

The Arts of Action

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The theory and culture of the arts has been largely focused on the arts of objects and has largely ignored the arts of action. Here, I wish to draw attention to the neglected arts of action. These are the arts intended to engender agency and activity in their audience, for the sake of the audience's aesthetic appreciation of that activity. This includes their appreciation of their own deliberations, choices, reactions, and movements.

The aesthetics of our own actions are already a natural part of the rich experience of our lives. And the arts of action already exist in plenty; we are surrounded by them. Many of our artifacts are designed for the sake of encouraging and structuring the aesthetics of actions. Games, cities, food rituals, social dances, and more — all are forms which sculpt activity, often for aesthetic ends. But these arts have been inadequately appreciated in theoretical work on art and aesthetics, and often ignored in much public reflection on the value of the arts. They are rarely called “arts”, but, I argue, they deserve to be.

Consider rock climbing. Rock climbing is a profoundly aesthetic enterprise. Climbing culture is replete with aesthetic lingo. Climbers talk about the beautiful movement of a climb, about the exquisite grace that a particularly tricky sequence called out of them. Many people climb in order to experience their own graceful, interesting, dramatic movement.¹ What's more, the quality of a climber's movement is significantly conditioned by an external object. Each climb calls for a particular form of motion. One climb calls for powerful, direct, aggressive movement; another one for loose, monkey-like swinging around; another for dainty, precisely balanced, tiny steps. And climbs, and their implied movement, can be designed. In climbing gyms, “setters” design climbing routes, creating puzzles to solve in movement. And the particular details of those puzzles shape the nature of the resulting movement. Similarly, some board games are designed to encourage particular turns of mind. For example, the design of chess offers a concentrated access to a particularly elegant form of cogitation. The chess player gets to experience the emergence of a lovely solution from a

1. (Nguyen 2017a). For general discussion of the aesthetics of movement from the philosophy of sport, see (Best 1974; Cordner 1984).

thousand tactical minutiae, and they get it with some frequency — far more than they are likely to get from grinding away at the actual problems of the world (Osborne 1964). Rock climbing and chess, I will argue, are examples of the *arts* of action. They are practices oriented around designing artifacts and procedures, which sculpt, encourage, and call forth aesthetic experiences of doing.

1. Process art and object art

Let's take a step back. There is a large category of human practice: the arts. Speaking loosely, the arts are the practice of manufacturing artifacts for aesthetic reasons.² We have been, I think, too ready to think that this practice can be filled out only in one particular way: An artist creates an artifact and imbues it with aesthetic properties. The artifact is the artwork and the bearer of aesthetic properties. Then the audience comes along and experiences the artifact, appreciating the aesthetic properties that occur in the artifact. The artifact bridges the gap between artist and audience by acting as a kind of carrier for aesthetic properties. This is the general schema of the arts of objects.

But I am suggesting that there is at least one more, very different schema for the arts: that of the arts of action. In that schema, some person (or persons) makes an artifact. (We might as well call them the artist, though we could just as easily call them something else.) The artifact is intended as a prompt for further activity. Others come along and engage with the artifact, letting it prompt them into an activity whose contours are partially determined by that artifact. And then those participants appreciate the aesthetic qualities which arise in their own actions. This schema differs sharply from the first schema

2. Many deny that all art is made for aesthetic reasons. I do not mean to be claiming that all art must be made only for aesthetic reasons. I only mean to be suggesting that, in the category of the aesthetically oriented arts, there are two sorts. I leave the notion of "aesthetic reasons" purposefully vague here, and I intend my account to be compatible with any number of ways of filling this out. I myself favor Dominic Lopes' recent account, which focuses on considerations of aesthetic value that bear on aesthetic actions (Lopes 2018, 32–36). Another useful account, which my discussion is compatible with, is (Gorodeisky and Marcus 2018).

in where the primary aesthetic properties emerge. In the arts of objects, the artist imbues the artifact itself with aesthetic properties. In the arts of action, the artist creates the artifact in order to call forth aesthetic action, where the intended aesthetic properties will emerge in the actions themselves. (I mean here an "artifact" in the loosest sense, which includes physical objects such as rock climbing routes, plated dishes of food, rituals such as the Passover Seder, communal practices such as tango dancing, and entities as abstract as the rules for a party game.)

By contrasting the arts of action with the arts of objects, I don't mean to be drawing a distinction between live performances and static physical artifacts. For my purposes, I count paintings, novels, movies, musical performances, theatrical performances, and staged dances as exemplars of the traditional arts of objects. In all these cases, there is some work which exists independently of an audience, which the audience appreciates and to which we attribute aesthetic properties. In a live performance as much as a painting, the aesthetic properties adhere to some external artifact. It is this performance of *King Lear* that captures the particular tragedy of regret so well; it is the album *Enter the Wu Tang (36 Chambers)* which is full of eerie aural space and satisfyingly unhinged rhythm. The arts of action, on the other hand, are marked by distinctively self-reflective aesthetic appreciation. In these arts, the focus of the appreciator's aesthetic attention is on the aesthetic qualities of their own actions.

The term 'action' — though in some ways the most evocative of my interest — is philosophically fraught, and some of its colloquial connotations are a bit narrow for my purposes. Let me switch to a slightly less laden term. Let's call the larger realm here "process aesthetics" and stipulate that the term 'process' refers specifically to activity from the perspective of the actor. Process aesthetics covers the aesthetics of mental and physical processes, including, but not limited to, one's own investigating, thinking, perceiving, deciding, choosing, moving, changing, and acting upon external objects. It also includes the aesthetics of the world, experienced as part of the activity. Part of the

process aesthetics of rock climbing lies in how the rock climber sees the rock, when they are looking to it as obstacle and means for forward progress.

Process aesthetics permeates our lives, often emerging as a part of our natural, spontaneous, and unsculpted everyday activity. When I swerve around an unexpected obstacle in the road, I might delight in the elegance and beautiful, swift precision of my response. When I finally figure out the solution to a philosophical puzzle that has been plaguing me, I can do so through clumsy, ugly, brute-force reasoning, or I might alight directly on the solution with a wonderfully precise turn of mind. Some actions, of course, are aesthetically evaluable from the outside and the inside. The grace of a dancer's movement may be evident both to the inner kinesthetic sense and to the outside observer's eye. But some aspects of acting are primarily available to the acting agent themselves: what it feels like to choose, to decide, to originate an action, to respond to a changing environment. The sense of freedom or constraint engendered by a game environment or an urban landscape is one available primarily to the navigating agent. These various experiences of agency and skill are the special provenance of process aesthetics.

But, I will argue, we can also shape these experiences as part of an intentional artistic practice. The process arts, then, are the arts in which artifacts are made for the sake of bringing about first-personal aesthetic experiences of mental and physical processes.³ I will contrast process art with object art, which I take to be the dominant form in high art culture — at least in the art cultures descended from the Western European tradition. In object art, the aesthetic properties adhere to the artistic artifact. In process art, the aesthetic properties adhere primarily to the processes and activities of the actor, as instigated or influenced by the artifact.⁴ In object art, the artwork is good in virtue of its being, say, graceful. In process art, it is I who am graceful; the artwork

3. Though I focus on aesthetically oriented process art, I have written the definition so as to be open to the possibility of non-aesthetic process art.

4. I intend no connection to Whitehead's "process philosophy".

is good because it has induced and encouraged me to be graceful, and helped to shape the form of my grace.⁵

I will assume, for the remainder of this paper, that there can be aesthetic qualities in one's own actions — that process aesthetics is real. I have argued for this possibility at length elsewhere, drawing especially on recent work in the aesthetics of bodily movement (Nguyen 2019a; 2020, especially 101–120).⁶ Furthermore, the recent conversation on the aesthetics of the everyday has also begun to explore the aesthetics of actions, as they emerge in ordinary activity. The conversation in everyday aesthetics has charted the aesthetic qualities of such actions as scratching an itch or doing housework (Irvin 2008a, 2008b; Saito 2007, 2015; Lee 2010).

Crucially, though philosophers have begun to think about process *aesthetics*, they have largely ignored the possibility of process *art*. Everyday aesthetics has focused on the aesthetics of more spontaneous, agent-driven activities. It has ignored the possibility that we might make artifacts in order to shape experiences of process aesthetics. Theorists of everyday aesthetics seem to presume that process aesthetics is somehow incompatible with the practices of art-making. Elsewhere, theorists have investigated art forms that seem rife with

5. I will not fill out the notion of an "aesthetic property", for I wish my account to be compatible with a wide variety of theories. I have attempted to ensure, at the very least, that my account is compatible with the views that aesthetic properties are recognized through judgments of taste; that attributing them requires first-personal acquaintance; that recognizing aesthetic properties in an object requires correctly perceiving features in that object; and that aesthetic properties merit the perceptions of them.
6. Much of this work has been made possible by earlier work on bodily perception and the possibility of an aesthetics of bodily senses, including work on proprioceptive experiences of dance (Montero 2006). Also crucial has been work rejecting the requirement that all aesthetic experiences be sensory, much of it emanating from work on conceptual art. (Schellekens 2007) provides an excellent overview of that terrain, and a convincing argument for the possibility of the aesthetic experience of ideas. Notice that the category of aesthetics of actions is a much larger one than, say, that of somaesthetics, which concentrates specifically on the internal aesthetics of bodily movement and excludes, say, the internal aesthetics of doing logic or playing chess (Shusterman 2012).

process qualities. The academic discussion of videogames as an art form, as we will see, has typically focused on object-qualities, such as fixed story, graphics, and music, and ignored the aesthetic qualities of player choice and skilled player action. In order to render such objects legible to the established terms of discourse, conventional aesthetic theory has largely ignored their process aesthetic qualities.

Philosophical aesthetics, then, seems to behave as if there are only two options: either there can be process aesthetics, but not in art; or there can be art, but denuded of process aesthetics. In other words, the discussion seems to presume that there can be no process art. Why might that be? Yuriko Saito makes a compelling suggestion in her account of everyday aesthetics. With ordinary external objects, says Saito, we can clearly delineate what we are supposed to focus our attention on. But with actions, the aesthetic qualities are too variable to support any intersubjectively stable experiences. We can all look at the same external object, but we each have our own different activities. It thus seems very difficult to have any sort of critical discourse or make any sort of objective aesthetic judgment of our own actions. And making such objective aesthetic judgments and having such shared experiences are the foundations of the practice of art. So, says Saito, to embrace the aesthetics of action, we must, for that space, abandon the demands of art (Saito 2007, 18–26; Saito 2015).

Here is where my account differs sharply. I think we can use artifacts to shape aesthetic activity in a way that is significantly like the traditional arts. Furthermore, those artifacts help to stabilize certain experiences of action and make them more intersubjectively sharable. The aesthetics of action are not simply confined to everyday activity; they can be intentionally called forth and sculpted through artistic practice. There can be arts of action.⁷

7. I don't mean here to require that the purpose of an artifact align with the designer's intent. A. W. Eaton provides a useful account of the "function" of an artifact, by which the function is set by etiological facts about use and the procedures by which artifacts evolve (Eaton forthcoming).

The historical inattention to the process arts has left a number of key questions unanswered. Who is the artist in process art? How do they imbue an artifact with the capacity to shape a resulting activity? Who is responsible for the aesthetic qualities of action — the artist or the active audience? In what follows, I offer a theory of the process arts and make first attempts at answering these questions. I argue that the process arts are a viable, and important, category of the arts. I give a general account of the basic difference between process arts and object arts, in terms of the prescribed focus of aesthetic attention. I give an account of the place of the artist in the process arts, and argue that we can often attribute significant responsibility for the aesthetic qualities of an audience member's action to an artist. And I defend the process arts from various skeptical claims. Finally, I take the first steps towards diagnosing the resistance to process art. This analysis, I hope, will also expose some basic presuppositions engendered by the largely object-centered history of our artistic practice.

One last note: I use the term 'art' here for lack of a better term, but I am not particularly attached to it. For my purposes, the important claims are that we humans engage in practices of making artifacts for aesthetic purposes; and that there are two distinctive categories of those artifacts, one of which has been theoretically neglected. And furthermore, that we have neglected the possibility that we can create artifacts to intentionally bring about aesthetic experiences of activity. When I say that the social tango, games, and cities deserve to be called "arts", I mean that they deserve to take up a place in the pantheon of human-created artifacts, created for aesthetic purposes. My goal is to investigate and give an account of these artifacts. I will make a case that these artifacts are quite similar to the traditional object arts in some very important regards, and that some of the most cherished features of the object arts also occur in the process arts. But I will not rigorously defend my use of the term 'art' beyond pointing out these similarities. If the reader wishes to reserve the term 'art' for what I'm calling the "object arts", and wishes to use some other term for the

higher-level category of “artifacts manufactured for aesthetic reasons”, they may feel free to substitute the term of their choice throughout.

2. Games, tango, cooking, cities

It will be useful to step back from philosophical theorizing for a moment and survey some representative process arts. First, games are clear examples of a process art. I mean games in the broad sense, including board games, sports, videogames, and tabletop role-playing games. Games are often made for the sake of the player’s experience of their own play: their controlling an avatar through carefully timed sequences of difficult jumps; their thinking through complex sequences of moves; and the grace and precision of their complex reactive movements. Part of the player’s experience also involves their practical experiences of the object as it is relevant to the player’s activity — like the speed and shape of obstacles hurtling at them in a videogame.

Obviously, many games also have traditional object-aesthetic qualities. When we praise the graphics of a game for their beauty or grandeur, we are attributing aesthetic properties to an object as it exists independently of our activity. But a very significant amount of game design effort goes into shaping the player’s experience of active play. Game designers sculpt a choice space and an action space which give players an opportunity for rich, interesting choices, for thrilling actions, for graceful movement. Game designers often also neatly coordinate the process and object qualities, as a claustrophobic choice space and a desperate set of obstacles might be matched to similarly ominous music and visual design. Note that the practice of game design and game criticism, as it is found in the wild, is largely focused on the experiential elements of active play. The discourse that naturally arises in the practice of creating and appreciating games often involves richly aesthetic language. The natural talk about games clearly treats games as a process art. However, when we move to the theoretical discussion of game aesthetics, and various attempts to demonstrate that games are a valuable form of art, the discussion usually switches to object-aesthetic elements — like graphics, sound, fixed scripts, and

fixed narratives. In doing so, the theoretical discussion excludes process aesthetics, concentrating instead on the object-aesthetic qualities that might be found in the artifact itself. This, I suggest, is due to theoretical baggage from art culture’s historical emphasis on the object arts, and the relative paucity of developed tools for thinking about the process arts.⁸

A survey of various theoretical approaches to games will serve here as a useful case study, to help us to get a grip on the dominance of the object art paradigm. Some theorists have focused on the representational qualities of the game. For example, Ian Bogost praises those games that make arguments through procedural rhetoric: that is, games that comment on social, political, and economic systems by simulating them in a pointed way (Bogost 2010). John Sharp has argued that videogames can become art when they move beyond promoting mere player absorption in the instrumentalities of play, and start, instead, to represent the world in a meaningful way. Sharp, for example, points to Mary Flanagan’s game *Career Moves*, which reproduces the old family game *The Game of Life*, while forcing players with female pawns to make stereotypically gendered career choices. Flanagan’s game, says Sharp, is art, because it brings the player to reflect on gender biases in the world (Sharp 2015). Flanagan herself has argued that games can become art when they start to perform the functions of much contemporary art — such as offering social critiques (Flanagan 2009). The pattern of argument here is clear: for games to be an art, there must be some sort of valuable representational content that we can attribute to the game itself. Notice that in all of these cases, the valuable qualities that make the game art are attributable to the artifact itself — its mechanics, its representation of the world, and the commentary embedded in the rules of its simulation. Here, the art-status of videogames is defended by ignoring any process qualities and focusing solely on the object qualities. A similar form of argument also occurs in the fast-growing literature which treats games as a kind

8. This paragraph is a brief summary of an extended account I have developed of game aesthetics elsewhere (Nguyen 2019a; Nguyen 2020).

of fiction. Here, we are directed to focus our aesthetic appreciation not on qualities in our own actions, but on fictional qualities in the work itself. In *The Art of Videogames*, Grant Tavinor claims that videogames are art because they are a kind of fiction. His account locates the primary aesthetic qualities of videogames in stable features in the artifact, such as the narrative, characters, and story. These are features attributable to the object — the videogame itself — rather than to the player's actions. The player's activity shows up in Tavinor simply as means to further the ends of immersion in the fiction. A player's struggles with the challenges of the game are supposed to help the player to identify with the struggles of their in-game avatar. The player's activity is supposed to aid in their absorption in the fiction (Tavinor 2009). Dominic Lopes offers a similarly object-oriented account of the art of computer games. If computer games are an art, says Lopes, they are a form of interactive computer art. Importantly, says Lopes, interactive computer art does not prescribe that the user pay attention to their own actions. Instead, the user is interacting in order to explore a possibility space, to bring the *algorithm* into view. As Lopes says, the user does attend to their own activity, but only as a means to appreciating the actual artwork. The actual artwork is the algorithm and the possibility space it creates; we look *through* our own actions in order to get a handle on the proper object of aesthetic appreciation. And notice that the algorithm is a stable object created by an artist. Interacting with the computer art doesn't create the object of aesthetic attention; it is something like a digital version of walking around and through a large sculpture. They are the actions that we, the audience, must take to bring the artist's work into view (Lopes 2010, 36–52, 67–84). Notice that, in all these treatments, the discussion of the art of games has avoided any direct treatment of process aesthetics. I take this to be a serious omission, one driven by an attempt to squeeze games into a theoretical framework that has been built to suit object art.⁹

9. This discussion of the videogames literature is merely a sketch of a much more detailed discussion I've offered elsewhere (Nguyen 2017b; Nguyen 2020). For another take on that literature, see (Tavinor 2010). On the other

Games should also draw our gaze to other kinds of choice space — of environments designed to support the free movement and decision of agents. Urban planning is also a process art, at least in part. Think of the difference between the miserable experience of navigating a certain kind of modern American metropolitan sprawl, full of sameness and repetition, compared to the rich and lively experience of navigating a city like Istanbul, full of lovely winding streets and delightful mazes of back alleys and market paths. Some of this delight arises from object-aesthetic qualities, such as the visual quality of the architecture and the street. But a day wandering the streets of Istanbul is also one replete with interestingly textured navigational choices — of noticing and discovering a hidden passageway, of deciding to take the broad, curving street or to enter, instead, the cool, dark labyrinth of an indoor marketplace. The layout of the city conditions the quality of these choices.¹⁰

hand, non-philosophical discussion of games often focuses on the aesthetics of actions. We find such discussion in designers' diaries and in online reviews of games — that is, in the natural practice of the aesthetic appreciation of games itself. I discuss those critical practices in greater detail in (Nguyen 2019d). Jon Robson does, in fact, discuss the aesthetics of videogame performances — though his discussion is confined to the question of whether such performances are aesthetically evaluable, and does not broach the topic of how the work of the game designer might shape the aesthetic qualities of such performances (Robson 2018). Notably, some writers outside of philosophical aesthetics have directed attention to the aesthetics of action, most notably Jesper Juul (Juul 2004, 2013). Importantly, some work in the field of game studies has started to explore the process aesthetics of games. For examples, see Daniel Vella's work, which occurs at the intersection of literary studies and continental aesthetics (Vella 2016), Graeme Kirkpatrick's discussion of videogames from the perspective of continental aesthetics and critical theory (Kirkpatrick 2011), and Veli-Matti Karhulahti's work on timing in videogames, again from a continental perspective (Karhulahti 2013). Notably, all of these discussions draw heavily on traditions of continental aesthetics. What's particularly interesting here is the degree to which philosophical aesthetics in the analytic tradition has largely ignored process aesthetics entirely in the discussion of games as an art form.

10. The phenomenology of city walking has been the subject of much study, though most of it outside of analytic aesthetics. For an overview of continental and phenomenological work on city strolling, see (Paetzold 2013). Jonathan Maskit offers a phenomenological account of urban aesthetics, as conditioned by mobility and transportation technologies (Maskit 2018).

Other process arts center on a designed social practice. Consider, for example, the inward aesthetics of rapport in the social tango. Importantly, says Beatriz Dujovne, the theatrical stage tango, which so many of us are familiar with from the movies, is something of a misleading imitation. The true tango, she says, is the social tango, which is improvised and intimate. In the social tango, the dancers aren't dancing for the eyes of an audience.

They improvise. They dance for themselves, introspectively. Shunning the external world, their eyes turn inward. This circumspect dance comes from a different heart and culture than the stage tango. At social dances we see neither sexual passion nor violence. The dance's form is different as well. Legwork is minimal; feet are kept on the floor; the size of the steps is small. People dance closely embraced to one another, bodies connecting, chests close together, heaving and retreating with every breath, heads resting delicately together, moving as one, immersed in total improvisation that forbids them to hide behind choreographed steps. Beauty radiates from the emotions inside the dancers, not from external displays of skill. (Dujovne 2011, 5–6)

True tango dancers dance for themselves. They appreciate their rapport with their partner, the sense of connection and responsiveness, the absorption in the collective improvisation of movement.

Similarly, consider contact improvisation, a dance form in which the dancers play with gravity by putting their weight — and their trust — on another person, rolling around each other's bodies and perpetually falling towards each other (Bigé 2017). Steve Paxton, the dancer who originated the practice, explains:

Just the pleasure of moving and the pleasure of using your body is, I think, maybe the main point. And the pleasure of dancing with somebody in an unplanned and

spontaneous way, where you're free to invent and they're free to invent and you're neither one hampering the other — that's a very pleasant social form. (Kaltenbrunner 1984, 11)

Contact improvisation is also a practice primarily oriented towards the inner experience of the dancer, rather than some outward display. This is why, as some have noted, beginning contact dancers often create spectacular performances, but experienced contact dancers can be quite boring to watch. Experienced dancers are dancing for an inner sensation and a felt relationship, and not for an outer observer. In fact, the contact improvisation community has frequently spurned the traditional performer/audience division, preferring to hold open contact jams, and to stage performances so that audience members can feel free to join in (27, 37–38).

Consider, too, the neglected aesthetics of activity in culinary life. There is an aesthetics of movement in and around food, as conditioned by the physicality of the dish. Some dishes are uncomfortably plated, like many of those teetering food towers so popular in the fancy dining of recently bygone days, which looked stunning but were physically annoying to eat (Nguyen 2018). The process of cooking, too, is full of aesthetic delight, from the gorgeous aromas of a simmering braise to the lovely sizzle of vegetables hitting oil. And many of these aesthetic experiences are distinctively agential. There is an interaction between one's sensual awareness of the ingredients — how they smell and look and sound as they simmer and fry — and one's cooking choices, as informed by that awareness.

Food writer John Thorne suggests that modern food culture separates the process of food creation from the eating itself, and socializes us to think that the food creation is just a chore — a mere instrument to the central aesthetic experience of the finished product.

However, cooking at its most primal is not consciously instructed labor but a flowing, attentive reverie. Spear a chunk of meat on a skewer and hold it over a bed of

smoldering charcoal. It's not conscious thought but a continual tension between the fire's hunger and your own that directs the sharp-eyed turning, keeping sear from turning altogether into char as the fat bubbles and pops, the juices sizzle and crust, and the odors of smoke and meat swirl about your head. (Thorne 1992, 29–30)

This realization, suggests Thorne, might bring you to change how and why you cook. Following a good recipe with painstaking precision might lead to a better finished product, but that subservience also robs the cooking process of much of its richness. Cooking more improvisationally may sacrifice a bit of quality in the end product, but it offers, in trade, a much more rewarding experience of one's own agency in cooking.

Other food practices are built around the pleasures of the eater's agency. Take, for example, the joys of Turkish breakfast. Traditional Turkish breakfast is a composed arrangement of small dishes, meant to be freely combined: small blocks of feta cheese, olives, jams, spreads, fresh bread, eggs, and perhaps a bit of sausage. One of the key pleasures of the meal lies in the experience of culinary free choice — of getting to decide and construct each next bite according to the whim of the moment. But that experience of free culinary activity is conditioned by the details of the layout of the breakfast. When the spread has been well-assembled, the process of assembly is full of small delights: the cubes of cheese are the right size to have with a bit of bread; the spreads are just the right density to scoop.

What's more, many food rituals structure, through their physicality and the surrounding social norms, a set of movements, a sociality, and a choice space. Consider the familiar rituals of hot pots and raclette machines, in which large groups of cheerful eaters cook their meal at the table, swishing slices of meat through liquid, or pouring a bit of sizzling melted cheese over cubed potatoes. During the process, they rub shoulders, argue about whose piece is whose, or whose turn it is to grab a particular piece of cooking real estate. It's the physical

details of the pot, and the implicit rules of its use, that structure those interactions. (Ruth Van Waerebeek recalls, in her lovely Belgian cookbook, her childhood family ritual of having Belgian waffles for dinner. The part she remembers with the most fondness and nostalgia, she says, was the hours-long argument amongst the twelve members of her family, all gathered around their single waffle-maker, about who had the rights to the next waffle [Waerebeek 1996].) If one thought that there could be an aesthetic experience of social interaction, then this, too, is surely a process-aesthetic experience conditioned by an artifact and its rules for usage.¹¹ And surely the social interactions are conditioned, in significant part, by the rules of the practice, and by the particular preparation and layout of the dishes and material.

Obviously, in many of these cases, process and object aesthetics are deeply intermingled. Part of the quality of a Turkish breakfast is certainly in the gustatory quality of the ingredients themselves. However, critical and aesthetic talk in the culinary realm seems entirely focused on the object-aesthetic qualities — the taste and aroma of the food itself — and not on the process-aesthetic qualities. But a life with food is a life full of process aesthetics. And many of these qualities arise from intentionally designed features. Our critical practice, however, largely elides the process-aesthetic features. In reviewing restaurants, we usually talk about the food's taste, smell, and appearance, but almost never talk about how the physical arrangement of the food made our own manipulation of it pleasing or awkward — though how that movement goes is clearly the result of the kitchen's attentiveness or inattentiveness to the forms of movement which will be called forth by how they arrange and plate the food. In reviewing cookbooks, we often talk of the recipe's resulting deliciousness or appearance, but rarely talk about how fun or annoying it was for us to cook the dish — about whether the processes described were elegant, where the times and activities fit just right; or whether they were jumbled messes, where we were required to do six things at once and jump frenetically between them.

11. For discussion of the aesthetics of social interactions, see (Bourriaud 2002; Bishop 2004, 2012; Finkelpearl 2013).

But the activity of cooking is itself part of the content of a cookbook. The activity of cooking is a product of intentional design, attributable to a cookbook's author. One might then protest that the object-aesthetic qualities are the genuinely important ones, while the process qualities are just a side-show. But this simply begs the question of why we favor the object arts over the process arts — of why, in so many of the artifacts that have both object and process art qualities, we concentrate our critical discourse on the object qualities.

All of my examples lie at the periphery of what is normally considered art, and belong to practices that are rarely granted the respect generally accorded to the traditional arts. This is part of the point. I think the historical focus on the object arts has induced a relative neglect, in official attention and valuation, to the process arts. This is why we cannot proceed merely by interrogating our intuitions about the use of terms like 'art', for those have been shaped by the very cultural patterns which I mean to question.¹² I freely grant that the norms and practices of the art world, at present, usually ennoble the object arts and marginalize the process arts. I grant, furthermore, that our intuitions about the use of the term 'art' often support the primacy of the object arts. I wish to question the basis of these intuitions and practices.

Much of the previous work on this terrain has argued for the worthwhileness of these various process arts by attempting to assimilate them to more familiar object arts. Consider, for example, Michael de Certeau's aesthetic analysis of walking in the city as a kind of textual creation, by arguing that various walks could be interpreted as a kind of expressive speech (Certeau 1984, 91–95); Bogost's and Flanagan's defenses of the worth of games in terms of their abilities to model, critique, and comment on society, economics, and morality; and Carolyn Korsmeyer's account of the meaning of food in terms of its capacity to

12. For a more robust defense of moderate skepticism towards the usefulness of interrogating our intuitions about the term 'art', see (Zangwill 2007, 1–35). Richard Wollheim's work is, in my eyes, an excellent example of careful theory building which takes, as its starting points, intuitions about artworks which implicitly exclude the process arts (Wollheim 1980).

represent and depict, and so acquire meaningfulness (Korsmeyer 1999, 103–145). Such attempts do indeed survey some valuable aesthetic terrain. But the overall approach also distracts us. They focus on fitting the process arts within an object art paradigm, and pull our attention away from these forms' unique potential. Ignoring process aesthetics and process art is a poor use of the aesthetic resources of the world. It is my hope that the following account will help us come to plainer terms with the process arts and their value.

Finally, I focus largely on pure examples — artifacts and practices that are almost entirely object art or process art. But this focus is intended only to help us start to get a grip on these categories. Actual artistic practice is full of all sorts of hybrids between the two forms. Many videogames invite process-aesthetic appreciation of the player's own actions, but also object-aesthetic appreciation of the graphics, the music, and pre-generated elements of storyline. And such features can harmonize and blend in fascinating ways, as when a videogame's soundtrack dynamically adjusts to the player's actions, emphasizing the drama and danger of the situation. And I suspect that there are many artistic practices that, though object-centric, also have substantial process-aesthetic qualities. For example: our involvement with detective novels typically involves not only appreciation of object-features like character and plot, but a self-reflective appreciation of our own process of puzzling through the mystery. And when we try to understand the aesthetic value of such a hybrid work within a theory built only for the object arts, then we will inevitably misunderstand key features of that work.

3. Process art: A theory

First, I define *process aesthetics* as the aesthetics of activity from the perspective of the actors. This includes the overtly self-reflective experiences of each actor's own activity. Process aesthetics also includes those experiences of the outside world that are related to that activity — such as a cook monitoring the smells and sounds and color of their sautéing vegetables, to determine when they're ready. Process

aesthetics thus includes experiences of sensory and aesthetic qualities in external objects as they are cognized as part of the activity. Consider, for example, the aesthetics of a rock climb. Process-aesthetic qualities include the climber's aesthetic experiences of their own movement, but also the aesthetic experiences involved in perceiving the rock as obstacle for movement and as means for aiding movement. I attend to those external qualities that are relevant for my activity, and I attend to them as part of an investigative and practical process where they function as, among other things, the basis for further decisions and actions. There is an aesthetic quality — a perception of a kind of practical harmony — that arises from recognizing that this little nubbin of rock is exactly in the right place to re-balance your foot.¹³

Process art refers to those artifacts whose function is to bring about process-aesthetic experiences. I mean 'artifacts' loosely here — I mean to include manufactured physical objects, rituals, instruction sets, and even social practices. The rules of the party game Werewolf are an artifact, in this sense; as are the conventions, traditions, and practices of social tango; as well as the physical apparatus of fondues, along with the social norms for their appropriate use. I will refer to the creators of process art as the *designers*. The designer here can be anything from a single individual, such as a board game designer, to a multi-generational community, such as the one that originated the social tango practice.¹⁴ I will call 'the enactor' the person or persons who engage with such an artifact, whose actions are appropriately guided or instigated by it, and who aesthetically appreciate their own activity.¹⁵ I will

13. For a further discussion of practical harmony, see (Nguyen 2020, 107–110).

14. For a discussion of how groups can be artists, see (Bacharach and Tollefsen 2010; Nguyen 2019c).

15. I intend no connection to Alva Noe's enactive aesthetics. Furthermore, though I will usually speak of single-person enactors, I am entirely open to the possibility of group agent perspectives — though I do not want to litigate here for the possibility of multi-person perspectives for aesthetic experience. Note that (Himberg et al. 2018) argues that the point of collective dance improvisation is to induce a collective perspective from which collective self-reflective aesthetic experiences can be had. See also my discussion of collective audiences in (Nguyen 2019c).

refer to the enactor's activities in response to such an artifact as their 'engagement' with it. None of these notions are meant to be exclusive; many artworks have both process- and object-aesthetic qualities, and an individual can appreciate both at once.¹⁶

Process art involves a more distanced relationship between artist and enactor than object art does between artist and audience. In the object arts, the artist creates a work which the audience experiences. The audience experiences aesthetic properties as *in* or *adhering to* that work, and makes aesthetic judgments about that work. Process art involves an extra stage. The designer creates an artifact. The enactors interact with the artifact, which conditions the enactors' resulting activity. The enactors experience aesthetic properties in their own actions ("That was a graceless serve"; "We were so beautifully in synch with each other in that dance"). The artifact influences what and how aesthetic properties emerge in the enactor's activity, but the primary aesthetic properties emerge in the enactor's activity itself. We may also make secondary judgments about the quality of the work based on its functional capacity to encourage aesthetically valuable actions. We might judge this board game good because it tends to create situations that are interesting, thrilling, fascinating, and tends to create opportunities for our own brilliant, dramatic, and elegant moves. But the goodness of process art as such comes down to its capacity to encourage valuable aesthetic qualities in the enactor's own activity.¹⁷

16. I originally introduced the terms 'object art', 'process art', 'enactor', 'artist's work', and 'attentive focus' in a very brief sketch in my book, *Games: Agency as Art* (Nguyen 2020, 142–144). Though *Games* bears a similar publication date to the present article, due to the complexities of book publishing, those parts of the book were actually written several years prior to the writing of the present article. In the interim, I've grappled with a wider variety of process arts. The present account departs from the earlier one in many details. I take the present account of process art to be much improved from the preliminary sketch I gave in *Games*. Furthermore, I take myself to have answered, in the present article, some of the open questions and puzzles I mentioned in *Games* about the nature of process art, and the questions concerning its lowly place in the culture.

17. I am relying here on Jane Forsey's account of the aesthetics of design (Forsey

With process art, there is a significant gap between the work and the aesthetic experience — much more so than with object art. This requires making a conceptual distinction between two aspects of artworks that are usually merged. In object art, we aesthetically attend to what the artist produces. Melville writes the text *Moby Dick*, and we aesthetically attend to that very same text. To understand process art, we must dissolve the expectation for such a singular locus of aesthetic effort. Let's distinguish between the *designer's work* and the *attentive focus*. The designer's work is the stable artifact created by the designer for the purpose of engendering aesthetic experiences. The attentive focus is the prescribed focus of aesthetic attention. In object art, the designer's work and the attentive focus are one and the same thing, or very close to it. The painter creates a painting, and the audience attends to that painting. In process art, the designer's work and the attentive focus come apart. The designer's work is the artifact: the game, the recipe, the city, the rules of the tango. The attentive focus is the enactor's own activity, which arises in response to the designer's work. In process art, there are two distinct generative processes: first the designer generates the work, and then the enactor generates an activity in response to the work. And in process art, it is that latter activity which is prescribed as the attentive focus.¹⁸

One might worry that I am presuming some special private interiority of agency — some inaccessible first-personal perspective for the agent. This might strike some as problematic. At the very least, one might protest, aesthetic qualities of agency are sometimes available to an outside viewer. The basketball player dodges and weaves, and the gracefulness of their motion is available both to themselves and to

2013) and Glenn Parsons and Allen Carlson's account of functional beauty (Parsons and Carlson 2008).

18. One might think that the divide between, say, composer and performer can be mapped onto the divide between artist and enactor. This turns out not to work; see Andrew Kania's excellent discussion (Kania 2018). Note that even when performance art ontologies are divided into multiple stages (the script, the performance), there is still some further audience, beyond the performer, who attribute aesthetic properties to an external work.

the spectator. A chess player makes a complex decision; the elegance of their solution can be grasped by an observer who understands the state of play. Certainly, some process-aesthetic qualities are available to the spectator. But many process-aesthetic qualities are not. What it feels like to react, how exactly the pieces of the solution come to you — these are qualities to which the agent themselves has special access.

More importantly, however, my claim is not that the attentive focus in the process arts must be private. My claim is only that the process arts are aimed *primarily* at an agent's experience of their own activity. This means that there is no requirement for externalizability and no demand for publicity for the aesthetic qualities — though, of course, some aspects of that activity might turn out to be publicly accessible. Let's return to rock climbing. Some rock climbs are quite aesthetically public, with spectacular large-scale gymnastic movement. Other rock climbs — like the classic balance problem *The Angler* — involve minute shifts of balance and delicate adjustments in inner torsion, invisible to the outside eye. *The Angler* is fascinating to climb, but mind-numbingly boring to watch (Nguyen 2017a). My claim here is only that rock climbing is primarily oriented towards the aesthetic qualities of climbing for the climber themselves; thus, *The Angler* is no aesthetic failure because of the relative absence of aesthetic payoff for the spectator. Consider, also, the differences between a more object-art dance practice, like ballet, and a more process-art dance practice, like the social tango. Though there may be process-aesthetic qualities to ballet, the practice is oriented primarily towards producing aesthetic qualities available to the non-dancing spectator. This is why, under the current social practice, it doesn't seem a viable aesthetic criticism of a particular ballet performance that it was thoroughly unpleasant for the dancers. And though there may be some observable aesthetic qualities in the social tango, the practice is freed from the demand that it must primarily aim at producing such observable qualities. The practice is designed primarily for the sake of producing the subtle feelings of connection

and improvisational responsiveness that are primarily appreciable by the dancers themselves.

Alternately, one might attempt to refuse the distinction between the object and process arts by pointing to the fact that an audience's appreciation of an object artwork involves a substantial amount of activity. Audiences for the traditional arts are not passive, as has been often pointed out. We choose what to attend to; we question and interpret. For example: experiencing fiction involves a substantial deployment of the active imagination. Note, however, that no matter how active the role of the imagination, critical talk of fiction usually attributes aesthetic properties and judgments to the text itself and not to one's imagination of it. Furthermore, if one loses oneself in one's own imagination, that attention is usually directed towards the fictional world as imagined, and not self-reflectively towards the mental efforts of imagining. In other words, in many encounters with fiction, even if the audience participates in the manufacture of an attentive focus, they still grapple with it as something produced. Their appreciative focus is on the world produced by their imagination, and not on their own process of coming to imagine it, nor on the relationship between that world and the process of imagining it.¹⁹

Consider, too, the precise target of our critical discourse. When we praise Jane Austen's novels, we praise them for their wonderfully exact descriptions of characters. This is an object-aesthetic attribution; the quality of precision is attributed to the novel and not one's own mental efforts in response. This is not true of all fiction, however. Consider, for example, more game-like fictions, such as mystery novels. There, it seems, the structure of the fiction encourages attention to the reader's own struggles. When we praise a good mystery novel, we often praise it for giving us a juicy puzzle to sink our teeth into. Other

19. I am confining my discussion here to those theories of the object arts which presume that the work of art is some external artifact. I take this to be the dominant view, and the most plausible one. Some other accounts, such as that of R. G. Collingwood, claim that the work of art is constructed in the imagination of the viewer (Collingwood 1938). Space does not permit me to address that family of views here.

recalcitrant texts, such as Thomas Pynchon's famously cryptic novel *Gravity's Rainbow*, may also highlight the reader's own struggles and the experiential qualities of so struggling. But that is just to say that fictions sometimes cross the line between object arts and process arts. It may turn out, once we have performed our analysis, that many of the traditional arts actually partake more of process aesthetics than we might have thought.

Finally, the object and process arts occur on a continuum. For example, there are certain intentional process qualities in the traditional arts. From my own experience playing piano, I suspect that Beethoven cared not a whit about the experience of the piano player. His interest was solely on the finished product. But Chopin's piano works have always seemed different to me. The physical movements that each piece requires have an expressive resonance with the music itself. Bold passages require athletic leaps of the pianist's hands; elegant melodies are often paired with movements that, when executed, feel physically elegant; agonized chords force the fingers to twist in a grotesque and agonizing manner. If this is right, then Beethoven's piano sonatas are object art, but Chopin's piano works are a mixture — they have some clear process art qualities that are accessible only to the piano player.²⁰ Similarly, consider some of the differences between various practices of dance. Some practices of dance, such as ballet, are largely in the domain of object art, where others, like the social tango, are largely in the domain of process art. But surely there are ballet dancers who dance primarily for their own inner experience of dance, and social tango dancers who dance for the outside eye. I'm classifying ballet as an object art and social tango as a process art from what seem like the overall aims of the practice. But the boundaries are fluid, and individuals may enter into the practices for different reasons. My intention is not to show that the object arts and the process arts are always distinct from each other. Rather, it is to show that the process art side of the

20. For a further discussion, see (Willard 2018).

spectrum has been neglected, as have the process aspects of many traditional arts.

4. Who is the process artist?

Who is the artist of a work of process art — the designer or the enactor? One might be tempted, at this point, to suggest that I've put the labels in the wrong places. Perhaps the designers of games, cities, and Turkish breakfasts are simply creating the background and the tools for artistry. The designers aren't any sort of artists at all. Instead, it is the enactors — the players, walkers, and diners — who are the true artists.

This does seem quite apt for some cases. It seems precisely the right characterization of, for example, the social tango. There, the social practice simply enables a kind of live, artistic, creative process. The dancers themselves seem primarily responsible for the aesthetic qualities that emerge in the dance. The designers of the social practice, such as they are, are responsible for creating a fertile ground for aesthetic creation, but not for the aesthetic creation itself. It would seem strange to think of those designers as any sort of artists or artist-analogues.

But the view that the enactors are the artists seems quite inapt for other cases: for instance, many board games and computer games. For example, the enactors-as-artists view doesn't have the resources to account for the difference in aesthetic responsibility between, say, the designers of a computer game versus the designers of a word-processing program. The team that designs a word processor is making the tools for other artists to write their various artistic masterpieces on. But surely the designer of the word processor isn't an artist. They don't have anything like particular artistic values or aesthetic qualities in mind as they design the software. They are not active participants in the act of artistic creation. Suppose that Paul Beatty wrote his novel *The Sellout* using a copy of Microsoft Word. The aesthetic qualities of *The Sellout* are wildness, bleak hilarity, and expressive bitterness. None of these specific aesthetic qualities can be attributed to Microsoft Word or its design team.

However, there is a very different sort of relationship between the setter of a rock-climbing route and the aesthetic qualities that emerge in a climber of that route. The route setter can aim at instigating graceful motion; they can set the size and difficulty of the holds to encourage delicacy in the climber. In many cases, process artists do have particular artistic qualities or values in mind, and they imbue their work with features that play some direct role in shaping the aesthetic quality of the enactor's activity — even if the process artist doesn't entirely determine that aesthetic quality in its full specificity. The designers of Microsoft Word had nothing like wildness or hilarity in mind. A climbing-route setter, on the other hand, may set a climb specifically for the purpose of encouraging graceful, delicate, aesthetically pleasing motion — though the precise form of grace is finalized only by a particular climber.

It will be useful here to consider Sondra Bacharach and Deborah Tollefsen's discussion of artistic collaboration. Some artworks, like movies, are made by a group artist. But what are the outer boundaries of that group artist? One might think that anybody that contributed at all to the aesthetic quality of the end product was part of the group artist. But this is too broad a criterion; it does not distinguish between genuine artistic collaborators and mere contributors. Obviously, say Bacharach and Tollefsen, the directors, script-writers, cinematographers, actors, and set dressers are part of the group artist, but the on-set caterers are not. How do we draw that line in a principled way? Their answer is that the group artist is constituted by its members taking on a joint commitment to collaboratively fix particular aesthetic qualities in the work. They intentionally cooperate to make a film delicate or spooky. The caterer's tacos may have helped the director make good artistic choices, but the tacos' cook didn't play a role in intentionally fixing the particular aesthetic qualities of the film (Bacharach and Tollefsen 2010).

Their analysis helps us to identify who the process artist is, exactly — and how that designation may fall in different places for different process arts. The designers of Microsoft Word don't play a collaborative

role in fixing the aesthetic qualities of *The Sellout*. Furthermore, no elements in Word play a significant role in fixing the particular aesthetic qualities of *The Sellout*. Word may have contributed to that work's quality by making Beatty's artistic creative life easier, but the particular aesthetic properties of *The Sellout* aren't significantly explained by any particular aspects of Word, nor by any choices of Word's design team.

Consider, on the other hand, the beloved computer puzzle game *Portal*. In that game, the player is given a single primary tool: a wormhole gun. The wormhole gun first fires an orange portal, which sticks to wherever you aimed it, and then a blue portal. Once you've attached these two portals to the world, the game connects them with a wormhole. You can go in one portal and you'll instantly exit out the other. Manipulation of the portal placements lets you manipulate the topology of the virtual environment. The game then places an increasingly difficult set of obstacles in your virtual path, which you must solve with only your wormhole gun. Solving these puzzles is a fascinating, mind-bending delight, in which gorgeous solutions finally emerge for the player out of frustrated despair. Notice, though, that the aesthetic quality of the player's activity in *Portal* are partially attributable to design elements in the game and to the game designer's intentional efforts. The astonishing feel of one's mind finally unlocking a puzzle arises in response to the counterintuitive physics and the details of each particular puzzle. And these parts of the game were surely designed, at least in part, to bring about the particular experiential qualities of that mental unlocking.

We might be tempted, then, to instead claim that the artist of a piece of process art and the enactor are actually artistic collaborators.²¹ And while this may be true in some particular cases, I do not think we should so readily subsume the relationships of artist and enactor in the process arts to the kinds of relationships we find in traditional object art collaborations. First, if it is a kind of collaboration, then it is one of a very different sort from traditional artistic collaborations. Consider

21. Such a view is advanced by Paul Crowther, who says the digital arts are unique in that their users also count as co-creators (Crowther 2008).

the relationship between a film's scriptwriter and its production team. The scriptwriter creates a document and passes it to a production team, who are inspired by that document to some further activity. Superficially, this might seem like the same kind of multi-stage affair as with process art. However, in film-making, the scriptwriter and production team are both focused on getting aesthetic qualities into the same end-stage artifact — the film — for appreciation by some further audience. The primary aesthetic qualities here occur in that finished work itself. The scriptwriter isn't focused on structuring and influencing the aesthetic qualities of the production team's activity of creation. A game designer, on the other hand, is designing precisely for the sake of the aesthetic qualities of the player's activity of play.

Second, an artistic collaboration usually involves both collaborators aiming at a shared goal — the production of an aesthetic object with certain aesthetic qualities. But the goals of the designer and enactor are often quite divergent. The designer of *Portal* might be designing for the sake of imbuing the player's experience with these particular aesthetic qualities, while the player themselves might, during play, be wholly aimed at winning. Often, the player generates those aesthetically infused actions when their mind is bent wholly to the practical considerations of the game-task; the aesthetic qualities are unintentional by-products of their attempts to win.²² Similarly, the city-walker may simply be intending to find something to eat for the night; the aesthetic qualities in their activity arise from an interaction between their local goal and the navigational qualities of the city. In many cases of process art, it is the designer who aims at bringing about aesthetic experiences. The enactor pursues some other aim, like winning the game or finding a late-night snack. For the enactor, the aesthetic qualities can arise indirectly, as a result of activity aimed at some locally

22. In some cases, the player may have initially decided to play the game for the sake of aesthetic experience, but during game-play, they are not choosing their particular action in order to generate those particular aesthetic qualities. Rather, those aesthetic qualities arise out of wholly instrumental intentions and actions, as conditioned by their gaming environment. See (Nguyen 2019a) for a detailed discussion of aesthetic qualities and agential layering.

non-aesthetic goal, as it brings them into interaction with the process artist's design.

Who exactly is the artist, then, in a given piece of process art? It will be useful here to consider Nick Zangwill's account of aesthetic creation. The artist, says Zangwill, is the person who has an aesthetic insight — an insight that certain aesthetic properties would depend on certain non-aesthetic properties — and who imbues some work of art with those aesthetic properties in virtue of those non-aesthetic properties. For example, an artist might have the insight that a certain array of colors and shapes would create a delicious tension in a painting. They then, based on that insight, create a painting with that array of colors and shapes, and so give it delicious tension (Zangwill 2007, 36–58). Notice that the definition as written excludes designers of process art, since they do not imbue the work itself with aesthetic properties. Rather they design a work with the capacity to trigger a particular range of aesthetic qualities, as they will emerge in downstream engagements. But let me suggest an expansion of Zangwill's account:

Expanded conception of the artist: The artist is the person who has an aesthetic insight — which is an insight that certain aesthetic properties would depend on certain non-aesthetic properties — and who imbues some work of art with aesthetic properties *or the power to bring about those aesthetic properties* in virtue of those non-aesthetic properties.

I have emphasized the addition I have made to Zangwill's account. The expanded conception seems utterly reasonable to me. It captures something essential about what it is to be an artist engaged in an act of aesthetic creation. The artist has some particular insight into how aesthetic properties might emerge from non-aesthetic properties; and they manipulate some non-aesthetic medium in order to give rise to those aesthetic properties. The expanded conception only relaxes Zangwill's implicit demand that those aesthetic properties emerge in the work itself.

I take it that, in the case of tango, the aesthetic insight is had by the enactor. It is the dancer who understands, on some level, that moving like *so*, and responding like *so*, will lead to graceful movement and a wonderful, sensitive sense of connection. The creators of the social practice have not had the aesthetic insights themselves; they have created a background against which such aesthetic insights might more readily flourish. In that case, I think we can say that the primary artist is the dancer. The designer's work — the social practice of tango — constitutes a background and environment for encouraging the dancer's process artistry.

In the case of many computer games, on the other hand, the aesthetic insight is largely held by the designer. It is *Portal's* designers who realized that such-and-such lines of code, and such-and-such virtual physics, will create such-and-such physics puzzle, which will make it significantly likely that a game player will, in solving the puzzle, have an aesthetic experience of their mind's own elegance. The game player may have an insight about the solution to the puzzle, but that is not an aesthetic insight in Zangwill's sense. During their absorption in the game, the players' attention is devoted to the instrumental calculations of play. It is the game designer's insight that a certain variety of instrumental calculations, as guided by particular goals and rules of physics, will result in certain aesthetic qualities in the player's activity.²³ The primary artist in this case is the game designer.

There can also be nested aesthetic insights. For example, consider the eater of a Turkish breakfast. They may have a culinary aesthetic insight: that a certain bit of feta would taste great when balanced with a very small dollop of bergamot jam. They then bring that insight into being, in the form of a particular morsel of food. They are the artist of that morsel, which is itself a piece of object art. But the process of creating that morsel also has aesthetic qualities, and the aesthetic nature of that creative process was conditioned by the aesthetic insights of

23. For a further discussion of the focused, goal-oriented nature of play, and its relation to the emergent aesthetic experiences of play, see (Nguyen 2019a; 2020).

the person who set up the Turkish breakfast. Those insights might be, for example, that this size of feta cube would be more pleasant to handle than that size, and that this arrangement of plates would generate the most elegant movement for an eater in the process of assembling their various tasty morsels. The person who sets out the Turkish breakfast spread can imbue aesthetic qualities in the process of the eater's own particular process of aesthetic creation. In other words, Turkish breakfast is an object art nested inside a process art, where the process artist is arranging a spread in order to design an aesthetically valuable process — where that process is the eater's activity of making object art.

I suspect that there will turn out to be many other examples of such nested arts. Consider, for example, tabletop role-playing games and improvisational theater, where the actors or players are creating a piece of object art — a performed narrative — but doing so inside a rule set which makes their process of creation itself aesthetically interesting. Role-playing games and improvisational theater procedures are process artworks, built around the process of creating object art.

Let me suggest, then, a taxonomy. With regards to the location of the artist, there are, loosely, three types of process arts.

Designer process arts: the arts where the designer has the primary aesthetic insights.

Enactor process arts: the arts where the enactor has the primary aesthetic insights.

Hybrid process arts: the arts where the designer and enactor share the primary aesthetic insights (either through collaboration or through a multi-stage nesting).

Portal is a designer process art. The designer had the insights to create the game-physics and game-environment in a certain way, in order to imbue the enactor's activity with certain aesthetic properties. Social tango is an enactor process art. The weight of the aesthetic insights is borne by the enactor. It is a process art because, when we wish to explain these aesthetic qualities, we will need to make reference to the

rules and methods of the social tango as part of the explanation of the aesthetic qualities that emerge in the final dance. And Microsoft Word is no process art at all. The designers of Word did not design specific parts of Word in order to bring about specific aesthetic qualities of the various novels, plays, essays, and philosophy articles that are written with it.

5. The frame around the process

It will be useful to compare my analysis of process art with the recent discussion of "everyday aesthetics". Yuriko Saito contrasts the formal practices of art-making and art appreciation with a range of less structured, more freeform aesthetic experiences — ones unconstrained by the prescriptions found in the traditional arts.

Says Saito: in the standard practice of art, there is a prescriptive frame around works of art. That is, there are prescriptions for a proper encounter, in which we must approach an artwork in a certain way and include only certain properties in our aesthetic attention. In order to experience a painting, I am supposed to view it from the front and not the side. When we discuss and judge a novel, we are supposed to do so by considering the meanings and sounds of the words, and not the smell of the ink and paper they are printed on. Such prescriptions are clearly central to our art practices. Simply imagine our reaction to someone breaking them — say, by pronouncing on the aesthetic qualities of Diego Rivera's painting *Flower Seller* by licking the canvas and commenting on its flavor.

Let's call anything that has such an attentional frame a "framed work". Framed works involve prescriptions for appreciation. Many of these prescriptions arise through practice and tradition. We know what to do with a book and with a painting from the way their appearance and the context of their presentation declare their membership in some prescription-bound class. In other cases, prescriptions are overtly declared by the artist, such as when a contemporary avant-garde artist instructs their audience to roll around in their museum installation's ball-pit as part of their experience of the work (Irvin

2005; Davies 2004, 50–79).²⁴ Importantly, the normative force of these prescriptions is entirely hypothetical; there is no reason to follow the prescriptions for “reading a novel” unless one intends to be engaged in the practice of novel reading. The prescriptions only specify what the work is, by specifying what one must do in order to count as engaging with the work. One is perfectly free to enjoy the smell of one’s copy of *Moby Dick* by burning it in a fire, but one is not thereby appreciating *Moby Dick*. These prescriptions only fix the nature of what *Moby Dick* is: it is not a piece of physical material to be appreciated in all its physicality. Nor is it a collection of words to be accessed at any order, like a dictionary. The work consists of a set of *words to be read in a particular order*. Those instructions frame the work, specifying what it is, over and above a particular set of material. Everyday aesthetics, on the other hand, is aesthetic experience without officially prescribed frames. In everyday aesthetics, says Saito, we wander through the world framing and re-framing as we please.

Why do we frame? The prescriptive frame helps stabilize the object of attention. It is part of what makes it possible for different audience members to have something like the same experience. The rule that a novel should be read in a certain order — all the words, from front to back — helps to ensure that all the readers are looking at the same basic narrative object, and are all starting from approximately the same experiential place. But that means, says Saito, that there is a trade-off between art aesthetics and everyday aesthetics. With art, we have a prescriptive frame, and a relatively stabilized and relatively sharable form of experience. But with everyday aesthetics there is no frame, so we lose the stable object and the sharable experience. What we gain, instead, is aesthetic freedom. In everyday aesthetics, we can exercise our imagination and creativity as we see fit. Rather than letting convention or social practice dictate our aesthetic attention, we choose

24. Note, as Irvin explains, that these claims do not violate the intentional fallacy, since they don’t depend on reference to private internal states, but only on public actions and declarations.

for ourselves how we will spend it, as we please. We can constitute the aesthetic object in any way we wish (Saito 2007, 18–19).

Let’s accept this analysis for the moment. It gets, I think, at something crucial about what we care about in art in particular — something about why the aesthetics of art are distinctive from everyday aesthetic experiences. Art involves artifacts and social practices which prescribe particular approaches to those artifacts. The point of all that rigmarole is to produce certain sculpted, stable, repeatable experience — to capture an aesthetic property in an object, to tie it down so that others may see.

So: what about process aesthetics? For Saito, all process aesthetics is everyday aesthetics. There is no such thing as a framed experience of process aesthetics. There is, in other words, no process art. Why reject the possibility of process arts? Saito’s suggestion is interesting. The art world, says Saito, wants to give us controlled and optimal experiences of art, which require a degree of physical distance and physical disengagement. The paradigmatic experience of art is, according to Saito, passive: we stand still in front of the painting; we sit still at a concert hall (20). Thus, the essential active participation of process aesthetics might seem in tension with the controlled nature of art.

Saito is surely right that our everyday experience is full of unframed moments of process aesthetics. But I do not think it is right to think that there can be no process arts. Processes, I argue, can also be framed. And artists can exert some degree of control over the aesthetics of activities, even when there is no physical distance between the audience member and their own activity. This is easiest to see in the practice of game criticism. One cannot pronounce a critical judgment of a videogame merely from smelling the disc. When I play the videogame *Shadows of the Colossus*, I am supposed to form a judgment of the game by aesthetically attending to the challenges of moving my avatar in and around the bodies of massive giants. I am not supposed to include, in my evaluation, how satisfying it was for me to eat popcorn between battles. Other forms of process art also involve some form of frame. The prescriptions involved with these practices may

be so familiar that we may forget their existence, but they are easy to bring into view. Consider, for example, if I were to pronounce on the poor texture of a restaurant's broth after trying to eat it with a fork. This is an illegitimate judgment, precisely because I haven't attended to the work while following the appropriate prescriptions. These process arts are appreciative practices whereby we frame processes. The social practice contains prescriptions which seek to focus various participants' aesthetic attention on the same set of features, to regularize and focus that attention in controlled and repeatable ways. These prescriptions usually accompany artifacts that have been intentionally designed for the sake of such aesthetic attention. And it is the coordination of the prescriptions and the artifact design that can give the artist some measure of control over the audience's experience, and provide for some stability to how the audience interacts with the artifact and to the experiences which it generates. When we all cluster around a Vietnamese hot pot to dip our various meats and vegetables in the bowl, it is no accident that we end up having these very particular experiences of dipping food, dropping food, searching desperately around for our lost shrimp, bumping elbows, and laughing. The conventions of the practice, and the physical nature of the artifacts involved, reliably give rise to those sorts of experiences.²⁵

The existence of framed process art is crucial to allaying certain worries about the status of the process arts as genuine arts — or at least their having art-like value. The frame is crucial to how art functions and why it is valuable. The fact that we share a frame helps to control and stabilize how different people attend to the material substrate of traditional art objects. It directs our various attentions along a similar course and towards a well-defined range of aspects; it brings the appearance of a painting or the narrative of a novel to the fore. In process art, the frame functions in the same way — but in this case, our aesthetic attentions are directed towards particular aspects of our actions and

agency, rather than towards, say, certain select perceptual qualities of a physical object. The existence of framed process arts is what permits the sculpting and delineation of particular activities, and their transmission from artist to audience. It's what permits us to have process-aesthetic experiences that are something like shared — like when we ascend the same rock climb, performing similar patterns of motion in response to precisely the same physical challenges.

Not all process art involves frames. A process artwork, according to my account, is some artifact made for the purpose of shaping the aesthetic qualities of the enactor's engagement. We can easily imagine artifacts made with such aesthetic intent but with no frame. I suspect that cities are such unframed works of process art. It is hard to think of a way to attend to the wrong sorts of features in aesthetically appreciating a city. So long as one is aesthetically appreciating the city, any form of roving aesthetic attention and action seems permitted in forming an aesthetic judgment of the city. An artifact can be made for the sake of conditioning the aesthetic quality of actions, even for a freely roving, unframed aesthetic attention. But most of the process arts I've described — games, cookbooks, tango, contact improv — seem to involve frames.

Interestingly, much of the aesthetic frame in traditional works arises from practice-based prescriptions. We know, through familiarity with the social practice, that we are supposed to attend to the words of the novel and not to its smell. However, some process arts offer what we might call a *functional frame*. That is, the enactor's attention is guided by the specification of some goal. Consider, for example, fly-fishing, which is a plausible candidate for a process art. Many fly-fishers describe a kind of aesthetic experience that arises from some gestalt between the rhythms of their casting, their attention to the water, and the particular mental state of scanning for signs of the trout. Notice that we don't need to teach a fly-fisherman social prescriptions that tell them to attend to these things — that attention arises through the instrumental demands of the goal of catching fish in this manner.

25. The discussion of frames and framed works in this section is an extension of (and improvement on) my earlier and much narrower discussion of framing prescriptions in games (Nguyen 2019d; 2020, 124–133).

6. Aren't we really just looking at the artifact, in the end?

Finally, one might insist that the process arts are not really distinct from the object arts. Perhaps what we are doing, with all of our activity with games and food, is simply a way for us to come to terms with the object itself. Lopes explores such a possibility in his account of interactive computer art. Suppose I am using a joystick to explore a virtual space on a computer installation. My interaction generates a sequence of displays. Crucially, says Lopes, the artwork isn't the particular sequence of displays that I generated. I am not the artist, and my particular voyage through virtual space is not an artwork. The real artwork consists of stable features that are shared between all users of the work: the algorithm, the program, and the possibility space that these other features create. In this case, says Lopes, I am not prescribed to aesthetically attend to my own activity. Rather, my activity is simply the means through which I appreciate the stable artwork. Maneuvering through a virtual space and participating in virtual events is, then, something like a very complex version of walking around a sculpture. My movements and choices are simply my method for bringing the whole of the work into view. This account permits Lopes to assimilate computer art to the traditional object art paradigm.²⁶ Similar suggestions have been made about architecture, as we might move through and around a piece of architecture for the sake of studying its movement-independent shape and structure. Such an instrumental view, as Jenefer Robinson says, treats movement as merely a means for constructing "a mental representation of the form of a building considered as a static structure" (Robinson 2012, 343).²⁷

26. This discussion of Lopes is drawn from my discussion in (Nguyen 2020, 145–146).

27. Consider, on the other hand, Robinson's own account of the place of movement in architecture. She insists that we must not only look or imagine a piece of architecture, but move through it. But, in Robinson's account, it is still the architecture that is the primary focus of aesthetic appreciation. She wishes us to use our proprioceptive senses to appreciate the architecture, but movement, here, is part of the process through which we discover and appreciate aesthetic qualities in the architecture itself. This is different from what it

Lopes' account is surely right about certain sorts of computer art, especially the interactive art installations in museums, which are his primary focus. In many cases, interacting with the artwork is effortless. There is little in the design or context to draw the user's attention to their own activity. Their attention is directed, instead, to a virtual environment or a space of choices. Compare these sorts of object to, say, an arcade game such as *Super Mario Brothers*, where the center of the experience is my skilled navigation of the challenges. The core elements of these sorts of games are failure, the development of skill, and the deployment of skill during repeated attempts to overcome obstacles (Juul 2013). When I play *Super Mario Brothers*, I encounter the same simple environments and visual and musical elements over and over again; what changes are my skill and my choices. In fact, the simplicity and the repetitiousness of the visual elements are useful for drawing attention towards player activity; the visual content of these elements recedes from attention, thus focusing the player's attention on their environment's practical aspects — its existence as challenge and obstacle.²⁸ This, in turn, foregrounds the enactor's active presence. It foregrounds their skill — and lets them, over time, aesthetically appreciate their journey through skill development. That journey begins in their lack of skill, moves through stages of delightful skill acquisition, and climaxes in a highly skilled achievement. In fact, the appreciative heart of much gaming practice is in the experience of bringing yourself, over time and through much effort, into greater and greater practical harmony with a set of challenges, peaking with that perfectly executed victory.

Some interactive art, then, is object art. There, our focus is on the stable object which our activities reveal — on the algorithm, the virtual environment, the possibility space. Other interactive art is process art. There, our attention is on our activity itself, which may vary

would be to treat architecture as a process art — where we take the movement itself as the primary focus of our aesthetic attention.

28. Simon Dor provides a useful discussion of how repetitive visual elements in *StarCraft II* focus the attention on non-visual strategic elements (Dor 2014).

from encounter to encounter and from enactor to enactor. And many interactive artworks are hybrids, such as most first-person computer role-playing games, which provide both beautiful environments for the player to freely explore, and frequent challenges that focus the player's attention on their own activity.

Suppose, then, that we accept that in the practices I've described — games, social tango, cooking — I am, in fact, orienting my aesthetic attention towards myself, and to the world as it relates to my activity. Still, an opponent might resist my claims that there is a distinctive category of process art. They might insist that this self-oriented aesthetic attention is only an intermediary — a means which we use to come to grips with the aesthetic properties and aesthetic value of the underlying static object. That is, we might think that, in playing *Super Mario Brothers*, I attend to my own experience of agency as a way to attend to the aesthetic qualities of the game itself. Let's call this the *transparency* thesis about process aesthetics, since we are looking through our processes just in order to get a better aesthetic handle on the object beyond them. The transparency thesis, if true, would reveal that all this so-called process aesthetics was but a peculiar sub-category of object aesthetics.

But the transparency thesis seems to get the order of explanation the wrong way around. Attributions of process-type aesthetic qualities to games are grounded in attributions of aesthetic qualities to the emergent activity. We praise games as aesthetically good precisely because they bring about aesthetically good play. Furthermore, the transparency thesis would confine our aesthetic attention to those aspects of our actions which reveal features in the object. That is, under the transparency thesis, reflective attention to our own action is part of aesthetic appreciation only insofar as it reveals aesthetic properties of the object. Thus, in appreciating an object through our activity, we should look primarily to the object-revealing features in our action. Take, for example, a rock climb in which a particular movement was forced by the climb as the only movement that would allow progress. That forced move is closely tied to the object and thus highly

object-revealing. Under the transparency thesis, that move would thus be highly favored. On the other hand, under the transparency thesis, those actions that are more distant from stable features of the object would be less important. The transparency thesis renders aesthetically unimportant those actions primarily attributable to the enactor's own special creativity or ability, since they would be not be object-revealing. But this runs against core features of the actual practices we've been looking at. In many of these practices, participants praise particular artifacts because they serve as environments for fostering creativity. Go is cherished, as a game, because it serves as such an intricate background for the wonderful experience of profound intellectual creativity. *Portal* creates the conditions for a very particular type of solution, but leaves much room for the player to fill in the details of their own solution. Turkish breakfast is wonderful because the eater has a luxurious sense of freedom, as they can tweak every bite to match exactly their heart's desire in the moment. The social tango is beloved for giving rise to particular intimacies that are unique to each pair of dancers, and to their creative coordinated response to the music, the moment, and the mood. Of course, the existence of those distant process-aesthetic qualities do reveal the object's capacity to encourage such qualities — but that simply drives us back to the sorts of evaluations of the object which are secondary to aesthetic evaluations of the inspired actions.

The process arts are distinct from the object arts because they aesthetically center on the activity of the enactor. In the process acts, these activities aren't used as a means to attend to the object. Nor do we self-attend preferentially to those activities which are more likely to reveal the true features of the object. We simply self-attend to the aesthetic qualities of our activity, and then we secondarily evaluate the object in terms of its capacities to encourage and foster those aesthetically rich activities.

7. The status of process art: On sharing experiences

Why have we traditionally emphasized the object arts over the process arts? A complete diagnosis, I suspect, will draw significantly on the resources of cultural and intellectual history, sociology, economics, and more. Here, I will examine a few philosophical sources for the historical preference for the object arts, and then give some defenses of the process arts. These final sections of this paper should be considered an opening salvo on this topic; I have selected a handful of skirmishes to help illuminate my positive account.

One philosophical explanation for the higher status of the object arts is that they make available a relatively stable appreciative focus. The attentive focus is on a shareable object. We can all read the same work and talk about it. We lose this, to some degree, with process art. There is an artifact we can share — the game, the recipe, the city — but the enactor's agency intervenes between the designer's work and the attentive focus. Obviously this is true with enactor process arts, like tango, but it is also true for artist process arts, like games. Even when the designers have tightly constrained the choice space to give the player's activity very specific aesthetic qualities — still, different game players have different skills and make different choices. The precise content of the attentive focus, and the precise form of its attendant aesthetic properties, varies from one enactor to the next, even when they are engaging with the very same process artwork.

Why did we want a stable attentive focus in the first place? There are a few reasons. First, the practice of the object arts makes it possible to have shared experiences, or something that approaches them. One might think, of a graceful drawing, that the gracefulness was in the drawing itself. Thus, we different appreciators can all be in contact with the very same gracefulness. With the process arts, on the other hand, we cannot have such mutually shared contact with one and the same aesthetic property. Since, in the process arts, the focus of appreciation is each enactor's own separately generated activity, no enactors

will be experiencing exactly the same aesthetic property as it arises in exactly the same activity.²⁹

There is, of course, a sliding scale. The more rigidly delineated the space of actions, the closer those experiences will be. Some videogames, such as *Dragon's Lair*, offer simple reflex challenges in a fixed sequence. Similarly, some rock climbing problems require such specific and precise movements to succeed that rock climbers often find themselves performing nearly identical sequences.³⁰ But this is certainly not the case across all the process arts. Many of the process arts offer the enactor significant freedom of choice, where various enactors' differing decisions will help shape very different engagements for each of them. This is crucial, since many of the process arts seem designed to support those aesthetic qualities which arise from giving the enactor genuine choices. Perhaps the deepest pleasures of Turkish breakfast are in constructing for myself, at each moment, what my next most pleasurable bite will be. (One might note a certain trend in high-end restaurants, which offer carefully constructed single bites. This strategy trades away diner autonomy in favor of the chef's control of the experience, presumably in the name of bringing the dining experience towards the stability of object art.) Many games are praised precisely because they afford their players genuine freedom — because a player's choices will help form the narrative or shape the simulated world. In fact, some games seem to offer us an aesthetic experience of our own freedom (Gingerich 2018) — which would be inaccessible if the designers eliminated choice in the favor of a controlled, repeatable experience.

29. Alternately, one might reject the claim that we can ever be in touch with the same aesthetic properties, even in the object arts. One might think that aesthetic properties depend substantially on an application of the skills and abilities of the observer. (Mary Mothersill's account might be read to support such a view [Mothersill 1984]). That may be true, but such a view would only further erode the reasons one might have thought elevated the object arts over the process arts.

30. Montero discusses how dancers may approximate a shared experience of motion through careful talk (Montero 2006).

In such cases I think we must give up on the hope of sharing precisely the same content in our engagements with process art. Here is where the process arts differ essentially from the object arts. The value of much process art is that it makes significant room for the agency of the enactor. Having genuine agency in generating the content of one's aesthetic experience is at odds with sharing precisely the same content with others.

On the other hand, the process arts may bring to different people experiences of agency with very much the same character. Players typically come up with very different particular solutions to particular puzzles, but the character of the experience — of coping with these puzzles with such a particular and peculiar affordance, of having to learn to think in terms of manipulating the topology, of figuring out particular tricks — is sharply similar. That is what we gain by putting attentional frames around our active processes. Different enactors are channeled into a similar situation when they engage with the same process artwork, and so when they act, the qualities of their actions can be quite similar. But we must sacrifice the precise shareability of aesthetic content in order to have particularly aesthetically infused experiences of our own free choice. What having framed process arts gets us is not precise shareability, in these cases, but some near approximation — far nearer than we would get otherwise. There will likely be little overlap in the experiences of process aesthetics that you and I might have as we go about our incredibly different days, with our widely varying practical struggles. But in a game, we can fix the goals, fix the abilities we have, and fix the environmental challenges. Even if you and I don't make precisely the same movement to get over this jumping challenge in *Super Mario Brothers*, we are using the exact same fixed abilities, while confronting the exact same challenges, and pursuing exactly the same goal. And this will put our aesthetic experiences in close proximity and give them a markedly shared character, even if we aren't fixed on exactly the same aesthetic object.

8. The status of process art: Cognitively, merit, and uniqueness

Finally, one might worry that something about the appreciation of processes essentially conflicts with the nature of the aesthetic and of art. According to some popular accounts of artistic and aesthetic value, aesthetic experiences must have a special relationship to some independent states of affairs.³¹

First, it has been suggested that aesthetic experiences, by their nature, must involve some form of *cognition* of a distinct state of affairs. Loosely, the thought is that aesthetic experiences aren't just free-floating pleasures or some other mental state whose value is derived wholly from its internal character. Rather, aesthetic experiences must involve an accurate perception or appraisal of some independent state of affairs. I intend 'state of affairs' here to include anything that could be the object of an experience, including physical objects, activities, internal states, and events.³² There are at least two versions of the requirement for cognitivism. Depending on the account, either aesthetic experience must involve the correct cognition of particular aesthetic features in the independent state of affairs, or it must involve the correct cognition of that state's aesthetic merit.³³ Such theories are usually driven by the need to explain our rational discourse about aesthetic

31. I am using 'aesthetic experience' here for the sake of brevity; some of the theories I am discussing speak in terms of a distinctive character to "aesthetic appreciation" or "aesthetic judgment". Nothing I say here turns on the differences between thinking of the aesthetic primarily in terms of experiences, appreciations, or judgments.

32. Note that my way of putting things here departs from the typical language in the academic literature, which is usually of relationships between aesthetic experiences and their objects. 'Objects' is meant in these cases to refer to 'objects of experience', and is so identical in meaning to my use of the term 'states of affairs'. I use the term 'state of affairs' only to avoid any potential confusion between the notion of an object of experience (which could include activities) and the notion of a physical object (which excludes activities).

33. For example, Monroe Beardsley's account of aesthetic value makes such cognition a key component of valuable aesthetic experience (Beardsley 1979, 728). Malcolm Budd makes a similar claim (Budd 1996). More recently, James Shelley's account and Keren Gorodeisky's and Eric Marcus' account involve crucial reference to such a principle (Shelley 2010; Gorodeisky and Marcus 2018). For a further discussion, see (Nguyen 2019b).

experiences — how we seem to correct each other's aesthetic experiences by pointing out features we've missed, or give reasons in support of a given evaluation of aesthetic merit. Aesthetic life often involves getting things wrong and then coming to see things rightly. Features of our aesthetic practice seem to indicate that aesthetic experiences are not free-floating; rather, they must arise from accurate comprehension of some independent state. That requires a separation between the experience itself and what it is of.³⁴ Perhaps there can be no such a separation with process artworks, since the aesthetic experiences aren't of the artist's work, but of the enactor's own activity.

Suppose we grant such a demand for a separation between experience and the independent state that experience is of. Even then, this presents no particular problem for the process arts. Such independent states need not be external, physical artifacts. That is, we need not be limited in our aesthetic experiences to experiences of physical objects. To satisfy the cognitivity requirement, we simply need our experiences to be of states of affairs distinct from those experiences. In the process arts, that independent state of affairs is the enactor's activity, which is distinct from the enactor's experience of that activity. Doing something is distinct from one's experience of doing it.

Next, let's turn to the requirement for the *uniqueness* of aesthetic value. According to some, the value of an artwork must be unique to that artwork — unlike, say, the value of money or nutrition. According to this view, the value of a particular artwork cannot be achieved via a different artwork. There is no substitute for the experience of the Wu-Tang Clan's rap masterpiece *Enter the Wu Tang (36 Chambers)*; its value is inextricably specific to its exact content and aesthetic properties. Another work, like Bill Evans' *Sunday at the Village Vanguard*, might also be a masterpiece, but it does not offer an alternate route to the very same value offered by *Enter the Wu Tang (36 Chambers)*. Artwork values aren't fungible. On the other hand, if I am eating this spinach salad strictly for its Vitamin K content, I could also achieve exactly that

34. I take such object/experience views to be expressed by (Shelley 2010) and (Zangwill 2007, 127–159).

value by eating, say, sautéed liver instead — and the liver would be just as valuable to me, and valuable in exactly the same way. As James Shelley puts it, the particular value of an artwork is inseparable from the artwork itself.³⁵

Let's grant, for the moment, that artworks must be unique in this way. Perhaps the problem with process art is that its artworks lack uniqueness. If the value of a process artwork is not in the artwork itself, but in the activity that it inspires, then we might think that the value is detachable from the specific artwork. Perhaps a particular occurrence of an activity — like one particular session of chess — might have a unique value, inseparable from that particular activity. But the artifacts — the games, the recipes, the cities — are too distant from that unique value, their features too separable from the aesthetic properties, which occur far downstream of the artifact. Thus, we might conclude, there can be no such thing as process artworks.

But I do think process artworks can often have a sort of uniqueness, though one that comes via a more complex series of stages than with object artworks. The particular qualities of a process artwork can uniquely inform the aesthetic activities they inspire. The activity of solving a chess puzzle cannot be had outside of chess. Any aesthetic value that we find in the player's chess activities, insofar as they are unique to that enactor's engagement with chess, is also unique to chess. And the exact nature of that aesthetic value is informed by the particularities of chess' design. Let's call this feature *aesthetic dependence*. An activity is aesthetically dependent on an artifact when the precise aesthetic character of that activity is dependent on its being evoked by that particular artifact. In this way, the process arts have their own distinctive form of uniqueness. An enactor's activity can be uniquely valuable in the same way a piece of object art can. But also, in many cases, that activity also aesthetically depends upon the

35. (Shelley 2010) also offers an excellent overview of discussions of the uniqueness requirement, including versions by Malcolm Budd, Stephen Davies, and Jerrold Levinson. Budd offers a particularly clear statement of the view in (Budd 1996, 4–11).

particular process artwork that inspired it. In those cases, the value of the activity is dependent on the process artwork which provides the unique condition for its existence. Notice that the structures of the uniqueness relationships are different between the object and process arts. The uniqueness relationship in object arts is, conceivably, a one-to-one relationship. Here is one pair: the work *Enter the Wu Tang (36 Chambers)* and its value. Each uniquely belongs to the other. But uniqueness relationships in the process arts have a tree-like structure. The game *Portal* can give rise to many different aesthetically valuable activities, but each of those aesthetically valuable activities depends on *Portal* as the unique condition of its existence.

Not all process arts will give rise to aesthetic dependence, but many do. The most obvious cases of aesthetic dependence are games. In Bernard Suits' influential analysis, games turn out to be activities constituted by the specified constraints and goals — the rules of the game. In other words, a set of game rules brings into being new sorts of actions and activities. What it is to "make a basket", in a game of basketball, isn't merely to pass a ball through a metal hoop. To make a basket is to pass the ball through the hoop while obeying the dribbling rule and all the other constraints, and while facing opponents. There is no such thing as "making a basket" separate from those various rules.³⁶ When the game uniquely constitutes the activity, and the aesthetic qualities of the activity depend on unique features of the activity, then we have aesthetic dependence.

Suppose I am playing basketball and perform an absolutely beautiful fake-out, followed by a perfect behind-the-back pass to my teammate, just as they are jumping into place for a dunk. The various aesthetic properties of those actions cannot be described without references to the specific rules and constraints of basketball. This is not true for all action and movement. I could leap with elegance and flair, and, in some cases, that elegance and flair could be comprehended

36. (Suits 2005). I've given a slightly simplified summary for the purposes of this argument. I've offered a detailed analysis of Suits' view and its implications in (Nguyen 2020, 5–11, 52–73).

without reference to the particular rules of the game in which they occurred. A leap is not necessarily a game action, and the beauty of a leap not necessarily dependent for its existence on being situated within a particular game. On the other hand, the actions of making a basket or performing an assist are, by their nature, actions within the game of basketball. The actions themselves are constituted, in part, by the game rules. If a particular game-action is beautiful *as a game action*, then that aesthetic activity is aesthetically dependent on the game. If the loveliness of my dunk shot arises not from the movements themselves, but from the movements understood as moves within the game — from the fact that they are elegant solutions to challenges brought into being by the rules of the game — then that beautiful dunk shot is aesthetically dependent on the game of basketball. Which is not to say that the rules of basketball entirely fix the aesthetic properties of each particular dunk shot. This is the essential difference between the object arts and the process arts. My dunk, in basketball, is mine. But basketball creates the conditions for that dunk and its beauty, and the rules of basketball play a significant and inextricable role in the formation of that particular occurrence of beauty.

The process arts, then, offer their own peculiar version of uniqueness. In many cases — but certainly not all — the aesthetic qualities of the enactor's activity are inseparable from a particular work of process art. This does not mean that particular, finalized aesthetic qualities are to be found in the process artwork itself. But the process artwork creates the special background conditions under which those aesthetic qualities can arise. A process artwork does not entirely determine the aesthetic qualities that arise from it, but many of those qualities depend, for their exact nature, on the particular process artwork which enables their existence.

9. Conclusions

I have offered the beginnings of a diagnosis of the traditional preference for the object arts. In the object arts, we can have a shared object of attention. Furthermore, in the object arts, it is fairly straightforward

to locate the aesthetic value. If the value of an artwork lies in its aesthetic properties, then the value of the object arts is fairly self-contained. We could, at least, act as if we could arrive at a collective shared judgment of an object artwork's properties and value.

It is not so with the process arts. There, the value is far more distributed. The aesthetic value of a work lies in its capacity to instigate aesthetically valuable activity. This is diametrically opposed to many traditional accounts of aesthetic and artistic value. Malcolm Budd, for example, has demanded that we find an account in which an artwork is valuable in itself, and not merely as a tool for some further experience (Budd 1996). With the process arts, we must admit that the artwork is, in fact, often merely an instrument. In many cases, the primary aesthetic value attaches to the instigated activity and not to the work itself. The work can play an indispensable role in bringing about the particular aesthetic qualities of the activity, but the aesthetic qualities are not finalized until the enactor has played their own active role. That is not something I think we can get past. It is essential to the very nature of the process arts. Of course, this doesn't tell us that the practice of engaging with process arts has less aesthetic value. It only shows us that in order to cope with it, we will have to distribute the locus of aesthetic value between artwork and enactor's activity. This is, in fact, exactly what makes the process arts special. The artifacts of process art can participate substantially in the aesthetic end product and its particular value — without finalizing that value.³⁷

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