The Trequartistas of Culture

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Alexandra Pirici & Jonas Lund, *N Football*, Allianz Arena, Public Art Munich, 2018.

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Many people in contemporary artistic and cultural milieus are quick to dismiss football, and sports in general.[1] "Don't you know they are reactionary through and through, dominated by racists, nationalists, awash in corruption, captured as tools for sports-washing by dictators and oligarchs?" they ask. And sure, that's not incorrect. But it also misses the point. Football functions as a stage for capture by these forces precisely because of its affective intensity, because of the way it resonates with millions, because of the stories and dramas it allows people to inhabit. As Gabriel Kuhn argues in *Soccer vs. the State*, the instrumentalization of football has little to do with football, but rather with the tendency of the powerful to "instrumentalize everything, including sports, arts, and consumer culture."[2] That is why the game matters—not despite its susceptibility to reactionary capture, but because of it. Football is, as Dimitri Shostakovich famously put it, the ballet of the masses. It's always already an aesthetics. It's riven with its own version of the undercommons, its own forms of study, as Stefano Harney and Fred Moten might remind you while chatting in the stands or watching a match at the pub.[3] It's a choreography of collective desire, a theater of anticipation, a dramaturgy unfolding in ninety-minute arcs. Shostakovich himself staged this entanglement directly in *The Golden Age*, a 1930 ballet where football becomes the medium through which the stakes of fascism and anti-fascism are played out, refracted through cultural and political

change.[4] In this sense, football has always been more than football. To forget this history is to forget that the game is already an art form, already a field of politics, already a battle of imagination.[5]

In short, the connection between art and football isn't a tenuous one. Both require an excess of vision: to see not only what is, but what could be. Both operate through collective affect, mobilizing crowds, shaping atmospheres, generating myths. The player who slips a pass on an impossible angle is not far from the artist who shifts perception, puncturing consensus reality. Both acts are irreducible to their execution; they resonate in the reverberations they unleash among those who witness them. And yet, art and football are also terrains of enclosure, of commodification, and spectacle. Stadiums and galleries alike are architectures of control, engineered to capture attention, to extract value from desire. Consequently, both spheres of practice engender insurgent modalities of organization—whether artist-run spaces and the collective production of art, or anti-fascist soccer clubs and "relationist" styles of play.[6]

Three-sided football was devised by the Danish Situationist Asger Jorn to explain his notion of triolectics, which was his refinement on the Marxian concept of dialectics, as well as to disrupt everyone's general idea of football.

With this in mind, I wasn't surprised when Factory International in Manchester put on the exhibition "Football City, Art United" in August of this year. Curated by Hans Ulrich Obrist (together with Spanish midfield great Juan Mata), the show paired footballers and artists to make new work together: anti-fascist Manchester United hero Eric Cantona with Ryan Gander, Japanese midfielder Shinji Kagawa with Chikyuu No Osakana, Lioness Ella Toone with the artist collective Keiken, and more. But I was left wondering what this framing—football as art, art as football—makes possible and what it might foreclose. The curatorial spine of the project rests on the figure of the *trequartista*: the creative midfield playmaker situated just behind the strikers. Neither midfielder (the beating heart of the on-field formation) nor forward (the one who finishes the job by scoring goals), the *trequartista* is less a position than a zone of possibility. They are the one who sees the game otherwise, who anticipates movements that have not yet unfolded.[7] The exhibition suggests that this role can be a metaphor for conceptualizing how art and football might collide: the artist as playmaker, redistributing attention, reconfiguring the rhythms of spectatorship, offering passes into spaces not yet visible. But what if we take this seriously—not as a metaphor, but as a method? What if, as many have done before me, we begin from the notion of football as a mass choreography?

Football as Medium

To ask what art and football can learn from each other is also to ask how each might unlearn itself, and how they might sabotage their own capture. Perhaps the more pressing question is not how art and football collaborate under the sign of "creativity," but how they both refuse the conditions that reduce creativity to spectacle. Walking through the exhibition with my son, I sensed the tension between these possibilities. For him, football is still a language of invention, a

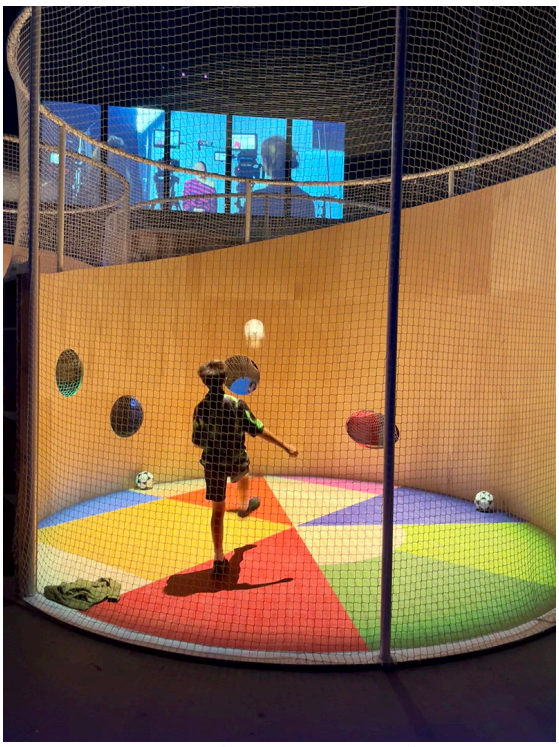
field of becoming where imagination can run without limit. For the institution (whether the museum or FIFA), it risks being reduced to a vector of cultural branding, a fresh pool of affects to be monetized. The challenge, then, is whether the function of *trequartista*, this promise of visionary play, can slip free from its enclosure, and whether the strange encounter between art and football can open new passing lines across the wider field of social imagination. You might describe this as Rancière on the pitch.

In moments of constraint, uncertainty, or political crisis, the relationship between the histories of football and art become visible. Artistic modalities have refunctioned the game, smuggling new forms of politics and aesthetics into its spaces, transforming matches, terraces, and stadiums. Tactical innovations, supporter culture, grassroots organizing, and artistic experimentation have regularly converged to make football not merely a spectacle, but a medium through which new forms of life, solidarity, and resistance might be rehearsed. In a short essay like this it would be impossible to trace the full archive of such gestures, which spans decades, continents, and countless overlapping currents of activism, artistry, and athleticism, but each instance offers lessons in improvisation, collective intelligence, and ethical engagement—proof that football can be more than the sum of its goals, scores, and media narratives.

It is enough, then, in this context, merely to gesture toward a few of these examples, to indicate the kinds of resources that might be drawn upon to think football otherwise, and to see what is possible when the game is approached not solely as entertainment or commodity, but as a living canvas for experimentation, solidarity, and critique. In attending to these traces, we learn to recognize the latent potential in the structures, rhythms, and spaces of the sport, potential that can be activated in our own times by those willing to read between the lines of play, and to act creatively in the interstices where football, culture, and politics meet.

The War Machine Plays Football

I grew up in the suburban US in the 1980s and '90s uninterested in football, or any sport at all. To me sports appeared boring, conservative, reactionary, and part of a cultural formation that seemed intent on disciplining the body and dulling the mind. Instead, I drifted into the minor currents: marginal arts, obscure subcultures, philosophy, radical politics. And yet, decades later, living in the UK, I find myself the father of a son who has gone completely football mad. His passions, unlike mine at his age, orbit around matches, players, scores. In following him, I found myself learning not only the rules of the game but the histories of anti-fascist stadium terraces, the ways music and art have long inflected the so-called beautiful game, and the moments when football has been a stage for collective invention as much as corporate spectacle.



From exhibition *Football City, Art United, 2025. Co-curated by Juan Mata, Hans Ulrich Obrist and Josh Willdigg.*

Why then does the notion of bringing these two worlds together seem to be a novel idea, which felt very much like a key if unstated assumption informing the "Football City, Art United" exhibition? As if art and football had not already, for decades (perhaps centuries), braided themselves through one another. As if the pitch had not already functioned as a site of poetic gesture, mythic enactment, or political struggle. Indeed, there are real risks in staging art and sport as if they were distinct, hermetically sealed realms, only to then undercut that distinction playfully. It feels uncannily like the way every avant-garde formation throughout the twentieth century felt the need to ritualistically insist that art and everyday life are utterly separate in order to then heroically bridge them, as if for the first time. This gesture, repeated to exhaustion, ends up reproducing precisely what it claims to dismantle: a tired version of the high/low culture divide, reiterated only so that one can appear radical in overcoming it. We are living through a moment when populism and neofascism are not lurking at the edges but very much on the rise, if not already consolidated, in the US and across much of the world. In that context, how we think about the entanglements of art and football is not an idle curiosity, but a matter of politics.

Take, for instance, Italy's opening match of the 2020 European Championship (played in 2021 due to the Covid-19 pandemic). In the aftermath of Italy's commanding 3–0 victory over Turkey, Italian journalist Fabio Caressa declared with evident pride, "We are a war machine." The phrase circulated quickly, invoked to describe the fluency and dominance of the team's play. On one level, it was simply metaphor: a flourish to mark how well one group of twenty-or-so footballers and coaching staff performed against another. But what if we took it otherwise? What if we took it literally—or at least theoretically literally—in the sense of Deleuze and Guattari's "war machine?" They used this term to describe not as a state apparatus bent on destruction, but a form of exteriority to the state, a force that operates in smooth space. To recast a football team in this way is to see it less as an instrument of national representation than a collective assemblage of desire, an apparatus of experimentation, a body moving at once within and against the rigidities of state capture. If that is possible, then perhaps anti-fascist football cultures, with their banners, chants, and aesthetics, can be understood as contemporary war machines: not armies, but forms of resistant collectivity that invent and inhabit spaces of transformation. An army potentially able to fight against the state's war machine, rather than for it.

Workers, Exiles, and the Politics of Play

Przemysław Strożek has undertaken invaluable work to excavate the buried histories where sport and the avant-garde once moved in tandem, revealing intersections that conventional narratives of athletic culture have largely ignored.[8] His meticulous research into the International Workers' Olympiad of the 1920s and '30s, organized by trade unions and socialist parties, illuminates a period in which sport was not merely a stage for nationalist spectacle or the emerging machinery of corporate sponsorship, but could instead be envisioned as an instrument of social imagination and collective emancipation.[9] In this context, the Workers' Olympiad was a deliberate counterpoint to the fascist co-optation of sports cultures and a space in which bodies could be trained not for militaristic-mimicking discipline but for solidarity, resilience, and shared experience. Through its events, festivals, and gatherings, it imagined a world in which movement and labor, play and politics, could be intertwined, where the shaping of the body was inseparable from the shaping of community and consciousness. Yet today, these experiments in embodied culture have been almost entirely effaced from public memory, overshadowed by the triumphalist narratives of the modern Olympics as the inevitable culmination of global sport. Strożek's work reminds us that this erasure is not inevitable but contingent, and that the history of sport is far richer, and more radically imaginative, than the familiar tales of medals, records, and spectacle would suggest.

El Lissitzky, *Footballer*, 1926.

And yet, even if submerged, such histories have left traces, visible in the very tactical DNA of football itself. The evolution of the game over the past century can be read not only as stories of athletic skill and institutional development but also as histories of flight, exile, and inventive adaptation, shaped in large part by the necessity of escaping fascism. The tactical revolutions that emerged from the cafés and clubs of Vienna, Budapest, and other Central European centers in the interwar years were the product of Jewish intellectuals and coaches who treated football as a space for experimentation, reasoning, and collective intelligence. They questioned the rigid hierarchies of traditional play, sought fluidity in movement, and imagined positional systems that allowed for improvisation, creativity, and a deeper orchestration of space and tempo. When the rise of fascism forced these coaches and thinkers into exile, their ideas traveled with them. As Jonathan Wilson details in *Inverting the Pyramid*, this diaspora carried innovative approaches across Europe and eventually to South America and beyond, seeding transformations that would remap the global game.[10] Hungary's deep-lying forwards, Austria's intricate short-passing systems, and the tactical flexibility pioneered in Vienna cafés all became threads

in a broader tapestry, influencing a new understanding of football as a living art form. The spread of these ideas was entangled with the pressures of survival, the need to negotiate new social and cultural contexts, and the ethical impulse to craft forms of play that valued intelligence, cooperation, and subtlety over brute force or authoritarian discipline. The tactical DNA of the game still bears the fingerprints of these displaced thinkers, whose innovations remind us that the story of football is inseparable from broader histories of migration, persecution, and cultural transformation.

Consider Gusztáv Sebes, who in the 1950s developed what came to be known as "socialist football," a philosophy of play premised on equality across the team: no single star, but rather a collective where roles are fluid, interchangeable, and dynamic. This approach prefigured what would later be celebrated as "total football."[11] Under Sebes, the Hungarian national team became a near-mythic force, embodying a cooperative, mobile, horizontal distribution of responsibilities. These genealogies remind us that tactics (whether sporting or political) are never neutral. They are not merely technical adjustments for maximizing efficiency, but crystallizations of political and cultural forces.

Another forgotten genealogy emerges in the work of François Tosquelles, the Spanish psychiatrist who fled fascism to France and, at the famous asylum of Saint-Alban, developed what came to be known as institutional psychotherapy.[12] In an echo of how the golden age of Danubian football was ended by the rise of fascism leading to its transfusion around the world, Tosquelles was trained by psychiatrists who fled Vienna. Football was not incidental here; it became a method, a practice through which patients and staff could engage with one another differently. The pitch became a space of relationality, a means of reorganizing power within the institution, loosening the rigid hierarchies that defined psychiatric care. Frantz Fanon, trained at Saint-Alban, absorbed these lessons.[13] When he later worked at Blida-Joinville in Algeria, Fanon had football pitches built for his patients, carrying forward Tosquelles's insight that the game could function as a therapeutic medium, a way of reconfiguring bodies, affects, and relations. Here, football becomes praxis: a collective experiment in mental health, anti-colonial struggle, and new forms of subjectivity.

This thread has not disappeared. Today we see it resurfacing in community football initiatives designed for refugees, asylum seekers, and survivors of trauma. The game is used as a means to combat isolation, to provide a structure for care and belonging, and to create a common language where other forms of communication falter. Match days can provide a form of stability and consistency in lives that are otherwise very unstable. Football therapy projects—whether in war zones, refugee camps, or urban peripheries—carry forward the same intuition: that the collective rhythms of play can reweave the psychic and social fabric, that movement and imagination together can open passages where words alone fail.[14] This is not to romanticize. Football can as easily exacerbate the very hierarchies it sometimes dissolves. The same structures that enable belonging can also enforce exclusion, discipline, and violence. But to ignore its therapeutic potential, or to cede the terrain entirely to reactionary forces, would be to misunderstand its power. The game's affective intensity—its capacity to draw bodies and minds into synchrony—will always be mobilized. The question is toward what ends.

This insight resonates strongly in the Italian context of the 1970s, when the currents of autonomia—the wide-ranging social movement encompassing countless organizations and spontaneous eruptions of militancy—spilled directly into stadiums. The ultras (football's well-organized fan groups), which are today caricatured as "apolitical" hooligans or reactionary mobs, were initially forged through the radical energies of the far left. They were not merely groups of fans but experiments in collective organization and self-expression. They invented chants, created banners, and organized rituals that transformed the terrace into something like a theater of counterpower.[15] Antonio Negri, for example, was among the early organizers of AC Milan's ultras, helping to shape a culture in which passion for the game was inseparable from a commitment to collective action and horizontal politics. Over time, as stadium culture was commodified and the original energies depoliticized, these formations became

increasingly disconnected from their roots, but their genealogy still reveals the latent political potential embedded in football.

Paolo Sollier, both a player and a writer, offers a particularly vivid articulation of this intersection in his memoir *Kicks, Spits, and Headers*.[16] Sollier played for several Italian clubs while remaining committed to far-left politics and framed football as a terrain of both resistance and education. For him, the pitch was never neutral: it could be a site for asserting dignity, for performing solidarity, and for enacting a politics of everyday life. His alignment with the autonomous left is evident not only in his personal engagements supporting labor struggles or his participation in grassroots organizing, but also in his approach to the game itself, which he treated as a medium for collective intelligence, strategic thinking, and emotional release. His contract at Perugia stipulated that for every goal he scored, the club had to take out a subscription to the radical newspaper *Avanguardia Operaia*.

Jean-Baptiste Ganne, *Ball Drawing*.

To attend to these radical genealogies is to see that any embodied social practice is never just what it appears to be on the surface. Like many social performances, football is a space where mental health, collective joy, radical politics, and authoritarian capture collide. It can be a sanctuary and a battleground, a site of healing and of injury, a theater in which the body in motion resonates with the body politic. From the terraces of 1970s Italy to the pitches of Central Europe, from the Workers' Olympiads to the cafés of Vienna and Budapest, football continually embodies both the capacities and the contradictions of collective life, offering a lens through which to witness how culture, ideology, and physicality are always entangled.

Grassroots Infrastructures

When Dutch footballer Ruud Gullit won the coveted Ballon d'Or trophy (aka "best individual player of the year") in 1987, he used the global stage to dedicate the award to Nelson Mandela, still imprisoned at the time, and to the struggle against apartheid. This gesture was emblematic of a broader understanding of sport as inseparable from social and political consciousness, no matter how much cynical politicians try to claim that sport and politics are unrelated when it suits their neocolonial allegiances. Just a few years earlier, Gullit had recorded the song "South Africa" with the reggae band Revelation Time, lending his celebrity to the sonic and cultural circuits of anti-apartheid resistance. In doing so, he transformed football from a spectacle of individual achievement into a vector through which political solidarity and cultural expression could converge, demonstrating that athletic visibility could be leveraged to amplify voices and causes beyond the pitch. In his book *How to Watch Football*, Gullit begins with a deceptively simple injunction: to truly understand football, one must learn to look away from the ball.[17] The drama, he insists, unfolds in the spaces often ignored

by spectators and cameras alike: the unmarked runs, the shifting positions, the tactical geometries that shape the flow of play long before the ball arrives. Here, football becomes a lesson in attentiveness, patience, and spatial intelligence. What matters most often happens at the margins of visibility, in movements that escape immediate notice yet determine the possibilities of attack and defense, coordination and disruption.

This insight has broader implications beyond the tactical analysis of football. Just as Gullit's activism reminds us that athletic fame can be mobilized for political ends, his emphasis on the off-the-ball dimensions of the game encourages us to attend to the invisible currents that structure both sport and social relations. In football, as in social struggle, the most decisive forces are rarely those in the spotlight; they are the subtle alignments, the strategic anticipations, the collective rhythms that give shape to outcomes before they manifest. Gullit exemplifies a vision of sport in which brilliance is measured not only in goals or accolades but in awareness, foresight, and the capacity to act in solidarity with forces larger than oneself—in underlining the inextricable relations between the pitch and the rest of the world.

The conjunctions of football, art, and politics operate in much the same way. Just like a subtle brushstroke or an understated musical motif can shift the viewer's perception, small tactical adjustments and unremarked solidarities on the pitch can transform the logic of the game. To perceive this requires a shift in spectatorship: a cultivated sensitivity to what is latent, what is forming, and what might yet become. In this sense, the political and the aesthetic share a structural logic. Both unfold across networks of relations rather than through isolated heroic acts. Both demand attentiveness to rhythm, alignment, and potentiality. And both suggest that true power resides in the capacity to orchestrate, respond, and create conditions in which collective intelligence, freedom, and new forms of life can emerge. Football, in this light, becomes not only a site of play but a lens through which to apprehend the dynamics of social imagination itself.

Banner at a Clapton match in 2019. Photo: Stevphen Shukaitis.

We can see this in recent examples that exceed the well-rehearsed headlines of sports and politics. Take Clapton Community Football Club in East London, a breakaway team that emerged from the disillusionment of local supporters frustrated with the governance of their club.[18] From the outset, Clapton CFC positioned itself as a site of anti-fascist community building. Their kits, designed in homage to the Spanish Republic, became unexpectedly iconic, selling in such numbers that the revenue enabled them to buy back their ground, a near-miraculous feat in the hyper-commodified real-estate landscape of London. Here football functions as a cultural infrastructure through which new forms of collective social life can be built. Clapton's example resonates with a broader constellation of clubs where supporters have mobilized around anti-racist and anti-fascist principles.

In Germany, FC St. Pauli has long been recognized for its radical fan culture, where leftist politics, punk music, and antidiscrimination activism are embedded into the fabric of match-day life.[19] In Bristol, the Easton Cowboys and Cowgirls[20] similarly illustrate the fusion of football and political engagement.[21] Emerging from the anarchist Class War Federation in the 1990s, the Easton Cowboys have built a culture rooted in anti-capitalist, anti-fascist, and DIY principles. Their

matches foster a space where political consciousness is inseparable from play. Perhaps most strikingly, the internationally famous street artist Banksy once played as their goalkeeper, a little-known fact that underscores how these grassroots cultures circulate quietly, outside mainstream recognition, even as they intersect with global cultural figures. More recently the global "Show Israel the Red Card" campaign calls for the suspension of Israel from FIFA and UEFA until it complies with international law and ends its violations of Palestinian rights. Emerging from the broader Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions movement, the campaign mobilizes athletes, fans, and human rights advocates to highlight how sport can be complicit in systems of oppression. By invoking football's disciplinary symbolism, the campaign turns the red card into a gesture of global solidarity and accountability.[22]

In Italy, clubs such as Livorno and Bari have historically attracted ultras aligned with communist and anti-fascist traditions. Football stars such as Cristiano Lucarelli exemplify this intersection of football, politics, and culture. A lifelong supporter of Livorno, Lucarelli has consistently foregrounded leftist politics throughout his career, using his platform to express solidarity with anti-fascist and labor movements. His engagement resonates with broader cultural networks, including the Luther Blissett project, a collective pseudonym (named after the legendary Watford striker) adopted by artists, writers, and activists in the 1990s to challenge dominant media narratives and explore experimental forms of intervention. Through this connection, football is linked to a wider avant-garde and anarchist sensibility.

There are many smaller grassroots outfits across the world that have nurtured terraces where banners, chants, and rituals explicitly assert opposition to racism, xenophobia, and authoritarianism. Supporter groups do more than decorate the terraces: they build mutual-aid networks, organize cultural events, campaign for social causes, and transform ordinary matches into occasions of political education and creative expression. Across these examples, it is evident that the game can function as a site of invention, where the choreography of bodies on the pitch intersects with the choreography of ideas, ethics, and collective action off it.

The lesson in all of this is not that *suddenly* football intersects with art and politics, as if for the first time. The more radical claim is that football has always already been an aesthetic form, a political stage, and a medium of collective invention. What is at stake is the capacity to perceive what is already moving away from the ball, in the margins of attention, and to amplify it into something transformative. This is where the figure of the *trequartista* returns as more than a metaphor. The visionary playmaker does not simply orchestrate from the center; they are the ones who see passing lines where others see congestion, who imagine spaces that do not yet exist, who translate the noise of the crowd into a rhythm of invention. Football is never just football. It is always a site where bodies converge, where stories are told, where communities are made and unmade. In a moment of resurgent fascism and authoritarian populism, to recognize the off-ball play of football—as aesthetics, as politics, as collective therapy—is to grasp how even what appears to be just a game might serve as a field of resistance, a training ground for imagination, and a space of becoming otherwise.

Notes

1 "Soccer" for the US reader. Ironically, and despite what is commonly thought, "soccer" was originally a British word, a shortening of "association football" via the habit of linguistic shortening that was trending around Cambridge and Oxford during the late nineteenth century.

2 Gabriel Kuhn, *Soccer vs. the State: Tackling Football and Radical Politics* (PM Press, 2019), 59.

3 Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study* (Autonomedia, 2013).

4 For more information, see →.

5 Chris Lee, *The Defiant: A History of Football Against Fascism* (Pitch Publishing, 2022).

6 For more on this see Minor Compositions podcast episode 19, "Emergent Assemblages of Relationist Football," which features an in-depth discussion with academy coach Jamie Hamilton.

7 For an explanation of this position, see →.

8 *Sport and the European Avant-Garde* (1900–1945), ed. Przemysław Strożek and Andreas Kramer (Brill, 2022).

9 Przemysław Strożek, *Picturing the Workers' Olympics and the Spartakiads: Modernist and Avant-Garde Engagement with Sport in Central Europe and the USSR, 1920–1932* (Routledge, 2023).
10 Jonathan Wilson, *Inverting the Pyramid: The History of Football Tactics* (Orion Books, 2014).
11 Jonathan Wilson, *The Names Heard Long Ago* (Blink Publishing, 2019).
12 *Psychotherapy and Materialism: Essays by François Tosquelles and Jean Oury*, ed. Marlon Miguel and Elena Vogman (ICI Berlin Press, 2024).
13 Camille Robcis, *Disalienation: Politics, Philosophy, and Radical Psychiatry in Postwar France* (University of Chicago Press, 2022).
14 Examples of projects like this include Klabu →, Common Goal →, War Child →, Soccer Without Borders →, and the Homeless World Cup →.
15 Tobias Jones, *Ultra: The Underworld of Italian Football* (Head of Zeus, 2019).
16 Paolo Sollier, *Kicks, Spits, and Headers: The Autobiographical Reflections of an Accidental Footballer* (Autonomedia, 2022).
17 Ruud Gullit, *How to Watch Football* (Viking, 2016).
18 See →.
19 Carles Vinas and Natxo Parra, *St Pauli: Another Football is Possible* (Pluto Press, 2019).
20 See →.
21 Will Simpson and Malcolm McMahon, *Freedom Through Football: The Story of the Easton Cowboys and Cowgirls: Inside Britain's Most Intrepid Sports Club* (Tangent Books, 2012).
22 For a history of football in relation to Palestine see Nicholas Blincoe, *More Noble Than War: The Story of Football in Israel and Palestine* (Constable, 2019).

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