In the Domain of Others
By Orit Gat

There was a ban on women's football in England for 50 years, between 1921 and 1971. The English Football Association prohibited women from playing on any professional ground or pitch associated with it, stating that 'the game of football is quite unsuitable for females and ought not to be encouraged'.

Almost every other Sunday, I go to the Emirates Stadium to watch Arsenal Women. I am there with tens of thousands of other spectators. There is the friend with whom I have a season ticket, who insists on never exhaling in frustration, always cheering on the team because we sit in the nineteenth row and he knows the players can hear us. There's an older couple behind us, who seem to know everything about every player and have an opinion about every moment of play. Next to me is an influencer, often wearing a T-shirt reading 'everyone watches women's sports', mostly posting on Instagram. And everywhere are young girls wearing kits they drew themselves with textile pens and carrying homemade signs.

The facts of the women's game – its history and how it is currently dominated by conversations about policy and change; how players want to be considered simply as individual athletes but end up representing the entire sport, if not an entire political project; how every game is seen as a possible watershed moment – should not distract from the experience of watching women's football. There is a sense of progress, a movement of women's football now, a feeling that things have changed, are changing.

In Ruth Beraha's work, what you are looking at is footage of football fans in Women's Super League games, the top-tier of women's football in England, the division Arsenal Women play in. What you are hearing are fans of Millwall Football Club, a South London team with a reputation.

The audio is tactile, cacophonous, intense. And then there is all the swearing. 'Fuck em all' and 'Where the fuck were you when you were bad'. The sound is loud, the voices aggressive. The images? Little girls looking at each as they cheer players on. A woman dancing. Two men looking at each other and breaking out in a smile at what they've just seen. My favourites are the arms outstretched, the scarves raised. The coming together. The lips scrunching in oohs and aahs. And the way synchronicity happens with the audiotrack: at some point, someone in the background chants, 'I wanna go home'. Amidst all the intensity, fandom can be humorous, irreverent. The force of habit: when you watch something week in, week out, a part of you seeps into it too – aggression, emotion, humour.

You are watching people watching other people doing something they are amazing at. And upstairs, the drawings populate the gallery further. Those stretched, open arms: a gesture universally enacted in pitches everywhere. The repetition of this in the drawings, the way people in them become just bodies, torsos, arms extended, they are stand-ins for the others like them. They are there every week. The drawings echo another aspect of the sport: narrative and representation. A game is contained in 90 minutes. Its imagery lasts: The photograph of Brandi Chastain in her sports bra having taken off her shirt after winning the World Cup for the US in 1999. The Dick, Kerr Ladies team in 1920 in a striped kit and 1920s bobs under their hats. Chloe Kelly waving her shirt above her head after scoring the match-winning goal for England in the Euro 2022 final. The drawings, like images, explore what lasts. What stays after the game ends: in memory, in affect.

To record viewers means to pay attention to people in the act of relation. They are individuals and they are community and they are a mass. They share something. The expression thereof can be ambiguous. There is a sense in women's football that history is being made not just in the games but in the stands, too. That the women's game introduces new ways of relating to football itself. And that while some things change,

others stay the same. I've seen boos and aggression in both men's and women's games. I loved those stretched-out arms but they also connote taking up space. Even just taking up space can be either positive or negative, depending what you think of it, depending who is doing it. This is a work that goes against expectation. It is work that confronts things with each other and doesn't try to put them in harmony, but rather, to create a space of and for unstable meaning. The work in front of you is a work of contradiction, a work which asks a simple question about the world: What happens if you take a thing you think you know, then flip its meaning?

Here is what it looks like in football: take the sport – and especially its supporters, who exist in a space with some very clearly defined rules, and change these. If you change the fact of who is playing and who is watching and not all are white, straight, macho. In England, the men usually play on Saturdays, the women on Sundays. It's the same game, the same stadiums, the same rules, and a totally different thing. This is possible, like superimposing one reality on top of another. In Beraha's work, this superimposition is just made literal.

And here is what it looks like in life: a lesson in imagining how things can be different. You take the world you know, then change it.