

Artletics

An exhibition curated by
Didier Morelli

January 19 to March 30, 2024

ARTEXTE

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Foreword

During a work meeting with Didier Morelli, he said something that's been on my mind ever since: "Sports are everywhere." I couldn't agree more. On the radio every morning, they talk about the Alouettes, the Canadiens' umpteenth loss, the next Olympic games, or the very faint possibility the Nordiques may return to Quebec City. As I eat breakfast, I learn far more about the world of sports than about the world of art. I'm not surprised, or course; it's always been that way.

Writing about sports doesn't come naturally for me, unlike Didier Morelli. In fact, it's been a favourite subject of his for years now, both as a writer and a curator. However, I *did* try my hand at it once. In 2005, Dare-Dare had asked me to write a text on their *Expo-Sport* project at the Downtown YMCA, where the artists were presenting their work in the Y's common areas. The idea behind the project was to bring art to non-art spaces. My thoughts about sports at the time still resonate today:

"Whether we like it or not, sports occupy a central place in our society, either through the many television ads promoting the benefits of physical activity or through sporting events that temporarily fill the airwaves. Sports, in all of its possible forms, brings people together, sparks debate, and arouses our passions."¹

I also thought about Matthew Barney, the former university football player turned artist and filmmaker, whose series of films *The Cremaster Cycle* I remember watching when they were released between 1994 and 2002. Out of curiosity, I wanted to see what he was up to now and came across a recent *New York Times*² article titled "Back in the Game," discussing his new video installation *Secondary* (2023), which looks at the spectacle of

1 With artists Belinda Campbell, Manuelle Gauthier, Mathieu Latulippe, Frédéric Lavoie, Martin Lord, and zipertatou, <https://bit.ly/4azMuvl> (accessed November 28, 2023).

2 Siddhartha Mitter, "Back in the game," *The New York Times*, May 14, 2023, <https://nyti.ms/3Rz3IR9> (accessed December 12, 2023).

violence spreading throughout the US and its parallel manifestation in professional football. In this way, Barney uses the sport he once played as a mirror of the society in which he has evolved, leveling his own critique in the process.

In *Artletics*, Morelli offers an overview of practices by artists who examine the world of sports through a variety of approaches: by showing bodies in action, by discussing performance and competition, by sharing skills, by creating a link to the community, by revisiting memories, by moving from the collective to the individual, or by evoking the clan, group, or family. The presence of the Olympic torch, conceived by the artist and industrial designer Michel Dallaire, reminds us that sports are also a means of transmission, a memory object, much like our collection at Artex. Here, people can come up with a research path that will guide them along any number of potential trails, making each user a long-distance runner in the making.

- Manon Tourigny

Translated from the French by Jo-Anne Balcaen

Artletics

I have always wanted to be an athlete. One of my first memories of this is of the 1996 Olympic Games in Atlanta. Each evening, my parents and I watched the track-and-field events on our small, rabbit-eared colour television. Living up in the country for the summer, we wiggled the antenna a few inches left and right, trying to find a clear image for either of the two local broadcasters: the CBC or Radio-Canada. Yes, the splendour, the brute strength, and the prowess of boundless endurance lured me, but it was also the pageantry that made me fall in love with the sports, athletes, and narratives we followed zealously for those two weeks.

My father, ever the artist, helped me produce a series of watercolour flags for each of the countries competing in the men's 100-metre final. When Donovan Bailey won, setting a world record, I ran around our house screaming with pure, unadulterated joy. Despite the televisual fuzz, that victory is seared in my memory: Bailey's mouth agape and eyes wide open in amazement, gold chain taut around his muscular neck, bald head glistening, left hand pumping upward with a clenched fist and right hand stretched out, fingers splayed. During the medal ceremony, I stood on a small stool, hand over my chest, as "O Canada" resounded across the stadium. I was transfixed by this part of the ritual: impressive displays of orchestrated patriotism produced by oversized flags rising slowly behind Bailey as our national anthem played. I had never seen anyone so beautiful, never felt anything so powerful. I was six.

Artletics comes from my fascination with sports, with the myth and desire surrounding the figure of the athlete that I have constructed over the years. Much like the visual arts, which have always been part of my life, play has also been at the forefront of my identity. During my childhood, my parents' weekends visiting galleries were carefully planned around my complex soccer schedule. When I grew older, the time I spent in the studio or in writing had to account for my daily two-hour training run. Somewhere along the way, these pursuits started to bleed

into each other, the lines between them having become blurred by their many aesthetic, kinaesthetic, and embodied overlaps.

My research at Artexte led me to focus on finding out how other artists, curators, and writers share this passion, how they embrace the realms of sport and play as a territory to draw from, intervene in, and channel through their practices. When I began my residency, I typed "sports" into the centre's search engine, e-artexte, and found barely twenty-five entries. Unsure about how to move forward, I started working alphabetically through the Canadian Arts section, one folder at a time. The result was dumbfounding. For each box I pulled from the shelves, usually containing three or four artist dossiers, I would find at least one sport reference: a repurposed bicycle frame in a kinetic sculpture, a tennis ball perfectly placed by a photo-conceptualist, or countless references to hockey sticks, pucks, and cups. By the time I made it to the letter E, I had put aside more than fifty items.

In my scavenging, there were pieces I knew I wanted to locate from the outset, by iconic artists who, throughout their careers, have centred the relationship between sport and art. Like West Coast artist Anna Banana's performances titled the *Banana Olympics*, a series of unusually modified, aestheticized, and impossible track-and-field events that attracted more than a hundred participants in San Francisco in 1975, and again in Vancouver in 1980. Works like these underscore how sports come with complex intersectional legacies. Unapologetically feminist, critical of the unbound nationalism and capitalist absurdism of the Olympic Games, the *Banana Olympics* highlight how athletics are inherently political, a reflection on the societies that celebrate them and a locus for the most pressing and divisive questions of our time. Sports expose the utmost beauty of our culture and its deepest ugliness, and artists have always been equipped to help us see this.

When I began preparing for *Artletics*, I also anticipated that certain elements might be missing from Artexte's holdings. As Joana Joachim's exhibition *Blackity* (2022) demonstrated, historically marginalized communities are often less present in institutional collections for

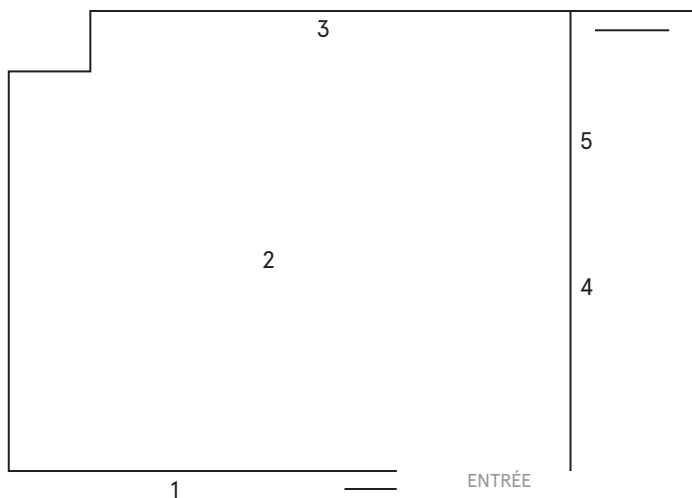
numerous reasons, including their erasure from major Western canons. It was always my intent to explore how Black, Indigenous, and other nonwhite artists have used athletics and play in their practices, often as a means of asserting a certain visibility or to celebrate their cultural identity against the racist paradigms and colonial tropes found throughout the wide world of sports. A postcard of Lori Blondeau's *Lonely Surfer Squaw* (1997) is especially striking in this regard. The artist asks us to rethink the common phrase "stick to sports," which solicits professional athletes to refrain from political or cultural commentary—as though sports somehow exist apart from real life. The strength and importance of Blondeau's contribution to the exhibition also makes me ask what other voices might not be present in the collection that could further our reflection.

Visitors to *Artletics* may also be surprised to find Michel Dallaire's emblematic Olympic torch and Paul Boulva's Lotus chair, both conceived for the 1976 Olympic Games in Montreal. While my father grounded me in the art world, my mother's career path as a design curator showed me that everyday objects have more than a functional use; they are also aesthetic/political entities worthy of exhibition. These two items are a reminder that sporting events have shaped Quebec design throughout the decades, in addition to dictating the very architecture of our cities. This exhibition ties together the Olympic Stadium and Melvin Charney's *Corridart* (1976), the ghosts of the Montreal Forum and the woes of the Centre Vidéotron in Quebec City, as part and parcel of a culture defined by its athletic dreams: its vision of greatness for itself and its fear of the loss of identity or *patrimoine*.

Adding a new voice to Artexte's sporting heritage, the exhibition also includes documentation of Florencia Sosa Rey's performance work *FatherDaughter* (2022), which she presented at Phi Foundation. An accompanying photograph, which the artist used to promote the event and which shows her, in her youth, together with her father on a soccer pitch in Montreal's Saint-Michel neighbourhood, brings me joy. In it, I see myself, rooting for Donovan Bailey in our living room or charging down the right wing of a soccer field. I played for the same club as Sosa Rey and, like hers, my father was my coach. In

FatherDaughter, I observe many of the elements I cherish about the crossovers between art and sport: inter-generational transmission and nostalgia, passion and love, masculinity and vulnerability, loose play and improvisation, as well as politics and culture enmeshed in a choreography of moving bodies. As Sosa Rey and all the artists in *Artletics* show us, sports are ubiquitous in our contemporary society, markers of our individual values and gauges of our collective beliefs. Sport is everywhere at Artex-te—you just have to look for it.

- Didier Morelli



1. Olympic Torch

Michel Dallaire

1976

Courtesy of Parc Olympique
de Montréal

5. Olympische Spiele 1976

François Morelli

2011 – 2016

Folio of 310 collages and stencil
and spray-ink drawings

2. Lotus Chairs

Paul Boulva (Artopex)

1976

Courtesy of Parc Olympique
de Montréal

3. FatherDaughter

Florencia Sosa Rey

2022

Colour audio, mp4

41 min. 20 sec.

Photo: Olga Rey

4. Private Collection

Arièle Dionne-Krosnick and

Didier Morelli

c. 1972 – 2017

Varied mediums and dimensions

Biographies

Didier Morelli is a postdoctoral fellow in the Department of Art History at Concordia University. At its peak, his twenty-year career as an amateur youth soccer player saw him play for three teams simultaneously, changing from one kit to the other between tournaments in the back of his mother's Volvo 240. He holds a PhD in performance studies from Northwestern University (Illinois) and his work has been published in *Art Journal*, the *Canadian Theatre Review*, *C Magazine*, *Esse arts + opinions*, *Frieze*, *Spirale*, and *TDR: The Drama Review*, among others. In his twenties, Morelli developed a passion for competitive running until a knee injury forced him to cease all athletic pursuits and re-evaluate his relationship to his body and to sport more broadly. In addition to serving as curatorial research assistant for the career retrospective of the photographer Evergon at the Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec in 2022, he also curated *Traversée/Crossing*, a group exhibition that same year on the intersections of contemporary art and watersports at Stewart Hall Art Gallery. Morelli swims at the Olympic Stadium and enjoys leisurely hikes with his dog Cosimo.

Florencia Sosa Rey is a visual artist based in Tiohtiá:ke/Mooniyang/Montréal. Through a physical and somatic approach expressed primarily through abstract drawing and performance, she explores themes of residual memory and affect left by people and experiences. She holds a BFA in Studio Arts from Concordia University and continues to develop a physical practice through various professional workshops. Her solo and collaborative work has been presented in Montreal, Quebec City, Toronto, Sudbury, the United States, Iceland, and Argentina. In the fall of 2023, she took part in the Fonderie Darling's artist residency at the Gare de Matapédia in the Gaspé region. Florencia Sosa Rey has received grants from the Canada Council for the Arts, the Conseil des arts et des lettres du Québec, ARTCH, and the LOJIQ. She has also served on the board of directors for VIVA! Art Action since 2021, and has worked for several community organizations, including Centre Turbine, Agir, and CÉDA.

Acknowledgements

It takes a team to make an exhibition. I would first like to thank Joana Joachim, H  l  ne Brousseau, and Jessica H  bert, with whom, in 2018, I first discussed doing a residency at Artexpte on the intersections between contemporary art and sport. One pandemic and a trade back from New York to Montreal later, in 2023 the project brought me to work with Mojeanne Behzadi, when I began my residency, who then relayed me to Kaysie Hawke, the MVP of this project. Manon Tourigny and Marie-Claire M  riaux have been supportive coaches throughout, making sure I have been cared for and felt at home, even when the away fans heckled. Without Jonathan Lachance and Mark Lowe, there would have been no equipment to protect me, no lights to play under, no scores to keep. Similarly generous support came from the stands, from Anabelle Chass   and L  a Boisvert-Ch  nier, who both regularly pitched in when I needed a hand, a cheer, or a shoulder to cry on after a big loss. And finally, thank you to C  dric Essiminy and the Parc Olympique, who helped me fulfill my dream of playing at The Big O, just like a pro athlete.

No exhibition would ever occur without the support of my family, starting with my wife and skipper, Ari  le Dionne-Krosnick. In addition to allowing me to repurpose the shelves, designed by Nathaniel Chavez-Baumberg, from an exhibition she curated at McGill University in the fall of 2023, she has workshopped and approved every play, tactic, and trade I have made. Thank you to both my parents, Diane Charbonneau and Fran  ois Morelli, without whom there would be no game at all.

I would also like to acknowledge the brilliant artists in this exhibition, of which there are too many to name. I began this project with knowledge of only a few of the works presented. Each discovery felt like a major victory, a new addition to an ever-expanding roster of likeminded creators. I am forever grateful for your beautiful work, which has given meaning and sense to the theory and practice of *Artletics*.



Artex te supports artists, researchers and curators in a collective effort that involves our entire team, including contractual collaborators who participate in the success of each project. In alphabetical order:

Collaborators: Jo-Anne Balcaen (translation), Edwin Janzen (copy-editing), Paul Litherland (photo documentation), Mark Lowe (exhibition technician), Luba Markovskaia (translation), Marie-France Thibault (copy-editing and translation) and Xavier Trudeau (graphic design).

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