

Art As The Parasitic Process of Thought: Art-Work, Art-Labour, and Art-Action in Hannah Arendt

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Art: An Introduction

In *The Human Condition*, Arendt places art at the end of the chapter entitled “Work”. The discussion of art is short but dense, with art reoccurring throughout her writings often in a central and pivotal role. She returned to the concept of art in *Between Past and Future*, as well as in her 1960 article “Society and Culture”, and in *The Life of the Mind*. Other lesser-known writings, such as her lectures on Brecht and Broch at Kenyon College in 1948 and 49 respectively, shed light on her understanding of the subject. Yet there appears to be a tension in Arendt’s conception of art, or perhaps more accurately in her placement of art under the domain of work. This tension is explored masterfully in Markell’s discussion of the topic in which he argues that work relates to labour and to action “as the fraught conjunction of two different pairs of concepts”.¹ Work provides labour with its use objects, and provides action the art that immortalizes it.² However, this could very well muddle a concept of work and its place in the world, thereby hampering the “disclosing quality” of words so valourized by Arendt.³ Indeed, while Arendt’s reflections on historical events, crises, and public problems were intended to provide insight into the here-and-now of her day, many of these problems were solved for her by introducing useful and often historically grounded, yet abstract categorical definitions that she felt had become forgotten⁴ or confused⁵ over the centuries. Thus, it is

1 Patchen Markell, “Arendt’s Work: On the Architecture of The Human Condition,” *College Literature* 38, no. 1 (2011): 18.

2 Ibid, 27.

3 Hannah Arendt, “Hannah Arendt on Hannah Arendt,” in *Hannah Arendt: The Recovery of the Public World*, ed. Melvyn A. Hill (New York: StMartin’s Press, 1979), 323.

4 This is the subject of her essay “What is Authority”, as she felt “the very term has become clouded by controversy and confusion” because “authority has vanished from the modern world”. As such, she believed it important to define what authority had been, so that we could better contextualize its loss. Quite simply, the concept of authority had been forgotten, and only the word remained, and thus was used awkwardly and unclearly. P.91

5 Her essays “The Concept of History: Ancient and Modern” as well as “What is Freedom” exist for this purpose. In both instances, while history and freedom, unlike authority, remain in the world, the shifts in their meanings overtime, as well as their use as synonymous with other concepts, and metaphorical use being taken as literal had to Arendt muddled their disclosing quality as words. This is one of Arendt’s favorite methodologies, and one heavily used throughout *The Human Condition*.

not surprising that Arendt also felt that the concept of art had a precise and unorthodox meaning. However, it is of great note that while most of Arendt's writing on art is from the earlier part of her career, the concept still occupied her and required more thinking and clarification late in life. Notably in 1970 she wrote in her Thinking Diary "What gives artworks their permanence is perhaps their origin – they were born on the non-time track of thinking."⁶ It is surprising then to find Arendt writing so confidently in *The Human Condition* on art and its place in the world for twelve years later she still appeared to be working on figuring it out. Unfortunately, she never provided us that late career clarification and her definition and placement of art as a result still appears as muddled, sandwiched between work and action, as it does within *The Human Condition*. My hope is to unearth what it might mean for art to be born out of thinking, and thus to clarify art as it appears in Arendt's works.

This fraught conjuncture between work and action may, perhaps, be smoothed if we distinguish the process by which something becomes a use object from the process by which art is created. Thus, one of our goals in what follows will be to examine the differences Arendt draws between art and use objects, as well as between what Arendt calls artwork and what is today celebrated as art. Through this process of comparison, we will see that Arendt made a slight mistake⁷ when she failed to distinguish between the process of fabrication and the two processes which create art: that of judgement and that of *art*. This latter, a process, it will be shown, is inherent to her own conception of art and tied directly to the aforementioned relationship between art and thinking.⁸

6 Hannah Arendt, *Denktagebuch*, January 1970. Quoted in Sebastian Hefti and Wolfgang Heuer, "On the Centenary of Hannah Arendt's Birth a Denkraum (Thinking Space) is Born," trans. Kathrin Nussbaumer, accessed December 1, 2024, <https://www.wolfgang-heuer.com/denkraum/eng/centenary.htm>.

7 I hope it does not seem harsh that I speak of Arendt's confusion, or that I claim she made a mistake regarding the workings of her own formulation. When I claim she made a mistake, I am doing my best to contextualize her work within the framework and methodology she herself used to approach words' meanings and related concepts. She said in her own appraisal of *The Human Condition* that the "main flaw and mistake of *The Human Condition* is the following: I still look at what is called in the traditions the *vita activa* from the viewpoint of the *vita contemplativa*, without ever saying anything real about the *vita contemplativa*" (Arendt, "Arendt on Arendt," 305). While this was admittedly said aloud, and not written, yet you will find similar phrasing throughout Arendt's body of work. For instance, in *On Revolution* she writes that due to Marx's interest in history he "therefore neglected, almost entirely, the original intentions of the men of the revolutions" (Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (New York: Penguin Classics, 1977), 51). In *On Violence* she claims that "Textbook instructions on 'how to make a revolution' in a step-by-step progression [...] are all based on the mistaken notion that revolutions are 'made.'" (Hannah Arendt, *On Violence* (New York: Mariner, 1970), 48). Likewise, in "What is Freedom?" Arendt writes "Even Montesquieu, though he had not only a different but a much higher opinion of the essence of politics than Hobbes or Spinoza, could still occasionally equate political freedom with security" (Hannah Arendt, "What is Freedom?" in *Between Past and Future* (New York: Penguin Classics, 1977), 148).

8 For the sake of the ease of the reader, we will distinguish the process of art from the noun by italicizing the verb form. It should be noted that this distinction does not exist within Arendt's own work.

On Judgement

This process of *art* differs from judgment, by which a person recognizes an object as having an aesthetic value (whether it is beautiful or ugly).⁹ Judgement is the process through which an object is selected *as art*, or, more accurately, *as beautiful*. As such, it cannot also be the process by which art comes into this world. That is to say, judgement brings art into the public world, but does not explain why some objects are to be brought into the public world and others are not. Further, while this relationship between judgement and art may serve sufficiently for art-work, it does not prove adequate for all that we conceive of as art.¹⁰ There is much that has long been considered art that would not fall under the purview of art-work.

Likewise, art-work, which I am using here to denote fabricated art, in the same way Arendt speaks of artworks, does not *really* work for Arendt's consideration of poetry, and she appears well aware of this issue. There is an exceptionally brief consideration of poetry within the art section of *The Human Condition*, which appears to have been cut down in size from its original appearance in Arendt's essay "The Permanence of the World" which is worth examining at length:

Poetry whose material is language is perhaps the most humane and least worldly of the arts, the one in which the end product remains closest to the thought that inspired it. The durability of a poem is produced through condensation, so that it is as though language spoken in utmost density and concentration were poetic in itself. Here remembrance [...] is directly transformed into memory, and the poet's means to achieve the transformation is rhythm, through which the poem becomes fixed in the recollection almost by itself. It is this closeness to living recollection that enables the poem to remain its durability, outside the printed or the written page, and though the 'quality' of a poem may be subject to a variety of standards, its 'memorability' will inevitably determine its durability, that is, its chance to be permanently fixed in the recollection of humanity [...] yet even a poem, no matter how long it existed as a living spoken word in the recollection of the bard and those who listened to him, will eventually be 'made', that is written down¹¹

It is worth noting several things within this quote. First, it is very clear that the judgement of the quality of the poem is not what creates the poem, that the poem pre-exists judgment of it as a piece of art. Second, that the poem is produced through "condensation" not fabrication. This already indicates that the poem comes into existence through something other than what Arendt calls work. Lastly, Arendt seems very aware

9 Anna Selmezi, "Art/work: Fabricating Freedom Or, Thinking about Instrumentality in Relation to Political Art," *Parallax* 22, no. 2 (2016): 223.

10 Bernard Flynn, "The Places of the Work of Art in Arendt's Philosophy," *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 17, no. 3 (1991): 226.

11 Hannah Arendt, "The Permanence of the World" in *Reflections on Literature and Culture*, ed. Susannah Young-ah Gottlieb (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007): 174.

that it does not really work within her conception of art as the product of work, since she adds this de facto justification at the end that a reification of the poem in book form will “eventually be ‘made’”, notably placing made in scare-quotes, as she is well aware the poem fully pre-exists its printing just as it pre-exists judgement. That this section is excluded from *The Human Condition* provides further ground to suspect Arendt was aware of the tensions between her framing of art as the product of fabrication and the nature of poetry.

Likewise, Arendt speaks of “composing a melody” and its inherent relation to art, but not the act of conducting a symphony, which we too would call art. This activity has no other place except art in Arendt’s schema of labour—work—action.¹² If conducting a symphony is not an art-work, then it must exist outside of Arendt’s human condition (an impossible proposition). For while we may be tempted to think of it as a job-holding task, such as in projecting a film, to do so would be to ignore the creative freedom that allows the trained ear to distinguish one conductor from another when they are conducting the same piece. Yet, before we rescue the symphony from oblivion, let us ensure that judgement is not *only* what makes art.-Arendt was determined, against the standard reading, to derive from Kant’s aesthetic judgement “a general ‘faculty of judgment’ that, while not political in and of itself, would be on the side of politics.”¹³ This judging requires both thinking and communication, but does not privilege genius or intellect, instead privileging the appeal of each action, or object, to the spectator who judges.¹⁴ It is this presumed equality, or potential equality of taste, that allows for a level of equality among the spectators in a way that judging based on intellect would not. Of course, this equality of taste, or in Kantian terms, common sense, is not necessarily common, but can only be presumed so, making it thus an “*as if* agreement” through which “a thinking individual comes to perceive herself as part of the plurality of the *polis*.”¹⁵ Judging then becomes for Arendt “a truly human praxis oriented towards past events, including the creation of works of art.”¹⁶ This, however, is not the creation of the work of art.

For while we could conceive that anything is art if it is judged by the collective to be so and accepted as such, we can see clearly here that judging is something done to art and is not that process that makes art itself. While it may be that good art must be judged to be beautiful, it would appear that art is not less art if it is not judged beautiful. It may only be bad art, which is not the same thing as being less or not art. Likewise, this judgment cannot be confused with value, as art is “not exchangeable” and thus defies “equalization

¹² Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 169.

¹³ Jae Emerling, “An Art History of Means: Arendt-Benjamin,” *Journal of Art Historiography* 1 (2009): 8.

¹⁴ *Ibid* 7-8.

¹⁵ Selmeczi, “Art/work: Fabricating Freedom Or, Thinking about Instrumentality in Relation to Political Art”, 224.

¹⁶ Emerling, “An Art History of Means: Arendt-Benjamin,” 10.

through a common denominator such as money”.¹⁷ Instead, this judgement creates a structural break between the past and the future, allowing within this break “the creation of a world”.¹⁸ The art-judgment process provides art the necessary asylum that makes it possible to “forget ourselves, our cares and the interests and urges of our lives, so that we will not seize what we admire but let it be as it is”.¹⁹ Thus, aesthetic judgement cannot be the primary part of the creation of art. Nor is judgement the sovereign domain of art. There exists not just political judgment, but judgment of all things, for everything “must appear, and nothing can appear without a shape of its own; hence there is no thing that does not transcend functional use”.²⁰ Instead, Arendt places art under the control of the *homo faber*, the fabricator of the world, and all worldly objects. She writes, “if mortals need [*homo faber*’s] help to erect a home on earth, acting and speaking men need the help of *homo faber* in his highest capacity, that is, the help of the artist, of poets, of historiographers, of monument-builders or writers, because without them the only product of their activity, the story they enact and tell, would not survive at all.”²¹

Of course, while this is indeed something that art does, it is not the inherent purpose of art. Art need not concern itself with actors. It does just as well with inanimate objects as subjects, or with no physical subject at all (as is the case with much modern art). Likewise, some things which Arendt might not allow as art, such as the interpretation of a symphony by a great conductor, are as quickly gone from this world as action or labour. At very least, Mary McCarthy believed that perishables still amounted to Arendtian art. She explained, “a birthday cake, elaborately decorated, is experienced not *just* as a cake to be consumed, and we almost have the sense that it *ought* to be preserved”.²²

The Traits of Art, And the Judgement Exception

Still, let us consider what Arendt does say is inherent to art-work. As we have just established, she first says that it is fabricated. Second, she claims that these objects are objects without use, and third, she claims that these useless objects are produced due to thought, which she differentiates from cognition. As it is their fabricated nature we have set ourselves to look most critically upon, let us first deal with the latter two arguments, neither of which is necessitated by fabrication.

¹⁷ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 167

¹⁸ Emerling, “An Art History of Means: Arendt-Benjamin,” 10.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 173.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ronald S. Beiner, “Hannah Arendt on Capitalism and Socialism*,” *Government and Opposition* 25, no. 3 (1990): 362.

Art is without use. It is not that art has no purpose, but that it is wholly without physical utility towards the creation of another thing in the world. Things that are art are “strictly without any utility whatsoever and which, because they are unique, are not exchangeable”.²³ Furthermore, for Arendt “the proper intercourse with a work of art is certainly not using it; on the contrary, it must be removed carefully from the whole context of ordinary use objects to attain its proper place in the world”.²⁴ Laikwan Pang reiterates this in practical terms when taking an Arendtian approach to the artifacts (including artworks) left behind by the 2014 Hong Kong protests. The difficulty lay in the job of the archivists, “struggling with the issue of which works to be treated as transcendental ‘arts’ that should be collected and restaged and which works to be treated as “things” created out of boredom, or due to frustration”.²⁵ We see in Pang a note of recognition that it is indeed partly through judgement that we decide what is art and what is not. Indeed, as these art-works “were so overwhelmingly defined by the [Hong Kong] occupation” none had any use left, if they had had any before, and were prime examples of how for Arendt often “art is the artifact”.²⁶

To this extent and this extent only can judgement create art out of use-objects (artifacts now removed from their purpose) and provide a new role in the thinking of the spectator. This role of art as artifact, while in line with Arendt, is not in line with the concept of *art* which this article proposes. However, that this exception should exist, that art can sometimes be art because it is an artifact, should not be seen as weakening the existence of the *art* process, but only places it as one among two ways in which art becomes art. As we shall see, it is not the dominant factor.

She writes in an essay on Walter Benjamin, “inasmuch as collecting can fasten on any category of objects [not just art objects] ...and thus, as it were, *redeem the object as a thing* since it now is no longer a means to an end but has its intrinsic worth” we can understand a “collector’s passion as an attitude akin to that of the revolutionary ... *collecting is the redemption of things which is to complement the redemption of man.*”²⁷ Thus any discussion of an object revitalized by judgement as art *must* be undertaken with the utmost caution and care. It cannot be presumed that any or indeed most items resurrected are art-works. This again brings into question if we can at all consider judgement a process of creation of art.

It is, however, interesting that art is useless. For indeed, according to Arendt art belongs to the world of *homo faber* who “judges and does everything in terms of ‘in order

²³Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 167.

²⁴Ibid.

²⁵Laikwan Pang, “Arendt in Hong Kong: Occupy, Participatory Art, and Place-Making,” *Cultural Politics* 12, no. 2 (2016): 160.

²⁶Ibid.

²⁷Arendt quoted in, Emerling, “An Art History of Means: Arendt-Benjamin,” 4-5.

to'.²⁸ In fact, Arendt goes as far as to declare “utilitarianism, the philosophy of *homo faber*”.²⁹ She writes, “fabrication chiefly fabricates use objects” where “the finished product again becomes a means” and that this philosophy applied to life results in “the limitless instrumentalization of everything that exists”.³⁰ Thankfully, because “of its uselessness, the work of art transcends and contests the means-ends relationship that characterizes the world of work.”³¹ We must then ask why would the *homo faber* ever create something as useless as art. Why does *homo faber* create an “existence finalized toward appearance” which “is not a characteristic of the world of work but rather of the world of action”?³² Why is it that “the world of action is threatened by the attitude of making but not by its product”—art.³³ These are the questions that plague any consideration of Arendtian art.

What then of thinking? That thinking is parasitic to the life process is a fact well known by Arendt who asserts, “its process permeates the whole of human existence so intimately that its beginning and end coincide with the beginning and end of human life itself”.³⁴ Note that she claims that it permeates the process, and is not the process nor an inherent part of the process. It is the cognitive process by which life’s needs are met, by which all ‘productive’ things are done, and which is truly necessary for survival.³⁵ Thought, on the other hand proves completely useless. It “has neither an end nor an aim outside itself” and “does not even produce results”.³⁶ Thought for Arendt is “the source of art works,” and is “manifest without transformation or transfiguration in all great philosophy”.³⁷ In this it differs greatly from cognition “by which we acquire and store up knowledge,” and is chiefly manifested in the form of the sciences.³⁸ Cognition is focused and “always pursues a definite aim, which can be set by practical considerations as well as by ‘idle curiosity’.”³⁹ However, just like its chief relation, fabrication, “once this aim is

28 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 154.

29 Her italics. Ibid.

30 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 157.

31 Flynn, “The Places of the Work of Art in Arendt’s Philosophy,” 219.

32 Ibid.

33 Ibid.

34 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 171.

35 Ibid, 170.

36 Ibid.

37 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 170.

38 Ibid.

39 Ibid.

reached, the cognitive process” comes to an end.⁴⁰ Thus we can see cognition and not thought as inherent in the fabrication process.

The Problems of Fabrication

It is high time we properly address fabrication. This is how Arendt believes art is made. Art-work to her is itself the result of the same process that makes the ladder or the hammer. Instead of directly defining here fabrication, we shall show, through a series of its roles, its incompatibility with art. This is not to say that fabrication is a flawed concept, because it proves inapplicable to the art it is supposed to encompass, as indeed it is exactly what happens when an object of sustained utility is created.⁴¹ It is only that the process of bringing art into this world must inherently differ from fabrication in enough ways that when the rules of art are applied to fabrication, or fabrication to art, they ring untrue.

First, let us examine her claim that the “actual work of fabrication is performed under the guidance of a model in accordance with which the object is constructed.”⁴² This is near indisputable when one considers a use-object. In fact, the required use of the object necessitates a certain level of a modeling, as otherwise when completed, the object may not perform its utility. However, to apply such a model to a painting by Jackson Pollock or Carl Heidenreich⁴³ would seem near absurd. Quite simply, art is not the following of a model from start to finish, or a necessary conception of how it will be when completed. Arendt’s genealogical method, which she termed ‘pearl-diving’, does not merely seek to return definitions to that which they were at their beginning, but to trace their changes over time. Art today cannot be said to be accurately portrayed by the ancient definition of art as craftwork. Process artists like Pollock, Eva Hesse, or Robert Morris⁴⁴ are simply too involved in the process of art for the idea of an end result, a model to be achieved, to have any significance. Moreover, the end result, the art-work, is not of paramount importance to process art, the art for them is the process, not the result. This can be further noted in 20th and 21st century artists’ attempts to design their art to avoid monetization and collection, however unsuccessfully.⁴⁵

40Ibid.

41 The use of the phrase “sustained utility” here is to differentiate the products of fabrication from the products of labourized work.

42Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 140.

43It is noteworthy that Arendt wrote the forward to an exhibition catalogue for Heidenreich and clearly considered the abstract impressionist’s paintings to be praiseworthy art.

44Himself heavily interested in phenomenology.

45 Examples of this include movements like the Arte Povera in 20th century Italy, as well as Viennese Actionism.

Further, for Arendt this model “whose shape guides the fabrication process, not only precedes it, but does not disappear with the finished product, which it survives intact, present as it were, to lend itself to an infinite continuation of fabrication.”⁴⁶ To imagine this being true of an art-work is not impossible. Certainly, it is the case for some of Andy Warhol’s work. Likewise, it is debatably true for printmaking in general. However, to suggest this of a book or painting is immediately recognizable as false. Perhaps, one could broaden the term ‘model’ until the general idea of book, painting, or a subject matter may be considered a model. Yet, to suggest that one can make a second painting in the same manner that one can make a second walking cane shows the idea as preposterous.

So too, does the assured end-nature of fabrication not fit artists’ conception of art. Arendt says of fabrication that in “the process of making [...] the end is beyond doubt: it has come when an entirely new thing with enough durability to remain in the world has been added to the human artifice.”⁴⁷ While this is not immediately untrue of art from the perspective of the judge, it does not apply to the process, of which only the author of the process can surely speak.

While it may be possible to find an artist who claims that when they begin a painting they know exactly how it will look at the end, and that the results do end up looking thus, the reader would surely regard the statement with suspicion. In this way art is much more akin to action than fabrication, both of which “may have a definite beginning, never [...] have] a predictable end”.⁴⁸ It is this contradiction between *art* and fabrication that when not clearly distinguished leads otherwise skilled theorists to conclude, “it is not just action but also work [...] that would be disfigured if it were seen merely as the rote execution of a plan given in advance”.⁴⁹

An Introduction to the Art Process

Let us then consider whether the artist is master. For Arendt *Homo Faber* is the only type of man who can truly claim this role. He is both “master of all nature” and “master of himself and his doings”.⁵⁰ The *laborans* is “subject to the necessity of its own life” and the man of action and speech “remains in dependence upon his fellow men”.⁵¹ However, this freedom is not fully known by the artist. Indeed while the artist may create it in private, the last act of the artist “it seems, is to show his work in public—that is, to surrender it, figuratively or literally, to its users and judges”, thus qualifying the artist’s absolute

⁴⁶ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 141.

⁴⁷ Ibid, 143.

⁴⁸ Ibid, 144.

⁴⁹ Markell, “Arendt’s Work: On the Architecture of The Human Condition,” 36.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

sovereignty through the necessity of the inclusion of the public.⁵² If we consider our other prime example, the conductor of a symphony they did not write. This artist both produces and displays their art in the same instant. It is a performance, and there is no sovereign space or time.

It is also notable that within the course of the work chapter Arendt changes the nature of the fabricated object. For use-objects and fabrication in general at the beginning of the chapter she focuses on “physical durability”, but in the section on art she replaces the concept with permanence, “which is a function of the “memorability” of tangible things”.⁵³ However, both these traits, it will be shown, are not necessarily inherent to art, though the later as Arendt has shown is a trait of art-work.

Arendt writes thought, “although it inspires the highest worldly productivity of *homo faber*, is by no means his prerogative; it begins to assert itself as his source of inspiration only where he overreaches himself, as it were, and begins to produce useless things”.⁵⁴ For as the reader will recall, she has already denoted cognition, not thought, as the cognitive process which corresponds to the fabrication process. However, it must be noted that *use* is a difficult term to define in relation to Arendt. It is no doubt tied to the means-end category of the *homo faber*; however, it also appears physically defined, in that use is related to wear and depletion, as we will come to see. Still, it is never effectively dealt with in Arendt, and while I suspect a definition could be arrived at, it remains outside the scope of this paper. I instead trust for now in the reader’s socialized conception of use, insofar as we can conceptualize in our daily professional and personal interactions that one can be used or not used. If we accept that thought creates art, and not cognition, *and* we accept that the fabrication process has many definite differences from the art process, then we begin to see room for a process that creates art that is not fabrication. Yet she is correct to write, “what makes the thought a reality and fabricates things of thought is the same workmanship which [...] builds other durable things of the human artifice”.⁵⁵ Is it then possible for there to be a process of art creation that *is not* fabrication, and can that process be more inclusive and true to art than Arendt’s limited artwork concept?

In German, Arendt’s native tongue, the word for art, *Kunst*, also means fake or trick. Supposedly, the root of this double meaning is that art is an imitation of the world, and not the world itself.⁵⁶ It is proposed here that artwork is brought into the world through a fake fabrication process. Just as thinking is parasitic to the life process, so too, and

⁵² Ibid, 32.

⁵³ Ibid, 36.

⁵⁴ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 171.

⁵⁵ Ibid, 169.

⁵⁶ Likewise, we could consider the root of the English word and its connection to artifice, or the French word of the same spelling. Further, there exists the Spanish and Portuguese word “artificio” all of which connect art with trickery.

perhaps due to this parasitic nature, the process of *art*, which Arendt refers to as the “reification” of thought, is parasitic of the other processes.⁵⁷ *By parasitic I mean to denote that art latches onto processes, transforming these through this latching on, that the other processes play host to art.* Notice here that “other processes” is said and not fabrication. This is because once we are free of art being defined as the fabrication of thought the possibility is opened up not just of art-work, but art-labour, and art-action.

Art is not missing from Arendt’s work. It is only muddled. In “The Achievement of Herman Broch” she writes of the modern novel that the intention is “to involve the reader in something which is at least as much a process of thought as of artistic invention.”⁵⁸ It is, of course, unnamed, but here she is discussing *art*. It is given the title of artistic invention. Likewise in “Society and Culture”, Arendt writes despairingly of “those who no longer write books but fabricate them, who manufacture”.⁵⁹ Again, here is *art* under a different name. If art is fabricated, and books are works of art, as she claims in *The Human Condition*, then it is meaningless to say that they are no longer written but fabricated, for to write is to fabricate. Thus, if we accept her critique of cultural malaise, laid out in “Society and Culture”, then we can read her as conceiving of art as a distinct activity.

Likewise, her critique of the entertainment industry, which is not art-labor, is reliant on a difference between *art* and fabrication. For as the reader will recall, fabrication has a model which outlasts the product, and can be used to make more products. However, when the entertainment industry takes cultural products and creates “cheap reproductions” by altering them, whether they be “rewritten, condensed, popularized” or “transformed” the result is the “deterioration of culture”.⁶⁰ Again this is something the product of fabrication can withstand, but not the product of *art*.⁶¹

We can also see that, while she called *homo faber* the only sovereign human, the artist is not sovereign. As we saw before, art is judged, and it must be judged if it is not to be a mere hobby. Thus, unless you account for *art* you arrive with the difficulty of “the natural phenomena that she had originally sought to exclude from the very *possibility* of public appearance” dependent on it, else it become hobby.⁶² As such, we see here an understanding of art as public forced private, which for Arendt is the true reason for her distaste for the hobby.⁶³

⁵⁷ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 169.

⁵⁸ Hannah Arendt, “The Achievement of Hermann Broch,” *The Kenyon Review* 11, no. 3 (1949): 476.

⁵⁹ Hannah Arendt, “Society and Culture,” *Daedalus* 89, no. 2 (1960): 284.

⁶⁰ Hannah Arendt, “Culture and Politics,” in *Reflections on Literature and Culture*, ed. Susannah Young-ah Gottlieb, Meridian (Stanford, Calif.) (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007): 181-182.

⁶¹ I am not here making any claim towards the validity of her conception of the deterioration of culture. I have included this claim because it further enunciates the distinction I am attempting to show within her work.

⁶² Markell, “Arendt’s Work: On the Architecture of The Human Condition,” 32.

Patchen Markell has noticed much the same problem as that with which this paper deals. Markell's work is enlightening in how it addresses the differences between art and work, and thus *art* and fabrication. Markell's greatest contribution is in relation to Arendt's section "The Location of Human Activities", in which she states, "each human activity points to its proper location in the world".⁶⁴ In this section Arendt illustrates that all activities, by the nature of them, have a location in relation to a public/private dichotomy. She uses goodness as an example of this, as an extreme example, which "must go into absolute hiding and flee all appearance if it is not to be destroyed".⁶⁵ If this is true, then art must have a space in the world. Markell rightly notes that it would make no sense for art to be with the fabricated world in private, and notes that art not only must but already in Arendt *does* have its own zone:

Arendt would even give this zone of relation between work and action a name: with characteristic idiosyncrasy, she would call it "culture", using the term to refer neither to the old-fashioned anthropological idea of a coherent body of beliefs, practices, and meanings, nor to the idea of a "high" culture under threat from the rise of mass society, but simply to the activity of attending to, judging, and caring for the "things of the world" in their appearance.⁶⁶

In this way, if we are to conceptualize the private as the household, as Arendt frequently does in her Greek tradition, the area that is "art has become, in effect, the exterior face, visible in public".⁶⁷ We can understand the *place* of art within the public/private dichotomy as existing on the border between the two.

Still, however, we have not laid out exactly what *art* is. We are aware it is a parasitic process, which mimics or alters other processes so that their end result is art. Further, we know that this is the result of thinking, however, this process still requires a more in-depth examination. Arendt writes, "men of action and the lovers of results in sciences have never tired of pointing out how entirely 'useless' thought it—as useless, indeed, as the works of art it inspires."⁶⁸ This is our connection. It is the root source of thought, versus cognition, intelligence, or the demands of the life-process, that gives the result of the process its lack of utility. Thoughts, like the Good, are "unrelated to this world which man creates as his home on earth" and "if they were to constitute a man-made environment for the human animal, this would be a non-world".⁶⁹ Thus, when thought is

⁶³ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 127

⁶⁴ Ibid, 73.

⁶⁵ Ibid 75.

⁶⁶ Markell, "Arendt's Work: On the Architecture of The Human Condition," 32.

⁶⁷ Ibid, 34.

⁶⁸ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 170.

⁶⁹ Ibid, 168.

harnessed to an activity “a human capacity which by its very nature is world-open and communicative transcends and releases into the world a passionate intensity from its imprisonment within the self.”⁷⁰ Of course, the price of this reification is the dead letter, but what we must realize is that works “of art are thought things, but this does not prevent their being things.”⁷¹

Yet here we run into a problem. Art, while it may have its own location, does not have its own process in the same way labour, work, or action do. The sheer variety of what we call art proves this and it is not something Arendt overlooked. For, while she primarily insisted on artworks, and their involvement in fabrication, she admitted that even in this strict limitation fabrication as the art process had its limits: “Poetry, whose material is language, is perhaps the most and least worldly of the arts” for “a poem is less a [fabricated] thing than any other work of art”.⁷² As mentioned throughout this section, Arendt herself solves this problem with the claim that thought can replace cognition in the fabrication process, and that when this occurs, the end result is an art-work. What Arendt fails to see, is that there is no reason thought could not appropriate labour and action from their own sources and thus with them produce useless versions of them as art. And indeed, it will be shown that this does happen. As such, *art is the process by which thought appropriates and transforms either labour, work, or action so that it may reify itself as art in the world*. The telltale sign that *art* has occurred is if the labour, fabrication, or action does not fully meet the qualifications inherent to labour, work, or action.

Art and Art-Work

This section need not be lengthy as much of its subject matter has already been covered in the section devoted to the problems of fabrication. However, it is worthwhile to state that many of the issues inherent in fabrication are not necessarily as untrue of art-work as they are of art in general. For instance, the work of a classical sculptor or painter is much more likely to have something akin to a model than say the work of Chris Burden, whose performance, depending on the piece, is either art-labour or art-action rather than art-work.⁷³

It is best now to discuss what the relationship between use-objects and art-works is. For indeed, Arendt points out, everything “that is, must appear, and nothing can appear without a shape of its own; hence there is in fact no thing that does not transcend its

⁷⁰ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 168.

⁷¹ Ibid 169.

⁷² Ibid, 169-170.

⁷³ Burden is a twentieth century artist most famous for his 1970s performance art, such as “Shoot” where his assistant shot him in the arm, and “Trans-Fixed” where he was crucified on top of a Volkswagen Beetle. His later works shifted his focus to mechanized sculpture.

functional use.”⁷⁴ Yet it would be a mistake to mistake everything for art. Throughout her writing Arendt maintains the distinction between things, “whether it is a use object, a consumer good, or a work of art”.⁷⁵ These things have use, and therefore are not art. We can consider that they have a primary use, and function as art in a secondary use (or lack thereof). However, as the reader will recall from earlier in this discussion, art cannot be art until it is removed from its use, or if it does not have a use to begin with. Thus, while things may be displayed and thus be judged to have a beauty or an ugliness, they are not art. They may be made into art by becoming an artifact. Still, as long as they maintain a use, they are primarily a product of cognition, and any thought which has snuck in is secondary. However, the object may be art if cognition is secondary to thought, as Arendt writes, “an object is cultural to the extent that it can endure; its durability is the very opposite of functionality, which is the quality which makes it disappear again from the phenomenal world”.⁷⁶ Likewise, she insists that “we distinguish between use objects and art works, both of which possess a certain permanence ranging from ordinary durability to potential immortality in the case of works of art”.⁷⁷ Thus we cannot confuse all objects for art-works simply because they have a shape.

It is this potential immortality that makes art works “superior to all other things [...] they are the worldliest of all things”.⁷⁸ Here, however, we must give a word of caution. For this potential immortality is true for all art, but is only ensured by the physicality of art-works. That is to say, it is the fabrication process, not *art* that provides the durability that can translate to immortality. *Art* only provides the uselessness of the creation, it is up to the process that *art* appropriates to decide how the art is manifested. Art is made unique by its uselessness, and is made useless by the parasitic nature of *art*, and it is this uselessness when applied to things that makes their durability potentially immortal. This art will not be worn down by use, of which it does not have. We cannot presume the same of art-labour or art-action as neither of their processes result in durability. Thus, neither of their processes made useless will result in durability. However, despite the lack of durability, the uniqueness inherent in art⁷⁹ ensures that it has the potential to be immortal regardless. However, this immortality is similar to that of action, in that it relies on art-work to record its occurrence.

74 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 173.

75 Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought*, Enlarged ed. (New York: Penguin Books, 1978), 209.

76 Ibid, 208.

77 Ibid 209.

78 Ibid.

79 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 167

Art and Art-Labour

That *art* should find a way to transform labor into art is truly remarkable. For Arendt, “labour is the activity which corresponds to the biological process of the human body, whose spontaneous growth, metabolism, and eventual decay are bound to the vital necessities produced and fed into the life process by labour. The human condition of labour is life itself”.⁸⁰ Thus, that the life process could be coopted into art is surprising, and fairly, although not completely, new to these last two centuries in western culture. Yet, as these last two centuries have also seen the labourization of work, it should not be surprising that they have also seen the *art* of labour.⁸¹ Indeed, in a fascinating turn of events, we have witnessed the *art* of labourized work, such as when South African factory “workers decided to manufacture a car for Mandela, recasting themselves as artists”.⁸² In doing so, they committed an act without utility, insofar as Mandela had no need of a Mercedes, and engaged in the artistic “capacity to ignore the reality of the social inequality and nurture desires that lie beyond the concerns of the world”.⁸³ Without the concept of *art* that is buried within Arendt’s philosophy, such acts would shed “light on the limitations of Arendtian delineations”.⁸⁴

I do not believe that this concept of art is Arendt’s intended meaning, as indeed, she would not have included it within the section on fabrication, but would have devoted to it its own section. Instead, this concept is a reconstruction, a position that is Arendtian and derived from her work, but not explicitly what she meant to convey. This concept of *art* shows not the limitations, but the power of thought to coopt the worldly and create the useless. However, as with the factory we are still discussing fabrication, even if it is labourized fabrication, we had better look towards the labour process in its purity. These are the activities that are continuous, and thus mimic the life process, from which they do not escape.⁸⁵ However, if such an activity, that was as constant in its requirements as the life process were shown as useless to the life-process, done for beauty’s sake, then would it not be art-labour? To explore this, let us look to Pang’s article on Arendtian art applied to Hong Kong’s occupation art. Pang argues that it was a continuous and conscious art-labour when occupants transformed the public toilet, “a ‘non-place’—a space that cannot be defined as relational or historical or concerned with identity” into “a piece of installation art, demonstrating conviviality and serendipity” by cleaning it, and personalizing it, and “turning it from a standardized, cold, and transitory site into a cozy

80 Flynn, “The Places of the Work of Art in Arendt’s Philosophy,” 217.

81 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 125.

82 Selmeczi, “Art/work: Fabricating Freedom Or, Thinking about Instrumentality in Relation to Political Art”, 226.

83 Ibid.

84 Ibid.

85 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 102-103.

common room, filled with cleansers, lotions, face masks, small decorations, and sanitary napkins”.⁸⁶ We can conceptualize this art-labour found in the task of cleaning a bathroom, as never complete, and this seems intrinsic to the art. Thus, the art work is consumed as quickly as it is created, and is maintained only through repeated *art*.

Another example of such a phenomenon can also be drawn from the Hong Kong occupation arts. During the occupation roadside flower beds were farmed in and potholes were planted in. By doing this this art “disrupted the continuity of time and the order of the original site “naturalized” by the dominant ideology. They directly participated in the social transformation and each work could be seen as an end in itself”.⁸⁷ These “useless” crops and flowers are here directly presented as art, and the sight, or judgement, of them creates the same disruption between past and future that we have previously discussed as inherent in judgement. Yet due to their biological nature this is art for which the *art* must be continuous, thereby making it art-labour. Of course, it could now be claimed that the bathroom and the plants did not outlast the occupation, thereby bringing into question their status as art. However, while it is true that they did not outlast the occupation, they did indeed last long enough to be preserved in art-work, in so far as Pang’s work, as well as the other documentation is art-work, including this piece. To this extent, these art-labours have been deemed beautiful enough to preserve, and thus, have the potential immortality of all art.

To turn our gaze to more traditional art forms, let us consider dance. It is difficult to say whether dance belongs to art-labor or to art-action, however it clearly is not an art-work. Once it is complete, it has no physical permanence except what is created by other forms. For the time, I am tentatively placing it within art-labor. This categorization is primarily due to its rehearsed nature. The case could be made that each independent performance is an art-action, however, various dance recitals are not commonly talked about as being different in this manner. One might ask whether you have seen said dance, but not what specific recital you went to, unless the asker is wondering if they were at the same performance as you. Generally, it is not a discussion of difference. Likewise, the non-public rehearsals, that are surely necessary, might very well count as hobby. Thus, as in dancers’ relation to their body, and the requirements of physical training as well as learning the dance, we can likely conceptualize dance as another form of art-labor. Thus, even if one rejects “modern art”, we can still see art-labor in the traditional arts.

Art and Art-Action

We thus arrive at art-action, which may be the most elusive of the three to find examples of, as it is so uncommon that we find an action with no effect on the world that is still great enough to warrant the permanence of being preserved and documented in an

⁸⁶ Pang, “Arendt in Hong Kong: Occupy, Participatory Art, and Place-Making,”: 157-158.

⁸⁷ Pang, “Arendt in Hong Kong: Occupy, Participatory Art, and Place-Making,”: 158.

art-work. For safety's sake, we will restrict our discussion to the non-explicitly-political so that it is not confused with action. Indeed, Arendt already may be criticized for overly aestheticizing politics. We need not confuse the matter any further by choosing actions which may or may not be art-actions as well as political-actions. It is my suspicion that these two cannot interact, that there are useless actions which are beautiful, and that there are political actions that are great, which can then be made beautiful through being recorded in art-work. I suspect this because political actions seem to inherently have *use* in a way that thinking cannot.

Further, it is more difficult to say what is without utility in the realm of action. With labor it was simple enough to say that labour that did not sustain life was useless. With work, Arendt had already provided us with the most literal meaning of useless: the product produced was without utility. However, with action it becomes difficult to tell what exactly the use is, as it functions as an end in itself.⁸⁸ It may very well be that all which today is understood as art-action is actually action and is political, not artistic in nature. To this subject alone an entire paper could easily be devoted. However, to hazard an informed guess at what art-action may be, let us look at a few of the arts of Chris Burden. If we consider his two most famous art-actions, *Trans-Fixed* and *Shoot*, (the former of which involved him being crucified onto a Volkswagen and the latter of which had him shot by an assistant in the hand) we can see two brief things resembling action, reliant on observance, and yet so absurd that they may well be meaningless. Further, as they are interactions only between Burden and his assistants, it is difficult to tell whether this is sufficient action to be political action, especially as this action was explicitly planned. However, if performance art is not art-action, it is difficult to say exactly *what it is*. It is not tied in any way to the life process, nor does it mimic it. Likewise, nothing is produced by it, except by documentation of it, which is art-work, and not the action itself. Perhaps the absurdity of nailing oneself to a Volkswagen speaks itself to the difficulty of finding activities which could be art rather than action. Of course, it could be action, however, to distinguish the two requires more thought, and would certainly make an interesting subject for future research.

Summary of Our Consideration of Art

I have identified inherent contradictions between Arendt's conception of fabrication and her conception of art-work which she claims is the result of fabrication. I then rejected Markell's claim that the work chapter is not a chapter defining work but separating labour and action, leaving work in a flux between the two (between use-object and art). I then proposed that a process may exist other than fabrication that creates art. I explored the possibility that this process might be judgement. This exploration proved to have some use, as it appeared that some art may be created by an object being removed from utility and becoming an artifact. However, as we discovered that more than art could

⁸⁸Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 206.

be an artifact, this too proved inconclusive as defining of art. We have allowed in our thought that some art may be identified as art by becoming an artifact. We then followed the useless nature of art as defined by Arendt to its root in the nature of thought as opposed to logic or cognition. This resulted in the hypothesis that thought has its own process, one given the name of *art*, through which thought appropriates and changes the other processes until they appropriately produce things (art) as useless as thought itself. As thought and art appeared independent of labour, work, or action, we postulated that art may have its own realm, which Markell has already identified in Arendt as culture. In order to test our hypothesis about the existence of *art* we approached work, labour, and action in turn and applied their processes to existing art. We concluded that *art* can be perceived appropriating both labour and fabrication, and may appropriate action. The latter of these, it was decided, could not be claimed definitively without greater study than the scope of this paper could provide.

In doing so, we have not only problematized Arendt's conception of art, but have sought to explain why art effectively resisted both the subsumption under playfulness that has befallen all other meaningful but not income-creating activities, as well as why it has resisted labourization when fabrication has not. It is notable that a possible answer to why it resists fabrication is not only that it is a different process, one derived from thought instead of cognition, but that thought is such an inherently useless thing that when labour approaches art the result is not the labourization of art but the art-labour. This should not be overstated, as in our earlier discussion of labourization we saw that there does appear to be a form of labourized artwork in what Arendt identified as the entertainment industry. Perhaps, we can still claim that art resists labourization in so far as Arendt insists that the artist has avoided the Sophie's Choice of placing the worth/meaning of the act on 'making a living' or being subsumed under playfulness and the hobby. Either way, we can at this point assert with a level of confidence that (1) art is distinct from labourized work (2) art is distinct from work (3) this distinction from work allows it a level of safety from labourization, and that (4) it represents a valid and worthwhile source of meaningful activity against the sterile end of history that Arendt appears to see in the fulfillment of the wish to be free of labour at the moment of labour's victory over other parts of the human condition. In fact, we can see that we have hope this meaning can be resurrected and provide meaningful activity, though perhaps not economic activity else it risks labourization.

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