

# de-sport: The Deconstruction and Reconstruction of Sports through Art

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## On the Deconstruction and Reconstruction of Sport through Art

We have discovered some parallels between sports and art. For example, when you consider the admirably beautiful movements of gymnastics and ice skating, and the incredible handling of the ball in soccer in artistic terms, sports could be seen as a form of expression in which we are moved by the diverse lives of the athletes, who wager everything on each match or game.

At the same time, when you look back over the extensive history of art, you find that artists have devised various new expressions that deal with a wide range of athletic events. These include using boxing to make paintings, using a former lover’ s letter as a shooting target, and running at full speed through the museum.

Did sports give rise to art, and was it the other way around? Or were art and sports originally one thing, which was expressed by both outstanding athletes and artists?

Going back in history, there are a few keys that can help unlock this riddle. Ancient Greek sports festivals, which served as the basis for the Olympics, were held as an offering to the gods. And in Japan’ s Kofun period (300–538 BCE), sumo is thought to have functioned as a ritual for the repose of souls. In other words, like art, sports originally existed as a method of interacting with invisible entities. Or to put it another way, familiar sports such as baseball, soccer, rugby, tennis, golf, basketball, ping-pong, skiing, swimming, sumo, and gymnastics, which are defined as competi- tive events based on winning or losing and setting records, are only very recent inventions. In tracing the roots of sports, we find that the word originally meant “a form of play unconnected to everyday labor,” and that it also included art forms such as music, theater, painting, and dance. Is it possible to reunite contemporary sports, consumed as a competitive form of entertainment, divorced from religion, and devoid of divinity, with art?

This exhibition, titled de-sport, is designed to pose questions regarding the relationship between art and sports. The title in part alludes to desport, a French term from the Middle Ages meaning “enjoy,” while also suggesting the potential to “deconstruct sports.” In anticipation of the Tokyo 2020 Olympic and Paralympic Games, we return to the roots of sports and reconsider them as social constructs, which reflect a variety of contemporary issues, including play, the body, the nation, war, and nonverbal communication. As you watch and experience these sports, decon- structed and reconstructed from an artistic perspective by ten artists from nine countries, we hope that you will enjoy yourself in the original sense of the word.

*This exhibition title was inspired from Eugene Kangawa’s solo exhibition “supervision / Desport”.*



Gallery 1	YANAI Shino	Blue Passages, The Deep End version	2020	video: 13min 49sec., mixed media	dimensions variable	Collection of the Artist
Gallery 2	Charles FRÉGER	RIKISHI	2002-2003	ink-jet print	each H56×W43 cm (20 pieces)	Collection of the Artist
Gallery 2	Charles FRÉGER	Water-polo	2000	ink-jet print	each H70×W54 cm (12 pieces)	Collection of the Artist
Gallery 2	Charles FRÉGER	Winner Face	2001-2002	ink-jet print	each H70×W54 cm (12 pieces)	Collection of the Artist
Gallery 2	Charles FRÉGER	MAUL	2005	ink-jet print	each H70×W54 cm (6 pieces)	Collection of the Artist
Gallery 2	Christian JANKOWSKI	Heavy Weight History	2013	video: 25min 46sec.	dimensions variable	Collection of the Artist
Gallery 2	Christian JANKOWSKI	Heavy Weight History (Ronald Reagan)	2013	ink-jet print	H140×W186.8 cm	Collection of the Artist
Gallery 2	Christian JANKOWSKI	Heavy Weight History (Syrenka)	2013	ink-jet print	H140×W186.8 cm	Collection of the Artist
Gallery 2	Christian JANKOWSKI	Heavy Weight History (Brotherhood of Arms)	2013	ink-jet print	H140×W186.8 cm	Collection of the Artist
Gallery 2	Christian JANKOWSKI	Heavy Weight History (Ludwig Warynski)	2013	ink-jet print	H140×W186.8 cm	Collection of the Artist
Gallery 2	Christian JANKOWSKI	Heavy Weight History (Little Insurgent)	2013	ink-jet print	H140×W186.8 cm	Collection of the Artist
Gallery 2	Christian JANKOWSKI	Heavy Weight History (Strong Man)	2013	ink-jet print	H140×W186.8 cm	Collection of the Artist
Gallery 2	Christian JANKOWSKI	Heavy Weight History (Willy Brandt)	2013	ink-jet print	H140×W186.8 cm	Collection of the Artist
Gallery 3	Allora & Calzadilla	Track & Field	2011	document video: 2min 18 sec.	dimensions variable	—
Gallery 4	Xijing Men	Chapter 3>Welcome to Xijing -Xijing Olympics	2016	video: 35min, mixed media	dimensions variable	21st Century Museum of Comtemporary Art, Kanazawa
Gallery 5, 13	THE EUGENE Studio	Mr.Tagi’s room and dream #four-handed	2020	object: steel, wood, oil on wood, brass, glass video: 6 channel video projection consisting of performance recordings 15min 15sec.	dimensions variable	Collection of the Artist

Gallery 6	Gabriel OROZCO	Ping-Pond Table	1998	deformed ping-pong tables, ping-pong racket, ball, water tank, pump filter, water lilies	H76.7×W424.5×D424.5 cm	21st Century Museum of Comtemporary Art, Kanazawa
Gallery 6	Gabriel OROZCO	Atomists: Double Stump	1996	pair of three-part, computer-generated print	H195×W306 cm, H169×W306 cm (set of 2)	21st Century Museum of Comtemporary Art, Kanazawa
Gallery 6	Gabriel OROZCO	Penske Project 1	1998	cibachrome	H40.6×W50.8 cm	21st Century Museum of Comtemporary Art, Kanazawa
Gallery 6	Gabriel OROZCO	Penske Project 2: Triangle with Holes	1998	cibachrome	H40.6×W50.8 cm	21st Century Museum of Comtemporary Art, Kanazawa
Gallery 6	Gabriel OROZCO	Penske Project 3	1998	cibachrome	H40.6×W50.8 cm	21st Century Museum of Comtemporary Art, Kanazawa
Gallery 6	Gabriel OROZCO	Piedras en la Reja (Stones in the fence)	1989	cibachrome	H40.6×W50.8 cm	21st Century Museum of Comtemporary Art, Kanazawa
Gallery 6	Gabriel OROZCO	Barda de Latas	1998	cibachrome	H40.6×W50.8 cm	21st Century Museum of Comtemporary Art, Kanazawa
Gallery 6	Gabriel OROZCO	Ex-Vitral	2000	cibachrome	H40.6×W50.8 cm	21st Century Museum of Comtemporary Art, Kanazawa
Gallery 6	Gabriel OROZCO	Lluvia en Tokio	2001	cibachrome	H40.6×W50.8 cm	21st Century Museum of Comtemporary Art, Kanazawa
Gallery 6	Gabriel OROZCO	Perron en silla	2001	cibachrome	H40.6×W50.8 cm	21st Century Museum of Comtemporary Art, Kanazawa
Gallery 6	Gabriel OROZCO	Star Caps	2001	cibachrome	H40.6×W50.8 cm	21st Century Museum of Comtemporary Art, Kanazawa
Gallery 6	Gabriel OROZCO	Fear Not	2001	graphite, ink	H30.5×W23 cm	21st Century Museum of Comtemporary Art, Kanazawa
Gallery 6	Gabriel OROZCO	Katagami Prints 1	2001	drawing, acrylic	H33×W24 cm	21st Century Museum of Comtemporary Art, Kanazawa
Gallery 6	Gabriel OROZCO	Katagami Prints 2	2001	drawing, acrylic	H33×W24 cm	21st Century Museum of Comtemporary Art, Kanazawa
Gallery 6	Gabriel OROZCO	Katagami Prints 3	2001	drawing, acrylic	H33×W24 cm	21st Century Museum of Comtemporary Art, Kanazawa
Gallery 6	Gabriel OROZCO	Katagami Prints 4	2001	drawing, acrylic	H33×W24 cm	21st Century Museum of Comtemporary Art, Kanazawa
Gallery 6	Gabriel OROZCO	Katagami Prints 5	2001	drawing, acrylic	H33×W24 cm	21st Century Museum of Comtemporary Art, Kanazawa
Gallery 6	Gabriel OROZCO	Katagami Prints 6	2001	drawing, acrylic	H33×W24 cm	21st Century Museum of Comtemporary Art, Kanazawa
Gallery 6	Gabriel OROZCO	Katagami Prints 7	2001	drawing, acrylic	H33×W24 cm	21st Century Museum of Comtemporary Art, Kanazawa
Gallery 6	Gabriel OROZCO	Rolled Ink	2001	drawing, acrylic	H33×W24 cm	21st Century Museum of Comtemporary Art, Kanazawa
Gallery 6	Liam GILLICK	Two Short Texts	2010	black vinyl wall text	dimensions variable	Collection of the Artist
Space A	Erwin WURM	One Minute Sculptures: Astronomical Purpose	2014	mixed media	dimensions variable	Collection of the Artist
Space A	Erwin WURM	One Minute Sculptures: Untitled (Tennis Balls)	1998	mixed media	dimensions variable	Collection of the Artist

## Chapter 1. Origins and Meanings of the Olympic Torch

In the distant past, sports were played both as funeral ceremonies for the dead and as offerings to the gods. They functioned as rituals for making decisions in situations where humans were unable to judge, and in ancient times the Olympic torch was a “sacrificial flame” dedicated on an altar to the gods. However, the tradition of the modern-day Olympic Torch Relay actually began as a Nazi German ideological spectacle ahead of the Berlin Summer Olympics in 1936. Carl DIEM, a sports scientist who made major contributions to German sports in the early 20th century, devised the torch relay, in which a flame ignited by sunlight in Greece was transported to the Olympic venue. This was an attempt to embody HITLER’s dogma of Germans as the legitimate successors to the ancient Greeks, and indeed the only true European civilization. Thus sports were used to mold citizens who devoted themselves to the state, and the relay began as a propaganda tool.

YANAI Shino’s *Blue Passages* on view in Gallery 1, can be interpreted as an act of resistance to such “politicization of sports.” The work was created by Yanai in 2016, inspired by animistic moun- tain worship. In the film, the artist retraces the footsteps of the 20th-century philosopher Walter Benjamin, who fled Nazi persecu- tion and eventually died by suicide in the Pyrenees as they closed in, her path lit by a single torch. This torch was lit by burning a copy of Benjamin’s final, unfinished Arcades Project. It ignited not by the sun but by books could be interpreted as a metaphor for “thought” passed from one individual to another through the words. At the film’s end, a small white boat is engulfed in flames, and the artist also disappears, swallowed up by the sea. The flame symbolizing BENJA- MIN’s thought is carried from a mountaintop to the sea floor and returned to the vastness of nature from whence it came. This piece compellingly rejects the official narrative of the Olympic torch as embodying global solidarity and universal enthusiasm. Here the torch is dedicated neither to the gods nor to the state, but as a flame of remembrance and mourning for a single thinker who tragically died on the pyre of history.

**Chapter 2. The Exercising Nation-State**
Since ancient times, sports have played the role of epitomizing the beauty of self-discipline and acting as a festival for the explosive expression of physical strength. In recent times, sports have also begun to take on a role of moral education, fostering an environment where people gather into groups and respect a particular set of rules. Individuals train their bodies so as to perform in accordance to the rules of being part of a group, strengthening bonds within civil society and the nation-state. This also leads to a shift towards a practical education that values the spirit of placing the team above the individual. This group-focused aspect of sports is particularly noticeable in global sporting events such as The Olympic Games. As with the national anthem and raising of the national flag, honor is placed not on the individual, but instead the nation. Here, we will rethink the relationship between the function of sports to govern- ments and art, through the works of four artists.

**2-1. (※First Half, The exhibition of KAZAMA Sachiko artworks have been cancelled due to the change of this exhibition period.)**

KAZAMA Sachiko’s *Dislympics 2680* depicts the cancelled 1940 Tokyo Olympics and 2020 Tokyo Olympics from the perspective of a parallel world. In the name of ‘improving the population,’ Japan’s National Eugenic Law passed in 1940 led to government-sanctioned sterilization of disabled people. Kazama’s work illustrates a fictitious 2020 Tokyo Olympics of a Japan still under the regulation of eugenic thought. Nazi Germany stated that architecture should strive to remain beautiful even when nothing but ruins remain in the future, like that of Ancient Rome and Greece. With this thought, they tried to construct “ruins of the future,” which meant that the stadium they built resembled an architectural ruin even before the opening ceremony.

The left side of the work features the construction site of the 2020 Tokyo Olympics’ main stadium, the New National Stadium, overlaid with youths dedicating their lives to the establishment of the nation as they stand in the exact same place the 1943 “farewell ceremony”——a government ceremony for the drafting of all students over 20 years of age. On the right side is the quarry from which cement for the stadium is extracted, with people with illnesses or disabilities forbidden form having children being poured into the concrete as a sacrifice. Taking up the centre of the work, citizens obediently exercise in order to improve their health for the nation. Near the heavens, the sun shines as the symbol of the state, a sacrifi- cial ritual involving a kamikaze-like figure takes the place of the Olympic torch. This work, which views a future Tokyo Olympics through the lens of the historical event that was cancelled, foresees the self-destruction of a state as it pursues a fascistic form of sports.

**2-1. (※Second Half)**
This series of photographs of people playing sports in countries across the world, taken by Charles FRÉGER, questions the diversity and function of modern sports——how does sport contribute to the impressions belonging to various social groups. For example, *RIKISHI* is a series that covered sumo culture in the Tokyo suburbs from 2002 to 2003, with the artist photo- graphing wrestlers of all ages. Instead of the famed squatting sumo poses with the wrestler keeping their hands to the ground or facing off an opponent, the subjects are all photographed in natural poses. By repeatedly taking photographs with a similar composition, the universal patterns of sumo become typified. Here, by comparing

these photographs to those of sports born in the modern age such as rugby and water polo, it is the “naked body” shaped by a youth’s dietary habits that becomes emphasized as the primary uniform of sumo just as much as easy to understand aspects such as topknots and the fundoshi loincloths.

**2-2.**
In 2013, Berlin-based Christian JANKOWAKI hired 11 robust athletes from Poland’s weight-lifting team and challenged them to lift 7 massive statues across Warsaw, from monuments celebrating Polish-Soviet relations to a life-size bronze statue of Ronald REAGAN. As these muscular athletes lift the historic monu- ments like barbells, professional sports-commentators provide energetic live commentary throughout the proceedings, giving the situation a comical atmosphere. The work parodies sports programming on television, while also contrasting the light mood with the heavy history embodied in the monuments, from cities burned to ash in the fires of World War II to an aristocrat who became a socialist revolutionary and later died in prison. By reduc- ing these monuments steeped in history to simple barbells, Jankowski highlights the confusion of political intent behind the public sculptures designed to define a nation and the identity of Poland as a nation. As an interesting aside, this work was added to the Polish Weightlifting Federation’s official program for the 2013 World Weightlifting Championships.

**2-3.**
Olympic gold medalists and athletes from the USA Outdoor Track and Field Championships silently run on a treadmill placed on top of the caterpillar track of an overturned sixty-ton tank. The performance piece *Track and Field*, by Puerto Rico-based artists Jennifer ALLORA and Guillermo CALZADILLA, was chosen to represent the United States in the 2011 Venice Biennale. The bulky tank, a vehicle designed for war that lets out a clamorous roar, is instead used as a treadmill, a piece of technology designed to maintain daily fitness. This divergence highlights the stark contrast between the exceptional nature of war and the ordinariness of daily activities we rely on for health and physical training. The tank being flipped onto its back, completely helpless and unable to move forwards like a turtle, may be read as an implicit critique of U.S. military policy. However, one can also spot the seemingly nonsensical presence of an athlete wearing a uniform emblazoned with “United States” on the backside of the tank. This element of the work touches on how, much like international sports competitions like the Olympics, the artists of “Track and Field” are representatives of a particular nation competing in an art festival. The composition of the work, having the viewer look up at the athlete representing a country, expresses the national prestige applied by the viewer to their hero——someone who is a human like them, but is elevated by their polished physical abilities and presence in the media——whether that be in the world of sports or art.

**Chapter 3. Games Without Competition**
Baseball, soccer, rugby, tennis, golf, basketball, table-tennis, skiing, swimming, sumo, gymnastics. All of these are defined as a sport, that being “the general term for a game played as a competition or establishment of a record through the skilful use of trained bodies or technology according to a set of rules.” However, in the modern world, the term has distanced itself from everyday activities such as work, growing closer to the ideas of enjoyment and relaxation. Through this change, it has even been used in the context of artistic pursuits including music, theatre, and dance. From this perspective, the modern definition of sports appears to have grown distant from the root of the word sport. Here, through the attempts of artists to return sports to the field of play, we consider what a pure sports without competition, and also not based on efficient training of the body or victory according to rules, i.e. “pure play” might be.

These works also frees the viewer from the game of an art museum making demands of them——the tradition of taking in the meaning of the work and praising the distinguished artist——and encourages the enjoyment of a pure type of play that is also free of competition.

The artist collective Xijing Men, comprised of OZAWA Tsuyoshi from Japan, CHEN Shaoxiang from China, and Gimhongsok from South Korea, held their own sporting event alongside the 2008 Beijing Olympics. The twist on the *Xijing Olympics* was that the sports involved no competition or physical training. Sports including fencing, shooting, and the triathlon were selected, but required meth- ods completely opposite to the traditional Olympic goal of “faster, higher, stronger.” Absurd matches that resemble The Olympic Games are held with plain everyday objects bought on a low budget, embodying a rejection of sports that involve a competition over winning-or-losing or achieving a new record. The artists appear to denounce the principles of peace and equality espoused by The Olympics Games as having been corrupted into being yet another part of the political and economic interest of those in power today, as well as stating to all sports that have elements of competition that “sports is just here to be enjoyed.”

Erwin WURM’s *One Minute Sculptures* asks the viewers to take a piece of sports gear and strike an odd pose. By mirroring the same posture as the artist’s drawings, such as raising a tennis ball up and observing it, or pressing a soccer-ball against one’s head and pretending to be a ballistic missile moments from launch, the typical use of familiar objects becomes overturned, allowing us to better see the connections of art, politics, and science that lie within sports. While the movement of one’s body in accordance to a set of rules

resembles modern sports, imitation and playfulness take the place of competition. The way in which individuals and groups can move their bodies solely for the purpose of pure enjoyment can be seen as a re-enactment of a certain type of sports enjoyed before the modern age. One might say that this is a work that recaptures a moment of the tension and relaxation experienced in the earlier days of sports as a “sculpture.”

**Chapter 4. Creation as the Source of Sports**
When we consider the elements of sports, our breakdown might include physical training, competitiveness, non-vocal communica- tion, musical rhythm, military strategy, coincidence, gambling, and a monetary economy, among other elements. On the other hand, if we were to think of something that is comprised of these elements, would we think of it as sports? To put it another way, it is possible to discover a brand new sports without a losing something from this original construction?

*Mr. Tagi’s room and dream* by THE EUGENE Studio presents itself as a possible answer to these questions. The work consists of a pseudo-documentary by the fictional sports historian Mr. Tagi, who documents a new sport consisting of playing chess and performing jazz music at the same time. If the sports we have now was devel- oped to allow people to become so engrossed in their activity that they could escape daily life, then one might say the creative fun that lies at the root of modern sports is cleverly expressed in this work. This exhibition presents a new version of the work, released as part of graduation work in 2014, with a six-screen presentation.

**Chapter 5. The Cosmos in a Ball**
In modern sports, where bodies and records are measured while improving structure and movement in the name of efficiency, one can see the logic of science and engineering becoming bound together. However, in ancient times exercise was a method for communicating with things that one couldn’t see normally, such as nature spirit, gods or the dead. In the case of ancient times, the ability to lose oneself was more important than efficiency. Pierre de COUBERTIN, founder of the International Olympic Committee, stated “For me sport was a religion... with religious sentiment.” Even in modern times, one can see certain similarities to the religious act of prayer and the physical act of sport.

Sports also acts as a mirror to the societal values of a certain age, even if the shape of the sport might change depending on that society, with the ball’s shape and purpose differing between soccer, the ancient Japanese sport of kemari, or rugby. Here, we will consider sports in the context of matters that exist as a part of, yet outside of, sport itself.

Mexican artist Gabriel OROZCO’s *Ping-Pond Table* is an enlarged ping-pong table in the shape of an X that four to eight people can play on. In place of the net in the middle of a normal ping-pong table, the middle of Ping-Pond Table features a small pond with lotus flowers floating on its surface. The edges of the table have been rounded so that it takes the shape of the four leaves of a lotus flower, which combined with its larger size allows for a greater breadth of permissible movement. The players are freed from the normal rules of ping-pong, being able to hit a ball over the water or to the side, and in some cases players may have to deal with balls coming from all three directions.

In Buddhism, lotus flowers symbolize the beginning of space, with the movement of the ping-pong balls representing the geomet- rical movement of the planets. This allows for sports to become a perfectly designed world, like a miniature garden, with the humorous appearance of playing within this environment. If the structure of sports have been constructed according to the world view of certain social groups, then it follows that to create a new structure of sports, one would need a new world view. To put it another way, the move- ment of the ball is turned into a geometric sculpture by the players, just as the table is turned into a space where new play is discovered. More than using the ping-pong table as a societal mirror that is based on various historical reference points that connect art, politics, and sport——from the ping-pong game held in a gallery as a method of communication by a Slovakian artist in the 1970s to the ping-pong diplomacy between the United States and the People’s Republic of China during the Cold War——the work seeks to change the structure and rules of sports to examine in what way the world is arbitrary and what way it is unchanging.

Just as the title of Liam GILLICK’s *Two Short Texts* suggests, the work is comprised of one large sentence posted on a wall. “Forget about the ball and get on with the game.” The work was originally unveiled at “Men With Balls: The Art of the 2010 World Cup” at a non-profit gallery in Manhattan. The original work was written in white text on a white wall, causing the text to seem to float up in an almost spectral manner, only when one examines the wall closely. In rejecting methods and scores, and instead emphasizing the unifor- mity that lies behind games, the work hints at a universal philosophy that exists within life and the world.

(TAKAHASHI Yohsuke / Assistant Curator, 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art, Kanazawa)



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