

**Zuzanna Janin, *FIGHT (ILoveYouToo)*, 2001, video installation**  
*Fight*, video 15 min (loop) + *Ring*, 5,5 x 5,5 m

## The Sporting Life

The world subjects every action to the alternative of success or failure, victory or defeat. I invoke another logic: I am, simultaneously and contradictorily, happy and unhappy: for me "succeeding" or "failing" have merely incidental, transitory meanings (which does not attenuate the acuteness of my pain and longings); what animates me, hollowly and persistently is not the tactic of I accept and affirm beyond truth and falsehood, beyond victory and defeat...

(They say it's not possible to live with such a love. But how can you *judge* what you can live with? Why is what you can live with Good? Why is it better to *last* than to *burn*?)

Roland Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*

## Boxing

Boxing involves direct physical confrontation – no complications, no excuses, no words. Mano a mano, here and now – boxing is combat in the abstract, stripped down to its bare essentials. This sublime distillate of combat is neutral and graciously embraces every projection. In *The Champion* boxing was a metaphor of the ruthless drive to succeed where each knocked-down opponent brings the hero closer to his goal : a glance into the dark side of the American Dream. Its flip-side was *Rocky* – by slugging away at slabs of meat in a slaughterhouse freezer its hero showed how determination, blood sweat and tears, and self-confidence can move mountains. As heavyweight Jake LaMotta in *Raging Bull*, Robert de Niro exposed the weakness latent within strength – if life is a struggle it always ends in defeat, because time is mercilessly working against the fighters. When the American Dadaist Arthur Cravan challenged the professional boxing champion of the time to an uneven contest, he was actually throwing down the gauntlet before the bloodless art of salons. Joseph Beuys also stepped into the ring, at documenta V in Kassel, donning gloves on behalf of direct democracy – using his fists to prove that socially committed art was not an aesthetic concept but a real-life struggle taken up by artists wanting to change the world.

## The Ring

In boxing, the corners out of which the boxers get up and fight are always different colours: the colours of two rivals, skirmishers of opposing armies. Zuzanna's ring is completely white. The fighter's territories are undefined. There is no war-paint adorning the corners, for Zuzanna's ring is not a theatre of military operations. War means tactics and games. But no tactical objectives are accomplished in Zuzanna's ring, nor can there be any game here since the precondition of all games – the victory of one of the participants – is out of the question.

## Contenders

In Zuzanna's work, a woman and a man, the artist and professional boxer, are pitted against each other in identical white costumes and red training gloves. Their identical uniforms seem to suggest that both are on the same team.

Zuzanna, a featherweight it would appear, is cast against a professional heavyweight boxer. The actual disproportion of strength does not matter: we are operating in arbitrary media space. A boxing champion is a TV celebrity, a semi-fictional character for most of us. Zuzanna likewise assumes the stance of a media heroine. Xena the Warrior Princess, Buffy the Vampire Slayer, Lara Croft – pistol-packing daredevil, Trinity – Matrix martial-arts mistress, cybercop Motoko and other Grrrls have gotten us used to the idea that women in pop culture know how to stand up for themselves. Size and weight are irrelevant – everyone's a fighter here.

## Fans

Chaotic physical violence leads to anarchy, and brawling is not well regarded in an ordered society. Naturally, combat is not to be avoided, we engage in it all the time, though we use ever more sophisticated techniques which conceal the brutal nature of the confrontation. Unfettered violence is left to the gladiators: boxers fight on our behalf, we fight through the agency of their hands. Like all sports, boxing is ritual in nature. It is a festival of combat in which we, the fans, symbolically identify with the athletes. Though physically outside the ring, we are within it in our imagination.

Zuzanna inverts the situation. In her work we, the fans, step into the ring which changes from stage into stalls. The ring is empty – surrounded by video images of the fight. Fighting takes place outside the ring – we are in its centre.

## The fight

Zuzanna's fight goes beyond the ritual nature of boxing. A boxing match is a purifying paroxysm in which we vicariously experience the dialectics of strength and weakness, victory and defeat. The clash spans from the initial tension to the last spurt of energy. Zuzanna's fight is different: a continuum with no beginning and no end. When we enter the white ring that is the space of the work, the battle is already in progress and will keep going after we've left. We see it registered on an array of video screens on which simultaneous looped sequences are projected – we see different stages and moments of the fight. The man and the woman circle each other exchanging blows, sometimes resting only to resume boxing with renewed force, never really stopping.

Zuzanna shows that struggle is a condition, a timeless state, a duel with no gongs, no rounds, and no outcome. There will be no victor nor vanquished here. The man and woman in Zuzanna's film do not fight one another, they fight together. It's about the process and the relationship itself. (...) Peaceful relations can only be maintained with a phantom: relationships with real-life people are a dynamic unity of opposites, made real by the pain. Struggle is the only way to define yourself against the Other. Every intellectual or emotional project we undertake is a series of battles large and small.

Stach Szablowski