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Works of Fine Arts as Sources for Sport-Historical Research.

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(The [web-links](#) refer to the addresses <www.claustiedemann.de/> <www.sport-geschichte.de/> and <www.kulturwiss.info/>, the documents to be found in the respective directory .../tiedemann/documents/)

Following the lucid polemic pamphlet of the American philosopher Harry G. Frankfurt, I daringly claim that there is a widespread mentality of "bullshit"¹ in sport science as well as in art science. I would say, that most scholars of these disciplines follow the mentality of "anything goes" and do not profoundly care what is "the truth". The main support for my thesis is the fact that only very few scientists in the realms of art and sport consider it necessary clearly to conceptualise the object of his (or her) science by giving their definition of art or sport.

I consider the reflection about the basic concepts of this workshop, "art" and "sport", to be a necessary prerequisite for seriously speaking and writing, at least in the scientific realm. So I'll present my definitions of sport and art, discuss the relationship between these areas and prove especially the benefits that sport historians can derive from their knowledge of works of fine art. I'll try to show as well the risks by discussing some artworks well known in sport history.

In the Anglo-American area, many authors meet the general requirement for scientific knowledge presenting their definitions of both art and sport. I am thinking of art scientists like Maurice Mandelbaum², Robert J. Matthews³ and Robert Stecker⁴, and sport scientists like Richard D. Mandell⁵, Michael B. Poliakoff⁶, and last but not least Allen Guttmann⁷. I criticise some of them as well, but I respect them as authors, with whom I can argue. The opposing position is represented by Graham McFee⁸.

In the German area, the sport scientific mainstream avoids or refuses at all to define the central term "Sport", represented by Peter Röhlig and Robert Prohl (the editors of the authoritative German dictionary of sport science)⁹, Gunnar Drexel¹⁰, and Klaus Willimczik¹¹.

¹ Frankfurt (2006).

² Mandelbaum (2005) (first 1965).

³ Matthews (2005) (first 1979/80).

⁴ Stecker (2005) (first 1997).

⁵ Mandell (1984).

⁶ Poliakoff (1989).

⁷ Guttmann (2004).

⁸ McFee (2004).

⁹ Röhlig / Prohl (2003), p. 493-495.

¹⁰ Drexel (2003).

¹¹ Willimczik (2007).

¹² Volkamer (1984, 1987).

Only Meinhart Volkamer¹², Sven Güldenpfennig¹³, and Christiane Eisenberg¹⁴ offered arguable definitions of sport. In art science it's mostly the same situation: The "Nestor" Ernst H. Gombrich¹⁵ refused to define art, Wolfgang Ullrich¹⁶ declares it necessary, but gives no own attempt, while some authors, many of them outside the academic scene, try to do their best, for example Judith Siegmund¹⁷ and Gottfried Renz¹⁸.

The scientific dispute with the authors and actors of the cited "bullshit" and conceptual arbitrariness has to be passed on a different, higher level: on the philosophical, conceptual level of epistemology and theory of language. I can not discuss this here in detail, but only briefly summarise some aspects of it.

The so-called "linguistic turn" caused a decisive change in a fundamental philosophical question since the beginning of the 20th century. While philosophers once asked about the nature of things, what they are, linguists now began to ask the question, why things were named how, denying the existence of real things outside their linguistic representation.

Mainly Ludwig Wittgenstein developed these ideas especially in his "Philosophical Investigations"¹⁹, published 1953 after his death. In his wake, many scientists set forth the general thesis, that it were not possible to define terms, and trying it wouldn't be a good idea.²⁰

I do doubt, whether the concept-skepticists can rightly refer on Wittgenstein at all, and I'm not the only one.²¹ Because Wittgenstein in his "philosophical investigations" formulates unclearly and even contradictorily; therefore, interpreting his text is very risky. He wrote, for example: "(... And therefore a definition usually does not suffice to this; and less than ever the statement, a word were 'undefinable'.)" (#182). His philosophical object is "the actual use of the language", which "the philosophy... in no way (is allowed to) touch"; "she leaves everything as it is." (#124). He formulates his claim, similarly hybrid like in the "Tractatus": "The clarity for which we strive is, however, a perfect one." (#133)²²

Most "Wittgensteinians"²³ assume that - like the concept "game" ("Spiel"), on the basis of which Wittgenstein developed his thoughts²⁴ - also "art" and "sport" are concepts with "family resemblances"²⁵, "concepts with blurred edges"²⁶; admittedly, one *might* define them,

¹³ Güldenpfennig (1996).

¹⁴ Eisenberg (2004).

¹⁵ Gombrich (1996).

¹⁶ Ullrich (2003, 2006, 2007).

¹⁷ Siegmund (2007).

¹⁸ Renz (2011).

¹⁹ Wittgenstein (2003).

²⁰ cf. especially Drexel (2003).

²¹ cf. Schulte (2003), especially p. 296 ff.

²² Wittgenstein (2003); English translations by me, C.T.

²³ This wording does not claim, that there were not considerable differences among the followers of Wittgenstein.

²⁴ Wittgenstein (2003), # 65 ff.

²⁵ Wittgenstein (2003), # 67.

²⁶ Wittgenstein (2003), # 71.

but only "for a particular purpose"²⁷; this were useful only for those, who "draw the sharp line"; for communication, however, it were a "hopeless service", (to look) "in the aesthetics... for definitions"²⁸. Wittgenstein considers the everyday use of language²⁹ an untouchable³⁰ standard for his considerations. But the problem is, that for scientifically researching and publishing people the every day language is too imprecise and risky in many respects.

Wittgenstein himself in his "remarks" plays gambling, that the "language game" ("Sprachspiel") with the word "game" simply is (merely) a game, too. It is hardly to find out when Wittgenstein argues seriously, when playfully, when as *advocatus diaboli* or *alter ego*, when as a serious philosopher.

In his typically enigmatic way, Wittgenstein expressed himself in a "remark" of his "Philosophical Investigations" (# 77) about conceptual problems of aesthetics: He calls it "a hopeless task": "Everything is correct - and nothing." "And in this situation is e.g. the one who searches for definitions in aesthetics, or ethics, which correspond to our concepts."

The "Wittgensteinians" deny the sense, even the possibility to define "sport" as well as "art". But the semantic philology in Wittgenstein's succession has not been undisputed in the art science, especially in the USA. The already mentioned Mandelbaum, Matthews and Stecker defended the essentialistic position, that it is possible and necessary to formulate what "art" is. I agree with them in general, even if there are many points to be criticised, e.g. Matthews' attempt to give a "minimal definition of works of art" - without defining the term "art"!³¹

I claim, that the answer to the question "*What is art?*" is just as possible, meaningful, useful, and necessary like the answer to the question "*What is sport?*". The German editor of the texts of Mandelbaum and others, Reinhold Schmücker, stated in his introduction: "For to determine the purpose of art and be able to justify scales for the assessment of art, we have to know what art is according to its nature."³²

Here is my suggested definition of "art":

"Art" is a cultural activity field, in which human beings strive to express both their feelings and thoughts by means of either a work of their own or a performance, founded on their individual gifts, abilities, and skills. If expressed by a work (object) to be perceived by other people after completion, it is called "fine art"; if expressed by a performance requiring

²⁷ Wittgenstein (2003), # 69.

²⁸ Wittgenstein (2003), # 77.

²⁹ Wittgenstein (2003), # 116 ff.

³⁰ Wittgenstein (2003), # 124.

³¹ Matthews (2005), p. 113: "*An artwork is, whatever relates in a suitable way to the paradigms of art - even if we do not know, and perhaps never will know, which is the suitable relation to the paradigms, that artworks must show.*" (This English wording is my re-translation of the German translation of R. Bluhm!) In this "minimal" definition (whatsoever the meaning of "minimal" might be) there is a crucial mistake of philosophical "craftmanship": the word (or word component) "art" (-work) to be defined occurs in the definition; thus it is circular.

³² Schmücker (2005), p. 7.

the actor's living body, it is called "performative art".³³

You can read about the single elements of this definition of "art" on the internet - currently only in German. Proudly I can add, that my "outsider" definition is highly ranked by Google's search engine and others, but this shows only that nearly no art scientist contributes to the central theme of his/her science.

Since, as sport historians, we want to deal with the value of "art" as a historical source, the limitation to works of "fine arts" seems to me reasonable, since from my point of view artistic performances have no value as sources for sport history, even if they have in the slightest to do with sport (or movement culture). Only works of "fine arts", especially of visual arts, can be considered and used as sport-historic sources.

Since I have already used the terms "sport" and "movement culture", I have to present my definitions:

"Sport" is a cultural activity field, in which human beings voluntarily establish a relationship with other people for to compare their respective abilities and accomplishments in skilled motion - according to rules set by themselves or adopted, basing on the socially accepted ethical values.³⁴

Just as about "art", you can read about the single elements of this definition of sport and the following one on the internet.

You can see that my sport concept is much narrower than in everyday language. It excludes e.g. activities such as jogging, walking or health gymnastic. Since these are activities that have been and are still regarded as worth treating in sport science, I extend my professional viewpoint as a sport scientist by the term "movement culture". My definition is:

"Movement culture" is an activity field, in which people deal with their nature and the environment, consciously and deliberately developing, shaping, and representing their particular physical skills and abilities, in order to experience a meaningful individual or collective benefit and enjoyment that is significant to them.³⁵

In sum, both fields of activity, sport and movement culture, for me are the legitimate subject matter of sport science, which abridgedly may be named so because of its simpleness.

³³ see <.../kunstdefinition.html>.

³⁴ see <.../sportdefinition.html> and <.../sportdefinitionEnglish.html>.

³⁵ see <.../bewegungskulturdefinition.html>.

For me, therefore, it is not a reproach on sport scientists because of illegitimate occupation, if, for the sake of clarity, I say, that certain facts for me can't be assigned to sport but to movement culture.

These terminological clarifications in mind, I'll shortly discuss the general relationship between "art" and "sport", in particular the question, whether sport is an art or a kind of art. The discussion of this question traces back to the French author Pierre Frayssinet³⁶. He stated in 1968 sport to be the eighth art besides the seven traditional arts (poetry, sculpture, painting, architecture, dramatic art, music and dance), and, to be more precise, one of the "fine" arts, not an performative one. The "work", that an athlete were "creating", "*l'Œuvre athlétique*", were an artwork like each other of the fine arts. Frayssinet even granted a material (ontic) character to this "work". Frayssinet's in my eyes daring thesis basically suffers, that he did not clear his concept of "art".

Another image or metaphor in this field is the "affinity" of "sport" to "art". This is often justified with especially the numerous works of the antique Greek art with sporting scenes as motives. Of course "affinity" is not the same as a presumed equality of sport and art. Maybe in this sense, Pierre de Coubertin introduced art-competitions at olympic games, which, however, have not gained permanent acceptance.³⁷

The identity of sport and art also sometimes is justified, because there are actually creative requirements in some sports, e.g. in figure skating and gymnastics. Not accidentally, the German words for these "sports" contain the German term "Kunst" (i.e. "art"): "*Eis-Kunst-Laufen*", "*Kunst-Turnen*". As a former gymnast ("*Kunst-Turner*"), I remember well the aesthetic challenge to "create" or "compose" an optional exercise. I admittedly did not feel as an artist on that occasions, but maybe I was too modest?

To be serious again, there are two German authors, who answer the question, whether sport is an art or a kind of art, in the affirmative: Sven Güldenpfennig and Hans Lenk.

Güldenpfennig claims to have justified this, but in the sixth of his nine criterions for this thesis, I cannot agree with him, when he writes: "In this world reigns the primate of aesthetic design."³⁸ This is applicable to the entire art, but not to the entire sport. There is no aesthetic design e.g. in a dash or a rowing match. Since all criterions must be given, his thesis, that sport is an art, fails in this.³⁹

Lenk has come to an interesting variation looking at the relationship between sport and art. After a detailed discussion he first comes to the result, that there is no identity of them. However, one could understand "features of sport better ..., if one uses characteris-

³⁶ Frayssinet (1968).

³⁷ Kramer 2004.

³⁸ Güldenpfennig (2004), p. 94.

³⁹ Cf. Pawlenka (2004).

tics of art as an interpretation model".⁴⁰ But underhandedly Lenk turns away from the classic catalogue of the already mentioned seven "fine arts" (poetry, sculpture, painting, architecture, dramatic art, music and dance) to a somewhat younger, also classic catalogue of the seven "liberal arts".

These "arts" (*septem artes liberales*) have been summarised in Roman times as "trivium" (grammar, rhetoric and philosophy) and as "quadrivium" (arithmetic, geometry, music and astronomy). Before the Romans canonised these seven liberal arts, "gymnastic" was also counted as such "art", for example by Plato and Aristotle. This leads Lenk to the idea to understand "sporting and gymnastic skills ... as the eighth liberal art"⁴¹. But Lenk's sophisticated line of thought lacks clarity: The term "art" in this thought is on a different level as in his previous argumentation; here it does not refer to "art" in general, but to "art" as a label for cultural faculties.

Lenk could have avoided this aberration, if he had strived for a clear definition of "art". Then he would have had to look for the generic term (the "*genus proximum*" in the classical Aristotelic way to define a term) of - in this case - "art". As art is a word with many meanings, this is the first important step of clarification. I chose "cultural activity field" as generic term. Lenk in his line of thought implicitly chose somewhat like "cultural faculty"; of course this implicit decision leads to a different understanding of "art". After that first step (choosing the generic term), one has to clarify what distinguishes the cultural activity field "art" from other cultural activity fields, i.e. to name the speciality of the term to be defined (the *differentia specifica*). Thus, a classical definition is built up.

So Lenk's first insight remains: There is no identity between art and sport. For me, both are cultural activity fields, but they differ specifically, as I denominated in my definitions.

Following, I discuss the epistemological and methodological aspects that historians generally (and thus also sport historians) should know and take into account, if they want to use works of fine arts, especially of visual arts, as sources. Here I refer in particular to the methodological statements of Heike Talkenberger⁴², Peter Burke⁴³ and Bernd Roeck⁴⁴ as general historians and to the sport-historians John Bale⁴⁵ and Douglas Booth⁴⁶, with whom I agree in most points.

Like the mentioned authors I regard it possible and desirable to make better use of visual sources for the historical research.

Sport-pictures are used in many sport-historic publications only as illustrations, as adorning accessories. They often have little reference to the text, if at all. Even the estimable sport-

⁴⁰ Lenk (1985), p. 107.

⁴¹ Lenk (1985), p. 114.

⁴² Talkenberger (1998).

⁴³ Burke (2001 resp. 2003).

⁴⁴ Roeck (2004).

⁴⁵ Bale (2002).

⁴⁶ Booth (2005).

historian Hajo Bernett in his book "Track and Field Athletics in Historical Pictorial Documents"⁴⁷ has not taken into account all methodological principles yet, to say nothing about other German authors like Diem, Eichel et al., Ueberhorst or Umminger in their sport-historical books.

This is an opportunity thrown away for sport-historians; because after a thorough examination of artworks many an interesting information can be won, that does not come out from other source-types (especially texts).

Pictures can convey true or false information. In sport history Greek vase paintings are highly estimated as sources. The German Wolfgang Decker 1995 stated:

"There are copies with sport representations, whose beauty and excellence of the motif satisfy the highest demands. ... There are artists at work who understand something of sport, who as competent viewers in the urban life of Athens always had the opportunity to study their subjects. This can be universally generalised for the whole area of sport and art in Greece."⁴⁸

2012 Decker again praised the expertise of the ancient vase painters.⁴⁹

This in my eyes naive, careless position meets severe contradiction by the German archeologists Martin Bentz⁵⁰ and Ulrich Sinn, who rejected the reality-hypothesis 1999: "Unfortunately this idea does not apply. It is a characteristic feature of Greek art that it is far from all attempts to catch reality authentically in the images."⁵¹ In 1996, Sinn formulated in a sharper way: "We must accept the fact that out of the ancient world of images we can take only little insight about performing the sports."⁵²

Let me test your acuteness, asking you, what is false in the following picture, a painting on an Panathenian prize amphora of the fifth century B.C.⁵³ [-----?-----]



The way those men are running is unrealistic: they run ambling. When going or running ambling, arms and feet of each side both are moved forward resp. backward; with each step, the torso must turn as a whole; hip and shoulder turn parallelly. When walking or running "naturally", arms and feet of each side are moved against each other; with each step, hip and shoulder screw against each other.

In most ancient (vase-) paintings, the runners are represented this not realistic way. It was apparently chosen for traditional and aesthetic reasons of the ancient artists, by the way, already in the Egyptian culture. The painters wanted to show especially the muscular chest

⁴⁷ Bernett (1986).

⁴⁸ Decker (1995), p. 194 (my translation, C.T.).

⁴⁹ Decker (2012), p. 154.

⁵⁰ Bentz (1998), p. 86.

⁵¹ Sinn (1999), p. 76.

⁵² Sinn (1996), p. 155.

⁵³ Panathenian prize amphora, ca. 530 B.C., New York, Metropolitan Museum #14.130.12.

of the male athletes straightly to the visitor's eyes, apparently (also) in a physiologically incorrect position - not to mention the position of the thighs, in most paintings purposefully giving a free look to the male sexual organ. Those paintings supported the ancient Greek culture of nudity and eroticism in the "gymnasium" ("gymnos" meaning naked).

So, by this first paradigm, it should be clear that the cultural background of those antique paintings must always be in the mind of the historian to avoid simple realism-illusions.

Now, I'll try to show some other methodological needs and opportunities by the example of a well-known photograph: The high jump of a Tutsi in the year 1907. This picture was first published in the report of Adolf Friedrich Duke of Mecklenburg about his expedition to the "inner Africa". It has been reproduced many times.⁵⁴



Schprung eines Tutsi (2,50 m). Kamerun.

Following the caption under the image, most of the sport-historians uncritically adopted Mecklenburg's "informations"⁵⁵, esp. the cleared height of the shown leap: 2,50 m. This would have ranged far above the actual world record at that time: 1,94 m.

This lighted the fantasy of those "Mtussi" or "Watussi" (today: "Tutsi") as "imagined Olympians", to cite Bale's book title.

The first, who published doubts about it, was Peter Rummelt⁵⁶. By technical considerations and certificates, he reduced the presumably cleared height to 1.84 or 1.89 m. He branded Mecklenburg's report simply a "pretence of false facts". This seems for me rather exaggerated and doubtful, if one looks at the two persons with hats beneath the rope. Nevertheless, it's a good try to proof an other special aspect of this picture. Besides, Rummelt denoted it "nonsensical" to call this leaping a "sport". So do I. In my eyes it pertains to "movement culture".

Aimable Ndejuru, a sport scientist from Rwanda, as well as later John Bale and Douglas Booth, examined more accurately the cultural background of the event. Ndejuru was the first to name it by its Rwandian words "gusimbuka urukiramende". It was a ritual activity. "Gusimbuka" means high jumping, "urukiramende" means the dismissal of the parental family, the acknowledgment as an adult man.⁵⁷

The young male elite of the Tutsi - called "intore" - practised the ability documented by this photograph (and later on by many others), to jump at least their own not inconsiderable height (as adults allegedly by 2 m or more), because its proof was a part of the transition rite, by which they won the recognition of the community as an adult man. About this abil-

⁵⁴ cf. <.../VortragWien2006Englisch.pdf>

⁵⁵ Mecklenburg (ca. 1909), p. 102 - 126, esp. p. 113; the discussed photograph is printed on p. 115.

⁵⁶ Rummelt (1986), esp. pp. 86 - 92.

⁵⁷ Ndejuru (1989), p. 448.

ity, extremely astonishing from a European point of view, they didn't make a lot of fuss outside this rite. They made no athletic competition out of it, neither among each other nor with somebody else so ever. They just learned and practised it, and they even demonstrated it when requested by the colonialists, but not more.

Additionally, Bale has scrutinised the snapshot - and many others likely - according to (almost) all rules of art. He shows how a photograph, to which authenticity is naively granted, must be "read" critically, if one wants to understand all meanings contained in it and conveyed by it.

This photograph, after Bale, is a testimony of a European, colonialist gaze on the "natives", who got some physical abilities or skills in their "wildness", that appeared highly surprising and thus documentation worthy to the "civilised" colonial sirs. Furthermore, by publishing and featuring such pictures, the Europeans fostered the image of the Tutsi as corporeally and socially superior to e.g. the Hutu, which could have been "of any serious significance to the causes of the post-1959 tragedies and the Rwandian genocide".⁵⁸ This is a further reflection on the potential impact of this photograph, not on its content in a closer sense, which for me as a historian has priority.

I still would like to add a small aspect to Bale's analysis: On the printed photograph, that I scanned from Mecklenburg's book of about 1909, a small sign of initials is to be seen in the corner below right, which unfortunately has been omitted at all reproductions known to me in sport-historical publications, even in Bale's book (p. 111).



It's the sign of the retoucher, placed in the photograph's negative as a stamp, as it was usual in that times. Besides, also the frame is such an addition of the retoucher. This shows a high estimation of this picture. And it is a testimonial for the circumstance, that at least important photographs, in this case glass plates, which had to get through a long expedition trip, at the then state of technology were "refinished" a little before taking copies. Of course this generally may imply reductions to authenticity, in this actual case probably negligible. At that time, the professionals handled it openly and honestly, and therefore this sign of the retoucher (and the frame) should not be cut away at reproductions.

This however still seems harmless regarding the present-day possibilities of digital picture manipulation. To return to the basic terms, this photograph for me is not an artwork but at most a craft work, taken to document a wondrous, astonishing (in European eyes) example of corporeal fitness.

At the end of my presentation I'll take a critical look on an two works, that are represented in many art-historical and sport-historical publications and meant to be artworks.

First, the so-called Bikini-girls, a ground-mosaic in a room of a villa near Piazza Armerina in

⁵⁸ Bale (2002), p. 169.

Sicily, Italy.

Most of the sport historians in past and present classify the activities depicted as sport, most of them even as incomplete pentathlon! Still 1999, French Jean-Paul Thuillier⁵⁹ held this opinion, although some years before in a journal, to whose scientific advisory board Thuillier belongs, the German Martin Dolch⁶⁰ in detail and length had shown, that this is a depiction of dietetic exercises for a young girl or lady. Hard to believe: There exists already a detailed, critical investigation on this artwork, and then it's simply passed over! By the way, this mosaic is an object of movement culture and therefore a legitimate topic of sport history.



My last instance is the famous "discobol of Myron", more precisely: one of six found replications in marble. My picture shows the so-called "Lancelotti"-copy, found 1781 in Rome, exposed in the Museo Nazionale Romano, Palazzo Massimo alle Terme. The origin was a bronze sculpture from ca. 460 B.C., multiple mentioned in antic texts, but lost. So immediately the question of authenticity raises.



In this case, it's a question of several elements of the shown work. Reconstructed are parts of the torso, head, feet, trigger finger of the left hand, and right arm with discus. Other copies show the head bent down, not rotated to the right. Of course we cannot be sure to have a realistic depiction of the discus throwing movement, but above all, it's a stunning beauty.

This very sculpture became one of the most illustrious artworks and experienced an extraordinary aftermath. You may know, that 1936 Leni Riefenstahl in the prologue of her (first) film about the olympic summer games in Berlin ("Feast of Peoples") showed this sculpture, then fading to a sportsman posing like this sculpture.



In 1937/38, German "Führer" Adolf Hitler caused the Italian "Duce" Benito Mussolini to sell this sculpture to be exposed in the Munich Glyptothek. 1948 it had to be refunded. The German sport historian Hajo Bernett in detail related about the aftermath of this famous artwork.⁶¹



Finally, I would like to summarise by an appeal:

⁵⁹ Thuillier (1999).

⁶⁰ Dolch (1992).

⁶¹ Bernett (1991); cf. Brands (1990), p. 104/105.

First: In the scientific fields of sport and art we should combat against the "bullshit" of arbitrariness! Fundamental standards should be respected, especially the standard to develop and use one's own individual terms, clearly defined, useful definitions. It costs intellectual exertion, I do know, but it's worth the trouble.

Second: Works of fine arts can be used as rich historical sources, when they are scrutinised in all directions: how they were made and handed down, what they show (or mask) and why, what they were used for, etc. In sport history there is a lack of many fundamental standards, but the means to better this are already available. It's our task permanently to develop the methods and contents of our scientific realm.

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