

## Artistic Practices of Interpreting the Present Through the Field of Sports\*

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**Abstract:** This artistic research is conducted between art, sociology and anthropology, seeking new ways and forms of cooperation between these fields. The main subject of the study revolves around the role of sport and more specifically of football as a group sport, in the construction of individual and collective identities, and the positioning of the athlete as a political subject of society. Understanding sports as an important social practice in today's political and economic conditions, a thorough study is conducted based on the aesthetic expressions and the new ritual practices that are applied by sport group identities, as carriers of symbols of dominant culture. In addition, the ways in which this concern is resolved through artistic practices and aesthetic expressions are explored.

**Key words:** sports, public art, society, art research

### 1. Introduction

Since the establishment of the first football clubs, the phenomenon of sports fan identity and the organization of fans in clubs or unions through the common characteristics of their team can be observed. Another notable phenomenon is that of fan rivalry arising among clubs. Both play a key role in strengthening a “traditional locality” in modern society (Crawford, 2004). The inclusion of an individual in a group through the traits acquired by the identity of the sports fan, is more often observed in large cities, where the development of sports associations is often related to the actual growth of the urban space as well as to the political phenomena of each era (Bale, 1993; Bromberger, 2007). For example, the German Turnverein movement (especially until the 1890s) constantly incorporated new narratives, always understood however as part of the German tradition. An interesting example of the use of sport as a social, cultural and political lever for accepting change was the process of changing the color of the athletes’ official uniforms (from black, red and gold to black, white and red) marking the transition of German nationalism from liberalism in imperialism (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 2004).

In modern Greek society it is increasingly common for football teams and their fans respectively, to maintain specific political stances. Thus, with a claim of a non-ownership status of sports teams or the collective disapproval of the terraces towards the general status of football as a starting point, “fandom” is brought to the fore. In the light of locality and the communal fighting spirit, one can observe a large, diverse spectrum of politicized collectives. In these cases, there is strong aesthetic expression and creation of new ritualistic practices (for example, in 2014 under the pressure of local administration, the organizational efforts of the OFI team and the fan organization, a multitude

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of new graffiti, “mantinades”<sup>1</sup> and songs emerged) (Zaimakis & Fournas, 2016).

Also, in recent years, there has been a significant increase in the number of self-organized football teams (such as Diogenis Olympiako Chorio, Alana, Livas, Tiganitis, Adespotos) which maintain a strong anti-fascist profile, displaying fan behavior that had first appeared in other areas (like St Pauli, Against Modern Football) (Daniel & Kassimeris, 2013; Kennedy, 2013; Zaimakis, 2018). In addition, there is a creation of sports clubs with members placed outside societal norms. One of the main concerns of these groups is the social reintegration and destigmatization of their members (Atherton, Turner & Russell, 2001; Borgogni & Digennaro, 2015).

In recent years, several studies have been conducted on the relocation of the role of sport within global political and economic development, arguing that football now marks more than just a mere “hobby”. Through studies of sports as a global occurrence, the phenomena of dissemination, hegemony, assimilation, cultural structure of different localities, national identity, disciplinary and organizational practices can also be approached. The above in particular, are often considered as and perhaps constitute essential factors of local and global economies in the post-industrial period. Not unjustly then, sports can be characterized as a social and cultural phenomenon intertwined with modernity (Zaimakis & Petre, 2014), shaping the contemporary way of political and social thinking.

Visual artists, stimulated by this rich field of sports, commenting on social structures and the political dimension of sports, have created a variety of works, among which characteristic, perhaps, examples are Asger Jorn’s *Three Sided football*, Harun Farocki’s *Deep Play*, Douglas Gordon and Philippe Parreno’s *A 21st Century Portrait* and other. Asger Jorn, in 1962, created a “new football” based on the concept of trialectics as a refinement of the Marxist theory of dialectics. This form of playing focuses on the participation of athletes from all teams for the game to take place and is presented as a metaphor for deciphering human relationships. In particular, the game within the theory of trialectics (three sides, three teams, three goals) is used as a tool to overcome the competitive spirit of traditional football and promote a sense of togetherness and cooperation between participants (Backhouse, 2011).

Farochi participated in “documenta12” with a work studying social energies. In this contemporary art exhibition, he presented the work *Deep Play*, providing the viewer with an unusual perspective of football. He used the sport as an allegory for the social life of a group of people, in which individual actions are possible through the actions of other communities. In his video projections individual players from both teams are presented, along with computer charts that show the game flow, creating in this way a network of relationships between players' actions (as spontaneous individual decisions) and the tactics practices and habits, as established within the game culture (Pisters, Strauven & Kooijman, 2008).

Another example comes from Gordon and Parreno, who created the *Portrait of the 21st Century*. This portrait is none other than that of the French footballer Zinédine Zidane. In 2005 the creators placed, during a football match, seventeen cameras around the stadium, recording exclusively the movements of the famous football player. Through this selective multiplied recording, the artists wanted to define the meaning of the contemporary portrait, closely examining its psychological complexity, as reflected in wider mass dissemination and identification with the celebrity-hero (Fried & Griffin, 2006).

In conclusion, in the present study, a combination of artistic identity enriched with theoretical — interpretive anthropological background is attempted. The dual role of the researcher — visual artist, is one of the peculiarities

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<sup>1</sup> Mantinades are musical declamations usually in form of a narrative, sung in the rhythm of accompanying music and are prominent in several parts of Greece, especially on the island of Crete.

of this research. Through this artistic research the aim is to explore the connection of personal experience with broader cultural, political, social concepts and perceptions but also the production of an artistic result, through the processes of action research and field research.

## 2. Aims and Objectives of the Research

In the past, the study of sport has been linked almost exclusively to the study of the national phenomenon and the consolidation of new imagined communities, whether state or ethnic related (Tomlinson & Young, 2006). Indeed, since the 19th century, sport has often been a key for consolidating and integrating new attitudes into society, through the form of tradition. Gymnastics and sports, although not clearly distinct until the 19th century, constituted a methodological tool of discipline and collectivity, intensifying liberal ideology and individualism, depending on social stratification (Koulouri, 1997). This century is considered ethnogenetic, a century of categorization (birth of the concept of the modern museum) and classification of species. Therefore, both football and fandom as identity-related features, are characteristic of modernity. Thus, the political dimension of football as a phenomenon, the formation of clubs, but also hooliganism, are aspects that have preoccupied researchers in recent decades since the field is considered ideal for understanding modern societies (Frey & Eitzen, 1991; Newson, 2017; Perasović & Mustapić, 2017; Williams, 2017). Correspondingly, art plays a prominent role in the transformation of modern diasporic societies (heterogeneous societies, to the extent that in some cases they seem more like a “set” of diasporas). Artistic events seem to be clearly influenced by socio-political conditions, while public art is becoming more and more widespread (Sharp, Pollock & Paddison, 2005; Turner, 2017).

Art in the public space and its ability to create a public sphere are burning issues in the contemporary art debate (Stavrakakis & Stafylakis, 2008; Marchart 2012). In addition, on the occasion of sporting events, it is increasingly often for artworks to be performed outdoors either by fans or by artists and activists who organize events, commenting on what is happening in their cities. Appropriately, the issue of the participation and intervention of anthropologists and sports sociologists in the research field (synchronicity of societies, sports and society) is established. This research attempts to approach it through the intersection of sociology, anthropology and contemporary art, offering new links and bridges of communication between these fields. Based on this data, anthropology of space and sports sociology are simultaneously enriching and being enriched by the study of the respective artistic production, opening a new path into understanding the phenomenon of modernity.

In this research, the aim is to first carry out a study of the self-organized sports teams (Adespotos Athens and Diogenes Olympic Village) based in Athens through field research and participatory observation, and then explore the aesthetic configuration of their political position and their public image. This documentation will lead to the study of the synchronicity of societies and to its artistic capture through the process of participatory action research. The reading of these new cultural forms, as they emerge through the phenomenon of football and sports, will be used as codes of understanding modern societies. Thus, through an interpretive, dense recording of these actions, the desired cultural forms will be documented, creating a new field of cooperation between art, social sciences and humanities. What will also be attempted is the creation of new ethnotopias as irregular cultural schemata, through visual discourse, something which will allow for not only an alternative reading of the present through the field of sports, but also a symbolic analysis of the synchronicity of diasporic societies.

The Indian social anthropologist Arjun Appadurai, in his work *Modernity At Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*, attempts to discuss the process of globalization from a local perspective. He examines its influence

on everyday life and argues that globalization simultaneously produces uniformity as well as differentiation. His theory aims at the analysis of the synchronicity of societies and speaks of global ethnoscaples, that is, global cultural people flows: immigrants, refugees, tourists, i.e., groups without fixed relations and secure conditions. He divides these flows into mediascapes (colonization of imagination through the Media), technoscapes (technology flow, know-how), financescapes (international financial markets) and ideoscapes (flows of institutions and ideas). This approach of modern reality also offers an alternative spatial reading of the present, where the concept of landscape does not signify stillness but fluidity and an amorphous composition of this variety of flows. These conditions, Appadurai tells us, challenge us to think of today “beyond the nation” as new communities or “landscapes” are established in the environment of once homogeneous “landscapes”, changing them. These “landscapes”, i.e., the new irregular cultural schemata, transform the tradition of each community and reshape national identities (Appadurai, 1996).

According to Henri Lefebvre, the continuous reduction of physical or geographical social relations results from the reduction of proximity, distance, or density, which often leads to an analytical weakening of space through its problematic: the capacity of social relations. This raises the question of whether a problem can be isolated solely in terms of the natural and geographical environment and not as a geographical naturalization of the social. Appadurai presents this problem through the reports of the western social sciences (references Auguste Comte, Karl Marx, Ferdinand Toennies, Max Weber, Emile Durkheim) according to which there is an increasingly strong feeling that the “modern”, quite often creates a rupture between past and present. This rupture refers to tradition and modernity, corresponding to seemingly traditional and modern societies. However, this rupture may not be generalized and may not involve complete separation from all forms of the past. Accordingly, Lefebvre concludes that social relations produced, are actually a social entity only if they exist, are created and registered in space (ethnoscapes and moral scapes) (Setten, 2004), which in its turn is also a social product of formation of specific behaviors (two-way relationship of social relations and space) (Goonewardena, Kipfer, Milgrom & Schmid, 2008). At the same time, ethnoscapes as national and international histories (or stories) are thus directly and intensely involved in the construction of the nation and its defense mechanisms, strengthening it through a single national identity (Appadurai, 1996).

### **3. Methodology and Research Sample**

The methods used to conduct this artistic research were those of data collection from the science of Sociology and also Anthropology. The objectives were approached by carrying out field research with participatory observation and participatory action research, methods which were used equally in art, sociology, and anthropology. Through ethnography, an attempt was made towards a dense interpretive documentation of social actions, where the cultural forms in question occupy space (Wright & Schneider, 2010).

The researcher followed the local collective culture as well as ritual practices developed and participated in them as an active member. More specifically, the aforementioned self-organized football teams operate through assemblies, in which all members contribute equally. Through this process of assemblies that have a horizontal organizational structure (equality among members), one can recognize and understand the performative function of the assembled bodies and their political dimension, regarding the very subjects that produce political results and appear in the political scene of public gathering (political collectives in the public space) (Butler & Athanassiou, 2016). In addition, this happens since within the groups studied, the roles may be distinct, the decisions however

are made through regular meetings and members speak circularly and equally. This creates space for a non-hierarchical or linear form of power, even though there are distinct roles. More specifically, there are subgroups within the group, consisting of 1 to 5 members, managing specific issues. For example there is a group in charge of materials, a graphic design group, and so on. Through the double role of the researcher-artist, the researcher managed to participate in the graphic design and artistic material subgroup, which enabled her to study her research questions ad hoc and in situ.

After field research employing participatory observation and participatory action research, the researcher tried to capture the basic needs that arise in these self-organized football teams. Needs with a political and social impact. In other words, an attempt was made through the aforementioned practices to understand and utilize the data that were collected, through the cooperation of the fields of art, anthropology and sociology, as well as between the researcher and the self-organized groups studied. Here, action research has as its object of study a problem that arises from a specific space and is solved collaboratively with those directly interested through artistic discourse, in the sense of “artistic practice” (Athanassiou, 2007).

Qualitative research has shown that the goal of both teams is none other than an opposition in modern football, but also in modern organized sports, since it is considered by the aforementioned teams that this particular sport is a reflection of modern societies. In addition, bringing together people with liberal political principles under a common framework still is a fundamental need for self-organized groups. According to this specific research, the members of the teams claim that modern football is deprived of freedom as a game since it carries the weight of modern economic and political interests.

More specifically, however, through the participatory field research conducted, it was found that the members of the Diogenes Olympic Village team are facing a characteristically political difficulty. This specific self-organized team consists of members, the majority of whom are residents of the Olympic Village. The Olympic Village was built for the 2004 Olympic Games held in Greece and consists of sports facilities as well as residencies, with the purpose of accommodating the athletes while giving them the opportunity to train in well-equipped sports facilities. Now, the so called Olympic properties of the Olympic Village belong to O.A.E.D.<sup>2</sup>, while the sports club Phoebus manages them so that residents of the municipality can train there. The association is operated and run by residents of the Village, while there is no commercial or financial exploitation on their part. One of the field participatory research findings, that came up during the regular assemblies of the self-organized team “Diogenis” of the Olympic Village, is that they are not allowed to train inside the sports facilities. The reason presented, after the researcher established contact with the sports club “Phoebus”, was that the members of the board of the association assumed that a self-organized group might vandalize the space, because they characteristically hold anti-fascist and anti-authoritarian political ideas. As a result, the members of Diogenes have been deprived of the right to train inside the sports facilities, a right that every citizen of the Olympic Village has. This is an arbitrary, illegal decision, as the entry or not of members of this self-organized football team depends exclusively on the board of directors of A.S.O.H. Phivos. Faced with this fact, the researcher decided to hold a match inside the facilities that would allow the team to attend and play even symbolically, through a work of art and more specifically a public action.

In addition, during the participatory observation in the aforementioned self-organized groups, the researcher approached artistic practices of interpretation of the questions mentioned earlier, which were later used in the implementation of the public artistic action. The following new set of rules was created in a participatory manner

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<sup>2</sup> O.A.E.D. is a government organization responsible for welfare and unemployment benefits etc.

(by both teams and the researcher):

New regulation: 1) Game duration 60 minutes, including changes. 2) The game starts with two distinct teams. 3) Player exchange-team mixing when a goal is scored, e.g., the player from team A who scores becomes a goalkeeper in team B, the goalkeeper from team B becomes a goalkeeper in team A and the goalkeeper from team A takes the place of the scorer. 4) Players changing team wear a badge. If, through the game process, they return to their original team, they take off the badge. 5) Player exchange - team mixing with the process of time. 6) Every 5 minutes, at least one change is made by each team. Changes are always made with players from the opponents' bench. 7) In addition to the time limit, changes can be made whenever the team members deem appropriate, but always from the opponents' bench. In this case, too, the player who changes team wears a badge. 8) Any non-aggressive action is allowed, e.g., the player's hand can touch the ball. 9) There is no referee. 10) The foul is judged by all the players, so is the penalty, as well as new formal game structures (change of location of goals). Here the space itself is offered as a unifying, merging field. Through this research and artistic process, and with artistic discourse as a main tool, there was an attempt to create new ethnoscapas as irregular cultural shapes (global cultural flows of people without set relations and security conditions) aiming at analyzing the synchronicity of diasporic societies.

#### 4. Results

The purpose of this action research was to solve the aforementioned problem (the — at least — symbolic entry of the self-organized team Diogenes in the indoor sports facilities) under specific conditions. Also, through this artistic practice — public action, new ethnoscapas were created as well as a new perspective of the game itself, offering the possibility of a spatial reading and decipherment of the relations developed within this new fluid landscape.

More specifically, from the artistic research, the work OFFENSE vs DEFENSE emerged, which is a visual work but also a public action and recording of a special 60-minute 5×5 football match, in which the participants were players of the self-organized football teams Diogenis (of the Olympic Village) and Adespotos Athens. Football, here, is defined as a sport that can be a source of certain social representations. Perceiving the sport itself as a miniature of society, its rules were altered in a participatory way. That is, not by the researcher — figure of authority but by a researcher — member of the team. So, all the members of the two teams, along with the researcher, co-formed a new system of rules, with the ultimate goal of this new system to affect the relationships that develop symbolically and socially. That is, beyond the field that is the terrain and its materials, i.e., the ball, the jerseys, the goals, etc. The interventions were symbolically made in a socio-political context associated with power relations, equality and society-building in that particular moment, like a miniature. Therefore, there is a secondary level, in which the research operates through the methodology applied, but also through football itself and the change of its rules as a symbolic social and spatial reading.

During the game, through the new system of rules created, players were allowed to move from one team to another several times, something which enhanced the creation of new fluid ethnoscapas, altered by the actions of the players. Also, through this new system of rules, a new setting of the football field was proposed (goals in the center of the field), which eliminates the simple, dual visual confrontation and at the same time emphasizes the promotion of flexible strategic alliances that focus on the feeling of freedom offered by the game itself instead of victory. This new perspective of the game offered both the participants and the spectators a new perspective of space

and the relationships that develop within it. More specifically, the actions developed within this new system of rules were characterized by a balance that allowed for new dynamics of grouping, and re-grouping of players through this new flexibility (Elias & Dunning, 1966).

## 5. Conclusions: Discussion

In conclusion, the historical and social observation of team sports and more specifically of football but also of self-organized teams that have emerged in recent years, both locally and globally, is a stimulus for research on and interpretation of modern diasporic societies. Regardless of who performs or views, team sports, being part of the national phenomenon, contribute to the assimilation and consolidation of new imagined communities, state, national or transnational. The present artistic research is an attempt to interpret the political and social present, at this particular point where the wide range of the artistic field intersects with that of sports. Consequently, the study and application of artistic research in public space, aided and allowed for merge and production of new forms of expression of heterogeneous populations, such as diasporic communities. Choosing this participatory process, both for the development and the result of the research, has to do with the fact that the researcher exercised a less authoritative aspect (as defined by participatory action research) in order for her personal beliefs and the theoretical background to be completely combined with the application of the research. Otherwise, a research paradox would be created, so in order for the research process to be relevant to the theoretical background, a conscious choice was made to co-formulate the rules in a democratic and equal way.

It is also important to mention that even regarding the results there was no authoritarian attitude maintained, since the experience of the players themselves constituted the most important part in choosing the place for applying the artistic public action. That is, the subjects of research co-shaped its outcome, selecting where and by which rules the new fluid field will be applied, through which new cultural patterns can emerge and be examined. Within this setting of the study of new ethnoscares formed by the modern differential communities, it is considered necessary to extensively inspect the context shaping these new flows. An extension of the research, since it met its purpose of making a symbolic social redistribution and interpretation, could perhaps be applied to different fields or to other team sports.

Consequently, future artistic research emerging within the field of sports will perhaps allow the formation of a clearer picture and safer conclusions on contemporary political and social circumstances.

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