

January 6 to February 17, 2018

Hand-Eye Coordination: Sports and Art

Curated by Abraham Ritchie

Bad at Sports | Robert Barnes | Ethan Gill | Michelle Grabner | Nicolas Lampert | David Leggett | Dutes Miller | Betsy Odom | James Pederson | Cheryl Pope | Karl Priebe | Ben Stone | Jacqueline Surdell | Wesley Willis | Karl Wirsum



Wesley Willis *Comiskey Park*, 1992, Marker and pen on board 28 x 40 inches. Courtesy of Intuit: The Center for Intuitive and Outsider Art

The stadium and the museum.

These structures are now a standard for any city worldwide, and indeed a so-called “Global City” will have multiples of them—consider Chicago’s two major art museums and multiple stadiums; Los Angeles, New York have even more in number. Each of these buildings is considered so societally important that they are almost always constructed and/or subsidized by the taxpaying public, often at great cost, with the incredible building projects of the Olympics (especially China’s and Russia’s Olympic host cities) being obvious examples. So why are a stadium and an art museum mandatory for any self-respecting major city? At their core, art and athletics each reflect and sometimes reinforce their society, culture, and its values.

Yet the crossovers between the art museum and the stadium are still very rare, despite the many artists who include athletics or sports in their work and the long history of that crossover that goes far back in time. A goal of *Hand-Eye Coordination: Sports and Art* is to gather a selection of artists together to point to a recent history that is ready for further investigation as well as the important subject strands that a topic as broad as sports includes.

WESTERN EXHIBITIONS 1709 W Chicago Ave., Chicago IL 60622 USA
(312) 480-8390 | westernexhibitions.com | scott@westernexhibitions.com

The art world can be dismissive of sports, as evidenced by the simple lack of exhibitions on this topic, yet art itself is a lens that can bring the larger societal picture into focus. The same can be said of sports, evidenced by the way that politics are almost always bound into athletics, sometimes subtly (high school sports that reify traditional roles), and sometimes very obviously (government boosting Olympic games.) The prominent place of sports in society only makes the artistic occupation of athletics all the more important and urgent.

This is not to say that there is only space for criticism of sports, but instead that there is a mandate for the artist to think critically about it. Wilhelm Reich wrote in his 1933 book *The Mass Psychology of Fascism*, that "if the psychic energies of the average mass of people watching a football game or a musical comedy could be diverted into the rational channels of a freedom movement, they would be invincible." There is a good point here, however this also elides the fact that athletics itself is freedom, each player bounded only by natural abilities—the proverbial “level playing field.” Like any human endeavor, both good and bad come out of sports, and *Hand-Eye Coordination* is intended to cover that range from celebratory to critical.

Many of the artists included in the exhibition mentioned how sports can become an area for shared experience and identity—a community that you can belong to simply by participating as a fan or a player. **Jacqueline Surdell** and **Betsy Odom** both pointed out in conversation that the body itself, pushed to limits in athletics, is on a basic level a shared experience. **Ben Stone** describes fandom as a “communal suffering” and shared personal connections that can grow off of that kernel of experience. Odom also described how athletics hold a special place in lesbian culture, her artwork being a way to access that community if not through sports itself. James Pederson says that sports are a “social conduit” that can bridge differences through shared experience and lead to a shared identity.

However, Pederson also notes that when taken to the extreme this shared identity becomes a form of tribalism, and the current President has certainly provoked that. A shared community is a powerful thing, a potential political bloc, and politicians seize on this aspect of sports for their own ends. Consider the Air Force flyovers that are now part of NFL games, or how President Trump has intentionally increased divisions and tension around the National Anthem protests started by Colin Kaepernick. If sports are a shared community, **Nicolas Lampert** has designed shirts and patches that are intended to facilitate conversation around the reasons for Kaepernick’s protests. People wearing these patches or shirts to sports events will act as a “walking historian and share information on the history when asked [about the meaning of the] shirt, name, or symbol.”

The stadium and the museum. If one of the roles of the art museum is to provide a roadmap to understanding the world, then the museum only ignores the stadium at its own cost.

—Abraham Ritchie, January 2018