





GESAMTKUNST- TEAMWERK

A.S. VELASCA, THE
FOOTBALL TEAM
AS ARTWORK

Words *Jacob Lomas*

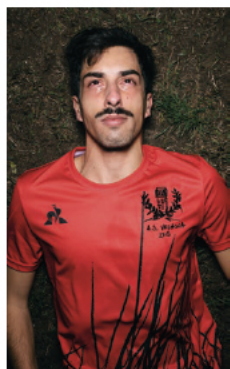
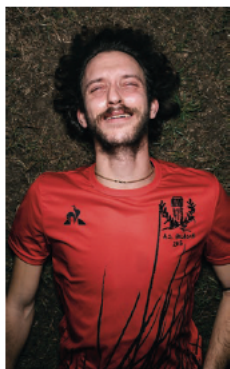
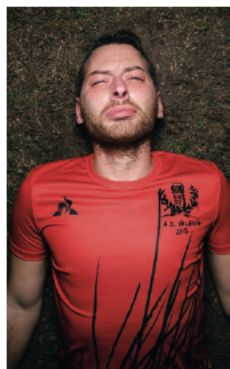
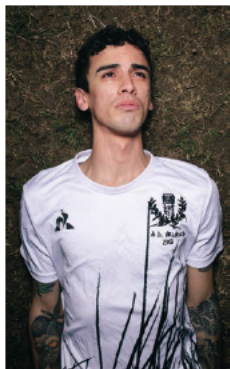
'FOOTBALL SHOULD BE a sad sport, but today I do not see the sadness in people. You cannot dream with big teams any more, and if you're not dreaming, the game has died... we want to see tears', says Wolfgang Natlacen, the founder of A.S. Velasca, a Milanese football team that's about so much more than just football.

A.S. Velasca is both a team and a 'total work of art' in which international artists are invited to design every aspect of the game, ranging from corner flags to seat cushions, turning the pitch into a constantly evolving gallery. Every matchday, tickets act as weekly art editions, designed by either an artist or a visiting fan.

Formed in 2015 by artist Natlacen and four friends, the club was a response to disillusionment with both modern football and modern art. 'The major clubs are not genuine, they hide their problems and have become too big for fans,' Natlacen says. Lower leagues are a place for football idealism; a team can be created by friends regardless of income and aspire to weekend greatness. They exist as a means of maintaining social bonds with local communities, where fans, players and officials intermingle on equal terms. This is lost at larger clubs, whose focus on capital is often at the expense of fans.

You could change the term 'club' to 'art institution' and the critique would remain the same. But what connects the two is a universal language. Natlacen relates a quote from legendary Italian filmmaker, and football fanatic, Pier Paolo Pasolini: 'The cyphers of this [language] are the players; we, in the stands, are the decrypters: so we share a code in common.' The evidence for this is the international reach of A.S. Velasca, which features the work of artists from China, Madagascar and Cameroon.

Natlacen wants to bring feeling back to football. The Velasca squad photoshoot for the 2021/22 season shows portraits of the team on their backs, harshly lit by stadium lights, openly weeping. They are players, but also performers whose faces and expressions we interpret either as ecstatic joy or pure despair. After all, if you strip away the physicality, football is about emotion and raw sensation. Every season offers some hope, yet debuting a fresh squad with tears rolling down their cheeks in a sport that usually projects confidence is a reminder of the cyclical inevitability of footballing disappointment. Football is for winning, but it is usually about losing. The portraits seem to have predicted both a string of early bad results as the team picked up just six points from the first half of the season and the





tearful relief of starting the second half with five wins. Natlacen wanted emotion, and he got it.

Velasca sits in the heart of Milan. The club's presence is visually dwarfed by two of the most decorated clubs in Italian football; AC Milan and Inter Milan. Velasca finished the 2021/22 season tenth out of 13 teams in the Terza Categoria, the lowest league of Italian football, which consists mostly of local church and student teams, and from which you can't be relegated. When asked what other teams make of Velasca, Natlacen says that 'they always want to beat us, it is terrible for them to lose to us, because who wants to lose to the club full of artists with the strange jerseys?' One of the clubs trailing them in the league had a 70-year-old goalkeeper whose biggest dream was to own a club and so named one after himself: 'We really can't lose to *them*,' says Natlacen, laughing.

Since 2015, Velasca has produced enough artwork to fill a dozen galleries. The art created is organic and always done in response to the mechanics of a Sunday league game. No matter how inconsequential, everything that happens during the 90 minutes acts like a machine that creates the work. Religion is a constant in the lives of Italians and the leagues are not immune from its influence,

adopting very strict blasphemy laws. As a consequence, a captain's armband created by the French artist Eric Pougneau that reads 'Dio Cane' ('Goddamn It') becomes an 'unwearable' artwork, even if it's a regular Italian expression of discontent on and off football pitches. Clubs can be fined upwards of €60 for blasphemous profanity. To curb extra fines, one regular fan is given a speaker that distorts his audible cries of sacrilege. Fans often play the role of performers at games, pushing their teams to win. At Velasca, they literally take on the role of the performance artist. If no fans turn up, artist Annalisa Cuzzocrea has designed a single self-playing drum to provide atmosphere and support.

In another work, artist Alessandro Belussi asked each player to hand over a deeply personal memory which could be printed onto a shin pad. A shin pad is like a deep dark secret: you hide it away, it preserves a part of you, but you always feel it wrapped around your being. Having it out in the open leaves you susceptible to exposing your vulnerability. 'I want the players to be able to explore and reveal this vulnerability', says Natlacen. A few players chose pictures of their mothers or players idolised since childhood. A film of the series shows one player

choosing the iconic 'hand of God' by Maradona, while practising his handballs. One shin pad sports an X-ray of a fractured shinbone. Superstition means we tell actors to 'break a leg' instead of 'good luck' but on the football pitch that takes on new meaning. Following this theme, a wooden sculpture created by Natlacen depicts a realistic amputated leg with a fresh surgery scar splitting the kneecap. This is an *ex-voto*, a Catholic offering to a saint in gratitude. Through community blessing, players and fans view and touch the leg as a means of healing an injured player.

The humour intrinsic to football culture remains at the fore in each series. Recent works include a collaboration with David Shrigley, who redesigned the referees' cards, the yellow one now reading 'do not do what you just did, again'. Here the forbearer of authoritarian rule is reduced to the dry comedian. French artist Jay Ramier has designed seat cushions in the form of church kneelers that read 'applause/pray'. Fans can get to be comfortable, with the added benefit of being able to fall to their knees and pray should Velasca find themselves behind.

Every season the club invites a new artist to design the home and away shirts on a classic Le Coq Sportif silhouette. For a small club, having contemporary

artists shape their visual identity is paramount to standing apart from the competition. 'It is important for me to connect with the artists; I don't want a Damien Hirst, we want to be a *contresens total* [against the grain]. I want someone who gets Velasca, I would much prefer my mother to make it.' Sculptor Régis Sènèque was commissioned to create the inaugural kit in 2015, which centred an image of cinder blocks on the chest, playing on the weight the game has emotionally on players and fans. Seeing the kit worn by a full squad shows how a team, like an architectural structure, is only a complete form when the blocks are in conjunction, when it's all working together. Subsequent kits included designs by Pascale Marthine Tayou, who cross-stitched anatomical imagery on to the shirt with an off-kilter crest heading into the guts of the player. This season's strip is designed by Joël Andrianomearisoa, a Malagasy artist who has placed burnt-black grass blades on the lower third of the shirt, visually grounding the players. Andrianomearisoa views the pitch much like one of his abstract canvases, where, like players, violent brushstrokes and splashes of matter collide.

The club crest features an image of the Milanese building Torre Velasca on a laurel wreath. One of the most controversial buildings in







Italy, the brutalist tower was built in 1958 from the rubble of post-war Milan and takes inspiration from the fifteenth century Castello Sforzesco, a Renaissance castle and dungeon. The combination of post-war design and Renaissance Italy was a call for Italians to innovate and move on from the war. On the shirt, it acts as a visual metaphor for the project itself: 'You either love it or hate it,' says Natlacen.

With all this art, it would be natural for Natlacen to consider displaying it in a more conventional art space. It turns out the club

is putting on an exhibition at Le Port des Créateurs in Toulon. It's hard to know how the energy and spontaneity of the work will feel when it's confined to a gallery. This is the same problem faced by lots of conceptual art; can the documentation of an event take the place of the art object? Everything at Velasca is documented and archived through photography, film and sketches: 'It is a non-ending narrative,' says Natlacen. The exhibition, which is subtitled 'From Pandemic to Chalov', documents the club's work during the Covid-19

lockdowns and the loan signing of its first professional player, Russian striker Fyodor Chalov, who currently plays for FC Basel but is in the midst of a bureaucratic transfer nightmare. 'This fucking war isn't helping,' says Natlacen. Ironically, the biggest problem comes not from the Russian invasion of Ukraine, but from the Italian Football Federation, which is perplexed at the idea of a professional player wanting to join a non-league team. That means no sporting visa. Perhaps the federation is nervous about an exodus of top-tier players feeling the desire to create more than goals. It could happen. One work to be displayed at the exhibition is a foosball table with each

figure hand-painted by the team, matching their own likeness and emotional state. One player, who is perhaps having a bad run of form, has turned their figure into a crash-test dummy. Coinciding with the work, a film created during the lockdowns shows players in a local park in complete silence, wearing their kits and completing the league through table football. The effect is tender and melancholic, like players re-enacting childhood games, giving in to the world and waiting for better days.

A 2018 super-8 film created by Natalacen entitled 'Volevo Fare il Calciatore' ('I Wanted To Be a Footballer') shows the players travelling home from their first international game. 'What did





you want to be when you were younger?’ asks an offscreen voice. Each talks about their dreams of playing for a professional club and the factors that ended that wish; injuries, economic necessity or, hardest of all, the realisation that time had passed. On screen, players wearing a giant mask of a shocked face wander around an anonymous city, lost and without an endpoint. It’s a hard watch, making you question your own childhood dreams. The best moments are when you see the players laughing in huddles, celebrating a win. They’re not playing for AC Milan, but in that ecstatic moment, with their teammates and friends, who really cares? **OOF**

