

Rejoicing in each other's presence

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I haven't been to a football game in years. Not that I was ever a big fan, but for a long time (more or less throughout my childhood) football was the territory through which to experience my relationship with my father. I remember very well—I must have been 6 or 7 years old—the evenings spent on the sidelines watching him play. At that time, he was a former player lent to amateurism, to five-a-side football with friends, and to the after-work gathering. Family legends told of a wasted talent whose face had even come out in a local newspaper—the yellowing clipping is kept in one of the tin boxes in which we file, to this day, the traces of our family history. As I followed my father's figure with my eyes and watched the gestures of the jerky bodies, the excited tone of voices, and the adrenaline sizzling on the grass, I understood what it means to believe in something and (literally) sweat to get it, the joy of sharing and the hard work required not to fail.

As I grew up, my focus on football gradually softened, and perhaps my focus on my father did as well. But, when I was about 18 to 20 years old, this team game brazenly re-entered my life for a much more pragmatic reason: my uncle ran the sale of a merchandising stand, the kind you find in front of stadiums, and more specifically, the Juventus's stadium. To make financial ends meet, I started working behind that counter on weekends, and it was there that I first saw the disruptive force of the fans: the group that moves like a wave, or rather, like a swarm. The absolute unconditional love for something you believe in, and the complete devotion to something that is other, that is more than you, an ideal, a representation. Something like a spiritual connection, a religious calling. The passion I saw, consumed on the concrete walkways in front of Juventus stadium, was made of anticipation, of choruses, of rituals, and of great little glimpses of animalistic humanity. There I learned that football is a window into human behavior.

So it is not surprising to me that Vincen Beeckman, indulging his unorthodox approach to the relational power of the image, in his latest project *Royale Charleroi Sporting Club* places his magnifying glass on the social dynamics underlying the world of football. This body of work is a multifaceted reconstruction of the history of the football team of Charleroi, Belgium, which interestingly wears black-and-white striped T-shirts inspired by those of Juventus team, but unfortunately fails to achieve the same international football success as the Italians.

Through archival materials, interview excerpts, and newly-realized photos, Beeckman assembles a composite portrait of the various elements that gravitate around the life of a football team, where players and fans play the leading roles. As is usually the case in his practice, photography is not enough on its own, so there are texts and graphic elements that recur to render a layered vision of the subject he's portraying. The result is a kind of vernacular archaeology, made up of decomposable fragments that overlap in a visual din echoing the background buzz that covers the stadiums.

One might ask what is the role of photography in this latest project. The most obvious answer would simply be that of a telling, a testimony, or a documentation. Of course, it could be those things, or

rather, it could be seen as a process of sharing, an act of relating through which to rework the image—and history—of an identity group, as sociologist Pierre Bordieau wrote in 1965: “Photography itself is most frequently nothing but the reproduction of the image that a group produces of its own integration.” Indeed, here Beeckman acts as a facilitator, stitching together a collective scrapbook, where the city’s history is intertwined with that of the people.

What surprises me most about each of Beeckman’s projects is that, despite the fact that they are stories extremely circumscribed in time and space (often his projects are developed locally on very specific topics), their genuineness and directness manage to touch something inside each of us. Perhaps because, quite simply, they speak of humanity. That real, somewhat animal humanity, that is made of stimuli, impulses, reactions, connections, and the possibility of rejoicing in each other’s presence

Since the days when I was a little girl watching her father play football from the sidelines, when faced with this project I wondered if that’s what football is all about after all: the happiness of coming together and understanding each other. Well, I now think it is, and it is good to rediscover it through photography.