



The will to Form: Is art a Form of Muscular Sports?

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Abstract: In this brief article I argue that both art and sport can be appreciated on a formal-aesthetic level, propelled by an underlying intent which can be called a will to form. I problematize this will to form as being both aesthetic and extra-aesthetic – and this dual and mutually exclusive dimension (I.e.. any form can come to be designated as having any meaning) mean that it is unclear whether sports offer a utopian vision as outlined by Suit's in his notion of games, or whether it is loaded ideologically, in which case art can be described as muscular sports of some kind.

Keywords: art; sport; formalism; Suits; aesthetics; ideology

Fundamentally, if one subscribes to the view that art and sport appeal owing to their formal structure and thus, their beauty, then could one not claim that inherent in the desire to make art or to move in specific ways, is what I term “a will to form”? Secondly, but no less important, is a kind of freezing of time, a capturing of the moment or the creation of an eternal present (this applies to documentary photography of sport and the like), the latter being a sub-category of the former. It is to these deductions that I now turn.

I refer the reader to Brancusi's “Bird in Space”¹ (1928) and an imagined documentary photograph² of Yamashita's judo throw. What could these two images have in common? There is a certain tension, weight, physical aliveness, a sense of grandness, even transcendence in both images. I attribute such perceptions to the fact that such imagery appears to me to exemplify formal mastery.

Brancusi makes the viewer feel a sense of upward joyous surge, a sensitive linear mobility that is even more sacred given the gold bronze colour. His sculpture is soft and sharp simultaneously, strongly vertical, and yet curved and organic. Brancusi was quoted as saying: “art must penetrate into the spirit of nature and, like nature, create beings whose forms and lives are independent” (in Walther [ed.] 2005:427). In this quote, the artist reveals the desire to create new, original forms, to create forms that exist independently, that speak the silent language of art. Form is thus the vessel of meaning and formalism, a theory that emphasizes the unique visual language in contradistinction to other forms of art or languages *and* the aesthetic disposition that certain artworks may induce in the viewer, helps clarify why we may attend so favourably to a work such as this.

In its abstract quality or its abstraction, Brancusi desires to reveal the “inner”, “essential” reality. Now, although the position has being criticized (of an “essential” reality), this modernism certainly holds a kernel of truth and “he (Brancusi) unerringly and painstakingly seeks an increasingly pure and perfect body of form that is transcendental in its immaculate finish” (in Walther [ed.] 2005:425, brackets my inclusion). Formalism therefore may be “spiritual” as it speaks of the “essential form” containing “metaphysical reality” (a la Bell) or as is the case with Greenberg, materialistic, in that we simply assert the fact of a form without attending to meanings. In either case, it appears that there is an inner need for form, a desire to be graceful, harmonious, rhythmic, effortless, in control, to flow, to hold power and if one cannot *be* these things or some of them, to realize them through visual perception of form, in an artwork!

¹*Bird in space*, 1928. Polished bronze, height: 137.2 cm. Circumference: 9.5-37.7 cm. New York. The museum of modern art. In *Art of the 20th century*, vol. ii, Tachen, Walther (ed.), photography: K. Hannef, p 427.

² In *Kodokan judo*, J. Kano, Kodansha international, 1986, photography: Kodokan judo, p 59.

We may then describe dance and performance arts as poetry in motion, as a revelation of symmetry, unity, as not been discordant. We may perceive qualities of balance and timing, pattern and design ... all this through creating form or simply viewing eloquent forms such as in Brancusi's sculpture.

In a self-same manner, the imagined documentary photograph, for example as recorded in *Kodokan Judo* (1986:59) inspires a sense of balance and power. The two fighters create a vertical line offset by the strong horizontals of the background. The sense that the physics of stasis is about to change as the O soto-gari throw³ will inevitably lead to the demise of the one fighter – that moment before chaos, is captured and we momentarily witness the intense, forceful action just before the plunge. Through this image, we can learn what is required to execute a good throw (or photograph) and choose to identify with Yamashita. In so doing, we project ourselves into the form, as one may do so with Brancusi's sculpture, and in this alignment of self with image, we transform ourselves, we intuit that the form poses a question. Perhaps the question is not only because of its aesthetic quality; perhaps it enters the domain of our will – do we wish to feel like a “bird in space”, can we also perform a judo throw with such gusto and verve or fall victim to it? My contention is that images enter the mind on this level because we need to see who and what we are or can be in order to think on it: it is the will to form that makes us.

Or in other words, we may say of art that it allows us to see the world from another perspective, as with Hegel's notion that art is the midway between sensual embodiment (form) and the abstractness of pure thought (idea). That which makes meaning is sensibly exemplified, rather than understood in logical terms alone. Sport too may also reveal an action (form) encoded with a picture of the sublime (idea). Brancusi's “Bird” is finite but its eloquent form hints at the infinite or that which is of the mind, the realm of ideas. The sporting documentary photograph captures the singular moment of a series of movements that was the alive, vigorous activity of that sporting event, and in that stillness creates the potential for that which has no limit – the idea of the sublime or the realm of ideas.

When we see an image or picture (a painting, a sculpture, a beautiful judo throw, a documentary photograph ...), the flow of time is arrested. When we watch a sports event, the world of make-believe⁴ usurps the rather more serious flow of time that is life. In this way, art and sport transport us to a kind of eternal present. Halt (2008), reflecting on Gumbrecht, believes that in the evocation of athletic beauty, the “everyfan” as he calls it, suggests a choreography of beautiful play in which “... the sudden, surprising convergence of serial athletic bodies in time and space” (Gumbrecht in Halt 2008:52) create a larger-than-life moment. In the athletic ideal there is an aesthetic quality. This is also due to the kind of sculptured body of the athlete (demagogue). The sports arena is an ideal space (time) in which the moment is elevated. Halt argues that there is a sense of “oneness” in such “moments of intensity”, a feeling of communion, even a “momentary loss of self” or transcendence of individuality that begins with beauty. He continues by saying that “the unexpected appearance of a body in space, taking a beautiful form that just as quickly dissolves, can be thought of as a kind of epiphany” (Halt 2008:56). I would claim the same effect may be inspired through the images presented in this section.

Gumbrecht (2006) makes the point that “Beauty is not the goal of competitive sports, but high-level beauty, the human beauty we're talking about here is beauty of a particular type. It might be called kinetic beauty. Its power and appeal are universal. It has nothing to do with sex or cultural norms. What it seems to have to do with, really, is human beings reconciliation with the fact of having a body” (Gumbrecht in Young 2008:10). It is the pre-discursive body through which the self acts (runs, paints, throws ...); it is the body that becomes the very materials (the whole body, just the hand ...) out of which form is composed. And in that presence of self through the body, there can be a dramatic moment, a sensual, though aesthetic, perception. One is not referring elsewhere or treating the sports

³ Judo is my area of expertise, being a 2nd dan and sensei (teacher) so I have a particular passion for the form exhibited in the sport/art, especially the Kata which really means “forms” and “randori” which is creative, free practice.

⁴ Depictions of early cricket matches, for example, are almost as potent as hunting prints in constructing a pastoral idyll in the midst of the Industrial Revolution. Or in tennis we have young men and woman in white set against the soft grass of summer. Other than spatial considerations, there are technical aspects as in the notion of “classic” shots, and an aesthetic orthodoxy, where cricketers, for example tended to be captured in portraits with one hand on the hip and the other on the handle of the bat in a heroic manner.

moment or the execution of an artwork, as symbolic. That is, like Kant's ideas, we attend to beauty for its own sake, without a definite concept, via the free play of imagination and understanding. It is disconnected from everyday life, and not grounded in concepts, since nothing in the everyday world is at stake (it's really a game, fantasy, a picture as developed in the previous chapter under "imagination") though here it serves to elucidate the question of form in and of itself, a certain formal "disinterestedness" as postulated by Kant.

What I have been pointing to is the role of the pre-discursive body⁵ in human meaning and understanding (c.f. Potgieter 2009), the inscribing of the body to be aesthetically moved by the sensory impressions that constitute art and sport.

Now such embodiment in sport is made possible by the formal set or code of rules that make a particular sport possible and that conspire, as it were, to create coordinated play. Bernard Suits's "The Grasshopper: Games, Life and Utopia" puts forward various notions of games, play and Utopia in a witty and entertaining, if not seriously philosophical account so that such coordination is intrinsically concerned with ideals.

One of the major aspects of Suits's argument is that one can define, for example, "games". Here he parts way in quite emphatic form from Wittgenstein who argues that games and many words in general cannot be reduced or easily defined, that at best there are simply "family resemblances". In the form of Ancient Greek dialogue and with the use of examples, some rather funny, Suits defines games as fulfilling three main criteria: 1) the prelusory goal, 2) the lusory goal and 3) the lusory attitude. The first has to do with a goal that is independent of the game, such as in golf that a ball enters the hole; the second has to do with a goal internal to the game, such as in golf breaking par and the third definition is that players accept the rules of the game, which are not the most efficient means of accomplishing the task or goal and that make the game possible. He further argues that games are autotelic, meaning that they are good in themselves and not necessarily instrumental.

So, we are left with a quandary: We may be able to define games and the playing of games. We may describe them as "sabbath" from ordinary life, a refuge of sorts and an ideal way of being and doing. We may further argue that to the extent that we play – that is, we conform to agreed rules, so we have fun and forget the seriousness of life – and thus we have entered a portal to a better world. However, it is not as simple as that. In fact, this may be incorrect.

For games – and here I incorporate games of make-believe, the arts, intellectual pursuits, board games and sports, perhaps even every aspect of everyday, mundane life as a philosophy in sync with the field of everyday aesthetics – are not that innocent and playful. That is, the games we play to put it bluntly reflect, reinforce, divert attention (one might call it entertainment or leisure), ideologically brainwash and appear to unify when in fact that mirror or even extend real-world strife. This is evident in sport for example which is often used for political and/or economic ends. The example of Hitler's Berlin games of 1936 is the most glaringly obvious, but one can find this in subtler ways where sport galvanises only to separate and divide and erect nationalistic boundaries. Art, another institutional game (obviously different to say sports-games in that the rules are less iron-clad, though there are basic rules to as it were play the game we call art) has historically been a powerful marker of the political, philosophical and ideological agendas of certain groups.

However, it is not all doom and gloom, suffused with manipulation, deception, aesthetic trends and even war. There is a strong "play element" (read: will to form) in culture that is perhaps free from systems of control. In this respect, games such as art and sport are ways of connecting people and finding joy, triumph and success through the medium that is that game. Sport, for example has the power to bring people together, even when political and economic solutions are not at hand. Art can often ignite and uplift consciousness, potentially even giving a vision of new ways to see old situations, and to revel in aesthetic delight to increase sensitivity, compassion, and empathy. And formal rules assist in realising such a vision.

⁵The pre-discursive body refers to imagination, feelings/emotions and the "body", that is to say, physical embodiment, wherein are included such properties as "weight, balance, containment, in-out, front-back, texture, line, colour, force, gravity" (c.f. *Restoring the body in Western philosophy and art practice*, Potgieter, F, Unisa, 2009) which conspire together under suitable aesthetic conditions.

So, if games are a two-edged sword and if Utopia is a paradox in that its accomplishment defeats the purpose (what meaningful activity can we do in such a utopia?), then how can play and struggle, work and fun contribute to a better world? Suit's version of Utopia falls short in that it presupposes, as I understand it, that there is a final resting place where everything is abundant, where our knowledge is complete. Such a picture is far-fetched.

Perhaps a better version of his idealism and the very reason behind the so-called posited will to form, is to maintain the importance of play and games and that it forms part of culture broadly defined, but that there is no ultimate utopia. For our games as I have argued are already enmeshed in ideological and often immoral pursuits. Secondly, and this is perhaps the more important point: there is something about life which is real and cannot be captured by the idea of a game. Because games are a kind of reverie, an imaginative construction with arbitrary rules, its play-element masks the reality and sacredness of life itself. Put in other terms we might say that love is not simply a pursuit that ends in victory or loss, but that it is a real quality that cannot be quantified and measured, that cannot be expressed in a game or framework of any kind. Friendship then is meaningful precisely because of its humane quality as is universal brotherhood, but as Suit's warns this is not to be found first by playing at something, but in fighting for core principles. To fight in the boxing ring is not to fight in life proper. And while it may be noble to contest and improve one's game, this may have little to do with actual Utopia, or rather with life itself. Paradoxically though, it appears that such ideals are in fact found within formally determined games that are rule-bound.

Another way in which one might argue for the will to form is in the imaginative image of the embrace of art and sport, what I have termed the "intertwining argument" whereby there is a co-existence of art talk, sport talk and aesthetic meanings. An example of this conception can be seen in the writings of Kupfer (2001:19) who writes (on sport and its creative play):

...perfection in negation lies at one pole of aesthetic experience and human life – the pole of austerity. It is minimal, clean and simple with counterparts in sport, in both nature and art. In nature, we delight in the austerity of stark vistas of desert or ocean. The perceptually boundless expanse of sand or water provides an aesthetic intensity that is captivating in its bare repetition. In art, we appreciate the clean lines of Brancusi's 'Bird in flight' or the minimalist painting of Rothko. At the other pole of experience is plenitude and proliferation. We also enjoy the seemingly endless profusion of flowers in a meadow or the starry galaxy that appears to spill forever into inky space. So, too, in sports. The counterpoint to perfection as negation is the aesthetic exuberance of abundance: the quarterback who throws for over 400 yards or completes a handful of touchdown passes; soccer and hockey players who score three, four, even five goals in a game...

We can enjoy abundance and proliferation as well as negation and austerity in nature, art and sport. The aesthetics of abundance and negation are "intertwined" in sport as art-like.

In view of the multiple arguments put forward: art and sport as formally aesthetic; art and sport as games – a sort of utopia – and art and sport as somewhat enmeshed, one might make the following assertion: Art and sport are both ideologically "muscular" and at the same time "beyond the system", adhering to formal, aesthetic principles that have nothing to do with real-world extra-aesthetic meanings. This mutually exclusive duality renders such games difficult to understand discursively, because as muscular aesthetics they precede discursive understanding and influence. This is because "form" itself presents at one and the same time, sublime coherence and relative discontinuity and entropy.

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Dr Daniel Shorkend, lives in Israel and is an academic, artist and researcher. His central thesis is that art can be broadly defined to encompass other disciplines. He therefore begins with inter and transdisciplinary analysis, such as is evident in this article where art is linked to sport. A further conjecture is that this broader (or deeper) definition of art may lead to world-bettering.

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