contemporary ambivalence towards what it might mean to be 'modern' people today.

In gently investigating the struggle inherent in the dream of becoming a 'rounded' individual— a person of heroic self-mastery as well as of submission to community - "Loneliness and the Modern Pentathlon" hints that assuming this role requires a great deal of dress up, poker-faced disguise, and slapstick experimentation. In oscillating between passionate urgency and formal restraint, it finds an escape from these opposed poles in what Schlemmer described as the "play instinct:" a joyous celebration of transformation, a delight in artifice.



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Artist's info

Born in San Francisco, 1973. Lives and works in London.

EDUCATION and AWARDS

2002 Artist in residence, Delfina Studios Trust, London.

2000 M.F.A., cum laude, University of California, Los Angeles.

1999 Artist in Residence, Cite Internationale des Arts, Paris, France.

1995 B.A., Humanities, magna cum laude, Phi Beta Kappa, Yale University .

ONE PERSON EXHIBITIONS

2005 Five Fights, Kunstverein in Hamburg, Hamburg. / Daria Martin, Kunsthalle Zurich, Zurich. / Man and Mask, Collective Gallery, Edinburgh. / Daria Martin, Kunstlerhaus Stuttgart, Stuttgart. / Soft Materials, The Showroom, London.

2004 Daria Martin: Closeup Gallery, Hotel, London.

2003 Daria Martin: Art Now Lightbox, Tate Britain, London. / Closeup Gallery, Analix Forever Gallery, Geneva.

2001 Birds, Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York.

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

2005 The Tate Triennial, Tate Britain, London (catalogue). / The British Art Show 6, The Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art, Gateshead. / Uncertain States of America, Astrup Fearnley Museum of Modern Art, Oslo. / A Certain Tendency in Representation, Thomas Dane Gallery, London. / Emblematic Display, curated by Catherine Wood, Institute of Contemporary Arts, London. / U-Move, Galleria Comunale d'Arte Contemporanea di Monfalcone, Italy (catalogue). / Beck's Futures, Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, and others (catalogue).

2004 In the Palace at 4 a.m., curated by Catherine Wood, Alison Jacques Gallery, London. / 100 Artists See God, curated by John Baldessari and Meg Cranston, Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, and others (catalogue). / Feast of Silenus, Edinburgh College of Art, Edinburgh. /

Sophie Macpherson and Daria Martin, Glasgow Sculpture Studios, Glasgow.

2003 The Moderns, Museo Castello di Rivoli, Turin (catalogue). / Paris is Burning, Entwistle Gallery, London. / Bootleg, Spitalfields Market, London. / The Fragile Underground, curated by David Thorpe, Bart Wells Institute, London.

2002 Al Respecto 7, Rafael Tous Foundation, Barcelona.

2001 Tirana Biennale, National Gallery, Tirana (catalogue). / Sharing Sunsets, Tuscon Museum of Contemporary Art, Tuscon. / Not at Home, Solitude Gallery, Stuttgart.

2000 Sentimental Education, curated by David Rimanelli, Deitch Projects, New York. / And She Will Have Your Eyes, Analix Forever Gallery, Geneva. / New School, Works on Paper, Los Angeles. / M.F.A. Thesis Show, UCLA New Wight Art Gallery, Los Angeles.

1999 Black Dragon Society, Black Dragon Society, Los Angeles.

SELECTED PERFORMANCES, SCREENINGS, and BROADCAST

2006 Regeneration, Tate Modern Turbine Hall, performance in collaboration with Zeena Parkins. / Diaries, Poor Man's Expression, Berlin, Germany (performance). / Dance and Art in London, Suzanne Dellel Center, Tel Aviv, Israel (screenings and lectures). / British Art Talks: Music, Tate Britain, London (lecture and panel discussion). / Joseph Cornell: Arnolfini Bristol (screening and lecture). / Daria Martin, Bonniers Kunsthalle, Stockholm, Sweden (screening and lecture).

2005 Daria Martin (screening and talk), Swiss Centre, Paris. / Daria Martin: Screenings, Casco Projects, Utrecht. / Flesh and Fantasy ,film night curated by Daria Martin, Tate Britain, London. / The New Moderns, Second Annual Conference, The Showroom, London. / Ed Ruscha Film Night, Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles. / Describing Form, screenings curated by Lucy Reynolds

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for LUX, The Henry Moore Institute, Tate Britain, and others.

2004 The New Female Voyeurism (screening and panel discussion), The Institute of Contemporary Arts, London. / bfi and Tate: International Symposium: By Design: Film Fashion / Art Architecture (screening and talk), Tate Modern, London. / Spring is the Future (performance), Concert in the Egg, curated by Emma Robertson and Jo Stella-Sawicka, The Ship, London.

2002-2005 Revolver, a series of short films by artists, curated by Carmen Zita, broadcast weekly on the European arts Channel "Expo 24X7".

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

2006 Kirsty Bell, "Track and Field" (feature), frieze, March 2006. / Barry Schwabsky, "Openings: Daria Martin", Artforum, March 2006. / Olivia Plender, "Greek Myth and the Ghosts of Bexhill-on-Sea," Tate Etc, Spring 2006.

2005 "Brit Art: the Next Generation", The Independent, 1 December, 2005.* / "Future Greats," Art Review, December 2005.* / David Bussel, "Daria Martin: The Showroom" (review), Artforum, May 2005.* / Lisa Panting, "Daria Martin: The Showroom" (review), frieze, April 2005.* / Diana Baldon, "Daria Martin interviewed", tema celeste, March/ April 2005.* / Sally O'Reilly, "Daria Martin: The Showroom" (review), Modern Painters, April 2005.* / Lisa Le Feuvre, "Daria Martin: The Showroom" (review), Art Monthly, March 2005.* / Rob Tufnell, "Eye Robot", Tank, January 2005.* / Pablo Lafuente, "Debut: Daria Martin", Art Review, January, 2005.*

2004 David Bussel, "Critics' Picks: Closeup Gallery", Artforum Online, November, 2004.* / Sanjoy Roy, "Moving the Goalposts", Contemporary, issue 66, October, 2004. / cover image.* / Emily Pethick, "London Picks: In the Palace at 4 am" Artforum Online, July, 2004. / "Palace Evolution", Time Out, 28 July-4 August 2004.* / Olivia Plender, "On Daria Martin", Untitled, Spring 2004.* / Barbara Polla,

"Daria Martin and the Modern Pentathlon", Citizen K, Paris, Winter 2004.*

2003 Andrea Vilianni, "Daria Martin", (review), Flash Art International, Milan, October, 2003.* / Roberta Bosco, "Quienes son los modernos?", El Pais, Madrid, May 2, 2003.* / "Contemporanei? No, Moderni", La Repubblica, Rome, April 5, 2003.*

2002 Pablo Lafuente, "A room of their own", Artreview, London, November 2002. / Esther Pierini, "Birds" (review), frieze, London, April 2002.* / Maurizio Cattelan, curator, Charley 01, New York, Spring 2002.*

2001 David Rimanelli, "First Take: Daria Martin", Artforum, New York, January 2001.*

2000 Holland Cotter, "Sentimental Education" (review), The New York Times, / New York, July 14, 2000. / Jerry Saltz, "Realm of the Senses", The Village Voice, New York, July 6, 2000. / David Rimanelli, "Top Ten of 2000", Artforum, New York, December 2000. / *Reproductions.

PUBLICATIONS

2006 Daria Martin, Ringier, Zurich. / Tate Triennial, Tate Publications, London.

2005 The British Art Show 6, Hayward Art Gallery, London. / Uncertain States of America, Astrup Fearnley Museum of Modern Art, Oslo. / The Showroom Annual 2004-2005, The Showroom, London. / U-Move, Galeria Comunale d'Arte Contemporanea di Monfalcone, Italy. / Beck's Futures, Institute of Contemporary Arts, London.

2004 100 Artists See God, Independent Curators International, New York. / Art Now and Then, Tate Britain, London.

2003 I Moderni/ The Moderns, Castello di Rivoli, Turin.

2001 Tirana Biennale, National Gallery, Tirana. /

SELECTED COLLECTIONS

Tate Modern, London.

Arts Council England, London.

Ringier, Zurich.

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