

# Football: There is an Alternative.

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An essay written for Gabrielle de Vietri's *Three Teams* project. October 2014.

I must admit that my first reaction, upon hearing that Gabrielle de Vietri was proposing to hold a football game in which *Three Teams* from regional Victoria played against each other simultaneously, was disbelief. I found it hard to imagine that such an event could happen at all. In part, I was skeptical that a three team football match could function. No image of what this game might look like came to my mind. But perhaps even more than this, I was incredulous that this experimental game could be brought about in the place and with the people de Vietri had involved in her project: three real, already-existing football teams from Horsham and its surrounds, in the Wimmera region of Victoria. It was difficult to believe that people from a country town would entertain and seriously engage with what an uncharitable person might call the whimsical proposal of an inner-city, art-making lefty.

Of course, my disbelief that these people would be interested in actualising a grand, relational art experiment presupposed a series of archetypal cultural oppositions that are often rehearsed. Art is elite, the preserve of a group of privileged initiates. Football, meanwhile, is the entertainment and cultural lifeblood of the masses. Art-goers are inner-city snobs, while football fans are authentic, genuine. Or perhaps football fans are boorish and tribal, whereas art audiences have inquiring minds. Footy fans are anti-intellectual, whereas art-goers like to think. Or maybe gallery attendees are out-of-touch, whereas footy—especially country footy—is of the people. Animating my skepticism, in other words, was a whole bundle of stereotypes about the fundamental incompatibility of the worldviews of art and football.

## Football, art and the making of collectives

These stereotypes neglect an important function that art and sport share. For no matter how often they are treated as being incompatible, art and football are both ways in which people come to consider themselves as part of a collective. They are both activities by which otherwise disparate individuals can understand themselves as belonging to a “community”.

Perhaps the capacity for football to bind people together is obvious in a country town. On the day of the *Three Teams* match, for instance, an umpire explained that a town without a football team isn't a town at all. A match is one of the few times each week, he said, when everyone comes together as a community.

Football is a domain that preserves certain traditional values thought to bind societies together. As has been remarked by Terry Eagleton (in relation to the roundball game, but the observation holds good for AFL as well), in our amnesiac, post-modern culture, where history and the past vanish in an instant, football is one of the rare repositories of a “vivid sense of tradition”.<sup>1</sup> Bruce McAvaney and others in the AFL commentating box often gush about triumphs or spectacular marks as historic victories, historic moments. Fans can recite an encyclopaedia's worth about their side's players, wins and losses. Football is also the protector of another traditional value: fidelity. No one thinks twice about divorce these days, but switching teams is the mark of a traitorous soul.

And of course, we project onto the titanic on-field agonism of footballers values that we would like to ascribe to ourselves as a nation. Curiously, even though Australia doesn't play AFL against other countries (no, the International League doesn't count), a slew of supposedly typical Australian traits, such as mateship and egalitarianism, are constantly ascribed to football and footballers. Not the least of these traits brought out by football is support for the underdog. As Donald Horne observes, “Australians love a battler, an underdog who is fighting the top dog, although their veneration for him

is likely to pass if he comes out from under.”<sup>2</sup> Australians don’t mind if you lose, so long as you do it in style. (On people’s lips just before the starting siren blew at *Three Teams* was the question: who are you going to support? The answer to this was quickly resolved. As soon as it became clear that two teams had started to dominate the play, those without prior loyalties began barracking for the team yet to score, the RSL Diggers.)

This capacity to give a community a sense of itself is also something possessed by art. Or, we can say, at least, that since the beginning of the Romantic period (which we have arguably never left), there is a conception that the artist’s role is to be an intermediary that permits a collective to gain an understanding of itself as a collective.

One of the early formulations of this idea can be found in the work of the late eighteenth-century, Romantic philosopher, Johann-Gottfried Herder.<sup>3</sup> Herder conceived of the artist’s activity in the creation of a work as involving “overhearing” and “idealising” the culture surrounding him. From this culture, described by Herder as an otherwise chaotic babble of images and voices—the imagination of the masses—the artist or poet takes a part. This ‘slice’ of the popular culture is then fashioned into an ordered work, formed by the artist as a sculptor might shape clay. This artwork is structured and meaningful, and because its raw material is the popular imagination, it has an inherent, metonymic relation to the society from which it is drawn.

It is through this artistic activity that a collective—in Herder’s discussion, the nation—gains a sense of itself as being a collective. The artwork allows the nation to gain self-consciousness. The artist doesn’t just hold a mirror up to society: he creates, with the artwork, an intermediary, without which a group of people cannot even conceive of themselves as a society linked by a common identity.

We might, these days, be skeptical towards many Romantic notions. The fact that we all now have the capacity to create representations of ourselves via social media makes it difficult to believe, as Herder does, in the artist as a unique, Titanic genius who bestrides the nation around him, acting as the chief shaper of shared self-identities. Even so, we do still retain the sense, Romantic in origin, that artists’ works say something about the communities and societies with which they engage.

We can ask, then, about how *Three Teams* acts as a means of collective self-understanding. If de Vietri has acted as an ‘overhearer and idealiser’ in Herder’s sense, drawing on popular Australian culture—AFL—as its raw material and shaping this, then what sort of image has she presented us with? What might it allow us to understand about the anxieties lurking in our societal unconscious? I’ll address these questions by considering how *Three Teams* acts as both an allegory about and a practical exercise in collective change. I’ll then talk about de Vietri’s framing of the work as an experimental intervention.

## The possibility of collective politics

There is a history of artists and other counterculturalists altering the rules of commonly-played games which extends back at least to Fluxus. In the 1960s, for instance, the Danish Situationist, Asger Jorn, conceived “three sided football”. This modified version of soccer is played on a hexagonal pitch. The winning team is the one that concedes the fewest goals. The teams must decide amongst themselves what the rules are to be and there are no referees. Consequently, the game must be played collaboratively.<sup>4</sup>

In the late 1960s and 1970s, the New Games movement, led by Stuart Brand, promoted the creation of new game formats that emphasised fun and play rather than winning.<sup>5</sup> The movement, in whose tradition de Vietri places *Three Teams*,<sup>6</sup> devised and held tournaments for a swathe of new individual and team games with such groovy names as “Hug Tag”, “Earthball”, “Hunker Hawser” and “Clench a Wench”.

The invention of these new game formats was always a response to the politics and philosophies of their day. Jorn’s Situationist game was an exercise in “trialectics”, a modification of Hegelian-Marxist dialectic logic. He believed traditional football to be a representation of a too-simple ‘us versus them’ model of class struggle.<sup>7</sup> The New Games movement, according to Brand, grew out of opposition to the Vietnam War: both from a belief that America’s conflicts abroad were an indication that something was wrong with their “conflict forms” at home, and from a sense that anti-war “peaceniks”, by condemning all warfare including competitive games, “were starting to project a heaviness on a personal level that was just as bad as the heaviness we were projecting in Vietnam”.<sup>8</sup>

*Three Teams*, too, responds to a particular historical moment and political situation. It reflects—and combats—a deflated feeling many have at present, that it is now impossible to come up with collective political projects. *Three Teams* is a work about what is required for the re-engineering of social rules.

Most of the work of *Three Teams* didn't happen on the football field, but in extensive consultations held by de Vietri and her collaborator, Renae Fomiatti, with communities in the Wimmera region over the course of a year. In these workshops, interviews and discussions, the question of how to redesign AFL's rules to incorporate *Three Teams* was puzzled out. This involved a complex set of quandaries. How many players would there be? Who should gain possession if a player incorrectly disposes of a ball after being tackled by players from two teams? Who gains possession of the ball if it is rushed for a behind? What shape should the field be? None of the answers to these questions was obvious. There was even uncertainty as to how much weight should be given to the respective views of those involved during the different stages of the consultation process itself—umpires, coaches, players and spectators. As Les Wills from the Wimmera Umpires Association remarked to de Vietri, "I don't know how you're gonna do it."<sup>9</sup>

The introduction of a third team necessitated, in other words, the creation of a new set of rules for football. Participants undertook the process of substantially remaking football's basic axioms, the core of which—the occasional introduction or removal of individual rules aside—has remained largely unchanged since the late nineteenth century. People from Horsham and the Wimmera Region were drawn and cajoled by de Vietri and her team—persuasive figures—into having the experience of renegotiating the codes that govern their activities.

This process of re-inventing football could be seen as an allegory for the possibility of social change. Australian football is only 154 years old. It was designed by humans. Yet perhaps because of its hegemonic status in our culture, it seems hard to imagine that footy could be altered. As Michael Green comments in his piece on *Three Teams* in *The Footy Almanac*, "football is a given."<sup>10</sup>

Nonetheless, it was changed. This fact can remind us that other structures of the world in which we live can also be reengineered, even if frameworks like government and the economy often strike us as immutable things. No matter how many times the historical weight of AFL is invoked by commentators, football is a construction that can be reworked and remodelled. Likewise, the allegory goes, though every side of politics has acquiesced to global capital, with concerted effort, couldn't we work together and formulate new strategies to challenge neoliberalism's assumed monopoly on the future?

Indeed *Three Teams* is more than a mere allegory of the mutability of social rules. It could also be seen as a sort of training exercise, giving participants—and indeed de Vietri and Fomiatti themselves—a taste for collective action. Chiefly, it provides a hint as to the sheer amount of work and organisation it takes to reshape social codes. After all, grinding through the minutiae of tactics and debating different strategic models is no breezy task. You have to call people up, hassle them, organise times to meet up and places to be. Groups end up disagreeing. Decision-making processes have to be talked about and grappled with.

This reminder and practice of creating rules anew is timely for us in 2014. We live in a world in which it is widely believed that it is impossible, if not in fact dangerous, to attempt to plan and bring about programs for social change. Last time anyone tried to do this, we are told, we ended up with gulags and Soviet totalitarianism. Neoliberal capitalism is almost universally assumed to be the only viable political doctrine. Accordingly, the slogan of the present day is: there is no alternative. This worldview, based on a phrase made famous by Margaret Thatcher, holds that there's no point resisting neoliberalism because nothing else is possible. The philosophers, Fredric Jameson and Slavoj Žižek, neatly encapsulate the saturation of the contemporary mindset by this narrative when they observe how in popular culture, it has become easier for us to imagine the end of the world—an asteroid hitting the earth, the zombie apocalypse—than it is to picture even small changes to our economic system.<sup>11</sup> *Three Teams* demonstrates the power of dedicated projects to successfully alter the rules and dynamics that govern our activities. We wouldn't need this reminder if we weren't troubled by a deflated feeling that collective action is an unrealistic prospect.

## **An experiment: adding one more.**

De Vietri has stated that the *Three Teams* project was designed to experiment with a specific alteration to Australian football. She describes it as a test of what happens if one more team is added to a two-sided

game. I want to finish by asking whether this experiment worked and, if it did, what this means.

One of the things that surprised me most while watching the three-sided game was that *Three Teams* functioned, not just as a relational artwork (a range of otherwise separate communities being brought together), or as an allegory (about how the rules by which collectivities are governed can be changed)—though it is an example of these things—but that it was enjoyable to watch as a match. All the thrills of a normal football game were there: the physical contest, the on-field biff, the nailbitingly-close scores.

In fact, the very enjoyability of the game made some wonder if the intervention performed by the work was big enough. After all, many elements of country AFL remained substantially the same. People watched the game from their cars. Everyone still barracked for the underdog. Salad sandwiches were eaten (albeit in larger quantities). And adding one more team didn't affect the binary structure of the game in one important sense, as there could be only one winner (a situation, incidentally, which isn't the case in regular AFL football, where a possible outcome of a game is a draw).

The suggestion that the alteration of AFL performed by *Three Teams* should have been more radical—enacting the breaking down of AFL and spectator sport altogether—does not, however, take into account the delicate balancing act *Three Teams* needed to execute if it was to be successful as an intervention. De Vietri's new form of football had to bear a resemblance to regular AFL. Aussie rules needed to be altered without the game thereby being rendered unrecognisable or completely destroyed. If too much changed, it wouldn't be a variation on footy, but a new code altogether.

On top of this, many expected that it wouldn't work. In the locker rooms prior to the match, players and club members aired the opinion that the game would likely become a schemozzle. No one knew what they were doing, they said, so the whole thing would probably fall apart. De Vietri's readjustment of football was made at the risk that what might actually ensue would be a degeneration into pure, ugly chaos.

And yet, *Three Teams* competed. The new rules were put into use and proven effective. Spectators, umpires and commentators understood what was happening and could follow the gameplay. Above all, people were excited. Suddenly, you heard suggestions that this event could be repeated, that maybe a football match between *Three Teams* in the Wimmera Region could become an annual event.

In one sense, the ability of this new game to be reincorporated within the life structures of a country town—the new rules' functionality and enjoyability— suggests that the change *Three Teams* introduced was very small: it just 'added one more'. It didn't create a radically different new game. It didn't destroy the possibility of football. Perhaps it didn't even interrupt the binary structure of gameplay (much to the chagrin of Situationists, Derrideans, Deleuzians and post-structuralist gender theorists everywhere).

At the same time as this game's modification was small, however, it was also huge. AFL has been redesigned, despite the skepticism of many. And while it is easy to retrospectively downplay this intervention—the coach of Noradjuha-Quantong claimed on game day that he believed a three-team game had been inevitable all along<sup>12</sup>—the fact is that not very long before the game was played, a three-sided football game in a country town with an artist at its helm was considered by many to be impossible. Bringing about a small change and making it work is a big thing in a world that believes there are no alternatives.

What does *Three Teams* mean for the many collectives it is drawn from and presented to? The work belongs to a time when we are frequently told that deliberate, social change is unviable and dangerous. Many feel that we no longer possess the ability to organise new political projects. Against this backdrop of resignation, de Vietri shows that, in fact, we have not lost the ability to alter the forms and codes we have received. We need not accept the corrosion of the social imagination. Instead, we can take *Three Teams* as a reminder that we still possess the knowledge, somewhere within our muscle memory, of how, with work and determination, we can arrange ways of being together that are currently unthought of and strange.

1. Terry Eagleton, "Football: a dear friend to capitalism", *The Guardian*, 16 June 2010. <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2010/jun/15/football-socialism-crack-cocaine-people>
2. Donald Horne, *The Lucky Country* (Middlesex: Penguin, 1964), pp. 30-31.
3. For this account of Herder's conceptualisation of the relationship between the artist's creativity and the popular imagination I am indebted to a lecture given in 2013 by Associate Professor Franz-Josef Deiters of Monash University. An important text of Herder's drawn on by Deiters is "Shakespeare" in *Selected Writings on Aesthetics*, trans. Gregory Moore (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2006).
4. Philosophy Football FC, "What is 3-sided football?". <http://www.philosophyfootballfc.org.uk/3sided.php>
5. *The New Games Book* (New York: Doubleday, 1976).
6. Gabrielle de Vietri, *Three Teams* website. [http://threeteams.net/?page\\_id=2](http://threeteams.net/?page_id=2)
7. Sachin Nakrani, "Three-sided football gives players something to think about", *The Guardian*, 7 May 2013 <http://www.theguardian.com/football/2013/may/07/three-sided-football-tournament>
8. Stuart Brand, "It Began with World War IV", *The New Games Book*, pp. 7-8.
9. "Three Teams: Wills & Goldie". <http://vimeo.com/78227594>
10. Michael Green, "Three-teams footy: a winning experiment", *The Footy Almanac*, 11 October 2013. <http://www.footyalmanac.com.au/three-teams-footy-a-winning-experiment/>
11. In the 2005 film *Žižek!* he states: "Think about the strangeness of today's situation. Thirty, forty years ago, we were still debating about what the future will be: communist, fascist, capitalist, whatever. Today, nobody even debates these issues. We all silently accept global capitalism is here to stay. On the other hand, we are obsessed with cosmic catastrophes: the whole life on earth disintegrating, because of some virus, because of an asteroid hitting the earth, and so on. So the paradox is, that it's much easier to imagine the end of all life on earth than a much more modest radical change in capitalism."
12. Michael Green, "Three Teams footy: a winning experiment".