



SPECTACLE

Brandon Donahue

Vesna Pavlović

Chris Boyd Taylor

exhibition essay by: Brandon Vogel

GALLERY GUIDE

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Spectacle is an exhibition that combines basketball and visual culture. It's a three-person show that features the work of Brandon Donahue, Vesna Pavlović and Chris Boyd Taylor.

I've been toying around with the idea of an exhibition that centered around basketball for a few years, and this exhibition was purposely scheduled for late February and March to coincide with *March Madness*, the distinctly American phenomena surrounding collegiate basketball. As we are inundated with capitalist-driven, basketball-related imagery during the month of March in the United States, I didn't want to travel down that same clichéd path but wanted to focus on how the visual identity of the sport permeates itself into the visual language that artists use to communicate bigger ideas. Ideas akin to power, voyeurism, architecture and economic struggle. Ideas of being a spectator and being spectated – living in the shadows, living in the light. The exhibition is a mix of mediums and voices that have the common thread of the sport of basketball.

- Michael Dickins
curator

SPECTACLE

THE NEW GALLERY AT AUSTIN PEAY STATE UNIVERSITY

FEBRUARY 24 – MARCH 27, 2020

CURATOR: MICHAEL DICKINS

At the moment I sat down to begin this essay, Emre Can created a moment of wonder in Leverkusen, Germany. The Borussia Dortmund midfielder was between 30 and 40 yards from goal and had options. The Bayer Leverkusen defense was scrambling, the Dortmund attack building. Can looked up from the ball at his feet for a second, determined that there was a space, maybe 4 square feet, near the far top corner of the goal that Leverkusen's keeper couldn't possibly get to—if Can acted now. And so he did, from that audacious distance. Even attempting the shot said, “there aren't 500 people in the world who can do this, but, right now, I'm one of them.”

Can was right. About all of it. He could score from there. The ball would go where he wanted it to go. When it did, Dortmund fans wouldn't care about the high-risk, low-reward attempt because they'd be momentarily drunk on dopamine.

The goal, worth no more than the nearly 1,000 others likely to be scored in Germany during the 2019–20 season, is a lot of things. Brilliant, yes, but more than that.

The goal could be a way into talking about immigration, religion or politics. Can is a German native of Turkish descent and a practicing Muslim who sparked some controversy when he liked an Instagram post supportive of the Turkish offensive into Syria in October 2019. He later said it was an accident.

The goal could lead us to a discussion on globalization, capitalism or the pharmaceutical industry. That I watched that goal, struck in North Rhine-Westphalia, live in Chattanooga, Tennessee, is common now—we can watch almost anything at this point, but especially live sports which remain one of the surest and thus most profitable bets in a fractured media economy—but it still feels like a small, bizarre miracle. It came against a club founded more than a century ago by the employees of a pharmaceutical giant. The Bayer in Bayer Leverkusen is the same Bayer you find on aspirin tablets.

The goal was probably even art to some. Surely to the fanatical supporters of Die Schwarzgelben, but this was the sort of strike rivals had to revere as well.

The goal can take us to all of those places potentially, but in my experience attending press conferences, interviewing coaches, talking to players and covering games—all the daily stuff sports writing entails—it is that last jump from event to idea that is the most difficult to make. At least for sports fans.

Of all the potential sources for an “is this art?” question—tired as that may be—sport might resist it the most by nature. The scoring systems, the rules, the video cameras that assist in the interpretation and application of those rules, it's all in service of the primary objective of any game: to objectively determine a winner and loser. Ambiguity is the enemy, abstraction a flaw. The news cycle is always running. Can's magnificent goal had news value for 10 minutes, real time. That's how long it took Leverkusen to score and draw level, on its way to a 4-3 win, which then became the story until it was time for the sports world to move on to talking about what might happen next.

Finding art in such a codified, unceasing world can be a challenge. The works collected in Spectacle are connected by their embrace of that challenge, their willingness to give us a scrap, a moment, a scene that breaks through the wall containing the sports world to let everyone know, inside or outside the wall, that there's more here to see.

As someone who lives and works inside the wall, happily most of the time, the invitation to venture outside it has become the thing I want most.

The work of Brandon J. Donahue shows the elemental appeal of basketball in a way that consuming hundreds of games a year can't. These hoops, absent a ball, pull up the intensely human urge to throw something through them. That is basketball reduced to its essence—put the ball through the hoop—but constructing the targets from found and repurposed materials hones the inherent humanity there. Far from the global business worth billions that basketball has become, is the urge that makes any of it possible. See the target, try to hit it. Having tried when given the opportunity, the urge only grows stronger. Strong enough that anything becomes a hoop and anything close to a ball will do. Donahue's work, in a sports context, reminds us that the origin stories of countless players who delight us with their abilities every night on national TV, and make millions due to that delight, actually originate with those objects—a milk crate and a kickball, a cardboard box and balled-up socks, a trashcan and whatever paper is around.

Beyond what basketball is, Vesna Pavlović forces us to consider what it is to watch. Her Watching Project, from which works were selected for Spectacle, places us alongside the fans as they consume from various vantage points, be that alone and on TV, at communal watch parties in Belgrade as the Yugoslav national team's games were beamed back home, an NBA arena or at the Olympics. There's very little awe in the series—we call them "jube shots" in the media, short for jubilation, when trying to make photo selections that "tell the story"—and not much outright angst either, which those of us inside the wall use when that's the story. Instead the viewer is offered a more realistic range—worry, cautious confidence, uncertainty, even indifference. Pavlović's images force the viewer to ask if the source of these emotions, what's unfolding on screen or in the arena, is really of any greater consequence than what's happening with those who watch.

The works presented here from Chris Boyd Taylor take us beyond the wall by placing us directly inside it in a literal sense. In this case, however, the stadiums are quiet and empty, the shakers awaiting a hand to shake them. They are either remnants of revelry just passed or signs of what's in store. Empty stadiums always straddle that divide between what was and what will be. They are not unlike religious spaces in that way, down to their rows of seating, an inspiration Boyd Taylor has drawn on from his childhood for these pieces. They ask us to consider the potential of these places, the potential for community, a shared experience, a singular event or whatever it is the attendee seeks. They look back through rows that reach skyward, the implication of an unlimited future inherent in the steeply pitched slope.

Flip on a game, any game, next time you're in front of a screen and all of these things are there, but they're never the thing. That's why we need people to pull them out and hold them up for inspection.

Two days before Can's goal in Germany, LeBron James delivered a stunning dunk in Los Angeles. He doesn't do that as often as he once did, which I attribute to the wisdom of age

rather than the ravages. He knows he can still do it, but he's learned he doesn't have to do it all the time. Only greatness offers such a luxury.

Los Angeles Lakers team photographer Andrew Bernstein captured the moment so beautifully that even social media couldn't dismiss it. James' legs are splayed just so. He looks up at the rim he's about to punish. The Houston Rockets players trailing James are arranged in such a way to fill out the frame and offer some color contrast. Of course, an ad for NBATickets.com glows just above his head, something I'm sure delighted the league office. It was an excellent piece of photojournalism, which led to a conclusion I see more and more often inside the wall.

As the retweets on that photo accumulated and the comments piled up, there was one version of the same basic refrain that people kept coming back to, one sports fans use often now: "This belongs in a museum."

It is only through considering works like those presented in *Spectacle* that we can put a comment like that in proper context. Yes, maybe that photo is worthy of exhibition. Maybe it will be exhibited. It's already been seen by thousands and the majority of those, I'm guessing, have already moved on to the next thing. That it was part of the action doesn't diminish the image, but forces us to reconsider it.

Bernstein was there to get an image like that, as were probably 50 credentialed journalists charged with recounting the spectacle on that court with pristine and precisely regulated rims. The cameras were all pointed that way, the seats full. More than 18,000 people paid to be there, a few million more watched from home. It's a powerful scene even if it happens all the time.

Yet I wonder now, when looking at that photo, what was happening outside of it, after the stadium emptied, if the cameras had pointed the other way, if we took it all the way down to its fundamental essence. What could that show us? It's a question worth asking on either side of the wall.

Spectacle, through the works of Brandon J. Donahue, Vesna Pavlović and Chris Boyd Taylor, asks that question.

- Brandon Vogel

Brandon Vogel is a writer, editor, and author with more than a decade of experience writing on sports and other aspects of arts and culture. He is the managing editor of *Hail Varsity*, a member of the Football Writers Association of America, and a Heisman Trophy voter. He has written for Fox Sports, *The Guardian*, and CBS Sports among others. His first book, co-written with Nebraska women's volleyball coach John Cook, was released by University of Nebraska Press in 2017.

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Artist Bios

Brandon J. Donahue (USA)

Selections from the *Foul Shot Series*

Donahue is an artist working in painting, assemblage, and sculpture. He received his B.S. from Tennessee State University and his M.F.A. from The University of Tennessee in Knoxville.

Donahue has exhibited nationally and internationally including the 13th annual Havana Biennial in Matanzas, Cuba in 2019. He is represented by David Lusk Gallery in Nashville and Trager Contemporary in Charleston, SC. Donahue now lives and works in College Park, MD as an artist in residence at the David C. Driskell Center at the University of Maryland.

www.brandonjaquezdonahue.com

Vesna Pavlović (Serbia/USA)

Watching

Pavlović obtained her MFA degree in Visual Arts from Columbia University in New York in 2007. She is an Associate Professor of Art at Vanderbilt University in Nashville. Her projects examine the evolving relationship between memory in contemporary culture and the technologies of photographic image production. Expanding the photographic image beyond its frame, traditional format, and the narrative is central to her artistic strategies. She examines photographic representation of specific political and cultural histories, which include photographic archives and related artifacts.

Pavlović has exhibited widely, including solo shows at the Phillips Collection in Washington DC, the Frist Center for the Visual Arts in Nashville, Museum of History of Yugoslavia in Belgrade, and the Crocker Art Museum in Sacramento. She participated in a number of group shows, including the Untitled, 12th Istanbul Biennial, 2011, in Turkey; The MAC – Metropolitan Arts Center in Belfast, Northern Ireland; Württembergischen Kunstverein, Düsseldorf, Germany; KUMU Art Museum in Tallinn, Estonia; Zachęta, The National Gallery of Art in Warsaw, Poland; City Art Gallery, in Ljubljana, Slovenia; the New Art Gallery Walsall, Walsall, UK; the Bucharest Biennale 5, in Bucharest, Romania; Museum of Contemporary Photography in Chicago, USA; Le Quartier Center for Contemporary Art in Quimper, France; NGBK in Berlin, Germany; Photographers' Gallery in London and Kettle's Yard in Cambridge, UK; and FRAC Center for Contemporary Art in Dunkerque, France.

In the 1990s, in Belgrade, Pavlović worked closely with the feminist pacifist group *Women in Black*. Vesna Pavlović is the recipient of the The George A. and Eliza Gardner Howard Foundation in 2017,

the City of Copenhagen Artist-in-Residence grant in 2011, and Contemporary Foundation for the Arts Emergency Grants in 2011 and 2014. She has received 2012 Art Matters Foundation grant. She is the recipient of the Fulbright Scholar Award for 2018. In 2018, she was a Southern Prize Fellow.

Her work is included in major private and public art collections, Phillips Collection, the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, the Museum of Women in the Art in Washington DC, USA, and Museum of Contemporary Art, Belgrade, Serbia, among others. Publication about her work titled *Vesna Pavlović's Lost Art: Photography, Display, and the Archive*, edited by Morna O'Neill, was published in 2018 by Hanes Art Gallery at Wake Forest University, USA.

Watching was a conceptual project between Vesna Pavlović and Vladimir Tupanjac.

www.vesnapavlovic.com

Chris Boyd Taylor (USA)

Arena

Taylor has fine arts degrees from The Ohio State University and The New York State College of Ceramics at Alfred University.

Craft, scale, color, movement, architecture, spectatorship, anthropomorphism, and interpersonal relationships make up the principle interests in his studio practice. He is currently creating work in direct response to travels he took throughout the Southeast United States documenting venues of spectatorship.

Chris has several permanent public art commissions *Remolcador en Camino* at the Pablo Neruda Plaza, Montevideo Uruguay and *The Cardboard Kids* at Austin Peay State University, Clarksville Tennessee. He has exhibited at many venues including the Nashville International Airport, Montgomery Museum of Fine Art, ArtFields, and Huntsville Museum of Art. In 2013 he was an Emerging Art Fellow at Socrates Sculpture Park in Queens New York.

He and his family reside in the foothills of the Appalachians in Northern Alabama where he teaches sculpture at the University of Alabama in Huntsville.

www.walkingcubes.com