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In the wee dark hours of a brisk October morning, Tibi Tibi Neuspiel could feel his arm throbbing in the chill. Across the net, Geoff Pugen fought a stabbing pain in his rotator cuff and a creeping numbness spreading through his shoulder.

But the show, as they say, must go on, and at last year's Nuit Blanche, this was the spectacle of spectacles: Neuspiel and Pugen's *The Tie Break*, an exacting, shot-by-shot recreation of a tie-breaker in the 1980 Wimbledon final between Bjorn Borg and John McEnroe. "We were both in a lot of pain," Pugen recalls. "But the cliché is true: Once the adrenalin takes over, you can't feel the cold, and nothing hurts anymore."

For the tennis world, it ranks as a near-spiritual event — two titans at the top of their games, exchanging blows for an excruciating 22 minutes. For an art event that gauges success as much on crowd volume as creative merit, it was, to extend the sporting metaphor, a grand slam: For most of the 12 hours they played — Neuspiel still has tendonitis, he says — crowds thronged the temporary tennis court installed on the granite outside Commerce Court at King and Bay Streets, usually four and five deep.

If the particulars of the project were lost on some — at one point, a chant of "Sampras sucks!" rose up from the bleachers — its most important aspect, of being a kind of can't-miss spectacle that becomes the emblem of the event for that year, was bang-on.

Like so many Nuit Blanche projects — the best ones, anyway — the rush of encountering something so riveting and unexpected is always tempered by the deflating truth of its necessary ephemerality: Once it's gone, it's gone.

That's partly why, this week, Neuspiel and Pugen have brought *The Tie Break* inside. At the Neubacher Shor Gallery, they're showing pieces spun out of the original performance. The works range from photography to sculpture to painting, and of course, a video of *The Tie Break* itself.

For Pugen and Neuspiel — McEnroe and Borg, respectively, from headband-strangled afro to flowing, Adonis-like locks — creating a tangible echo of that fleeting moment only makes sense. *The Tie Break* was an all-or-nothing venture, right down to the tight white Tachinis: They trained for a full year, mapping out shot sequences, footwork and most significantly, who won each point.

The show is a gratifying revisitation of a deeply committed act (for Neuspiel, maybe, a little more than Pugen; Pugen played NCAA Division One tennis at the University of South Carolina and almost turned pro; Neuspiel, a practiced amateur, had to work to raise his game. "I was shoveling snow off the courts at Trinity Bellwoods in February," he said. "Once I started training, I knew it was going to take a long time to get it right.")

Extending *The Tie Break* past the typical documentation that accompanies performance art projects — which is what this was; re-creation



Geoffrey Pugen and Tibi Tibi Neuspiel face off at the Neubacher Shor Gallery, where they bring the Tie Break, their popular Nuit Blanche performance, inside. In the background is Neuspiel as Bjorn Borg and Pugen as McEnroe.

STEVE RUSSELL/TORONTO STAR

has a long history in performance art, as a kind of process-based filter for collective memory and its general fallibility — fits nicely into the idea of re-creation itself.

Iconic events in recent history, sporting among them, are television experiences, not real ones, for the vast majority of those of us who see them. Through photography and video, our experience of recent history is heavily mediated by camera angles and image selections — what's kept in, and what's left out.

Collective memory can't match even edited reality, and for the relative few who saw it first hand, memories fade in ways that videotape never does, making the array of products and documents surrounding these kinds of events — commemorative DVDs, books, photos — weirdly definitive, despite their exclusions.

At Neubacher Shor, a box of Wheaties, properly antiqued to ape the '80s convention of pro athlete endorsements, bears multiple images of Pugen and Neuspiel in full McEnroe/Borg costume. In another piece, a photo of the pair bends and distorts in a small wooden box meant to evoke the oblique curve of an old cathode TV tube.

The theme is nowhere more apparent than in a video of the match — available for purchase as a commemorative DVD, no less — that plays on a monitor in the gallery. It's shot in a shaky, hand-held style, making it the opposite of definitive — a jerky, chopped-together edit that mimics memory in its piecemeal recollections, like a partially-remembered dream.

For Pugen, whose work has always been focused on photography, video and digital manipulations, this makes perfect sense (neither artist has much history with performance; Pugen first studied theatre and wanted to act, "but I ended up on the technical side of things instead," he said. "They told me 'you're no good at this,'" he laughed. You could have fooled me: Pugen's direct channeling of McEnroe in full brat form, with his explosive rants and simmering, disgusted glares, was spot-on).

Neuspiel, meanwhile, is less an image than a maker of things, a fact that made him well-cast as the emotionless, Zen-like Borg ("I bet he has a wood shop somewhere," he smiles). The show casts a balance between the two sensibilities, with images and video presented alongside works like a pair of strung stretchers — rectangular picture frames strung like racquets — and a serenely beautiful pair of paintings that, but for the context, might be seen as colourfield abstraction. Here, though, the precise white line bisecting a textured green and brown background, it can only be what its title says: *Centre Court at Dusk*.

But *The Tie Break* is really about memories — how we acquire them, how long they linger, and in what form. It's safe to say Neuspiel and Pugen now have less memories of the event than deeply-embedded programming. Which begs the obvious question: Will *The Tie Break* live to be played again?

"Maybe," Pugen says, a little cagey. "We did have a few sessions where we tried to project its future.

"With the right opportunity, who knows?"

The Tie Break continues at Neubacher Shor Gallery, 5 Brock St., to Feb. 4. www.neubachershor.com