

<http://www.glimpseculture.com/blog/>

## Three is the New One Posted by Julie Talen on March 31st, 2006

One of the things that always fascinates me is how, knowingly or not, people working in multi-image forms come up with similar solutions to the same problems. John Pilson's show, *Coliseum*, whose last day is tomorrow, Saturday, April 1, at the [Nicole Klagsbrun Gallery](#) (526 W. 26th St., btwn 10th & 11th Avenue), explores the realm of three in ways that are witty, profound, and well worth seeing.

The peculiarly (though not exclusively) male obsession with vicarious forms of battle – be it the 1999 Yankee's World Series or the strategy for a 12-hour game of dungeons and dragons – form the narrative spine for three of the four pieces in *Coliseum* – so named, I suspect, because the obsessions depicted here are our equivalent of the Roman Empire's during the corrupt heights of their power.



In the first, *Sunday Scenario*, three aging men, each in a square in a separate location, share a conference call. Shot on stationary cameras – one man in his office, a second in a leaf strewn woods, the third, inexplicably in red-striped pajamas, on the edge of a bed – they are, in fact, framing devices for the rapid montage of sports images which flash onscreen each time one of them names a player, place or event. We don't know who they are, nor their relationship to each other, nor why they are ostensibly on the phone in the first place. We know nothing about them except that they are able to speak together for twenty-two solid minutes and never utter a syllable that isn't related to their mutual, lifelong obsession with sports – all sports, but primarily New York's baseball, basketball, hockey teams and boxing.

Whoever makes the first reference gets the image in his frame. Hence the wideness of the framing, to make room for these baseball cards and photographs, which occasionally obliterate the men themselves. The cameras on the men don't move or cut; all the visual tempo is supplied by these references, culled from websites of sports memorabilia, as they pop in and out in the spaces not occupied by the men, and they often pile one on top of the other as the men disagree, or someone slams home a point, or names the entire starting line-up of the 1950 Brooklyn Dodgers. The Man on the Bed mourns the passing of the Brooklyn Dodgers as if it had happened that morning. "I have to live with this. I still have sleepless nights. I still have to go to the bathroom, two, three times a night," he grieves.

In our 'three is the new one' universe, watching the sports triptych of *Sunday Scenario* requires no more of us than watching a three person conversation at a dining room table. The sense is one of connection, of sameness, of a shared universe. Though in separate frames, the effect is not of separation, but unity. We are meant to see these men as equal. It is a simple form of organization and succeeds by the utter humility, charm, and haplessness of these men in their love of the games.

By the time they are reminiscing over the restaurants that flanked the Madison Square Garden of their boyhood, we both see and hear how the past is not past for these men but, in the world of sports worship, an ever-present present. We hop through time in the stills – collectable baseball cards, archival black-and-white photographs, glossy color shots of the sports players in question, all available on the web at any given moment – while their *Sunday* conversation plays out in real time. And, in cutting these stills to the precise rhythm of their actual speech (Gary Hill's work comes to mind – and sure enough, there he was in the guest book) Pilson emphasizes and mimics the propulsive staccato of the arguments, corrections, additions and assorted byways the conversation follows.

It is a double-layered nostalgia: these men for the teams they once loved: "You used to have a corps of ten, twelve guys you could root for," says the guy in the woods, whose dog occasionally wanders in and out of frame. "Now they're all just hired guns." But also, as I learned when the Man on the Bed appeared in the gallery to watch himself on screen, of John for his father's generation – it's his Dad in the office and his Dad's best friend of 35 years, a former Phillies player, whose sleep is still troubled by the Dodgers and who once played against Joe Torre, now manager of the Yankees.



In a second installation, *Wisdom and Charisma*, five youngish men walk into a room, arrange themselves around a table and appear in his own monitor in close-up. I would not have known what the hell these guys were talking about unless I'd read the program, nor that the center monitor belongs to the Dungeon Master, whose job it is to advise them through this ordeal. In various states of disgruntled confusion over the 12 hour game just played, the four quiz the Dungeon master for clues. His masterliness is emphasized by his having the center and largest monitor and a dark red curtain for a background, while the other four – two on each side – are framed in white (hence a variant of three).

This is another intense debate, with the same hyper attentiveness, the same nearly maddening attention to detail, on an equally – well, I hesitate to say useless – but certainly arcane topic: not baseball trivia, but an entirely made-up world of portals, demons, and hells one can be

trapped in for days. They talk, for nearly eight minutes, about the battle just played, is itself a bewildering discussion for those of us unversed in this particular world (I can do Harry Potter, Star Wars and Lord of the Rings, courtesy nephews and godsons, but not this one) which becomes almost Augustinian in its intricate theology: "Who has the best God?" "Well, there's a small percentage that God hears you and an even smaller percentage that he'll do something about it." As in the previous piece, the men are framed identically, with same head space, same lenses; because of the camera placement, bits and pieces of them veer into the other's frames, emphasizing whomever is dominating the discussion at that point.

Both these pieces have a simple, clean, almost journalistic accuracy about how men really do act and talk — a kind of filmed radio or live chat. All of these cameras are still; they do not move, nor do they cut, except an occasional seamless trim between all the screens at the same time, neatly illustrating, as do all the multi-frame pieces in the show, one of the principles of multivision work: the shot can be left running far longer than you would in single channel because the rhythm and changes — the edits, as it were — are generated by your own eyes glancing among the separately framed screens.

Wisdom and Charisma, in fact, feels so realistic that one of the more remarkable aspects of it can easily be overlooked: the unseen cameras allow us an equal view of all five people around a table simultaneously and open up the space inside the world of the story in a way that a single camera never can. Simultaneity of multiply placed cameras enlarges our sense of the interior space in the world inside these monitors. We have the options we have in real life, of turning our heads and seeing whomever we want to see. Holding the camera completely still is part of the way this works, for we experience our own visual world as still, even when we move in it. By presenting his images uncut and in real time, our eyes are allowed to explore it as if it were our own reality, our own intense visual universe. The combination of multi-monitor and multi-camera'd work, viewed simultaneously, presents us with a reproduction of the visually complex world our eyes actually inhabit. To my mind, a new realism.



Rondori, the third installation, is a wordless ballet: a group of young women twirl into dance-like rhythms on a divided widescreen of three cameras on the same Aikido sparring exercise. The piece is a photonegative to the men's pieces: female and not male, actual, not vicarious, physical where theirs is passive, Asian where theirs is Western, racially diverse as opposed to the all-white ensembles of men, intimate where theirs is mediated by mass entertainment, silent, punctuated only by their own falls to the floor, while the men's rapid-fire conversation frequently overlaps, speeds up and seems scarcely to pause for breath. There are no winners, nor do the women care, as they take turns upending one another to the floor. While the thuds of falling bodies create a percussive soundtrack, the girls themselves never make a sound; they don't even breathe heavily. They begin to glow, and smile at each other, proud of their skill, and get up for another joust. Because their arms reach out, they appear for a

fraction of a second to literally be waltzing.

With their simultaneous cameras on the same action, Wisdom and Rondori share something I call the Rockettes' Principle: Whenever identical motion is repeated, as in the Radio City Rockettee's row of legs kicking in unison, its innate rhythm is emphasized. Repeated motion is visual rhythm. In the Wisdom discussion, the short bursts of points the dungeon master is making are punctuated visually by his hand with a red pen suddenly piercing each of the other frames.

The logic of this kind of coverage for sports is obvious. I personally have been waiting for sportscasting to do this for a long time: to show more than one angle on a play of a game at the same time, instead of merely consecutively, as in the replays — not that I don't love reruns, I wrote my thesis at Columbia on the history of televising football and the invention of the instant replay, which is how I first saw the inside of a monitor-lined football television truck. Anyone who has been in a sports truck and seen the phenomenal beauty of ten cameras on the same play will never forget it. Television audiences are ready for what the director and producer see every Sunday. It's an incredible sight, a visual joy. And this joy is what John develops here: the young women's joy at their strength, at being black belts, at their own competence.

But a visual mystery pervades this triptych and unsettles us: The breaks between the three cameras fracture the space and the players' movements; we cannot quite predict where they are, when they will show up again, nor when they will land when they are thrown. On closer examination, it's simple camera placement which has done this: two cameras frame up the girls slightly to the right, so their content overlaps, while on the left-most frame, the camera is a bit closer and further from the other two. This creates a brief gap, into which the girls mysteriously disappear, to emerge on the leftmost frame slightly closer up.

This is a way that our eyes don't see — it is prismatic, refractory, a video cubism. Rather like the mismatched rooms that we see in any surveillance screen anywhere. Ironically, in both surveillance systems and here in the three-screened world of Rondori, the multiple cameras which are meant to convey completeness, in effect, give less of a sense of completeness than a single screen, because they emphasize what they cannot contain.

Probably the single greatest power of the single screen is this illusion of completeness, that you are seeing everything in that moment that you need to see in one frame. The divided screens and monitors of Sunday Scenario and Wisdom and Charisma maintain this necessary fiction — their evenness fulfills the same illusion. But this breackage of Rondori, this action which falls between the frames, reveals the arbitrary nature of what a lens covers. You are seeing, in effect, what you are missing.

It required three screens for John Pilson to make this elegant, intensely gazeable, point — no more and no less. It's an adept, meaningful use of three. Three, as it happens, is an essential organizing principle of multiple images, by now so common and so easily grasped that web design, films, news shows, ads, instant replays, or, as here, video installations — increasingly show three rather than one image at once. (Hence my title: three is the new one). Even the ubiquitous letterbox is a form of three. And it's a principle of editing in multivisual work itself.

Walter Murch discovered when he analyzed multiple layering of sound in his essay Dense Clarity "... three is the borderline where you cross over from 'individual things' to 'group.' It turns out Bach also had some things to say about this phenomenon in music, relative to the maximum number of melodic lines a listener can appreciate simultaneously, which he believed was three. And I think it is the reason that Barnum's circuses have three rings, not five, or two. Even in religion you can detect its influence when you compare Zoroastrian Duality to the mysterious multiple singularity' of the Christian Trinity. And the counting systems of many primitive tribes (and some animals) end at three, beyond which more is simply 'many.'"

There is much more to be said on this topic in terms of multichannel editing, but, in the meantime. I hope you can make it over to this show, which closes tomorrow, Saturday, April 1.