

# A-Z

Jo Longhurst's visual taxonomy explores the subject of Perfection - in photography, and in gymnastics. The work, loosely based on elements of a gymnastics routine named after the gymnasts who invented them, draws our attention to specific individuals, histories, nationalities and photographic media, emphasising the visual language on which the discipline is built.

Gymnastics has a long social and political history, and one often entwined with an idea of aesthetic perfection. Longhurst's installation of photographs of the human body in action, captured in various poses and mounted along the curved wall of the museum, creates a fractured system of tucks, pikes, straddles, layouts and twists, which, as the title implies, make up the basic components of a gymnastics routine. Gymnasts of all eras and nations are presented, arranged between the first photograph of the installation – an expressive shot of the glamorous Russian Svetlana Khorkina, acknowledged diva of the discipline throughout the late 1990s and early 21st century, and now an elected member of the Russian State Duma - and the final photograph, an image of the Aryan Alfred Schwarzmann, Hitler's gold-medal winning German, holding a classic pose on the floor. While each image evokes its own particular response, this last image brings to mind Leni Riefenstahl's seductive Nazi propaganda film *Olympia*, shot at the 1936 Berlin Olympics; an infamous film in the history of Aesthetics, in which sport, politics and art are inseparable.

Longhurst's interest in social systems, power and control is readily apparent in her *A-Z*, as are other formative influences, such as her exposure to Soviet propaganda and Constructivist aesthetics. We also see echoes of artistic strategies employed in her previous body of work with the British Whippet, *The Refusal*. Much like *Twelve dogs, twelve bitches*, the first, establishing piece of this project, which features canine champions photographed in classic show pose, *A-Z* is intended as a touchstone for future works. Inherent in the artist's work is a questioning of Ideals. The name and formal installation of this work hints at an order or system, but one that fails to fully materialise in the artwork. The presentation of immaculate photographs of famous gymnasts performing key moves is undermined by a fractured repetition of similar photographs, which place the gymnasts (and photographers) within a particular cultural and political context.

Working with hundreds of editorial sports photographs sourced from various archives,<sup>1</sup> the artist draws our attention to the changing photographic technologies employed in sports reportage, and the importance of the mediation of lens-based media in the creation of the gymnastic spectacle. Longhurst clusters groups of images of such iconic moves as the Azarian Cross, after the Soviet Albert Azarian's signature move on the rings, first performed in the 1950s; the Korbut Flip pioneered in the 1970s by the legendary Soviet, Olga Korbut; and the Tsukahara, after the Japanese gymnast, Mitsuo Tsukahara who performed this vault in the 1960s and 70s and which is still widely used today. These and other iconic moves, devised by individuals in their quest to push the boundaries of the sport, are now integral to the discipline and have given their inventors a lasting place in the history of the sport. A most noticeable aspect of the installation is the dominance of Eastern Block champions and Japanese male gymnasts in images from the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and a more multinational spread of elite competitors in contemporary photographs - gymnasts from China and the USA feature particularly strongly, reflecting both the exodus of stars and coaches from the former Soviet Union and its satellite states to the West, and the changing order of world power.

A-Z  
215 appropriated photographs on mdf  
each 73mm x various heights  
Installation 10.25m x 95cm x 18mm  
Jo Longhurst, 2008

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<sup>1</sup> Including the Allsport Hulton Archive; British Gymnastics Archive; Giradet Archiv, Museum Folkwang; and images from professional photographers including Sing Lo and Volker Minkus, official photographer to the