

Sport as art, dance as sport

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ABSTRACT

A standing debate in philosophy of sport concerns whether sport can count as art in some sense. But the debate is often conducted at cross purposes. Naysayers insist that no sport is an *artform* while proponents insist that certain sport performances count as *artworks* – but these are entirely consistent claims. Both sides make unwarranted assumptions: naysayers are purists about sport and art (no transaesthetic purposes) whereas proponents are tokenists about artforms. Naysayers admit that figure skating may count as art yet only in non-competitive contexts. Their burden is thus to explain why a routine (e.g., Torvill and Dean’s ‘Bolero’) may count as art in a showcase but not at the Olympics. The debate is also inevitably framed in terms of whether sport counts as art, neglecting the equally viable question of whether art in some form (e.g., competitive dance) may also count as sport. I conclude in favour of an appropriately qualified sport-as-art thesis.

KEYWORDS

aesthetics; movement; competition; transaesthetic

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INTRODUCTION

The debate about whether sport can count as art is of long standing if not always of sustained interest. Diving into the literature one soon gets a sense of immersion in a surprisingly viscous liquid through which it is exhausting to make any headway much less achieve a breakthrough. This overall impression remains even in the face of fresh approaches that emerge from time to time in the literature.

Part of the problem is that art is a notoriously difficult subject to handle theoretically. Even assuming that art can be defined – a big if – or at least that certain conditions of inclusion and exclusion may simply be assumed, it is too easy to resolve this stubborn debate, as it were, by stipulation. If we understand the term ‘art’ to designate any domain of skilled activity, as in ‘the art of living on a budget’ or ‘the art of winning friends and influencing people’, and so on, then any sport – a game of physical skill – will trivially count as art, though this is not the sense in which we are interested in the question of whether sport can be art, that is, whether sport can be *fine* art. Suppose we cite Beardsley’s aesthetic definition of art as “an intentional arrangement of conditions for affording experiences of marked aesthetic character” (Beardsley, 1979, p. 729; quoted in Arnold, 1990, p. 181). Granting this definition straightforwardly implies that many sports count as art, since playing for aesthetic effect is a part of scoring in some sports and in others is frequently intended as desirable if unnecessary. On the other hand, if we assume that the beauty created in art must not be realized for some further end, that it may have no *transaesthetic* purpose, then sport will be, again trivially, excluded from the art class, since aesthetic effects will either be inessential or essential only as means to the end of scoring and winning.¹ Similarly, following David Best’s curious life situations argument (1978, p. 115), if we stipulate that art must say something about life situations and that sport cannot do so, it naturally follows that sport cannot be art. Such stipulation is as vexingly arbitrary as it is convenient.

As we shall see, this is by no means the only way in which philosophers on either side of the sport-as-art debate tend to talk past one another. However, it does reflect the relative impasse at which the debate has seemed to stand for some time. Part of my purpose here is to reframe the debate so that the impasse can be overcome, giving both sides the due often denied them. I will argue that some sport performances count as *artworks*, though fewer than is often supposed, and that figure skating (if no other sport) counts as an *artform*. A corollary of this view is that most sports are not artforms and most sport performances are not artworks. Where most philosophers begin with established sports and try to determine whether and how they may count as art, I also approach the question from the neglected other side by considering whether some art may count as sport, specifically artistic dance in competitive contexts.

Before (re)framing the debate, it will be helpful to highlight certain essential distinctions and terms. First, we should mark the aesthetic/artistic distinction. Being beautiful or aesthetically pleasing is different from and insufficient for art. No one denies that sport can be beautiful, with certain elegant movements, graceful styles, and dramatic contests, for instance. These qualities may be associated with art, but they are also distinguishable from art, as a sunset and a painting of it may both be aes-

¹ See Mumford (2012, p. 41) for a succinct expression of this view.

thetically pleasing although only one of them, the painting, is a work of art. Second, by art in this sense we mean individual works and general forms that count as fine art: painting, sculpture, poetry, theatre, dance, music, and so on. If any sport counts as art, it will be something akin to theatre or dance. Third, we should also note the beauty/aesthetic distinction in that something that would be totally unappealing in real life, such as an evil character, may well be aesthetically pleasing when depicted in an artwork. Hannibal Lecter may delight us in fiction, but should not do so in real life. Fourth, we should note the aesthetic/purposive sport distinction: in aesthetic sports such as gymnastics, diving, and synchro the scoring and outcome are at least partly determined by judged aesthetic criteria, whereas in purposive sports such as soccer, track, and weightlifting the aesthetic is at most a byproduct, immaterial to competitive outcomes.

FRAMING THE DEBATE

One of the reasons the sport-as-art debate appears to be deadlocked, again, is that philosophers on either side appear to be talking past one another. Those naysayers who deny that sport is art tend to insist, for various reasons, that no sport counts as an *artform* (e.g., Best, 1978; Cordner, 1988; Hyland, 1990; Mumford, 2012; Allen, 2013). As David Best succinctly puts it, “I contend that *no* sport is an *art form*” (1980, p. 69, original and added emphasis). Those who rather affirm the sport-as-art thesis, however, tend to focus on insisting that certain sport performances count as *artworks* (e.g., Boxill, 1985; Wertz, 1985; Arnold, 1990; Platchias, 2003; Elcombe, 2010). As Peter J. Arnold articulates the point, “a skater like Katarina Witt [...] embodies and articulates her aesthetic intent [...] In her rendering of the music from Bizet’s *Carmen* at the 1988 Olympics she was able to do this with perfection [...] Similarly in the pair skating [*sic*] of Torvill and Dean [...] skating to the music of Ravel’s *Bolero*” (1990, p. 175).² Although the point of contention might not be entirely clear here, it should be evident that there is a sharp division between both hostile and friendly attitudes toward the idea that sport is or can be art in some sense.

What might strike one, however, is the impression that critics and advocates of sport as art are focused on supporting positions that are neither contrary nor contradictory but are rather entirely consistent. The naysayers might be right about artforms even if the proponents are right about individual artworks. It might be the case *both* that no sport counts as an artform *and* that certain sport performances count as artworks. This is because questions about artforms concern *types*, which are logically distinct from questions about individual artworks: tokens rather than types. Analogously, mental states may be token-identical to brain states – i.e., each one *is* a brain state – even if, for principled reasons, there is no single *type* of physical state that corresponds to the mental type. More concretely, note that Marcel Duchamp’s *Fountain*, a urinal presented in a gallery, may count as an artwork even though urinal presentation per se is not an artform. It may likewise be the case that figure skating, say, is not an artform

² Note that Torvill and Dean competed in ice dance, not pairs, and that if any subclass of figure skating as sport also counts as art, ice dance is the most plausible given its particular constraints on jumps and so forth.

even if certain performances count as artworks. If one were to counter that *Fountain* is an example of *object trouvé*, or ‘found art’, which is an artform, two replies are in order. First, *Fountain* was one of the first *objects trouvés*, paving the way for – and thus not depending on – the established artform. Second, even if the art status of certain skating performances required an associated artform, just as *Fountain* stands in relation to found art, so too would they stand in relation to the artform *dance*. If anything can be art, that doesn’t mean any type of thing can be an artform.

But the debate does not stop here. Both sides press further on the basis of problematic if largely implicit assumptions. For naysayer Best, for instance, figure skating as a sport will in *no instance* count as artwork (1978, p. 121). This is in part because the activity of creating art is or is supposed to be autotelic or aesthetico-telic, something done for its own sake or the sake of aesthetic creation alone. Since the aesthetic is created in sport at most as a means to the desired end of scoring and winning, it is thereby not properly, since not purely, artistic. On the other side of the debate, a proponent like Boxill contends that a sport like basketball – indeed, sport generally – should be seen as an artform *because* great players like Dr. J and Kareem Abdul-Jabbar show great artistry in their unique, creative styles of play (1985, pp. 36, 46).³ In other words, the naysayers tend to be implicit *purists* about both sport and art, taking the view that no sport is an artform to imply that there is no case of sport performance that counts as an artwork, as well as seeing the creation of aesthetic beauty for some further end, like scoring or winning, to exclude the product from the art class. But just as such purism seems unwarranted, proponents tend to fall prey to undue *tokenism* by taking the view that some sport performances are artworks to imply that the sport itself is straightforwardly and unproblematically an artform. When made so explicit, neither the naysayers’ purism nor the proponents’ tokenism appears sufficiently plausible.

Since it is a matter of some dispute whether any individual sport performance counts as art, the best way to proceed, I think, is to replace the somewhat nebulous question “Is sport art?” with the more focused “Is sport *ever* art?” If sport is ever art, it will no doubt be so in the case of an aesthetic rather than purposive sport, and if any such sport is to count as an artform, doubtless it will be some such sport as figure skating. If figure skating as a sport ever counts as art, it will most plausibly be a performance such as Torvill and Dean’s gold-medal ‘Bolero’ routine at the 1984 Sarajevo Olympics, a routine many consider to be one of the all-time high-water marks of figure skating artistry. Even Best, the most adamant naysayer of all, admits that figure skating is the most plausible case for sport as art, conceding even that it sometimes *does* count as art, albeit only in essentially non-competitive (i.e., non-sport) contexts like a professional showcase where the purpose is entertainment, not winning (1978, p. 121). We can use ‘Bolero’ as a test case to determine first whether sport is ever art, and then move to address the larger question of whether any sport is an artform.

The ‘Bolero’ burden

The naysayer’s concession is a reasonable one. It is too implausible to deny that figure skating performances outside the competitive context of sport may constitute artworks. After all, figure skating is a peculiar kind of dance – dance on ice – and

³ Boxill also highlights notable athletes from other sports (1985, p. 42).

although some types of dance are non-artistic activities, dance is a bona fide artform. On the surface at least, the naysayer is perfectly consistent in affirming the arthood of skating outside the sport domain but denying the arthood of skating within the sport domain.

Problems arise, however, when we consider the possibility of particular routines being performed *both* in sporting and in non-competitive contexts; Torvill and Dean have performed their 'Bolero' routine in non-competitive showcases as well as in winning Olympic gold. The naysayer's position implies that this very same routine performed by the very same dance pair fails to qualify as art in the Olympics yet qualifies admirably in the showcase. We may assume for argument's sake that the aesthetic appeal of these several performances is similar, although the Olympic performance, because of the heightened tension of an event viewed by millions, is in reality a far more dramatic one. If the showcase 'Bolero' counts as art, the naysayer's burden is to explain why essentially the same performance, the Olympic 'Bolero', fails to count as art. If the 'Bolero' is showcase art, why not Olympic art as well?

It would be natural for the naysayer to answer this 'Bolero' burden by appealing to the landmark work on indiscernibles by Arthur Danto (1964). Part of Danto's insight is that what makes something an artwork is perceptually unavailable to an observer insofar as a pair of perceptually indistinguishable artifacts – such as one of Andy Warhol's *Brillo Boxes* and an ordinary carton of Brillo pads – may constitute art in the one case and non-art in the other. In a similar vein, the naysayer might claim that the Olympic 'Bolero', like the ordinary Brillo box, is not art, whereas the showcase 'Bolero', like a Warhol *Brillo Box*, is art. This insight has been a significant force in sculpting the profile of recent philosophy of art for decades now.

However, although this is a possible move by the naysayer, it is the wrong way to think of the Brillo box analogy. In the 'Bolero' cases it is not as though we have different agents with different performative intentions fashioning different works that happen to look the same, rather we have the same performers doing the same beautiful routine with the same aesthetic intention: to represent a loving relationship, in rhythm with the music from Ravel, between two sometimes birdlike creatures in harmony with each other and ending with the beings' or their love's literal or metaphorical death. True, the Olympic 'Bolero' is intended to be aesthetically appealing for the sake of winning, just as the design of a normal Brillo box is meant to entice consumers. But it is more as if we have two Warhol *Brillo Boxes*: one in a gallery, one in a supermarket. Both count as art despite their different contexts and whether or not there are any transaesthetic purposes in play.

For the naysayer to insist, moreover, that the competitive context of sport is an *excluding* condition from the art class, leads to the following reductio: that there can be no such thing as an art competition. This is because the minute an artist submits their work to be considered for some transaesthetic purpose – a sale, a critique, a competition – the naysayer's position implies that the art status of the work is thereby nullified, the 'proper' purpose of art being no more, and no less, than aesthetic creation itself. But this position is untenable, or at the very least rather naïve about the artworld. There *are* various permissible transaesthetic purposes for which art is made, among which we may count winning art competitions, and to deny this is too idealistic, somewhat naïve about the motives of many artists for creating their works. So considered,

the ‘Bolero’ test case shows that at least some sport performances, however few, also count as genuine artworks.

Dance as sport

Even if we could not show, as I believe I have, that some established sport also counts as art, that by itself would not close the debate, since it could turn out that some established art, in particular dance, in some cases might also count as sport. It is somewhat curious that philosophers of sport have effectively ignored this line of inquiry, although it should be noted that dance theorists have not been so neglectful. Guarino for instance maintains that as an art dance is not only sufficiently physically demanding to qualify as sport, but also, no less importantly, that it is often sufficiently competitive to so qualify as well (2015, pp. 77–78). I believe this line of argument is essentially correct. The art-to-sport inference seems at least as and perhaps more plausible than the sport-to-art inference, so it would behoove us to explore the art-as-sport angle of the sport-as-art question.

Backing up a bit, we should note that dance is not always an artform and comprises three different broad types: ceremonial dance of the sort we might find in a tribal ritual, social dance as happens for instance in nightclubs, and proper artistic dance such as ballet (Cohen, 1962, p. 19). There may be some overlap among these categories. As I dance a foxtrot it is barely even a social dance and certainly no artform, yet as Fred Astaire danced it, it is unquestionably art. Since not all dance qualifies as art, we must be careful to focus our question accordingly. The question is not whether dance simpliciter may count as sport, but whether dance qua art may count as sport. Dance in a general unqualified sense fails to count as sport just as in a general unqualified sense dance fails to count as art. This is because sport is essentially a type of physical contest, whereas dance as an activity is not necessarily competitive.

But this does not settle the question of whether artistic dance in certain contexts qualifies as sport. Dance need not be artistic but is still an artform, and likewise artistic dance need not be competitive but still may qualify as sport, and even as a ‘sport-form’, when it *is* competitive. We should distinguish at least two types of such competitive dance. First, there are types of artistic dance that are essentially competitive: competitive ballroom (i.e., so-called *dancesport*), b-boy battles, power cheerleading, and so forth. Then there are types of artistic dance that, though not inherently competitive, have significant, clearly defined competitive contexts. Take ballet. There are longstanding ballet competitions, such as the Prix de Lausanne, not to mention the inherently competitive nature of auditions, competing for roles and status within and among dance troupes, and so on. In both types of competitive artistic dance, the activity meets such a criterion of sport as “competitive events involving a variety of physical (usually in combination with other) skills, where the superior participant is judged to have exhibited those skills in a superior way” (Suits, 1988, p. 2).⁴ It is no accident that Sylvester Stallone, perhaps the quintessential sport film icon, directed the dance movie sequel *Staying Alive*. The opening scene is of John Travolta at a dance audition leaving it all on the stage to the music of Frank Stallone’s ‘Far from Over’, a soundtrack

⁴ It should be noted that this is Suits’ mature view, in contrast to his earlier, game-centered, and explicitly institutional view (1973).

that might just as well have accompanied an athlete at a walk-on tryout leaving it all on the field.

Setting aside the unfortunate, often implicit, and clearly problematic tendency to gender sport as ‘masculine’ and the arts as ‘feminine’, perhaps the strongest resistance to dance as sport is grounded in institutionalism. An institutional theory of sport requires that a sport be not only a game of physical skill but also have a “wide and stable” following (Suits, 1973, pp. 59, 60). By this objection, although ballet has a wide and stable following, that is only in its non-competitive artistic form; it lacks such a following in its competitive varieties. Likewise, dance activities like power cheerleading may be essentially competitive, but their followings also seem of insufficient standing for sport.⁵

In response to this naysayer’s objection, the proponent has several plausible responses at the ready. First, we may object on principled grounds to an institutional requirement for sport (e.g., Meier, 1988, pp. 15–17). Second, we may note that institutional theories of *art* rather than sport do not require a wide and stable following for the activity type but rather artistic status conferral on, or public presentation of, the token: a criterion of artworks rather than artforms (Dickie, 2000, pp. 93, 96). Third, on the heels of this point, and returning to the sport-as-art question again, we may note that on the institutional theory of art a skater like Toller Cranston was perfectly able to make his competitive performances art, as he intended, by his own status conferral and public presentation. To object that the artworld and ‘sportworld’ are wholly disjoint institutions is simply a non-starter. Fourth, we should note that at least some artistic dance competitions *do* have wide and stable followings, not only individual competitions like ballet’s Prix de Lausanne (an international competition in its forty-fifth year), but also artistic dance types like competitive ballroom. It is entirely fitting, not merely aspirational, to refer to competitive ballroom as *dancesport*.⁶

The artform question

Backing away from institutionalism, we may turn to considering what it means for a *practice* to count as an artform. Urinal presentation never became an artform, but the more general category of found art did become an artform, partly because of such groundbreaking works as Duchamp’s *Fountain*. Intuitively, if somewhat sketchily, what makes something an artform is a combination of a sufficient number of artwork instances overarched by a sufficiently robust creative practice. Thus *Fountain* helped inaugurate the artform of found art rather than urinal presentation. More traditionally, dance and painting are artforms because there are significant numbers of paintings and dances that count as artworks and because these works are embedded in sufficiently robust practices of creating such works. Their artform status is not undermined by the fact that not all painting activities or dancings are artworks or by the possibility that such practices might exist outside institutional contexts.

Very few sports meet such a criterion for artforms, but at least figure skating does.⁷ We should note that the failure of most sports to meet this criterion is at the heart of what makes the naysayer’s position attractive. Very few of the arts satisfy an analogous

⁵ See for example Johnson and Sailors (2013, p. 270).

⁶ For a useful discussion of competitive ballroom as sport, see Marion (2008, Chapter 6).

⁷ Synchronized swimming might also qualify, though again the vast majority of sports will not.

criterion for sportforms, but at least some competitive dance does. Even as a sport, figure skating is too similar to other forms of artistic dance not to be considered a variety thereof. Even as an art, competitive dance is too similar to other sportforms not to be considered a variety thereof.

My conclusions, then, are that (1) some figure skating performances count as both sport and art; (2) some dance performances count as both art and sport; (3) figure skating (if no other sport) counts as an artform; (4) competitive dance (if no other sport) counts as a sportform.

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