

The football turn in contemporary art: how the game became an artistic language

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Abstract

The article explores the “football turn” in contemporary art, analysing how football has progressively become a legitimate cultural object within the artistic field. Drawing on the model of cultural diamond developed by Wendy Griswold the study examines the intersections between football and contemporary art, focusing on the practices, institutions, and symbolic processes that have enabled their convergence. Through UK-based case studies ranging from the 1953 exhibition *Football and the Fine Arts* to recent initiatives such as OOF Gallery and *Zidane: A 21st Century Portrait*, the article reconstructs the historical and sociological conditions that have transformed football from a site of mass alienation into a space for artistic dialogue and experimentation. By intersecting art and football, the analysis highlights how these two systems, once considered irreconcilable, overlap in the neoliberal order of images, generating a hybrid cultural ecosystem where symbolic logics are shared, reconfigured, reproduced and contested.¹

Keywords: Contemporary art, Football, Cultural diamond, Neoliberalism, Cultural production.

1. Introduction

On the occasion of the reunion of the historic Manchester band Oasis, Bohemian FC – the oldest football club in Ireland, owned by its supporters – produced a special jersey for the FAI Cup. In direct collaboration with the Gallagher brothers, who personally approved the project, the Dublin-based club designed a kit in which the sponsor’s logo, usually placed at the centre of the shirt, was replaced by the distinctive Oasis logo: white lettering on a black rectangular background, in Helvetica Black Oblique. This choice, which shifted attention from the economic to the cultural register, rapidly turned the Bohemian shirt into a viral object. It was not the first time, however. The previous year, the club had entered into an agreement with the band Fontaines DC, whose shirt was even worn by Greta Thunberg during her participation in the

¹ The term “turn” in the title – signalling contemporary art’s renewed attention to football-related themes and symbolisms – is inspired by Claire Bishop’s notion of the “social turn” articulated in her influential 2006 Artforum essay “The Social Turn: Collaboration and Its Discontents.” In that text, Bishop diagnoses a significant shift in contemporary art and criticism towards practices prioritising social engagement and collaboration while urging a critical balance between aesthetic and ethical criteria in assessing socially engaged work.

Flotilla². The idea of associating a football shirt with a musical group is not entirely unprecedented, particularly in England. During the 2020/2021 season, the post-hardcore band Enter Shikari sponsored the club of their hometown, St Albans, competing in the National League South. Even earlier, the pioneering heavy metal band Iron Maiden presented themselves as an actual football team in the booklet for their 1998 album *Virtual XI*: personalised shirts bearing the “Maiden” logo and the five band members arranged in a virtual line-up alongside Premier League stars such as Stuart Pearce, Faustino Asprilla, Paul Gascoigne, Ian Wright, Patrick Vieira, and Marc Overmars.

The Oasis episode was certainly extraordinary, but it illustrates a longer history of intersections between football and music. Despite the visibility generated by the Oasis-Bohemian collaboration, the relationship between music and football is, in many respects, already codified. In the same way, the dialogue between art and football is not entirely new. We may recall, for instance, the constructivists sport kit designed by Varvara Stepanova in 1928, or Umberto Boccioni’s *Dynamism of a Football Player* (1913), held at MoMA in New York. What is particularly interesting is the emergence, particularly since the 2000s, of a more systematic engagement of contemporary art with football, opening itself up to its languages, aesthetics and social dimensions. A striking example was offered by the 2025 Venice Architecture Biennale, where the Dutch Pavilion placed football at the centre of reflection with the project *SIDELINED: A Space to Rethink Togetherness*. The stated aim was to explore sport as both architectural and social device, capable of organising spaces, bodies and behaviours. Adopting a queer perspective, the project questioned conventional norms related to gender, identity and collective dynamics, seeking to redefine the ways in which we gather and interact in public space. Alongside the installations presented in the Pavilion – such as a one-goal table football reconfigured as a performative and relational space where the rules of the game become a terrain of symbolic experimentation – the project extended to Venice’s Pierluigi Penzo Stadium, involving the women’s team of Venezia F.C. To crown this collaboration, an interview with the artist Gabriel Fontana and curator Amanda Pinatih was published on the club’s official website: a tangible sign of how the boundaries between seemingly distant worlds – contemporary art and professional football – can indeed be traversed³. Following this line, the aim of this text is to examine the relations between football and contemporary art, reconstructing the points of convergence and the conditions that have made their encounter possible. The guiding question, deceptively simple, is how such an entanglement between two traditionally distant worlds has come to take shape. From this, two lines of inquiry emerge. First, how has the incorporation of football into contemporary art practices redefined the relationships between artists, artworks, and audiences within the artistic field? Second: how and why have art criticism and institutions come to recognise football not merely as a terrain of mass alienation – as denounced by a certain strand of leftist tradition (P. Kennedy & D. Kennedy, 2016) but also as a legitimate space for dialogue and cultural experimentation? To address these questions, the analysis draws on Wendy Griswold’s cultural diamond model, as the phenomenon under examination is configured through a still-emerging set of relationships. At this early stage, it is therefore more productive to foreground the existence

² For further details see: <https://oasis-bohemianfc.com> (last access 25th September 2025).

³ For the entire interview see: <https://www.veneziafc.it/en/news/sidelined-a-space-to-rethink-togetherness-the-dutch-pavilion-at-biennale-architettura-2025> (last access 25th September 2025).

of these relational dynamics and to make their key nodes explicit, rather than to articulate definitive causal linkages. The analysis seeks to delineate interpretive keys to the meanings generated by this convergence. The case studies were selected within the UK's contemporary art field on the basis of specific criteria. Each example is formally recognised for its artistic value within the institutional system of contemporary art. The exhibition *Football and the Fine Arts* (1953), for instance, was organised in collaboration with the Arts Council of Great Britain, a non-departmental public body dedicated to promoting the fine arts nationwide. OOF Gallery consistently works with artists who have received major international awards and distinctions such as Martin Parr and Jeremy Deller. Douglas Gordon, a Glasgow-born artist who won the Turner Prize in 1996 and later represented Great Britain at the Venice Biennale, co-produced the work *Zidane: A 21st Century Portrait* with Philippe Parreno, a central piece of investigation for this text. A further criterion concerned the presence of direct collaboration with recognised football institutions. The 1953 exhibition was developed in partnership with the Football Association, while the video installation dedicated to Zidane was produced with the involvement of Real Madrid. OOF Gallery, moreover, emerged as part of the urban development project associated with the construction of Tottenham Hotspur's new stadium in North London. More broadly, the UK art system operates within a social context in which football – as illustrated by the musical examples discussed earlier – holds a widely acknowledged cultural significance. Moreover, F.C. United of Manchester represents a football-rooted example of how certain artistic practices can contribute to redefining a club's public image by aligning with, and reinforcing, an expected collective imaginary. In this specific case, although it is not a matter of contemporary art in the strictest sense, the use of cinema and music has played a decisive role in the reconfiguration of the club's symbolic horizon. Music and cinema – understood here also in the form of video installation – are likewise central to *Zidane: A 21st Century Portrait* and can therefore be fully integrated within this shared cultural language.

This research builds upon fieldwork begun in 2016, when, together with the artist Luca Resta, I co-founded *Autopalo*, a project aimed at directly analysing the models and processes of participatory artistic practice in urban space through football. Within this trajectory, particular attention is devoted to the English context, with the case of OOF Gallery, in which I personally participated as a selected artist. This experience constitutes the empirical foundation of the reflection developed here⁴.

2. Theoretical framework: the cultural diamond

Methodologically, the article adopts a qualitative, relational approach, using case studies as analytical lenses to trace processes of cultural legitimation rather than to establish causal generalisations. The cultural diamond model, developed by Griswold (1986) as “an accounting device intended to encourage a fuller understanding of any cultural object's relationship to the social world”, (Griswold, 1994, pp. 15-16) is grounded in a specific definition of the cultural object and the role it plays in the human construction of meaning. Griswold defines a cultural

⁴ For an analysis of *Autopalo*'s work, see: Meschini E.R. (2025). *Autoetnografia di una ricerca. Come studiare la pratica artistica attraverso il calcio*, in: Mancini M.G. (ed.by), *Attraverso territorio e scultura*. Milan: Mimesis.

object as “a shared significance embodied in form” (Griswold, 1994, p.12) In other words, it is an expressive vehicle for meaning that is “audible, visible, or tangible, or that can be articulated” (Griswold, 1994, p.12). In this view, the cultural object is not simply a static artefact but “an interpretation, a set of meanings that fit into a context of ideas and institutions, that transform random happenings into events, and that suggest an appropriate set of attitudes and actions” (Griswold, 1994, p.134). This definition calls into question the creative dimension of the human being – both individual and collective – placing particular emphasis on the agency of those who produce and those who receive culture. In sociological terms, *agency* refers to the capacity of individuals or groups to act autonomously, to make decisions, and to influence the social context in which they are embedded (Paltrinieri & Spampinato, 2024; Gell, 2021). From this perspective, the cultural object appears as a dynamic node of relations between producers/creators, receivers, and the social world: not a fixed entity, but a process in constant transformation, capable of generating meanings while simultaneously being reshaped by them. Culture is thus not merely reflection but also practice, interpretation, and mediation: the cultural object becomes a symbolic device through which human beings make sense of the world they inhabit. The cultural diamond proves valuable precisely because it enables us to visualise and analyse these relations among four poles: creators, receivers, the cultural object itself, and the social world. Borrowing the metaphor of a baseball diamond, Griswold describes a geometrical figure in which each side represents a possible relation, for a total of six connections. As Griswold notes, the cultural diamond is neither a theory – “because it says nothing about the points relate” – nor a causal model, since “it does not indicate cause and effect” (Griswold, 1994, p. 15). Rather, it functions as a device of revelation: it makes connections visible, clarifies the dynamics of relationships, and highlights the internal movement of cultural objects. The vertical axis replays the logics of reflection theory: depending on the “direction chosen” it can show how culture reflects the material conditions of society (as in the Marxist conception of culture as superstructure resting upon economic forces of production), or, conversely, how social life reflects cultural visions, as in Weber’s analysis of the Protestant ethic and its influence on the development of capitalism (Weber, 1904). The horizontal axis, meanwhile, foregrounds the interaction between creators and receivers, emphasising that cultural production is never unilateral but always shaped by reception, interpretation, and what Jauss (1987) termed the “horizon of expectation” – the sediment of prior cultural and social experience carried by the audience. Research in the sociology of sport has demonstrated that football extends far beyond its symbolic or identity value (Martelli, Porro, 2013). Rather, it is embedded in a dense web of relations that both shift with the repositioning of the social world and actively reshape that world through the interaction of creators and receivers.

3. The cultural diamond in football

The cultural object “football” has itself been transformed over time through multiple relationships that the cultural diamond makes visible. The meanings football acquires in people’s lives are constructed through heterogeneous and layered practices. Among these, the most immediate and salient relation is that which links the cultural object to its receivers – essentially,

the fans. Yet this relation is never simplistic nor unidirectional. The axis that connects football to its supporters intersects with all the other dimensions of the diamond, producing meanings that must be situated in their social contexts. A particularly emblematic case is that of F.C. United of Manchester (FCUM). The club was founded in 2005, when a portion of Manchester United's supporters opposed the takeover by American businessman Malcolm Glazer, seen as yet another step towards the commodification of football. Escalating ticket prices, the subordination of fixtures to television schedules, and the transformation of stadiums into sanitised, corporate spaces had already fractured the bond between club and community (Brown, 1998; 2008). Against this backdrop, a group of supporters chose to abandon Old Trafford and create a new team based on values of community and association. Thus, FCUM was born, organised as a Community Benefit Society: democratic, non-profit, and collectively owned, with around 2,000 co-owners and a system of community shares that raised over £2 million. With the motto "Our Club, Our Rules," the supporters redefined themselves from receivers into creators, reshaping the very meaning of football belonging. This was not merely symbolic⁵. In 2015 the club inaugurated Broadhurst Park, a 4,400-seat stadium that reclaimed the tradition of terraces and functioned as a community infrastructure: shared spaces, social services, and initiatives during the pandemic. Culturally, FCUM has articulated an imaginary rooted in resistance and independence. This imagery has been reinforced through cinema and music: Ken Loach's film *Looking for Eric* (2009), featuring the iconic Manchester United captain Eric Cantona, tied football directly to narratives of working-class solidarity and resilience. The choice of Loach – long attentive to working-class experiences – was far from casual, and many of his films contain football references. Musically, the club's culture resonates with *I Wanna Be Adored* (1989) by The Stone Roses, a band from Manchester central to the "Madchester" scene, which fused football, music, and rave culture in the late 1980s. The anthem, played regularly at Broadhurst Park, encapsulates the ethos of FCUM: not selling one's soul, but seeking recognition on one's own terms. The case of FC United of Manchester can be approached from what may be defined as a football-based perspective and interpreted as a process of cultural legitimation grounded in grassroots agency. A key role in this process is played by cultural intermediaries (Heinich, 2012), understood not only as individual actors but as cultural infrastructures that enable mediation, circulation, and meaning-making. In the FCUM case, this intermediary function – albeit indirectly – can be attributed to the field of cinema, and in particular to the work of director Ken Loach. Through his film, Loach situates FCUM within a set of widely recognisable cultural frames, facilitating its intelligibility beyond the football domain and enhancing its symbolic visibility. His representation shifts FCUM away from a purely sporting reading and inscribes it within a narrative of struggle, a recurring theme in his work. Crucially, the focus of this narrative is not the team as a competitive unit, but its supporters. Fans are portrayed as active social actors whose collective practices, values, and forms of self-organisation constitute the core of the club's meaning. Through this representational shift, FCUM emerges less as a football club and more as a collectively produced social formation, embedded in broader histories of class, resistance, and community. Supporters are thus framed not as passive consumers of the football spectacle, but

⁵ Details on the management of the club are available on its official website: <https://fc-utd.co.uk/manifesto> (last access 28th September 2025).

as protagonists in the construction and circulation of cultural and political meanings. A comparable process of cultural mediation can be observed in the relationship between FCUM supporters and the legacy of The Stone Roses. In this case, the band functions as a symbolic resource appropriated by fans as a model for representing an underground, niche form of football culture that nonetheless claims a form of cultural primogeniture. This symbolic positioning gains particular significance in relation to the far more globally visible band Oasis, whose members have publicly declared both their support for Manchester City and the influence of The Stone Roses on their musical trajectory. By mobilising this lineage, FCUM supporters articulate a counter-hegemonic cultural identity that operates through selective appropriation, subcultural memory, and distinction, reinforcing the club's positioning within an alternative cultural economy of football.

4. The cultural diamond in the sociology of sport

The cultural diamond, which we have heuristically applied to the case of FCUM, can also be fruitfully employed within the sociology of sporting cultures. Its utility does not lie in defining football as a cultural object *per se*, but rather in tracing the ramifications and relational complexities that make it such. Used retrospectively, the diamond allows us to capture the multifaceted interactions that football has generated. Each axis of the model, in fact, points towards a distinct field of inquiry. Let us begin with the axis connecting the cultural object “football” to its consumers, namely supporters, whether with high or low levels of identification (Bifulco & Pirone, 2014). Studies on highly identified fans have often analysed the rituality of fandom as a form of “miniaturised battle” (Morris 1981; Dal Lago, 1990; Giulianotti 2002), highlighting the production of identity mechanisms, the incorporation of collective narratives, and the enactment of practices that, in some cases, assumed disruptive traits (Kennedy, 2016). These studies – alongside others that cannot be recalled here for reasons of space – have investigated not only the relationship between football and its fans, but also the dense web of relations that fans weave among themselves, giving rise to parallel systems of sociability and mutual aid. A telling example comes from research on amateur football in Argentina (Frydenberg, 2011; Daskal, 2017; Reyna, 2016), which demonstrates how, in a formative stage of state-building, clubs functioned as *enfrustraturas ciudadanas* (Daskal, 2013), filling gaps in welfare provision and responding to cultural needs. Along the same axis of consumers, considerable scholarship has focused on organised fandom and, in particular, the ultras movement. Valerio Marchi (1994) investigated the differences between the ultras model and hooliganism, and later devoted a detailed analysis to a single match: the 2004 Rome–Lazio derby, marked by violent clashes following the false news of a child's death (Marchi, 2005). Research into ultras has shown the adaptability of the phenomenon to local contexts (Giulianotti & Robertson, 2009), disentangling it from reductive stereotypes and conceptualising it as a complex puzzle (Spaij & Viñas 2005), albeit not without its internal contradictions. Equally, lower levels of identification have been analysed, particularly in relation to the transformation of football into a mass spectacle and the correlative shift of supporters into consumers (Bromberger, 1999; Kuper & Szymanski, 2010). The nexus between football, its supporters, and the broader social world has also been examined through the lens of masculinity (Archetti, 1999; Alabarces, 2004; King, 1997) and gender more

broadly (Pitti, 2019). Turning to the axis of creators, understood here as players and clubs, scholarship has explored the reconstruction of post-career trajectories within the framework of celebrity studies (Tirino, Russo & Castellano, 2024), as well as the socio-historical formation of specific teams (Colozza, 2025). At this level, the link between history and the sociology of sport emerges clearly, as in studies retracing the sociopolitical genesis of mega-events such as the FIFA World Cup (Brizzi & Sbeti, 2018).

5. Football and art before the 2000s: the case of “Football and the Fine Arts”

The relationship between art and football has an important precedent dating back to the 1950s, when attempts were first made to bring the game into the sphere of national cultural dissemination. As reconstructed by Ray Physick (2013), this is the context in which the exhibition *Football and the Fine Arts* was inaugurated in London in 1953, marking the 90th anniversary of the Football Association (FA) and organised in collaboration with the Arts Council of Great Britain. The declared aim of the initiative was to bring together two apparently distant worlds, by inviting artists to represent matches or scenes connected with the game of football. As J. St John, one of the organisers, put it, “the worlds of art and football were not so far apart. The excitement of admiring paint skilfully applied to the canvas was not so far removed from artistry of by men like Mercer, Puskás and Matthews” (Liverpool Daily Post, 1954). Beyond fostering a new connection between two fields traditionally seen as separate, the exhibition also sought, on the one hand, to secure new sources of funding for the arts sector, and on the other, to confer cultural legitimacy upon football. Physick highlights how the FA had already begun to show an interest in visual language in the years leading up to the exhibition, experimenting with artistic commissions. The aim was not only to expand the representation of the game to a wider and more diverse audience, but also to construct a cultural image of football akin to that already associated with more “noble” sports such as cricket. As the exhibition catalogue put it: “Compared with cricket, there is no tradition in Britain of football painting.” (Physick, 2013, p. 46) A telling contrast is offered by Camille Pissarro, one of the leading figures of Impressionism, who, during his 1897 stay in England, painted *Cricket Match at Bedford Park, London*. While cricket was perceived between the wars as the quintessential national sport, it was football that drew mass audiences and, particularly in working-class districts, came to embody the *de facto* national sport. The exhibition featured 152 works, which Physick divides according to subject. Forty depicted stadiums, ranging from Stamford Bridge to The Valley, as well as lesser-known grounds such as Goldstone Ground (Brighton), Fratton Park (Portsmouth), Brunton Park (Carlisle) and Burnden Park (Bolton). The latter was captured in one of the most emblematic works linking art and football: Laurence Stephen Lowry’s *Going to the Match* (1928). A further twenty-seven paintings depicted football played in “community settings” – matches improvised on public fields, streets, or vacant lots. Around fifteen works focused instead on action within the game itself, often adopting a wide perspective that situated the stadium within its urban surroundings of working-class housing, power stations, and vestiges of a still-rural landscape. Between 1953 and 1954, in keeping with its aim of broadening audiences for this emerging subject, the exhibition toured several British cities, with uneven results. The greatest success came in Birkenhead, where the Williamson Art

Gallery drew over 21,000 visitors, aided by the display of trophies, medals, and memorabilia belonging to Ralph “Dixie” Dean, Everton’s legendary striker of the 1930s. Manchester (around 12,000 visitors) and Bootle (5,000) also recorded strong numbers, whereas in Bradford – despite being home to two professional clubs – the 5,773 attendees were deemed disappointing. Sheffield and Blackpool attracted modest crowds (7,000 and 2,000), while Wolverhampton stood out for its enthusiastic reception, hailed as “the most popular exhibition of the year” (Physick, 2013, p. 50). Some galleries – including Liverpool, Burnley, Stafford, Rochdale, and Birmingham – refused to host the show, citing either financial constraints or, more often, prejudice against football as an unsuitable theme for “serious” art institutions. For many years thereafter, *Football and the Fine Arts* remained an isolated case of collaboration between the worlds of football and art. As Physick suggests, only from the mid-1990s did this relationship begin to take more structured form. Once again, England played a pioneering role, with two notable exhibitions: *Offside*, hosted initially at Manchester Art Gallery before travelling to other venues, which explored complex social questions through football-related art; and *England’s Glory*, more commercially oriented and staged in a private London gallery, which displayed both contemporary works and pieces originally exhibited in 1953.

6. The intersection of football and contemporary art

The relationship between contemporary art and football began to consolidate in the 2000s, and particularly in 2006. This does not mean that artists had previously ignored the theme – examples in Italy include Enzo Umbaca, active from the mid-1990s, the match between curators and artists at the Bologna Art Fair, and the well-known 1993 work from Maurizio Cattelan’s *Rauss* (Bishop, 2012; Meschini 2021). These were pioneering experiments, anticipating a growing interest, but they emerged outside of a structured field of recognition and validation, with all the indeterminacy that such a context entailed. The year 2006 has since come to be treated as a watershed moment: a point of transition between an art world without football and one in which football became a legitimate cultural subject. Of course, this is an analytical rather than empirical date, constructed retrospectively through research choices and patterns of interpretation that were not visible with such clarity at the time. Two key episodes marked this turning point, both signalling a move toward greater formalisation of language and content. The first was the exhibition *One Love: The Football Art Prize*, hosted at the Lowry Galleries in Salford to coincide with the 2006 World Cup in Germany. Sponsored by the sports brand Umbro, the exhibition was staged in the same institution that houses one of the emblematic works from the 1953 show, thus seeking to create a sense of continuity over time (Melucci, 2000). The second was the release of the film-installation *Zidane: A 21st Century Portrait*, directed by established contemporary artists Douglas Gordon and Philippe Parreno, and premiered – receiving critical acclaim – at the 2006 Cannes Film Festival. From the perspective of the cultural diamond, *Zidane: A 21st Century Portrait* exemplifies several themes that would become recurring refrains over the following two decades, ultimately helping to articulate a degree of discursive autonomy. The work by Gordon and Parreno is a film-installation centred on a Spanish Liga match (Real Madrid vs. Villarreal, 23 April 2005), observed entirely through the perspective of Zinedine Zidane. Seventeen cameras

followed him for the full ninety minutes, while the soundtrack by Scottish post-rock band Mogwai provided the rhythm of play. There is no commentary, no sporting narrative, only an aesthetic and iconic portrait: gestures, silences, intervals of waiting, culminating in Zidane's final expulsion, which exposes the duality of the champion – poised between control and vulnerability. It is, in every sense, a portrait aligned with the artists own aesthetic. Gordon, for example, had already explored questions of time, duration, and hyper-representation in *24 Hour Psycho* (1993), where each frame of Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960) was slowed down to stretch the original 109 minutes into a twenty-four-hour projection. Here, Zidane emerges as an icon of the present: a figure condensing cultural and political tensions – French of Algerian descent, national hero yet distanced from mainstream representations. In this sense, he functions as a perfect catalyst for aesthetic reflection, to the point of appearing on the cover of the Italian edition of Marc Auge's *Finzioni di fine secolo*, a collection of essays in which the anthropologist recounts, also, his own experience as a spectator at the 1998 World Cup in France. While remaining faithful to the artistic idiom of Gordon and Parreno, the work is also firmly embedded within the football system: it was produced in the context of a real match, with both club and league actively participating in its realisation. Art and football do not merely reinterpret one another; they converge. The artist and the player, the gallery and the stadium, art and football operate together as parts of the same creative dispositif. If Andy Warhol's 1978 pop portrait of Pelé isolated the player and transformed him into a consumer icon, Gordon and Parreno's work positions Zidane as a systemic figure, foreshadowing the deeper incorporation of football into the neoliberal circuits of image and spectacle.

7. The OOF gallery

As with the Oasis–Bohemian collaboration, *Zidane: A 21st Century Portrait* marks another peak – this time a generative one. From this moment onward, the relationship between art and football began to acquire a systemic dimension. In England, in particular, a genuine cultural ecosystem has emerged (Allegrini, 2021), composed of museums, prizes, creative enterprises, and social initiatives, all capable of translating football into recognised aesthetic languages. Consider, for instance, the Football Art Prize, promoted by Arts Council England, or the role of the National Football Museum in Manchester as a hub for research, memory, and artistic production⁶. Parallel to these initiatives, companies such as *The Art of Football* and *Classic Football Shirts* have transformed football culture into fashion and design, even sponsoring professional clubs such as Burnley and Parma. This ecosystem reached public visibility through the major exhibition *Football: City, Art, United* (Manchester, 2025), curated by Hans Ulrich Obrist and former footballer Juan Mata. The exhibition staged dialogues between artists and players: Suzanne Lacy, pioneer of socially engaged practices, with Vivianne Miedema and Ali Riley on women's football; Ryan Gander with Eric Cantona in a reflection on time and memory; and Philippe Parreno, thereby

⁶ The most recent Football Art Prize edition, held in 2022 at the Millennium Gallery in Sheffield, included among the jury members David James, former goalkeeper of the English national team, confirming the dialogue between these two worlds.

symbolically closing the circle opened in 2006⁷. Within this landscape, the foundation of the OOF Gallery in London (2021) stands as an emblematic development – the first gallery entirely dedicated to the relationship between contemporary art and football. Emerging from the earlier experience of *OOF Magazine* (2017), founded by critic Eddy Frankel together with Jennie and Justin Hammond, the gallery was built on the premise that football constitutes a powerful collective emotional experience – beyond mere aesthetic representation. OOF Gallery invites artists to approach the game as a metaphor of shared sensibilities, identity tensions, and collective emotions, through exhibitions, events, and publications featuring figures such as Emile-Smory Fofana, Jeremy Deller, Martin Parr, and Corbin Shaw. Alongside its curatorial programme, Frankel and the Hammonds organised events such as a five-a-side football tournament, involving leading London institutions including the Lisson Gallery, Tate, and Christie’s. At the second edition in 2023, staged at the N17 Arena – part of the Tottenham Hotspur Stadium complex – the Tate emerged as the winner. The trophy, designed by artist Mark Wallinger, was awarded by former Spurs captain Ledley King. Through this interplay of institutions, practices, and languages, football has achieved a stable place within the geographies of contemporary art, consolidating its legitimacy as a field of cultural and symbolic production.

8. The establishment of the gallery and the urban regeneration plan

OOF Gallery is located within the Tottenham Hotspur Stadium, housed in the historic Warmington House. The gallery is accessed through the stadium’s retail store, and it is not insignificant that Justin Hammond himself has long been a season ticket holder at Tottenham, underscoring the biographical and affective entanglement with the club. From the perspective of its relation to the “social world”, OOF Gallery occupies a pivotal position within the intersection of the art and football, as it was an integral component of the urban regeneration programme that accompanied the construction of the new stadium and the redevelopment of its surrounding area. The new Tottenham Hotspur Stadium exemplifies a broader trend towards “integrated” stadiums, where, as Tosi argues, “the stadium becomes a part of the city and the city enters the stadium” (Tosi, 2018, p. 51). From the outset, the Tottenham project was conceived not simply as the replacement of the historic White Hart Lane, but as one of the most ambitious football-related regeneration schemes in Europe – capable of profoundly reshaping the social and economic fabric of the borough. Launched as the *Northumberland Development Project* in the late 2010s, the scheme responded to Tottenham Hotspur’s ambition to build a modern, competitive stadium, in line with developments already undertaken by other clubs such as Manchester City and their North London rivals Arsenal. However, the project extended far beyond the stadium itself, encompassing an extensive urban transformation of the surrounding area. From the beginning, the process encountered significant opposition: from businesses and residents affected by compulsory purchase orders, to concerns regarding the loss of historic buildings, rising gentrification, reductions in affordable housing, and the impact on traffic and

⁷ For the preparation of this article, I conducted an interview with Caterina Avataneo, Assistant Curator of the exhibition, who provided valuable insights into the genesis of the project, the criteria guiding the selection of artists, and the process through which relationships between artists and football players were established.

neighbourhood quality of life (see Report 2015). Multiple rounds of authorisation were required, with successive revisions to the masterplan. These changes included expanding the stadium's capacity to over 62,000 seats, creating new public spaces, and integrating cultural and commercial facilities. Like many regeneration plans affecting historically or culturally significant districts, the Tottenham project placed particular emphasis on art – both in terms of architectural heritage and as a core element of urban and social regeneration policy. In this respect, the 2015 *Strategic Planning Application Stage 1 Referral* of the Greater London Authority (GLA) provided the then-mayor Boris Johnson with a framework for evaluation. The report described the intervention area in detail. On the western side of the stadium, at the corner of High Road and Park Lane, stood the club shop, while further north, at 744 High Road, was Warmington House – a three-storey brick and stucco building dating from around 1828, listed as Grade II (of national historic and architectural interest). At the time, the building was vacant and shuttered. It was incorporated into a multi-use zone designated as the “Tottenham Experience (Sui Generis)”, which included “museum and learning facilities, including a Museum of Tottenham Heritage, and a Club Museum.” (Report, 2015, paragraph 27). The report repeatedly emphasised the significance of art and cultural heritage. Paragraph 49 explicitly situated the project within the *Upper Lee Valley Opportunity Area*, recognising art and culture, alongside sport and tourism, as strategic functions of regeneration. This framing reveals how the relationship between football and art was embedded within a holistic regeneration agenda. After years of appeals and negotiations, final approval was granted in 2015, paving the way for construction to begin the following year. The new stadium was inaugurated in 2019. Two years later, in 2021, OOF Gallery opened its doors in Warmington House.

9. The exhibition “The Art of the Football Scarf” and the solo show “It’s the Hope That Keeps Us Here”

In recent years OOF Gallery has developed a programme that operates fully as an “institution” of contemporary art. Alongside its exhibitions, the gallery runs a residency programme that provides artists with the possibility to live and conduct research on site. On the curatorial level, OOF’s programme is both rich and complex, offering several critical and artistic insights. An exemplary case in this regard – one that I discuss here also due to my direct involvement as a selected artist – is the exhibition *The Art of the Football Scarf*, held from 4 November 2022 to 25 February 2023. The collective exhibition brought together a group of mainly emerging artists, many of whom were not formally represented by galleries. It was the first OOF show to articulate itself on two levels internal to the contemporary art system: on the one hand, a collective exhibition; on the other, a solo show by an established artist, Mark Titchner, who in that same year had been shortlisted for the Turner Prize, the most prestigious award in British contemporary art. The lower floor of Warmington House hosted his solo exhibition *It’s the Hope That Keeps Us Here*, where Titchner reworked visual languages taken from football fandom and coaching manuals, transforming them into immersive installations composed of mirrors, video, and sound. In doing so, he explored the internal communication systems of football and how these are reflected – literally – into everyday life. Titchner’s project also included an intervention

that strikingly crossed the creator/audience axes of the cultural diamond. Working with the football scarf as concept, Titchner – an artist usually associated with large-scale installations – re-laborated the motto *We Believe in Us*, shifting it from the scale of a scarf to that of an environmental installation. During the Premier League match between Tottenham Hotspur and Leeds United (12 November 2022), the phrase was broadcast across the LED screens and digital structures of the Tottenham Hotspur Stadium, effectively turning the game into a collective art installation⁸. As reported in *The Art Newspaper*, this was the first time an artist had displayed work during a Premier League match⁹. The effect was to blur the conventional boundaries between art and football space, embedding the artwork directly into the live fabric of the event. The meanings generated here are multiple and intersect across different axes. In English football culture, unlike in Ultras traditions, banners are not an essential element of fan scenography. Many fanbases support their teams primarily through scarf displays, although “patches” – small banners – belonging to individuals or groups are also present. In several new English stadiums, such as Manchester City’s Etihad, horizontal LED screens have increasingly been used not only for commercial purposes but also to display virtual patches. While the appropriation of advertising formats by artists to subvert or reframe their messages is hardly new – Barbara Kruger and Group Material’s anti-AIDS campaigns in New York are notable examples – what was innovative here was the live remediation between football fandom and the commercialisation of football within a neoliberal framework (P. Kennedy & D. Kennedy, 2016) where the distinction between supporter and consumer becomes increasingly blurred. Between the collective and Titchner’s solo project, the intersections of the art/football become particularly visible. The football scarf, on the one hand, belongs to the world of fandom – not merely as a merchandising object but as a tool of collective agency. On the other hand, its artistic reworking relocates it within an authorial dimension closer to the creators. Indeed, the football scarf had already appeared in the work of artists such as Maurizio Cattelan and Aurore Le Duc, while Corbin Shaw has more recently focused on “patches.” The collective *The Art of the Football Scarf* therefore explored fandom’s collective dimension through an artistic, bottom-up perspective, working around a shared theme. Almost one hundred scarves, made by dozens of artists, were suspended from the ceiling and walls of the gallery, echoing the way scarves are displayed in pubs, fan group headquarters, or bedrooms. Among the participants were David Shrigley, the Guerrilla Girls, Babak Ganjei, Gray Wielebinski, Aurore Le Duc, and Bedwyr Williams. Some artists, such as Joe Richardson, expressed a genuine interest in football not only as a sport passionately followed but also as an established cultural language. His scarf *There’s always a next week* – also worn at Cheltenham Town matches – referred to the club’s run of eleven games without scoring, equalling records held by Coventry (1919–20) and Hartlepool United (1992–93). The phrase, as Richardson explained, came from the spontaneous shout of a supporter during a match: a fragment of football orality transformed into an artwork.

⁸ News of Titchner’s intervention is also reported on Tottenham’s official website, reinforcing the connection with the artistic initiatives promoted by OOF Gallery: <https://www.tottenhamhotspur.com/news/2022/november/mark-titchner-brings-celebration-of-football-fandom-through-art-to-n17-this-winter/> (last access 28th September 2025).

⁹ Full article at: <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2022/11/18/oof-turns-premier-league-football-match-into-a-mass-art-installation> (last access 28th September 2025).

10. The role of cultural intermediaries

Although the central focus of this contribution is to highlight the emergence of a new connection between football and art – one oriented towards a progressive process of systemic structuration – it is nevertheless necessary to pause on a figure that takes shape precisely within the spaces of intersection between these two realms: that of cultural intermediaries (Bourdieu, 1984; Negus, 2002; Heinich, 2012). In this respect, a particularly significant role is played by OOF Gallery, which operates as an actor positioned between the field of contemporary art and that of football. The language, positioning, and institutional credibility of OOF Gallery are grounded in an artistic foundation already fully legitimised within the contemporary art system. Drawing on Bourdieu's formulation, cultural intermediaries occupy a position in which 'jobs and careers have not yet acquired the rigidity of the older bureaucratic professions' (Bourdieu 1984, p.151). Access to such roles occurs predominantly through networks of relationships, shared values, and common life experiences, rather than through meritocratic mechanisms based on formal procedures of evaluation and recruitment. As shown above, the British art–football nexus is structured, on the one hand, by the cultural production of the contemporary art world and, on the other, by an emerging demand for cultural content within football itself. The actors revolving around OOF Gallery, as well as the artists involved in the Manchester exhibition curated by Hans Ulrich Obrist, belong to a shared artistic ecosystem capable of ensuring recognition, continuity, and symbolic stability. It is within this framework that the work of OOF Gallery assumes relevance as both a mediating function and a crucial node in processes of legitimation. In his work on cultural intermediaries, Keith Negus questions the extent to which these actors are creative, active, and reflexive, drawing on earlier studies of those occupying so-called *boundary-spanning roles* – a term introduced by Paul Hirsch (1972) in a series of works on the music, publishing, and film industries. Hirsch conceptualised the relationship between production and consumption through the metaphors of filters and flows, relying on the notion of the *gatekeeper*. As Negus observes, one of the most significant contributions of this strand of literature lies in demonstrating how the production of symbolic materials is often the outcome of established routines that require limited effort in terms of research and innovation: the updating of pre-existing content, the rewriting of familiar forms, and the reuse of tested formats and narrative schemes. Such routines render work more manageable by enabling actors to cope with temporal pressures and production constraints, while introducing a degree of predictability that encourages adherence to formulas that have already proven successful. Although this body of literature may initially appear distant from more recent debates on cultural intermediaries, it proves crucial for understanding the professional practices of this class fraction. It suggests that a substantial portion of work related to symbolic goods and services unfolds through adherence to genre conventions and standardised formulas, operating predominantly within – rather than across – organisational boundaries. It is precisely within this tension between habit and innovation that the activity of OOF Gallery can be located. Its work consists in transferring the modalities of artistic production into the football world, while simultaneously working on the legitimation of artworks through the legitimation of the field that hosts them. In this sense, the artwork gains recognition when it is inscribed within the symbolic space of the Premier League, and more specifically within a

London-based club that is central yet not part of the top-tier sporting elite, such as Tottenham, and that is undergoing a phase of identity reconstruction. It is precisely this condition of transition and openness that makes possible a renegotiation of the club's image, creating margins for artistic practices to intervene as devices of reinterpretation and re-signification. The examples analysed here explicitly operate through the transfer of competencies and dispositifs specific to contemporary art into the ordinary universe of football, with its rituals, symbolic figures, and sites of sociability. The exhibition devoted to scarves, the insertion of Titchner's slogan into the LED displays of Tottenham's stadium, and the very location of the gallery within the stadium complex all constitute elements of a broader process of re-signification and legitimation. Within this intertwining of art and football, it is the parameters of the artistic field – rather than those of the footballing world – that function as criteria of recognition. Consequently, legitimacy is not granted to the artist who has supported a club for the longest time or to one who has experienced a stadium ban (*DASPO*) – forms of symbolic capital internal to ultras culture – but rather to those who already possess consolidated recognition within the art system, a structured exhibition history, and insertion within an internationally articulated critical discourse¹⁰.

Conclusions

The convergence between football and contemporary art, examined through the analytical lens of Griswold's cultural diamond, reveals a dense and dynamic set of intersections. What emerges most clearly is that these two realms – once considered irreconcilable – have increasingly overlapped by virtue of their capacity to operate as cultural objects within systems of meaning that are simultaneously symbolic and relational. In this process, the axes of the diamond – creators, receivers, and the social world – are progressively redrawn. Clubs and players are no longer merely agents of sporting production but also figures embedded within a broader cultural economy; fans are no longer only supporters but also consumers and interpreters; and institutions – museums, galleries, media organisations, and brands – mediate these relations by conferring legitimacy, visibility, and value. Within this renewed relationship between art and football, at least two distinct interpretative trajectories can be identified. The first, which may be described as *football-based*, emerges paradigmatically in the case of F.C. United of Manchester. From this perspective, artistic practice and cultural production more broadly function as tools through which questions of identity and belonging can be re-signified and negotiated. Art enables actors within football cultures not merely to endure the processes of globalisation passively, but to adopt an active position, capable of producing, articulating, and controlling their own narratives. At the level of the imaginary, the encounter with artistic production also serves to construct a symbolic differentiation from a football system increasingly perceived as mechanised, hyper-spectacularised, and socially depleted. A second trajectory, which may be defined as *art-based*, instead interprets artistic practice as a product internal to the very neoliberal football system that

¹⁰ *DASPO* (*Divieto di Accedere alle manifestazioni SPORtive*) is an administrative preventive measure introduced in Italy in the late 1980s and subsequently reinforced through various legislative amendments. It allows public authorities to prohibit individuals identified as posing a risk to public order from attending sporting events, primarily football matches, for a specified period of time. Although formally framed as a security instrument, the *DASPO* has acquired a strong symbolic meaning within football cultures, particularly among organised supporters, where it functions as both a marker of repression and, in some contexts, a source of subcultural recognition and legitimacy.

a significant portion of contemporary fandom explicitly seeks to contest. In this configuration, new cultural intermediaries become possible precisely within a football world that is increasingly exclusive. The entry of contemporary art – coinciding with rising ticket prices, the construction of new stadiums, and the growing economic valuation of football as a cultural industry – appears to contribute to the maintenance of selective boundaries of access and inclusion. Rather than opening its symbolic and discursive horizon to new publics, this integration risks reproducing long-standing social divisions and hierarchies. It is true that the contemporary football audience is “new” when compared to that of thirty years ago, and even more so to that of the 1950s, which largely rejected the hybridisation of cultural languages and displayed a marked distance from artistic practices. Yet this audience cannot be considered genuinely new when viewed in relation to the art world. As football has been transformed into a fully-fledged spectacle – partially stripped of its twentieth-century identity matrices and its historical popular embeddedness – the language of contemporary art becomes intelligible and legitimate precisely because it is already familiar to more affluent social groups, who share its codes, symbolic repertoires, and modes of cultural consumption. At the same time, this intersection between art and football is far from dichotomous or crystallised. On the contrary, it remains in a phase of active development and ongoing redefinition. The cultural diamond proves particularly effective in capturing not stable positions, but shifting relations, allowing us to observe how football and contemporary art reconfigure each other across different axes of production, reception, and institutional mediation. The English case examined here demonstrates how the expansion of an economic system grounded in continuous symbolic consumption – and in the construction of identity as an increasingly individualised process – has brought together worlds once perceived as distant, as already anticipated by the 1953 *Football and the Fine Arts* exhibition. From the early 2000s onwards, artistic interest in football has taken on a more systematic and reflexive form. Players such as Zinedine Zidane have come to embody not merely sporting icons, but symbolic figures operating within a global field of meaning. In this sense, Gordon and Parreno’s *Zidane: A 21st Century Portrait* exemplifies football’s transformation into a cultural symbol embedded within a relational system of creators, receivers, and the social world, each continually shaping and influencing the others. The encounter between art and football does not therefore entail the erasure of their differences, but rather rests on their shared capacity to function as symbolic dispositifs within a neoliberal economy of images. Art and football intersect insofar as both are able to condense meanings, circulate globally, and produce imaginaries that exceed their original contexts. The “football turn” in contemporary art can thus be understood as the outcome of this mutual contamination: a process in which the cultural diamonds of art and football overlap, generating a hybrid field in which the symbolic logics of both are rearticulated and brought into convergence, producing a cultural ecosystem in its own right. From this perspective, the joint study of art and football offers a privileged vantage point from which to observe broader dynamics of cultural production in late modernity: the circulation of objects across fields, the reconfiguration of meanings, and the ways in which practices once considered marginal or merely popular have become central to the symbolic economies of the present.

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