One is the loneliest number.
By Glen Helfand

When considering tennis as a sport that has psychological and philosophical implications, it's difficult not to address the fact that love is the baseline of the scoring system. It's wordplay that's too full of metaphor to pass up. Is it a romantic game— or a sexual one? On the surface it seems to be self-consciously mannered. Tennis has French roots, and so do the rules. According to one theory, the score zero looks like an egg, *l'oeuf*, which in sloppy English morphed into 'love.' The Gallic perspective is more sober: They cry *zéro*! (As a Jew, I love the fact that, in the 1970s, tennis pro Eddie Dibbs, aka Fast Eddie, dubbed a zero game in a set a "bagel"—for the hole in the middle.)

On the court, love mean's you've got nothing, and that emptiness does something to the soul and your ambition. Winning is everything. Or is it the game of getting there? You have to clear your head and harness your body. You've gotta grunt with exertion to really triumph.

And if you do, well, then you'll howl: Yesssss!

The idea of love, and sex, makes a good framing device for this exhibition. The artists in *Quiet Please: The Mental Game of Art and Tennis*, Libby Black, Jennie Ottinger, George Pfau and Andrew Witrak, create works point to attributes that could be applied to courtship and consummation: that would be presentation, elitism, communication and catharsis, with a bit of Zen thrown in for meditative good measure. To play tennis, they suggest, is a lot like making a successful work of art, or falling in love. A score. You've really got to be in it, to win it.

Obviously the artists here have some love for the game. They appreciate it metaphorically, for the back and forth and the strategic components. They all played as kids, and some still do. Did that fuel their art practice? Perhaps the works they present here, publicly, reveal the answer. With four artists, they could play doubles, but each of

them actually made their work alone in their studios. Presenting it can be seen as a gesture of seduction. They draw parallels between the volley on the court and that bounce between art and audience. All of these exchanges require a distinct, ardent kind of focus.

Another common trope of the game is the glance, the steely gaze of the player, the heads of the audience nodding right and left following the ball over the net, and sometimes out of bounds. The simple directness of it looks great, even formally elegant, on TV. There's an amazing scene in Alfred Hitchcock's 1951 film *Strangers On a Train*, in which spectators' heads turn left and right in robotic unison, it's the one audience member with an unwavering gaze who seriously undermines a handsome male player's resolve.

In those days, tennis had a reputation for being fancy-- those crisp white skirts, clubhouses with cherry-ornamented highballs and high membership fees. City-subsidized facilities, however, don't maintain the same kind of glamour. The Gucci racket case and accessories made by Libby Black are luxury brands, but they're made of paper and hot glue. Her objects cross class—they're not pricy, highly engineered materials but they do have tony designer labels and the aura of the art object. Back in the day, rackets were strung with catgut. As I kid, I imagined the material actually came from cats and imparted the spirit of our beloved pet Siamese. How that kitty would have howled and hissed—and perhaps lived on in games played. Wikipedia, however, names sheep and goat intestines as the more common animal innard, as if that makes it any more palatable. These days we might categorize this organic version as artisanal, like something made from scratch.

Black's gear is for show. They are items of good taste and elevated economic status if not athletic prowess. Her interest in tennis is rooted in famous games she saw on TV, and how they helped form her identity. In her youth, she watched with her family and was entranced by Martina Navratilova, who for decades was considered the greatest female tennis player—and a queer role model. Martina followed Billie Jean King, whose 1973 match against Bobby Riggs was a constructed "Battle of the Sexes" that *she* won. King is such an ironic name for a woman in the power position.

King and Riggs were famous for their public banter, though I would imagine that Riggs must have had some major therapy after the whole thing. There was powerful tension between them, like sparring characters in a classic rom com—despite their antipathy, they fall in love. (Though in this case, they were mismatched media constructs, and their banter was scripted, clearly just for show.)

The most effective lovers manage to communicate well with each other, and the best players manage to effectively, strategically keep their intentions from their opponent. They play them. There are many ways players apply a whole range of mental strategies, physical exertions, cathartic joys of victory and agonies of defeat. If visually, the court has a formal elegance, it's a stage seething with physical and mental tension. Televised audio upgrades now broadcast grunts that could easily be dubbed into porn scenes.

Jennie Ottinger notes that the game is one of the few that strands a single player in the game without a team or coach. Thereby, the internal monologues can get kind of loud out there— emotions bubble and sometimes pop out in awkward ways. Ottinger's stop motion animation*, I Know You Can Do It Jana*, is rooted in famous matches where the tension is palpable, but the internal feelings are expressed differently. She paints an inventory of body parts, of gestures, that visualize the players in two notable games. Jana Novotna was cool and stoic pitted against Steffi Graf in 1993 Wimbeldon, whereas in the 1984 French Open, John McEnroe got, um, a little aggressive and verbal when pitted against Ivan Lendl. These are gendered styles of communication, of attraction, and Ottinger allows us to ponder them repeatedly.

Andrew Witrak also works with McEnroe's tantrums, outbursts witnessed by a judgy ref who sits in a pristine white chair. The artist made a gleaming monument of this furniture out of papier mache. It resembles a lifeguard's chair with kinky accoutrements—stirrups and tickly feather dusters. The title of the piece is "You cannot be serious," and it comes from what McEnroe famously yelled at the ref, twice, letting loose with increasing force, from a mutter to an unhinged scream. It's worth noting that McEnroe opened a Soho

gallery a decade after that notorious outburst, and had a messy divorce from Tatum O'Neal.

Witrak also created an ornate tennis trophy, in the same low rent material, albeit gilded in gold paint, which is inscribed on one side with the phrase, "Painting the Lines." It's a term of the trade that has obvious art parallels. In tennis parlance, the phrase refers to when players are so skilled that they can hit the ball so it travels almost directly above the crisp geometry of the court. He describes these as "tough, deep shots that win points." It sounds like a satisfying sexy groove we'd all like to get into.

Most of us need a bit of advice to get to that point of success, of catharsis and release, hence the popularity of self-improvement tests and tomes. Inspired by the inherent, unexpressed anxieties of tennis, George Pfau created an incisively tongue in cheek "Tennis Survey" that tallies all the reasons one might engage in this strange game, and which strokes are most effective in successfully beating your sparring partner. (Interestingly enough, tennis players were miffed, and maybe even offended when they encountered the surveys that the artist placed at various tennis clubs and public courts.) The most famous pop psych books that emerged in the world of fluorescent yellow balls are the regularly updated *The Inner Game of Tennis* by Timothy Gallwey, first published in 1972, and *Winning Ugly* by Brad Gilbert from 1993. Pfau, who encountered these books in seventh grade, mashes up the text and illustrates with drawings that dirty the tennis whites. He depicts the anxieties that plague players in sometimes grisly visceral terms—line drawings of flayed skin, exploding heads, overflowing toilets, and gooey anthropomorphic rackets. The advice both Gallwey and Gilbert give is to stop getting caught up in your head, to quiet the mind and feel the ball hit the racket with effortless impact. The Gallwey quote accompanying one drawing is instructive as it details a (male) player's shifting focus: "The 'hot streak' usually continues until he starts thinking about it and tries to maintain it; as soon as he attempts to exercise control, he loses it."

That's definitely a tennis thing, an art thing—and a love thing.