

A Written Accompaniment to: Hubris

By

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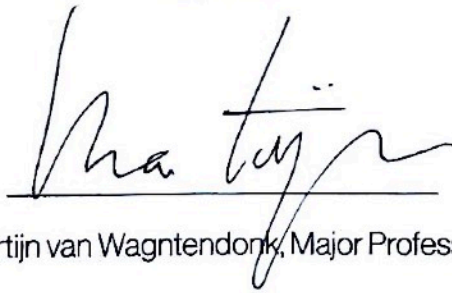
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Approved:

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Martijn', written over a horizontal line.

Martijn van Wageningen, Major Professor

5/3/24

Date

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Art-Making as Gameplay

In the classic psychological dichotomy of nature vs nurture, I am a massive believer of nurture. I view people and things as largely products of their environment¹. It follows that the best way to adjust the work I make would be to adjust the environment and systems I make in. As much as my time in grad school has been for designing and making objects, it was first for designing my studio and day-to-day life, and before that, designing my mind. The first design for my mind was “game design”.

What is a game? A game is the normalization of typically abnormal actions and goals. If someone were to throw discs at their tree every day, with no rhyme or reason, we might look at them as a real loony. But now, reframe: they are simply practicing for disc golf. Ok—they are only half-loony.

Purpose makes actions and goals plausible. A “thing’s” existence is often justified by its purpose or meaning. Purpose protects an object from being labeled “extraneous” (i.e. worthy of elimination). In my research for this graduation requirement, I read through many essays in the anthology *Art and Its Significance*. I was perplexed as to why people over the years keep trying to define art. Perhaps, in defining something, they are trying to determine what it is for. Perhaps people just don’t want to appear loony.

In *Games: Agency as Art*, philosopher C Thi Nguyen argues that, similarly to how paintings arrange color into art, games arrange behavior and decisions into art. While I appreciate his claim that games can be art, I am also interested in the inverse: can art be a game?

Nguyen asserts that the core aspect of gameplay is that players try to achieve a specified goal while also enforcing certain inefficiencies. The aesthetic quality comes from the struggle; the beauty comes from the inefficiencies. In a world that is becoming increasingly data-driven, where every self-labeled “entrepreneur” is trying to find the next market-inefficiency to get rich, Art and Craft become a respite from capitalist-crazed mass production².

Art is a mode of making that lets us engage in inefficiencies, and to discover where those inefficiencies take us. Painting is no longer the most efficient way to make a portrait, carving is no longer the most efficient way to make a chair, but the resulting portrait and chair do something for us

¹ “You are what you eat”, in a non-literal sense, has long been a truism I live by.

² In particular, art as an approach to object-making are a respite from the mass produced object. For more on this, see footnote 2 in “Art-Making as Production”.

that efficient versions cannot. We endure these inefficiencies because we like both 1) the process of struggling and 2) its results.

In this way, making art can be structured like a game. I give myself arbitrary heuristics, perform abnormal behavior, engage with the world with a childish curiosity, and incentivize for the absurd. The process of making sculpture is first imagining the heretofore unimagined, and then figuring out how to actualize it into a tangible object. Instead of choosing the medium I would like to work in, or the aesthetic I would like to achieve, I can just force myself to make intentionally inefficient objects.

Nguyen describes a type of play he calls “aesthetic striving play”, a kind of gameplay one engages in for the “aesthetic quality of the struggle”. From this perspective, we could easily describe many works of performance art as games played for the aesthetic quality of their struggle, from the maintenance art of Mierle Ukeles, to the long durational time clock piece of Tehching Hsieh, or Francis Alÿs pushing a block of ice through the streets of Mexico City³. In performance art the nominal subject of the art is the actions taken by the



Tehching Hsieh. *One Year Performance*



Tom Friedman. *Hot Balls*. 1992. Approximately 200 balls stolen by the artist over a six-month period.

artist/performer. It's easy to say the art itself is the aesthetic quality of their struggle resulting from the rules/game the artist has imposed upon themselves.

On the other hand, I think we can still see this aesthetic-striving-play in the work of sculptors and two-dimensional artists. For example, Tom Friedman's stolen *Hot Balls*, any hyper-tedious painting or drawing such as the work of Vija Clemons, or even Gordan Matta-Clark's cut forms from pre-existing buildings. These

³ There is an astonishing number of who have pushed or rolled an object through a city street. It really oughta be it's own category of art.

works are presented as final sculptures or drawings, but they still clearly communicate to the viewer the unusual process by which they were created. Aesthetic value comes from the struggle (and problem-solving) that each artist had to go through in order to create these pieces.

If we think about each artist's process as a game they construct for themselves, their final art piece can now be seen as a win-state⁴ indicator. This is the framework I use to think about my art. I first come up with a win-state (a sculpture, such as a pedestal that always comes upright after falling over), and I now have a game to play in order to reach that win-state⁵. The design of the win-state informs all the choices I make along the way. An interesting design is necessary in order to force aesthetically pleasing choices.

A quick aside on the topic of win-states, perhaps the greatest conceptual game ever made is the video game *Baba is You*. You start off controlling a sheep (Baba); reaching a flag is the win-state. Instead of simply playing by the rules, the game lets you move and alter the rules. You could change yourself to be a rock, or you could win the game by changing the win-state to yourself. This conceptual play with the structure of the game is really only possible because of the graphical component of video games. Game design in art tends to be grounded in the physical limitations of real life, and how one can display the game to the viewer.



The first level of *Baba is You*.

In my comparison of art pieces to games, I found that many interesting instances of aesthetic-striving-play existed outside of the traditional art world, and seemed quite similar to performance art. I think in the way the art world today values novelty, and can reward artists for seeming revolutionary⁶, there's a very similar dynamic on Youtube and other content platforms. It's

⁴ In video game design "win-state" and "lose-state" are terms that tell you (or the computer) that the game has won or lost. For example, a puzzle win-state is when all the puzzle pieces are correctly placed together. A race win-state is when your body has crossed the finish line.

⁵ This is also a common idea in writing code. In test-driven-development one writes the tests first, and then writes the code to pass the tests. By first setting up goalposts, it clarifies the task.

⁶ Perhaps as a result of the progress narratives in art pushed by the MoMA in the early 20th century.

perhaps not surprising, both the artists and Youtubers make for viewers, and economically depend on viewers⁷.

A Google Maps aficionado, GeoWizard, has a video series from 2019 where he drew a straight line across Wales on a map, and then he tried to follow it in real life with a handheld GPS. This game he laid out for himself forced him to trespass and camp private land, climb through a treacherous bramble patch, and kayak as straight as possible across a small pond (both obstacles one would normally circumvent). A unique durational endurance piece like *The Mission Across Wales*, in my opinion, seems like it would fit right in with endurance based performance artists, if only it were presented differently.

One last example I want to bring up on the topic of aesthetic-striving-play is the work of Nathan Fielder, a Canadian comedian and TV show revolutionary whose made some of the most cutting edge comedy in recent years. In *The Rehearsal* from 2022, Fielder constructs elaborate “rehearsals” of real life situations. One section of the show rehearses 18 years of parenting in a few months by hiring child actors and trading out children to speed up aging. The ridiculous conceit forces all parties in the rehearsal to behave in absurd ways creating an unsettling and hilarious aesthetic. For example, the “mom” figure plants seeds for a garden one day, which the show staff

replace with full-grown store bought vegetables overnight.



The Rehearsal episode 3, harvesting vegetables.

I don't document my play in video, like many of these examples, but I strive to make objects that, like Friedman or Matta-Clark, have their aesthetic-striving-play evident in the win-state of the sculpture on display. The sculpture should have aesthetic value on its own, but it should also indicate aesthetic value in the process that got there.

⁷ We can see how the difference in economical models incentivizes for different content in each realm. Youtube is a popularity contest: content is made to maximize views. Artists, I'd like to think, don't as intentionally make to optimize income, but the art economy is also a popularity contest: it's a bidding war instead of pay-per-view.

Art-Making as Production

If the first framework for making I use in the studio is gameplay, the second one I use is production. I like to be inspired by product design for consumers, but I want my approach to be distinctly different. I am not trying to produce a commercially viable product, but I am still making something with a viewer/interacter in mind, and I need to start my design with their experience in mind.

I once interned with a machinist who designed and manufactured small-batch nice products like pens, watches, or bike parts. He was previously a product designer at Ideo⁸, so he had experience in making products enticing to a potential consumer. Being a one-person operation, he made all the decisions from the 3D model in Fusion, aluminum milling, the branding, the distribution, etc. At the end of the day, he had to make a living off the objects he made and sold, so all the little decisions he made along the way had to lead to a profitable end.

While art making can still be an economic proposition for a working artist, it can also be a respite from needing to make decisions always with the “bottom line” in mind. If anything, I like to make objects that are intentionally antithetical to a “bottom line”. Instead of making objects that provide utility and will be desirable, and I can subvert that goal⁹. I may be making for a viewer, but I am certainly not making for a consumer. If *Art* is all about making what the world doesn't give us¹¹, and the world in the United States at present is transfixed with capitalism and profit, it only follows the highest form of *Art* in this environment would be to produce the object that hurts the bottom line the most¹².

I got a bit off track there. The point on making I think it can be empowering to think of the studio the same way we would conceptualize of mass-production¹³, but instead of having our end goal to create a market-viable product that will deliver value to shareholders, we can instead define

⁸ A famous/infamous corporate design firm.

⁹ While typical object-producing companies use the approach of generating profit by selling objects that provide “utility,”⁹ I design objects that provide neither positive nor negative utils. My art is measured in *iu* (imaginary util), the square root of a negative util.

¹⁰ Utility is measured in the standard unit of a util. Système international d'unités define one util as the convenience provided by a toaster popping up one toast.

¹¹ This is my theory for the definition of art that is the most applicable throughout history.

¹² I do love absurd logical conclusions, which is why I resonate with *The Rehearsal*.

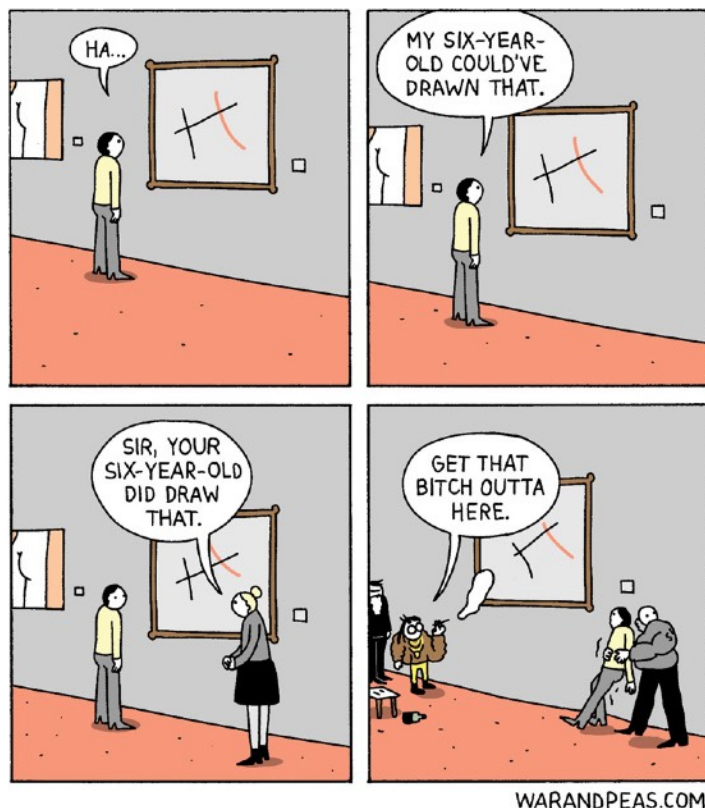
¹³ Not making a Benjamin reference, but perhaps I am making an optimistic take on so called “art in the age of mechanical production”

our goal any way we want. Instead of being driven by profit, we are now free to produce for whatever reason motivates us. I can still utilize all the tools of a one-person manufacturing operation, but I don't have to play by any of their rules. I think this is how many established artists work; their studio setup like a small company with studio assistants who produce for them.

The parts of mass-production that are most interesting to me to integrate into an art studio are the ideas of user-centered-design and human-centered-design. I strive to make and fabricate as efficiently as possible, but towards the end of making the least efficient product/object possible.

Art as Exclusion

I feel weird about art. I don't feel weird about making art, I just feel weird about spaces that show art: galleries, museums, etc. *Whats weird about them?* I'm glad you asked. It's because they can feel elitist and exclusionary, regardless of entry price.



WARANDPEAS.COM

I'm guessing you're familiar with the walks-into-art-gallery-and-see-modernist-painting-and-exclaims-my-kid-coulda-made-this trope. I think this trope highlights exactly what can be exclusionary and elitist about *Art*. A lot of *Art*, as it exists in a the *Institution* has a constructed canon that determines the value of art. But because this canon and these values aren't explicit and clear to a person walking into the art space, they can feel alienated because the rules of the space make it clear it is not for them. What a logical person could only deduce, is that by placing an image on a white wall in a gallery, it becomes art; by placing an object on a pedestal, it

becomes art. The most important part of the "Art" signifier is not the objected that becomes "art-ed" it is the machine for "art-ing", the pedestal.

Tom Friedman has a sculptural piece displayed on a pedestal, that is 1:1 scale fly made from "plastic, hair, fuzz, Play-Doh, wire and paint". I do love this piece for its humor:

You walk up to what appears to be an empty pedestal, but acknowledging that you are in an art space you know there has to be some art here! But no, there's only but a fly that has happened to land on the pedestal. Or is it just a fly?

Anyway, I think you get the point, what a cheeky little piece piece of “art” that gets the viewer to ask: what is *Art* anyway? Now, heres the kicker: this fly sold for \$88,125 at Christies in 2000¹⁴.

So, I think you can see the how a person could feel alienated by an art space . Imagine walking into a gallery and all you see is a little fly replica that is “worth” as much as a house you worked hard to buy. Theres something certainly preposterous to the proposition. The value in this *Art* economy is very visibly disconnected from the value of labor¹⁵. Value instead is tied to perception. The thing with perception, it’s subjective¹⁶.



Tom Friedman. *Untitled*. 1995.

Making a sculpture from a pedestal, the very infrastructure that makes up an art gallery, starts to question what value any of it has. I also strive to make sculpture that doesn't require additional context to be understood. If I need to read a dissertation to understand why this painting of a black square has aesthetic value, perhaps that is a failure of the painting¹⁷. While not every art piece can have 100% accessible context, we can make art spaces better for viewers by making art that can be understood fully in its visual presence.

¹⁴ That's \$163,000 in today's money. It's also 73% of the median US home price at the time.

¹⁵ With big artists, the labor can also be hidden. Anish Kapoor or Tom Sachs or anyone who pays assistants and fabricators to make their objects, which are presented behind one name that hides the many hands.

¹⁶ Labor can also be subjective, but at least it can be quantified by hours.

¹⁷ Sorry Malevich. Perhaps you made it for a specific audience at the time that had the context, but now it just seems pretentious and uninteresting. Most of times I encounter *Black Square*, (is as a symbol for an elitist art world.

Art as Art as Art as Art

The ideas discussed in this paper are some of the main topics that percolated through my brain and dripped out into my sculptures at UGA. I leaned into art-as-gameplay during my second year, starting with a hyper-tedious oil painting replicating a ceiling tile. With both *Ceiling Tile* and my *Exit*



Ceiling Tile. Oil on canvas. 2022. 24x24"

Sign paintings, the win-state is creating a convincing imitation of the actual object. In addition to this

game I designed for myself, these pieces also allowed the viewer to discover their nature, creating a game for them as well.

Art-making for me started from the same impulse that led to me standup comedy. Art and



Exit Sign. Acrylic on canvas. 2022. 7x12"

comedy are both about creating a certain experience for the viewer. I want the viewer to find the art/joke accessible. They should possess the necessary context to understand the art/joke as it is

presented. This often leads me to work with recognizable everyday objects, and I usually pick objects that are designed to blend into a space. No one thinks twice about seeing an exit sign. I also like that these objects bring up questions of value and ask the viewer to pay attention to things generally overlooked.



Pedestal 2. Cement, wood, gatorboard. 2022.

In a similar vein, but moving in a different direction, I built my first rocking pedestal sculpture. The physics challenge of balancing a pedestal was a much more engaging game than a hyper-

tedious painting, and the sculptural, semi-kinetic object-ness of it provided more to a viewer than a static painting could.



Wrinkling Board.. Cherry and ironing board legs. 2023.

In my final year at UGA, I made a couple absurd objects out of wood. The first, a ironing board for wrinkling clothes. The second, a suitcase made specifically and only for this rock.



Penance. Wood and luggage hardware. 2024.

This brings me to my final work at UGA, *Hubris*, presented in the thesis show. An expansion on my previous pedestal, I dialed in on the fabrication and used 3D-modeling, CNC-milling, and mold-making, to create 4 identical pedestals. *Hubris* also include the addition of robotics. Hidden on the inside, the robotic mechanism shifts each pedestal's center of gravity, causing the pedestal to fall or come up-right.



Hubris. Mixed media. 2024.



Hubris. Mixed media. 2024.

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