

Leistung – Inside and Outside the Fight Arena

Quite specifically, these considerations of Predrag Terzić's drawings presented in the exhibition *Leistung* at the Museum of Contemporary Art of Republic of Srpska in Banja Luka, which mean an opus of several hundred drawings titled *Of Lightness and Weight* contained in several sketchbooks, begin with the description and interpretation of one photograph. These drawings, made in charcoal and pencil on paper, some of which now stand on the walls of the museum exhibition space – showing scenes from basketball games, fighting for the ball on the court, player overpowering player, are evocative, in terms of content, of a well-known photograph taken nearly ninety years ago, which also represents athletes in play. The photograph taken by Theodore Lux Feininger in c. 1927, called *Jump over the Bauhaus*, captures a moment of intense contact, i.e. collision of two players in the heat of the confrontation. As the two players 'battle' for the ball, it is as if they are in a state of confrontation between sprightly individual freedom, spontaneous game and certain rules as inherent to a concrete sport game, which is football in this case. Terzić's drawings *Of Lightness and Weight* also focus on 'points of contact' created during action on the court, during the encounters of two or more participants *performing* and playing the game. Without analysing the differences characterising the purpose and signification of certain photographs and drawings, by deliberately confronting them, we find similarities in the presented, that is, a common motif leads to a deliberation of the anthropology and philosophy of sports games now and then and of the differences between the structures of different sports, and finally introduces the topic of whether sport is an art, and if so, what kind of art it is, or if it is rather a metaphor of modernity and of social reality at this point in time. In a statement prepared for a public discussion led on the topic of his work, the artist Predrag Terzić says: "Touch has a dominant, well-defined role in basketball, and without this aspect the game loses its significance. Touch has a special place and is the point of contact, not only between players on the same team but also between those on opposing teams, efforts at domination and the final touch allow them to secure their position and importance on the basketball court."¹

One important aspect of competitive play is its social function. Sociological theories recognise the importance of play by categorising it as a very important form of socialisation, with collaboration and competition possibly having a positive effect on individuals, their individual performance or achievement as well as communal contribution. In his book *Homo Ludens* the Dutch sociologist and historian Johan Huizinga defines play as 'friendly competition,' which is the source of such social virtues as loyalty, chivalry and healthy competition.² Huizinga's ideas can also be applied to sport, and the afore-discussed photograph *Jump over the Bauhaus* may imply a social activity frequently engaged in at the Bauhaus by students, amateurs, as well as sports fans who spent their spare time on campus playing football. The game of football is visually illustrated to represent spontaneous, instinctive or, as the sociologist Ratko Božović defines it, true play, rather than the ardent type of 'battle' on the playing field linked to professional sport and its imputed goals.

In modern society, professional sport is increasingly distancing itself from 'true' play. Greater systematisation and disciplining of the structure of the game leads to its losing a good deal of its spontaneity or innocent urge to play. Due to sports becoming fully commercial and market-oriented, their competitive aspect is now ruled by external factors, social status and monetary gain, with the game played on the court or field turned more into a disciplined ritual, a well-calculated strategy to fight the opponent, in order to ensure victory, by whatever means. Sport has long been a business with clear material rewards, and whatever spare time

¹ Stojadinović, Mirjana B. (2013). *Umetnik kao publika: razgovori među publikom. Predrag Terzić*, 49–65. Beograd: Frekvencija.

² Huizinga, Johan. (1970). *Homo Ludens*. Zagreb: Matica hrvatska.

professional players may have, they must use it to think about the upcoming matches and competitions and how to optimise their physical and mental condition, despite the fact this may have devastating effects on their health. It seems that professional athletes no longer have any spare time as such, leading to the game losing its spontaneity, as previously said, which can only result from leisure pursuits and friendly competition. Since money has become the goal of professional sports, preparing for a game and the game itself become lard 'labour', which makes sports 'game-free' and often puts it in the domain of aggression, with the most ruthless stratagems used on the playing field in order to achieve the desired target. The sociologist Đuro Šušnjić says: "Present-day sport is rather like a high-output manufacturing plant than a fine community of people holding a feast for the senses and the spirit. Athletes are increasingly less motivated to prove their courage, strength and skill, but rather aspire to power and glory."³ Thus, if sport was previously defined as the culture of the body and shown as the 'image' of an individual's healthy energy and the birth of the team spirit, as well as a school of health, present-day sport shows us 'the other side of the coin' – fitness, strength and speed surpass playful casualness, fun and ease of movement. But how did this happen and what can we expect from such great aspirations? The right answer was possibly offered by Henri Lefebvre, a French sociologist and philosopher, as far back as the 1930's, according to whom sport creates a false sense of 'alienation' in connection with the desired feeling of detachment or escape from daily life, and that by participating in sports and watching a game we actually look at an inverted image – 'compensation for daily life.'⁴ Battle on the playing field is often used as a metaphor of one battling against oneself, one's psyche, another person and natural obstacles. Individual and collective competitions represent symbolic images of the functioning of society as a whole, the individual's struggle within the system, for the system or against the system.

Leistung is a German word that, among other things, has sport connotations, meaning one's ability, capacity, and enormous physical strength. It is a word used to describe superhuman, superphysical moments, attempts to push oneself to one's physical limits, which may eventually lead to damaged limbs, only for the sake of battle worthy of the playing field. *Leistung* largely consists of wall-mounted drawings that are approximately life size, of scenes from present-day professional basketball matches rendered on paper, or, more precisely, scenes of players on the basketball court, situations captured during games, aspects of collapse, fighting for the ball, moments of contact. The scenes were stylistically remade to look more like sketches, like quickly abstracted drawings, chosen in a way for their composition, for the action within the game, to "highlight the actual moment of struggle, of pathos, of the final contact that turns a match already lost into a success story, one that makes it into the annals of history of basketball."⁵ Thus, to the artist, a match becomes a training ground for reflection and analysis of the position and movement of athletes' bodies engaging in performing action, that is, in *performing* a game on the court. The works bring into focus the drama on the court, the participants' struggle to establish and define the structure of the game. The goal of the match in this case is not a direct one, the good-fellowship is immeasurable, the outcome irrelevant. The players' identities are generally not indicated, the artist has even erased the surroundings, the spatial element, fully depriving us of scenery of the game. It is the human body that is primarily objectified, and the content opens with

³ Božović, Ratko R. (2007). "Agresija i nasilje u sportu". *Sociološka luča*, broj 2, godina I. Nikšić: Filozofski fakultet.

⁴ Lefebvre, Henri. (1988). *Kritika svakidašnjeg života*. Zagreb: Naprijed.

⁵ Stojadinović, Mirjana B. (2013). *Umetnik kao publika: razgovori među publikom*. Predrag Terzić, 49–65. Beograd: Frekvencija.

encounters on the court, or rather collisions, or contact – with *haptics*.⁶ In his book *Philosophy of the Body*, the contemporary Russian philosopher Mikhail Epstein discusses haptics and states that it basically concerns human interaction with the surrounding world, human action mediated through skin as an organ of touch.⁷ Touch, as such, is a particularly important element of any type of play, not only during body interaction, contact with another player on the court or with the ball, but also of the general rules of the game, meaning the possibility or impossibility of tactile action, its being permitted or prohibited (e.g., playing with hands or arms in football, legs in basketball, or blocking fouls). Touch is used to send and receive information, to communicate during the game. Its intensity or force higher or lower, touch may direct and lead a sports game in a specific direction, possibly decisive. Terzić focuses on such interfaces, or interaction outcomes, visually and artistically depicting the drama of the moment, of the shot, movement, performance in the ‘battle arena.’ Interestingly, parts of the depicted bodies were deliberately thickly shaded or dimmed, e.g., the players’ heads or arms, as if to indicate the sensitivity of the body at the given moment, a hot spot caused by pain or tension, and to specifically visualise the definition of physical sensations as offered by Aristotle: “...The field of each sense is according to the accepted view determined as the range between a single pair of contraries, white and black for sight, acute and grave for hearing, bitter and sweet for taste; but in the field of what is tangible we find several such pairs, hot cold, dry moist, hard soft, etc.”⁸ The players’ faces reveal the intensity of the pathos and the level of the pain felt, their bodies the immense physical effort exercised, with moments of languish or surrender. The level of dramatisation of these feelings or conditions in its formal and expressive construction can be linked with that found in romanticism. In the era of romanticism, among the post-revolutionary generation of artists, the artist Théodore Géricault most radically presented the wounded or fragmented body.⁹ Certainly more radically presented than what is seen in Terzić’s drawings – bodies broken, amputated – they both remind us of the fact there has been a time in the history of modern representation when ‘dismembered’ human bodies, or human bodies twisted by pain, existed not merely as a metaphor but as a historical reality. Art has often made the human body not only an object of desire, but also a scene of suffering, pain and death; such was the prism of romanticism, as well as of antique art, with its prevalent iconography of martyrs and victims, and especially of contemporary art. Also, another ‘romanticising’ feature of the drawings comprising *Of Lightness and Weight* is that the human body has not only been limited to the vertical or upright dimension, but is very often horizontal, prostrate or supine, which is associated rather with the mortal mode and is not typically found in representations of sports games. The iconography found in some drawings is reminiscent of the crucifixion iconography, with expressively potentiated pathos, or catharsis occurring due to player conflict, becoming a symbolic depiction of the battle between good and evil, the positive and negative, and thus assuming all elements of ancient tragedy. The ancient Greeks defined tragedy as the battle of two equally positive principles, as the only possible kind of conflict that could have sad and fatal consequences. This visually emphatical dramatisation of the character of play takes us back to the question asked at the beginning of the text – should sport be experienced as art, actually, do sports games as such conceal art within them?

⁶ Haptics is the theory of the tactile or touch, which deals with tactile sensation and touching, skin as an ‘organ of perception,’ tactile forms of human action and human self-expression.

⁷ Epštejn, Mihail. (2009). *Filozofija tela*. Beograd: Geopoetika.

⁸ Aristotle. (2014, February). On the Soul. *The University of Adelaide Library*. Retrieved from <https://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/a/aristotle/a8so/complete.html>

⁹ Nochlin, Linda. (2001). *The Body in Pieces: The Fragment as a Metaphor of Modernity*. London: Thames & Hudson.

In sports, everything is secondary to action, to a certain dramatic dimension, suspense, that is, the very spectacle that is linked to performance is more important than the beauty of movement. It is exactly through its dramatic or performative quality that sport assumes artistic quality. The aesthetics found in sport cannot be related to that which is likeable and beautiful, but rather to a (lofty) sense of drama and dramatisation. The performance theorist Richard Schechner distinguishes between a sports performance and a theatre play in the following way: "The theatre aims to perform a symbolic reality. Sport does not imitate anything, it is a reality in itself, characterised by specific rules that would contribute a common goal, whose purpose is to get in and block the most efficient way to the goal, to introduce a range of barriers intended to maximise the players' efforts and increase the drama of the event. Here lies the dramatic quality of sport that steps into the territory of performance. It is part of everyday reality. The broadcasting of a sports happening is a dramatic event in sport life, while a theatrical performance is clearly something staged."¹⁰ Despite the fact a match must be seen as a disciplined ritual, a performance carried out under certain terms and conditions, what definitely puts sports games in the domain of reality or the psychology of everyday behaviour is that in sports, whether professional or amateur, that which cannot be influenced but which is often encountered is the element – or moments – of coincidence, chance. The real drama of sport, whose goal is always clear – victory, is fed by movements and hits or shots, whether intentional or unintentional. There is a strong motive behind both of these, spontaneity and intention, pure physical action, accidental bodily gesture or touch, and staged situations, deliberate action, strategically designed performance propelled by desire. The problem lies in reconciling these two contradictory models of play, feelings and excitement on the one hand, and staying level-headed and in control of the rules of the game on the other. Regardless of the fact that to some extent sport has its own independent role, today, if not one of the key actors, sport is a 'phenomenon' which reflects the political and economic situation in the world. The players' engagement in the game is also determined by social structures, which have a huge impact on their physical and mental condition, and on the result of their conduct on the playing field. Fierce resistance, deliberate knockdowns by the opponents, deliberate blocking fouls, getting down on one's knees, are not merely chance situations that may occur during offensive or defensive play, but result from tensions being released while the goal is still explicit. It is due to stress and expectations that athletes accumulate energy, which they release during competition by intentionally playing rough. To demonstrate aggression, one needs to have accumulated a lot of energy first.

Finally, the exhibition *Leistung*, focusing on the basketball game and commitment, on direct physical struggle arising from close contact, spontaneous and deliberate, of lesser or greater intensity, potentiates aspects of the actual drama of the so-called sports life, but is also symbolic of battle 'on and outside the court.' These studies of the body and movement, which range from mythologised to realistic violent and dramatic performances of the body, introduce us indirectly to anthropological and philosophical studies of sport and art, but they primarily provide guidelines for thinking about sports as a distinct dimension of self-reality. Strategic play or intended action can be seen as a peculiar metaphor of contemporaneity. These are questions and considerations arising from the abovestated: How can resistance be defined at present? At what level of battle does aggression begin and how is it demonstrated? Who is the enemy? Who are 'we' and who are 'they'?

Una Popović

¹⁰ Kreft, Lev. (2014). "Sport kao dramski performans". Exhibition catalogue, *Ofsajd / Umetnost u nedozvoljenoj poziciji*. Likovna galerija Podrum. Beograd: Kulturni centar.