

Predrag Terzić - LEISTUNG

The work of Serbian artist Predrag Terzić follows once again one of his greatest passions: basketball. In previous works he has taken the big names of both coaches and players of the Yugoslav basketball during its Golden Age and has portrayed them all under the series *National Class*. Later on in the series *Elan vital*, consisting of photographs of outdoor basketball courts with the artist's own intervention on them, he was more interested in the technique of coaching, decision making and the unrepeatability of a certain shot for victory, action, moment, a more abstract notion, yet a very representable concept through the use of geometrical forms to denote the motion happening on the court-field. In his new series *Leistung* presented here, we see a return to the figurative in art. The motion on the court of play now does not have to be imagined by the spectator, not even for a moment, it is such a strikingly imposing image that we almost feel the movement of the subject portrayed. The drawings are so charged with movement that it is immediately clear to us that the protagonists of this play not only are in motion, but it is a very striking and uneasy one, full of range and as if the bodies are almost trying to escape their own place, their own being to go forward to the position of the next step (Sartre). It is no surprise then the artist has chosen the German word *Leistung* for this series, having its first meaning in English language as "performance" or "power output".

_____ Although sport has been raised to the level of a culture-creating activity ... and it is the apotheosis of the play-element in our civilization, sport as a subject in art has not been much explored nor has it been the basis of many works. Although sport has had a mass dimension to it since antiquity, be it from the Greek Olympiads or from the Roman gladiators, it is only recently after Freud that the notion of sport has been introduced in science as a notion of play. In his psychoanalysis he reveals the phenomenon of the mass as a matrix for the research of processes by which the ego of modern individuals is captured¹ - Basketball is nowadays deeply penetrated in mass culture as a form of play further confirming that sport can be looked at as a paradigm of mass culture. In its study, sociology deals with structured, organised masses, formed by a specific reason which can very well be a professional basketball game between two opposing teams. Media have also encouraged the development of a mass culture and sport is massively enjoyed from home television screens. It is from this that Terzić takes his imagery, but contrary to how the print mass media would portray NBA players as ultimate stars shining in what can still be called the "American Dream", the artist is rendering them in their outmost fragility, innocence, truth... showing their "real" character versus the idealised one that appears in magazines glorifying the players with their accomplishment and celebrity status. In Terzić's *Leistung* the accomplishment lies in the battle. Other artists such as Jeff Koons and Jonas Wood have also portrayed NBA players but in a more "pop" approach, more appealing to the masses and what the fans want to see. Terzić's approach on the contrary is absolutely subjective, and at the same time intrinsic to the sport. Because the artist has knowledge of and understands the game, he is able to extract not the obvious from it, but what is more significant in both physical and mental strength of a player to achieve the desired outcome, i.e. victory. This achievement sometimes can get violent by using force as a means of obtaining it. Force is looked upon as a mean for obtaining and maintaining power, thus making it a static category; violence on the other hand is an action, an expression and implementation of power. In Terzić's work we can perceive force but not necessarily as a static form. It is static of course because the artist has made it static by capturing a single moment of the body's movement in a drawing, as if trapping it from its next move, but our cognitive mind can perceive that it is a figure in motion, almost torn by its own force, violent. The notion of violence in sport undertakes rational but at the same time irrational activities by which man, material resources and social values are damaged, it is manifested as a necessary use or menace that can be a means of obtaining a special or individual goal through a sport play or organisation. It is precisely after the discovery of these

1 Smiljanić, D. Ego without contours? (de-)forming of the being in sport mass perception, in *Philosophy and Psychoanalysis of Sport*, Agrafo 01, Journal for the philosophy of psychoanalysis, 2013.

irrational actions that the notion of sport managed to be considered as a notion of play in the domain of scientific research, as mentioned earlier, backed up by Freud's psychoanalysis, existentialist philosophy and phenomenology. Interestingly modern societies tolerate aggression more in sport than in any other sphere of human activity. Force and violence acting as a mean for obtaining victory in sport is absolutely legitimate as long as it is within the boundaries of the established rules of the sport. It is as if the imagery we have in front of us accounts for an absolutely normal situation, argued by the sole fact it takes place within a sport context. But what happens when these figures are out of their sport environment? Can they still be seen as justified and ordinary?

Terzić's distorted figures, standing between pain, agony and battle, are not immediately recognised as basketball players. They can be part of any monstrous world where adversaries are confronted with each other. Rather than using the term "enemy", the term "adversary" is more suitable as it denotes a "*stranger or foreigner who is in your group's way*"². This is very specific to war, as the agonistic factor can be traced to the primitive stages of civilisation and according to Huizinga nation states do not have enemies per se, that is to say people or nations that they hate, rather they are seen as obstacles, blocking their way in their process of achieving the desired goal. Terzić's imagery could very well be associated with Spanish painter Francisco de Goya's war scenes, in all their brutality and darkness. Terzić has transported the scenes from one world (that of basketball) and has incorporated them into a world of his own. The artist's work in all its anguish and charm is "*taking from one dark world for another unknown one, taking it from nothing to something that we do not know what it is*"³. Just as all play occurs within a play-ground marked off beforehand either materially or ideally, the exhibition space can be seen as a temporary world within the ordinary world, dedicated to the performance of an act apart⁴ making Terzić's exhibition a world on its own in which the artist himself plays portraying fulminant and sudden movements which could have not been seen by anyone, with their secret meaning to the eyes of future accretion, to the free interpretation of the spectator.

In his *Conversations with Goya* (2011), Ivo Andrić writes:

*"All human movements come out of a need for attack or defense. That is their elementary, in most cases forgotten, but true cause and only catalyst. The nature of art is such that it is not possible to paint a thousand of small movements which each for its own are not dark and evil. Every artist...is forced to represent a movement that is the sum of all those numerous movements, and that dense movement necessarily and inevitably carries with it the mark of its true origin, attack and defense, anger and fear. And the more inwrought and compressed moves there are in that movement, the more it is distinct and the more the image is convincing."*⁵

The argument here reveals the impossibility of other types of movement; they are all dark, fearsome and disturbing. By a non-aesthetic way of portraying the athletes, it is almost as if Terzić is depriving them from their "aura"⁶, to use the same term used by Walter Benjamin. In the same way that a reproduced image loses its "*cult value*" being replaced by its "*exhibiting value*"⁷, Terzić's works replace the celebrity awe-inspiring status of the NBA players into a different awe-inspiring image rendered possible by the dramaturgy, tragedy, darkness and fear inherent in the imagery he has chosen to portray. The same way a fan cheering for the players of his team can empathise with the spiritual state of the athlete, a viewer in the gallery can also empathise with the subjects before

2 Huizinga, J. *Homo Ludens*, p.209, 1938.

3 Andrić, I. *Conversations with Goya*, p.26, Službeni Glasnik, Belgrade, 2011.

4 Huizinga, J. *Homo Ludens*, 1938

5 Andrić, I. *Conversations with Goya*, p.3, Službeni Glasnik, Belgrade, 2011.

6 Benjamin, W. *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, London, Penguin, 2008.

7 Smiljanić, D. Ego without contours? (de-)forming of the being in sport mass perception (24), in *Philosophy and Psychoanalysis of Sport*, Agrafo 01, Journal for the philosophy of psychoanalysis, 2013

him. Sympathy is the kind of identification with the Other which presumes achieved harmonies with it. This is a question of morality; a moral subject is the one that can change the perspective of the viewer with the one of the participant and vice versa and in that way reconcile its own affect according to the appropriate situation.⁸ Terzić has shown his ability to empathise with the athletes and has therefore proven his own morality. His ability to do so may very well also be connected to his great admiration for the sport and his desire to recognise himself as one of the players on the court. Just as the person in the mass is found under the hypnotic influence of the athlete and sees him as an object of desire it is possible to deduce that the *alter ego* of the athlete, the one the fan is cheering for is the idealised figure of one's own *I*. In this case, the artist thus is not "elevating" its subjects in his portraits but is keeping them at a level in which the public can identify itself, with their vulnerable state; only after this identification has been done then we can proceed to their "glorification" as warriors. "*There is no identification without fascination and that is where suggestively sport lies as a mass phenomenon*"⁹. Being excited about every movement of the alter ego and uniting with him.

At this point then, we shall try to take play as the player himself takes it: in its primary significance. Play as a cultural factor in life. Pure play is one of the main bases of civilization and older than culture, animals play just like men, plainly an experience of tremendous fun and enjoyment. We find the principle of play, as described by Huizinga, in the characters of Terzić's work by their "*innate urge to exercise a certain faculty, or in the desire to dominate or compete*"¹⁰. The competition is always play, and it is from this point of view that we have to interpret its cultural function. Competitive attitude is promoted in our society today and as we have already discussed its early origin earlier through the example of war, we will now turn to what Roger Caillois calls *agon*¹¹ to describe the competitive element in his classification of games. He defines competition as a battle in which there is equality of the rivals in order for the play to be fair. Even in its fairness, play and sport carry a certain dose of tension characterized by Huizinga¹² as uncertainty, chance, an effort made to decide the issue and end it. The player wants to escape from something or be successful by his own efforts in its struggle achieving something difficult, success ultimately resulting in the release of tension. This tension is very clear in Terzić's work and it reassures that the bigger the extent to which a player takes on competition the more ardent the play is. But still in this intense ardor the player knows he is playing and this play character in Huizinga is attached to the sublimest forms of action, and even made abstract, having a close connection with mystery because of its detachment from the mundane, as if guarding its own space where to perform a ritual. Very similar to Terzić's allusion to a church-like atmosphere with its dimmed light and misty aura where the personages are almost taking a saint-like appearance. Almost, because as aforementioned, tension dominates the general ambiance. Terzić's players are completely devoted to their game, they have submerged themselves entirely in their own sacred spatial and temporal arena of play as if almost forgetting they are "just playing". The fun and joy elements of play cannot be detached from it, moreover they encourage this forgetfulness that one is playing and lead to tension, euphoria making frivolity and ecstasy twin poles between which play moves. But all this elements, forgetfulness and ecstasy, can lead to serious injury and pain. The thin line between "play" and "reality" cracks in an instant once a player is hurt. What was once an isolated playground becomes the pure expression of reality, the player must abandon the game and is therefore very abruptly thrown to reality. It is that very thin line that makes the sublime character in play, the fast and veracious switch from an isolated world to the real one. Play is what is not serious but between seriousness an play the boundary remains almost transparent in its own time.

8 *Ibid*

9 *Ibid*

10 Huizinga, J. *Homo Ludens*, 1938 (2)

11 Caillois, R. *Igre i Ljudi*, Belgrade, Nolit, 1979

12 Huizinga, J. *Homo Ludens*, 1938

Just as an exhibition, a game is time-bound, it has no contact with any reality outside itself, and its performance is its own end. Further, it is sustained by the consciousness of being a pleasurable, even mirthful, relaxation from the strains of ordinary life - and it is here we finally agree to remain pinned in Terzić's game, our only exit being the end of the exhibition, outside the walls where it resides and continues to exist by the rules the artist prescribed to it. Since Huizinga suggests that play is primary to and a necessary (though not sufficient) condition of the generation of culture and a certain playfulness is by no means lacking in the process of creating and producing a work of art (strong play element is essential, fundamental, the play-function is especially operative where mind and hand move most freely) let us then remain inside the boundaries of Terzić's own play.

Enjoy playing!

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