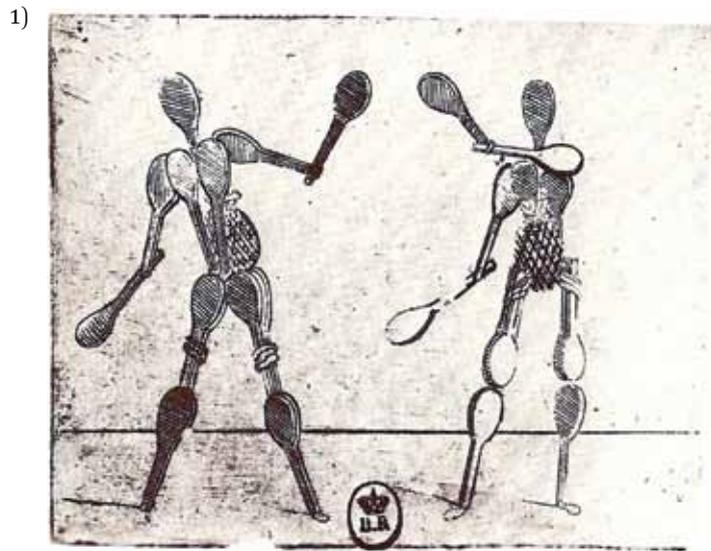


Ricochet in the Renaissance ¹



Giovanni Battista Bracelli
Bizzarie di Varie Figure
c. 1624



Carlin Wing
Sketch for "Ricochet² in the Renaissance",
2015
Colored pencil and tape on copy paper
Photograph of lecture hall³ at Villa Romana
made by Giulia Del Piero ⁴

- 2) Ricochet is a complex kind of bounce, a series of two or more interconnected impacts. Generally speaking, a bounce does not belong to any one object, surface, or body. It is a property distributed among these things: a name for those kinds of interactions from which all of the entities involved emerge with their respective shapes and speeds relatively intact and with their identities confirmed. What I mean by this is that it is through bounce that objects are produced as whole, intact, flexible yet recognizable, knowable and known entities. "Ricochet" carries with it a particularly strong implication of unpredictability. It is a bounce that always threatens to exceed human capacity.
- 3) I wasn't quite sure what I would do with this room. I knew that I wanted to demonstrate different ways of sounding out the world. I packed a suitcase full of many kinds of balls – handballs, golf balls, squash balls, tennis balls. I packed balls made of tape and plastic bags and string and strips of socks. I packed

two big solid purple rubber balls that I had made using molding rubber. I wanted these objects to feel like the balls that were used to play the Mesoamerican ball game when they hit my body. I bought what I thought was a tennis court net to divide the room. But it turned out to be a net for table tennis. I packed it and also many different colors of artist tape. I forgot my racket. When I arrived at Villa Romana, I spent a few hours throwing and hitting these balls against the walls of this room. At first, the cats wanted to play with all of the bouncing objects but then some of the sounds scared them.

- 4) In the months before the symposium, Giulia sent me photographs of squares and courtyards and other enclosed spaces around Florence that might be good for hitting balls against. When she sent me three photographs of the lecture hall at Villa Romana, we realized that this room already had everything that was required.



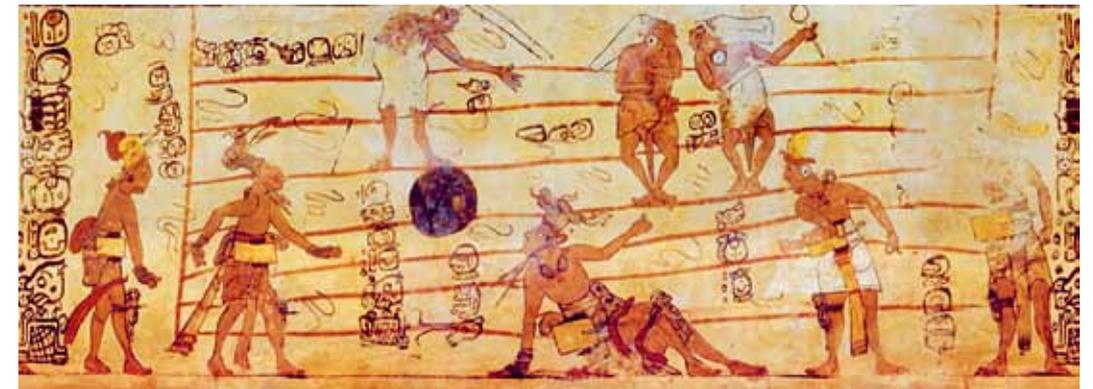
Christoph Weiditz⁶
Aztec ballplayers performing
at the court of Charles V⁷
Trachtenbuch, 1530-1540

5) The caption reads: “In this way the Indians play with the inflated ball, with their buttocks without raising their hands from the ground; they also have a hard leather [protector] over their buttocks to receive the impact of the ball; they are also wearing similar leather gloves.” Both the composition and the caption emphasize what would have been one of the most unusual features of the Aztec game to the artist’s European eyes. But there seems to have been a mistake about the material technology at hand. Aztec balls were almost exclusively made of solid rubber. Which is why the hip and buttocks were the primary site of impact. This presumption about the ball would in turn make it more difficult to understand why the players use their hips, elbows, and thighs to direct it. Hands and feet were too fragile and puny to provide the necessary force or control for this kind of ball.

6) Weiditz was an artist who happened to be at the court of Charles V seeking a royal patent

that would allow him to continue his profession of striking portraits of nobles out of metal when Hernán Cortés arrived with a troupe of Aztec performers in tow. The series of drawings Weiditz made of the Aztec contingent are the earliest known depictions of Aztecs in Europe. This drawing is itself a striking representation of bodies at play. But as a representation of sport, it is lacking. He does not represent the rules, the architecture, or the team-based structure of the game, either visually or verbally.

7) This drawing is the first record of a demonstration of rubber bounce on the European continent. The demonstration took place in 1528. We have no other description of the performance at the court of Charles V, so we cannot say for sure what it consisted of, but we do know that it was not merely two players, but rather two full teams of ballplayers who arrived with Cortés.



Maya Ballgame Vessel,⁹ c. 700-800 CE¹⁰
Ceramic with slip
22,7 × 17,2 cm
Saint Louis Art Museum

8) The scene on the vessel depicts two teams playing the Mayan form of the Mesoamerican ballgame. The fallen player may have made a fatal error. The Mayan creation story, rendered into alphabetic writing by Francisco Ximenez in the eighteenth century as the *Popol Vuh*, centers around the story of the Hero Twins, ballplayers who take their father’s old equipment down from where it hangs from the ceiling and go on to raise such great racket with their play that they get called down to the underworld to account for the commotion. They become heroes by defeating the gods at the ball game, thus avoiding their father’s fate (decapitation) and ascending to the heavens where they are transformed into the sun and the moon, thus initiating a new age on Earth. In this world – where heads become trophies and players become planets or other celestial orbs – agency is attained by mastering bounce. Virtuoso play provides passage between the realms of the human and the realms of the gods.

9) Digital imaging and editing techniques were used to convert this circular scene of play painted on a vessel into a two-dimensional image. In doing so the object’s conditions for viewing (that require a viewer to circle it in order to see the whole scene a piece at a time) is replaced by conditions that are more amenable to the archives of a museum and to the pages of a book.

10) As early as 1200 BCE in Mesoamerica, the Olmec (Nahuatl for “rubber people”) began building an entire cosmology around the phenomenon of rubber bounce. They developed techniques for extracting latex sap from trees and stabilizing it into an elastic material that they used to manufacture a wide range of objects, the first and foremost of which were rubber balls for their ritual ball game and rubber ballplayer figurines that were presented to the gods. The later civilizations of the Maya and the Aztec carried forward and refined the Olmec’s technology and ideology of bounce. While the cause of the decline of the Olmec remains unknown, and the decimation of the Maya, Aztec, and Inca by the Spanish and Portuguese has left us with many gaps in our understanding of their material technologies and semantic structures, one thing we do know is that, collectively, these cultures carpeted the region with ball courts. Over fifteen hundred have been excavated to date. The most spectacular versions of the ball game were played by two teams on large outdoor ball courts that usually took the shape of a capital *I*. Points were won by hitting the ball either through the stone hoops that jutted out from the top of the court’s slanted stone walls, or by hitting it over these walls, or off of certain parts of opponents’ bodies.



Carlin Wing
Ball Ellipsis,¹² 2012
 Balls¹³ made by participants in Maravilla¹⁴
 Ball-Making Workshop

11) Historian of science Londa Schiebinger tells us to look at instances of the “*nontransfer* of important bodies of knowledge from the New World into Europe” in order to reframe “questions about ‘how we know’ to include questions about what we do *not* know, and why not”. Her point is that, often, ignorance is not an absence, but an outcome of cultural and political struggles. This was the case here, played out in the realm of technical knowledge: while the colonizers did record the Aztec process for making rubber balls, including the use of juice from the *Ipomoea alba* species of morning glories in the processing of the latex, they failed to recognize the key role that this sulfur-rich liquid played in enabling rubber objects to hold their form across time and temperature. (It should be noted that practicalities also played a role; liquid latex did not travel well, and it had a strong odor, especially when exposed to heat.) But perhaps most importantly, the Europeans recognized neither the deep semantic power of the material nor its related economic value.

12) ...

13) Most animals, including humans, play ball. Playing with balls and other kinds of bouncing objects is a basic way that humans hone their spatiotemporal skills and learn what kinds of motion to expect from their own and other physical bodies. When play turns into a

rule-bound game, the self encounters the social – games let us scale ourselves to our worlds. Over the past two hundred years, *ball* games in particular have come to dominate the popular imagination with huge swaths of airtime and large volumes of ink given over to the dramas of football, basketball, baseball, American football, tennis, etc. I am specifically interested in physical and digital court games – games of ball that are played in confined spaces, and therefore allow and encourage the measuring, situating, and placing of the self in the world through play with and placement of bounce.



14) The Maravilla Handball court is the oldest standing court in East Los Angeles. At the time of the workshop, the nephew of the deceased property owners was considering selling it and the attached grocery store that his aunt and uncle had run for years to developers who would have demolished the court. The court has since been granted historical status thanks to the work of Amanda Perez and other organizers in the community.

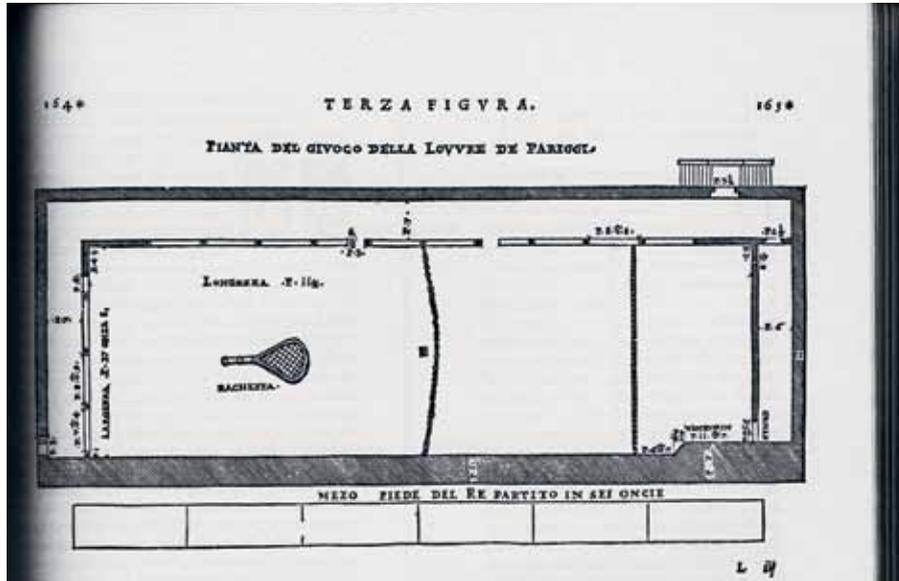


Herri met de Bles
Landscape with David and Bathsheba,
 ca. 1535–1540¹⁶
 Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum

15) In Europe during the early modern era, the early form of tennis, also known as *jeu de paume* (game of the palm) or *pallacorda* (game of the cord), was wildly popular: courts could be found in every city and in most small towns. *Jeu de carre* (game of the square) was a variation played on a slightly larger and more symmetrical court. But long before the game was enclosed and codified, people in Northern France played an open-air version called *jeu de bonde*, or “the game of bounce”. Heiner Gillmeister identifies *jeu de bonde* as one of the earliest iterations of tennis. He dates the first documented usage to a verse of a medieval play written in 1300 in which the Queen of Scotland, adrift on the ocean, laments the way the sea plays with her, as with a tennis ball, casting her about here and there. Gillmeister draws a connection between the word *la bonde* and the French Provençal word for the service slab (the flat often sloped surface that the ball was served against to begin play) *boundadou*, which in turn corresponds to *steute* in the Saterlandic version of the game of ball, both of which Gillmeister translates as “the bounce”. From our vantage point today, it is usually the ball that appears as the exemplary object of bounce (the object that in itself implies the

type of movement in question). Gillmeister’s etymology shows that *de bonde* referred first to the designated and bounded surface area that the ball was hit against to begin play. This suggests how responsibility for the type of movement produced from the interaction may have moved from the bounded surface to the bouncing ball.

16) This is one of a number of nearly identical Dutch paintings from this period on the theme of David and Bathsheba that are famous in the history of sport because they include some of the earliest representations of an enclosed *jeu de paume* court, located on the grounds of a palace belonging to Charles V. Charles V himself was an enthusiastic player of the early form of tennis. Roger Morgan, a historian of tennis, suggests that the artists used the biblical allegory to evade the censors and communicate a sly protest against Charles V, who was hated by many for his amoral lifestyle and for his suppression of the Protestant Reformation. If this reading is correct, the tennis court communicates to already in the know Dutch viewers the painter’s critique of the Catholic ruler.



Antonio Scaino¹⁷
 Diagram of the *jeu de paume* court¹⁸
 at the Louvre
Trattato della Palla Corda,¹⁹ 1555

17) In 1555, Antonio Scaino was a young cleric and budding Aristotelian philosopher living under the patronage of the Prince of Ferrara. In the *Trattato della Palla Corda (Treatise on the Game of the Ball)*, he rallies both ecclesiastical and Socratic traditions to argue that the game of ball is both a standard against which all other games should be measured and a model of the world in the sense that participation offers both players and observers an opportunity to understand the natural, social, and cosmological orders of the world.

18) Scaino writes that those who are so inclined can “think of the court, closed in on all sides by walls and barriers, as nothing more nor less than this troublesome world.” For Scaino, all the world is not a stage: it is a court.

19) The *Trattato* was published by the House of Gabriel Giolito de Ferrari and Brothers, just twenty-five years after the Aztec demonstration. It is the first known codification of a European sport. As a set of rules, it articulates a common form for the game (in the sense of a sharable standard), thus shifting the emphasis away from a common kind of play (in the sense of locally popular and non-elite). Marco Beretta cites the nineteenth-century authority on rare books, Jacques-Charles Brunet, who argues that although only a limited number of copies were printed, “the influence of this small volume was not at all limited to a restricted circle of readers ... [it] set the standard not only in the tennis literature, but in the literature on sports more generally.”



Carlin Wing
*Ricochet*²¹ in the Renaissance, 2015
 Documentation of lecture performance²² at Villa Romana
 Photograph by Stefan Esselborn

20) The image projected on the wall behind me is an illustration of court tennis from M. de Garsault’s *Art du Paumier-Raquetier et de la Paume* (1767) that was originally printed in Denis Diderot’s *Encyclopédie, ou Dictionnaire Raisonné des Sciences, des Arts et des Métiers*. Court tennis is the only ballgame that was included in the *Encyclopédie* perhaps because there were racket-makers guilds in France beginning in the late fifteenth century.

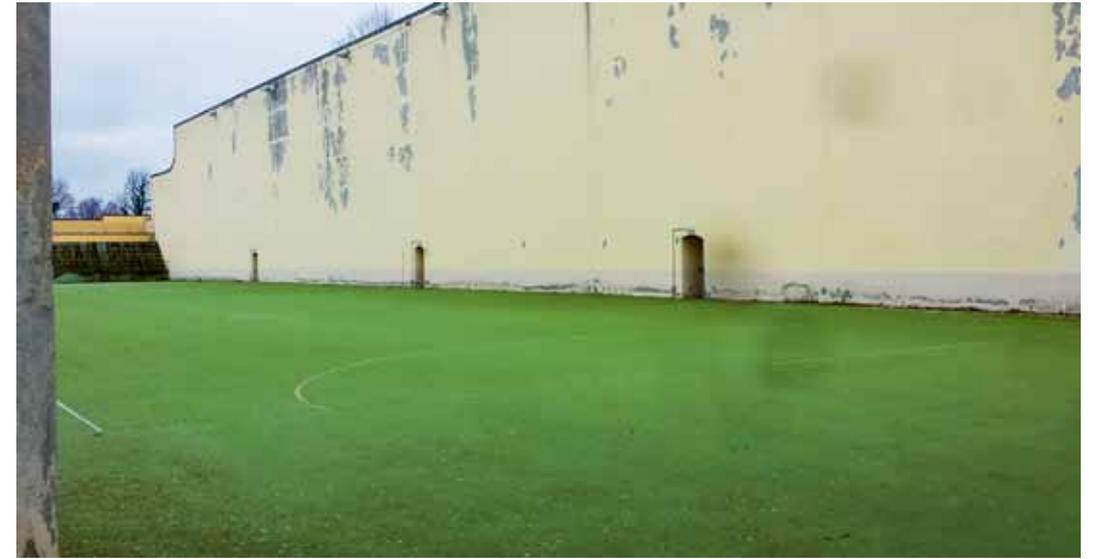
21) Court tennis puts ricochet on display. Taken into English directly from French, ricochet appears first in the Middle French phrase *fable du ricochet*, an endlessly repeated thing, especially an endless exchange of questions and answers, and a little later in *chanson du ricochet*, a form of song that took this endless repetitive back and forth as its model. It was first used as an independent word in the early seventeenth century, initially to describe the action of a stone skipping across water and eventually to refer simply to a series of interconnected events. In the late seventeenth century, the Marquis de Vauban, famed military engineer

for Louis XIV, adapted this phenomenon into a military strategy. Ricochet firing describes a method for aiming and firing projectiles so that they skip along and rebound off surfaces inflicting a maximum damage and chaos. The cannons were often fired at low angles and at less than maximal power. The damage was done not through the brute force of the shot punching through a wall, but via a skipping bouncing cannonball that destroyed the structure from the inside out.

22) For the performance I drew heavily on an article I had just published under the title “Episodes in the Life of Bounce”, *Cabinet* 56, no. 4 (2015): p 53-63 as well as research and writing I was doing for my dissertation “Bounce: The Material Certainty of Sporting Chance”. I have again turned to these texts for this catalog contribution: reconfiguring them, rewriting them, and resituating them as footnotes for images.



Carlin Wing²³
20150316_135016.jpg²⁴
2015



Carlin Wing
20150316_135346.jpg
2015

23) After the conclusion of the symposium, I had a free day to walk around Florence. Some of the other artists went to see Massacio's *Holy Trinity*. I went in search of the oldest ball court in the city. It sometimes feels a little strange to go in search of walls. But I am in search of a sense of scale.

24) The *sferisterio* in Florence was built in 1893. It has been repaired and rebuilt many times since then, most recently after a supporting wall collapsed in a lightning storm in 1993. The plaque on the exterior wall reads: "*SOCIETA CIVILE DEL GIUOCO DEL PALLONE. SFERISTERIO DELLE CASCINE*". It is in Cascine park near the *Circolo del Tennis Firenze*, which was built shortly after it in 1898. It is the only place

in the city where you can still play *pallone col bracielle* (the ballgame with the bracelet) and *tamburello* (the ballgame with the tambourine). Scaino describes *pallone col bracielle* in his *Trattato*. It was widely popular in Italy from Scaino's era through the early twentieth century with teams of professional athletes traveling from region to region to compete against each other in front of large crowds. But the professional circuit faded when British ball sports came to the fore. Today, the top of wall is studded with electric floodlights to allow for night play and artificial turf covers the ground. From the looks of the half assembled goals at the ends of the stadium, the space is also used to play games of football and handball along with the older wall games.

