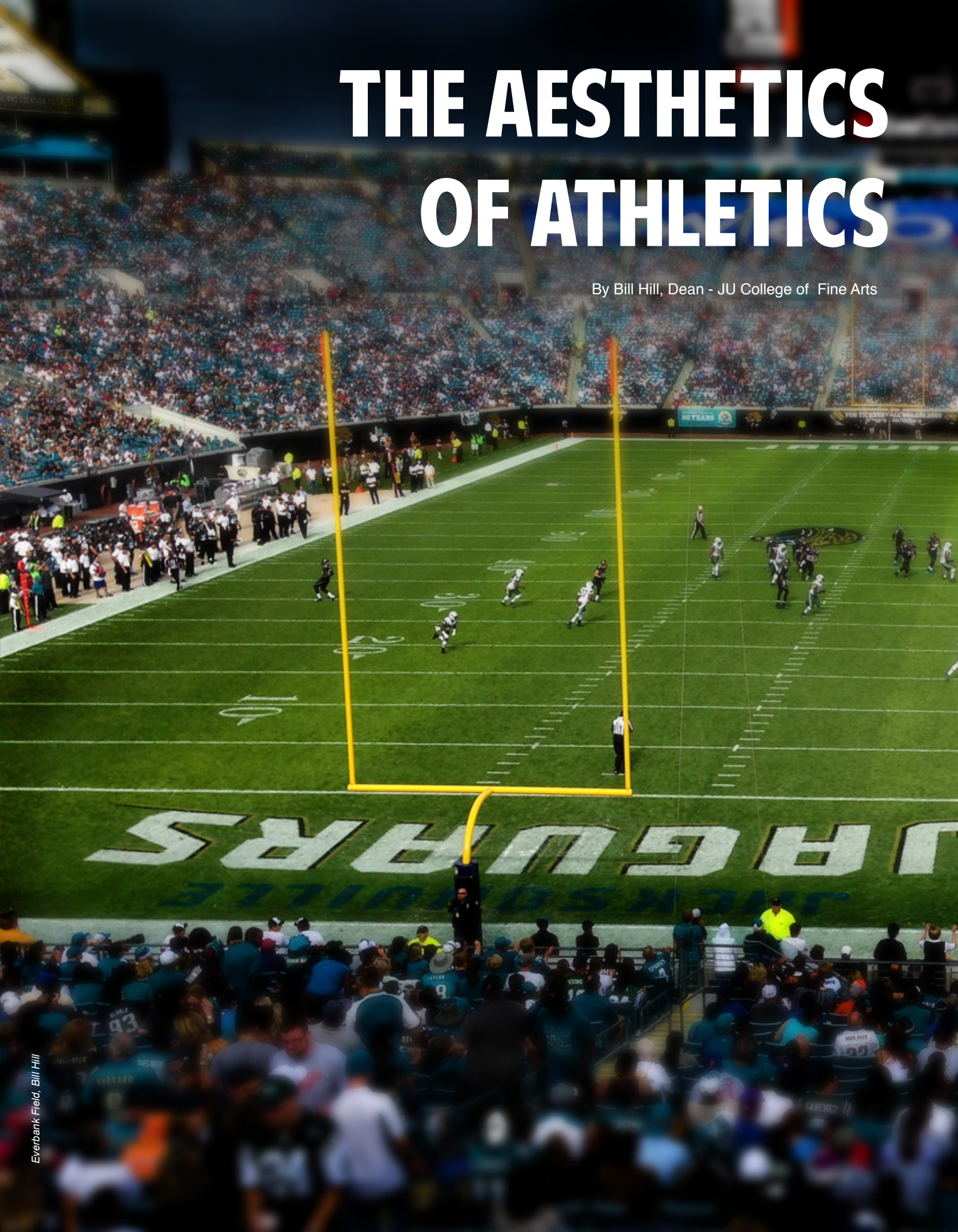
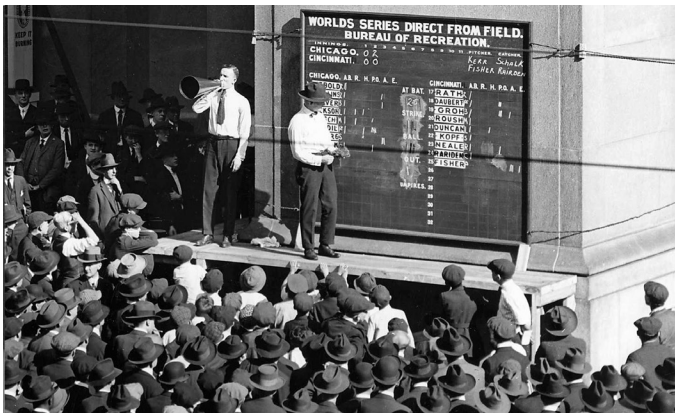
THE AESTHETICS OF ATHLETICS

By Bill Hill, Dean - JU College of Fine Arts



Everbank Field, Bill Hill

SCOREBOARD. It is only the beginning of the conversation. Today's athletic competitions are analyzed and critiqued before, during and after the heat of the battle. Clearly winning must not be everything. North Florida's own Tim Tebow has had volumes published on every aspect of his game. Each victory only intensifies the examination; his throwing motion is too elongated, his ball flight too arched, his style too combative. An industry that is driven by numbers and statistics relies on language like artistic, creative, balance, repetition, harmony, and dominance to describe their sports.



1919 World Series, Pittsburgh City Photographer Collection

Historical View:
From the dawn of human civilization, the progress of Arts and Athletics have paralleled one another and defined each society. Paleolithic cave paintings appear to document physical feats of humans overcoming the natural environments through athletic endurance and skill in hunting. According to archaeologists dance may be the oldest art form. It seems likely that the first way we might be creative is with our own bodies. Similarly, the most ancient forms of Athletics appear in ancient Egypt with running and jumping events as part of the Sed Festival. This festival mixed music, dance, and art with physical competitions to celebrate the continued rule of the pharaoh. Even in the tribal communities of Mesoamerica, sporting events like the *BallGame* blended with arts to simultaneously inspire the best in and serve as power over its people. For that is why, even to this day, cultures embrace the arts and athletics as symbols of unlimited human potential.

Perhaps the most significant athletic event from our past was the development of the Olympic games in Ancient Greece. This culture used athletics as it did literature, arts, theatre, music, philosophy, and architecture to inspire the pursuit of perfection. The aspiration to be god-like in both physical and mental form transcends the society and for the first time the human form was considered a work of art. If Greek art and sport were to elevate men then the Romans sought to dominate them. Echoed through the art and architecture of the time and wrapped into the arena of the coliseum, Rome overpowered itself with extremes that would lead to its downfall. But along the way it transformed the perfection of individual Greek ambition into a spectator driven form of entertainment. As it goes through history the culture of an age is wrapped tightly in the sporting activities and it artistic representations. The middle age became utilitarian; the renaissance became leisurely, while the modern became competitive.

Botanical Gardens, Copenhagen, Denmark, Zserghei

Case Study:
Today our athletic events have become a true art form. Regardless of the sport, consider the sights, the sounds, the smells: they appeal to the senses and transform the viewer. Football, with its pomp and circumstance, possesses the all characteristic of fine art. As if a theatrical show, it has elaborate costumes, with leading men and a supporting cast engaging in drama before a captive audience upon stages built by master architects. Today's football stadiums mirror the Greek ancient outdoor theater, like in Epidaurus designed to promote clear lines of sight and acoustical perfection. Music is an integral part of football festivities. College's and high school's have bands that exceed the size and scope of the athletes on the field. In professional ranks, the PA systems rival rock shows with High Definition Video. The visual display is a color theorist's dream of seas of complimentary colors that flow with harmony. The performances, as defined by the analysts themselves, are graceful, uplifting movements that would rival classical ballet as bodies fly through air defying gravity. For example, the wide receivers explode off the line with speed and agility as they sprint across the stage then leaping into the air to stretch and contort their bodies only to land on their toes to keep from going out bounds. The rehearse each step making the X's and O's look like a theatrical blocking chart. Sideline manager use wireless headsets to communicate with

Collage, Bill Hill

the control booth in order provide the necessary cues for the actors on stage. Even the pre game and post game activities are comparable to the arts. Tailgating with beer and brauts equal the wine and cheese of a gallery opening and the Monday morning quarterback session played out on countless AM radios across the country is a solid academic critique of artists and their work. The two elements of modern sport that make it unique are the engagement of the audience to have part in the outcome and the thrill of a victor. Perhaps fine arts can learn something from sports fans that create fantasy teams and collect signed editions of relics from past productions.

FI vs USC, John Raoux

Shen Yun, Matthias Kehrein

Redefine Fine:

Clearly popular forms of the arts are embracing the athletic paradigm. Rock concerts have long had the roar of an untamed audience, singing along with songs in a stadium atmosphere. The growing series of television programs that engage the audience in the outcome are opening avenues to new audiences. From *American Idol* to *So you think you can Dance,* viewers are tuning in for the competition foremost and as a bonus capturing bits of the aesthetic influence. Why do the "Fine" arts resist these approaches? The silence at the symphony, the shush in the theatre, the quiet of the gallery; drive a wedge and distance between the "art" and the audience. The classical model of Fine arts audiences are told to not touch, to not speak, to not photograph, essentially to not disturb the genius and only passively observe. Art functions within human experience in many ways; but is

Cloud Gate, Bill Hill

arguably most successful when it, as Hamlet urges, holds the mirror up to nature. Our nature is becoming increasingly participatory and the fine arts are evolving to reflect the engagement. Visual Artist, Matthew Barney's work *Drawing Restraint* uses athletic metaphors and structures to turn drawing into an athletic event. Public sculptures, like Anish Kapoor's *Cloud Gate* in Chicago, engages the community by distorting their reflection. Broadway is encouraging your drinking habit, by allowing audiences to drink in sippee cups throughout the show. Whether you are a sports fanatic or an art snob, Joe Six Pack or a Chorus Girl, there appears to be increasingly more in common.