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THE Measure

ART Soccer Goal Celebrations as Socialist Performance Art

Posted by Benjamin Sutton on Thu, Jul 8, 2010 at 4:04 PM

Last night, during a talk titled **The Art of Celebration** lead by philosopher and life-long football fan Simon Critchley and *Cabinet* editor-in-chief Sina Najafi (pictured, blurrily) at **apexart**, the two discussed the evolution of goal celebrations in soccer from the gentlemanly handshake + back pat to more complex, choreographed routines **like this**. Critchley, who curated the gallery's current **World Cup**-themed **exhibition**, suggested that this shift may be a symptom of the sport's transition from socialist origins amidst the labor movements of northern England to the global capitalist enterprise it's become today, the symbolic victory of showmanship over sportsmanship.

Najafi outlined a parallel trend away from communal celebrations—in which the scorer of the goal and his teammates celebrate their collective success—to more individualistic celebrations epitomized by Thierry Henry's frequent insistence that his teammates keep at a distance during his goal celebrations, as seen at the 32-second mark in this goal compilation:

Najafi pointed out that players often address issues beyond the game at hand in their celebrations, like a Spanish player's recent bullfighting pantomime after a goal, which alarmed fans of FC Barcelona, the team with which he's just signed, because the city is currently locked in a heated **debate** with Madrid over the place of bull fights in Spanish culture. Or, Eric Cantona glaring triumphantly at the perceived crowd of critics who'd accused him of being an ineffectual striker after this goal:

Or, Carlos Tevez getting in trouble for doing the funky chicken dance after scoring a goal against a team whose emblem is a chicken, earning a red card and hilarious homage from the referee:

By way of emphasizing the total capitalist co-opting of the socialist goal celebration, Najafi began with an exploration of FIFA's dedicated **video channel** of goal celebrations, and the Coca-Cola partnership program **The Longest Celebration**, in which fans upload their ridiculously long goal celebrations to YouTube. He was quick to point out, though, that commercial goal celebrations are hardly a new phenomenon:

If anything (aside from **this video**), the talk was missing the larger framing device of why goal celebrations are worth looking at in the first place. Certainly enough people enjoy, perform and choreograph goal celebrations, but do they represent that moment when, as Critchley put it, paraphrasing Sartre, the serialized group is galvanized into a fused group by joyous and spontaneous celebration of the collective's success? Couldn't we also say that they interrupt the capitalist flow of football, pulling us into close-up angles and unexpected rituals that obscure the conspicuous advertising and mediation of contemporary football? And what is their relationship to celebrations in American sports, from the touchdown celebration to the home run rounding of the bases and the slam dunk, which performs a goal and a celebration in the same act? One thing's certain, though: goal celebrations are dangerous. Najafi quoted a medical journal article that found some six percent of injuries in professional football occurred during goal celebrations.