

Popular Culture and Wellbeing: Teamwork, Action, and Freedom

Sue Spaid

Abstract: *With this paper, I introduce the category “ameliorative practices,” which are collective actions that have wellbeing as their goal. Such practices include somaesthetics, everyday aesthetic practices, cultural heritage, particular kinds of popular culture, as well as ameliorative art practices. Before articulating how various forms of popular culture might also engender wellbeing, I explain why wellbeing is such a hot topic and survey philosophy’s current interest in this field, which dates from Aristotle’s notion of eudaimonia. In light of what philosophy and ameliorative art practices have taught us regarding the significance of wellbeing, it is increasingly obvious that certain forms of popular culture might also enhance well-being, a view that is either largely dismissed or has escaped philosophical inquiry. I end by assessing art historian Claire Bishop’s classic critique of art’s ameliorative claims and Grant Kester’s response.*

Keywords: *well-being, everyday aesthetics, artistic practice, aesthetics.*

1. Introduction

I first introduce the notion of ameliorative practices, which are generally collective actions enacted to achieve wellbeing. This vast category comprises somaesthetics, everyday aesthetic practices, cultural heritage, publicly-accessible popular culture, as well as ameliorative art practices. Since the notion of wellbeing described here is inspired by artists’ actions, I employ Joseph Beuys’ 1971 *Forest Action* as a case study to show step-by-step how ameliorative practices facilitate wellbeing. I next try to explain why wellbeing is currently such a hot topic and survey philosophy’s recent interest in this goal. Once a philosophical account of wellbeing is in place, I can demonstrate how popular culture arising from freely-performed, self concordant actions boost well-being. Finally, I revisit the debate concerning art’s ameliorative potential.

To hint at the relationship between popular culture and wellbeing, consider songs of rebellion, resistance, and reconciliation that have helped people (African slaves and Irish workers alike) across centuries endure their lack of freedom.¹ The same goes for material culture such as crafts and garments adorning indigenous people across the world, which not only enrich the senses, but affirm daily that society’s cultural achievements. One of this paper’s central claims is

¹ Check out this amazing list of contemporary songs of rebellion. <https://x96.com/life/25-songs-of-rebellion/>. Accessed 18 December 2018.

that cultural heritage and wellbeing are so entwined that colonizers' historical efforts to remove indigenous people's everyday objects and to outlaw their rituals, dress, and language have been first and foremost demoralization strategies.

Given that popular culture is largely consumer-oriented, it's hardly surprising that scholars focused on wellbeing have overlooked its ameliorative potential. Even more confusing, the media routinely markets candles, diets, juices, retreats, smart drugs, spas, edible supplements, and vitamins to consumers eager to experience, attain, or achieve wellbeing. Although I heartily encourage wellbeing as a goal, any attempt to procure it via consumer goods is specious, if not fallacious. Obviously, particular food choices (e.g. more vegetables/fruits, fewer sugars/fats) make people feel better than others, but as this paper argues, wellbeing is more complicated than feeling good or being happy. Unlike diseases readily cured by surgery or medicine, wellbeing results from concerted efforts over time that build capacity and affirm access, not curative or preventive substances meant to compensate deficits. Teamwork and actions, not cozy environments (e.g. Denmark's *hygge* fad), arouse wellbeing.

Here, the adjective ameliorative specifies practices meant to improve, amend, or restore participants' wellbeing. By contrast, Richard Shusterman, who follows pragmatist philosophers such as William James and John Dewey, employs meliorative, melioration, and even meliorism as intermediaries between "popular art's grave flaws and abuses" and its "merits and potential" (Shusterman, 2000a, p. 177). Actions that aspire toward wellbeing are procedural (make it work), not processual (mere happenings). As briefly noted, my brand of wellbeing is derived from eight decades of ameliorative art practices dating to Le Corbusier's *Le Pavillon de l'Esprit Nouveau* (1925). Related historical examples include: Hélio Oiticica, *Parangolé* (1965); Yoko Ono, *Mend Piece to the World* (1966); Lygia Clark, *Relational Objects* (1967); Robert Morris, Tate Gallery actions (1971); Joseph Beuys, *Forest Action* (1971); and Teresa Murak, *Procesja* (1974) (Spaid, 2017, p. 214).

By the 1990s, ameliorative art practices were no longer outré performance art. Esteemed as participatory art, such works were appreciated because they simultaneously challenged participants' comfort levels and invigorated them, as exemplified by: Rirkrit Tiravanija's *Untitled (Free)* (1992); Marie-Ange Guilleminot, *Emotion Conteneu* (1995) and *Paravent* (1997); Carsten Höller, *Flying Machine* (1996); Lee Mingwei, *Dining Project* (1998), *Sleeping Project* (2000), *Bodhi Tree Project* (2006), and *Mending Project* (2009); Hans Haacke, *De Bevölkerung* (since 2000); and Olafur Eliasson, *The Weather Project* (2003-2004) (Spaid, 2017, p. 214). Presented in the context of public exhibitions, these artworks gathered the multitudes to freely perform actions of their own accord and achieve something memorable together, decades before wellbeing became a "thing."

Just as not all painted walls are wall paintings and not every singer is recognized as a performer, not all ameliorative practices are art. And in fact, the vast majority of ameliorative practitioners perform said practices either as their profession (paid experts) or in order to improve their capabilities (paying students/volunteer strivers), rather than enact them *as* art *with* art audiences. Artists who originate ameliorative art practices tend to do so as *strivers*, rather than as experts bent on sharing their expertise. They take the opportunity of an exhibition to invite the public to try out, learn, or even permanently adopt particular skills. To distinguish artworks, I simply place "art" between "ameliorative" and "practices," since ameliorative practices' status as art is optional, rather than mandatory. Whether art or not, ameliorative practices share similar structures (teamwork), functions (capability-building actions), capabilities (survival skills/coping mechanisms/adaptive tools), and goals (wellbeing).

Although popular parlance tends to link happiness to wellbeing, these terms prove to be false friends, since neither secures the other. Wellbeing doesn't necessitate happiness, and vice versa. Positive self-assessments of wellbeing rather signal some combination of access and capacity, similar in affect to Hannah Arendt's notion of freedom, where the "I will" and "I can" coincide (Arendt, 2000, p. 451). I would argue that wellbeing reflects one's beliefs (more a disposition than a mood) that one can enact what one wants in the real world (as envisioned in the imagination, and of course within reason and guided by ethical conduct). On this level, wellbeing proves closer in effect to Foucault's notion of *power* or Arendt's concept of a *free action*. Wellbeing reflects one's sense of self-esteem owing to accomplishments coupled with the belief that it's possible to envision and enact ever more actions. I next describe the six-step process that artists and experts engaged in ameliorative practices deploy, over and over.

2. How Ameliorative Practices Engender Wellbeing

Visual artists, as well as theater directors and filmmakers, increasingly address wellbeing; some by employing related issues as content in their works and others by actually organizing people to remedy societal ills *as their art*, which is what I term ameliorative art practices. My research into ameliorative art practices indicates that they generally follow six action steps: "1) some actor-producer proposes an alternative mode of being, which 2) he/she publicly shares with others via an exhibition, workshop, and /or performance, 3) prompting actor-recipients to envision a better world that 4) compels them to implement specific actions, 5) indicative of their newfound capacities, skills, and values; thus 6) spawning greater cooperation and self-empowerment for all involved" (Spaid, 2017, p. 215).

Let's look at how these steps underlie Joseph Beuys' *Overcome Party Dictatorship Now*, December 1971: "1) Believing that urban forests are integral to city life, 2) Beuys invited students to sweep paths through the local forest [with brooms], 3) thus generating a public awareness concerning invaluable trees being demolished to make room for tennis courts, 4+5) inspiring artists and the general public either to initiate their own actions years later or to help Beuys plant 7000 *Eichen* in Kassel in 1982, simultaneously 6) augmenting everyone's wellbeing." As Beuys' 1973 *Save the Forest* poster declares for all to read, "Let the rich beware, we will not yield: Universal *wellbeing* [emphasis mine] is advancing" (Spaid, 2017, p. 215). My linking Beuys' healing action to wellbeing is not a just a matter of interpretation, yet he didn't necessarily envision this outcome when he earlier performed the action.

It's well documented that Beuys was highly influenced by Rudolf Steiner, who in 1894 published *Die Philosophie der Freiheit* (its English title is *The Philosophy of Spiritual Action*). In 1919, Steiner published *Toward Social Renewal: Rethinking the Basis of Society*, which introduced his Fundamental Social Law: "The *wellbeing* [emphasis mine] of a community of people working together will be the greater, the less the individual claims for himself the proceeds of his work, i.e., the more of these proceeds he makes over to his fellow-workers, the more his own needs are satisfied, not out of his own work but out of the work done by others" (Steiner, 1993). Steiner adds, "Every community must have a spiritual mission, and each individual must have the will to contribute towards the fulfilling of this mission." Echoing the spiritual dimension of Aristotle's *eudaimonia*, whose literal translation from Greek is good (from εὖς) spirit (from δαίμων), Steiner concluded this section with a proto-poem that some regard as his personal motto.

*The healthy social life is found
 When in the mirror of each human soul
 The whole community is shaped,
 And when in the community
 Lives the strength of each human soul* (Steiner, 1993)

Clearly, Beuys was channeling Steiner when he organized his 1971 forest action. And the rest is history. One soon recognizes that most ameliorative practices cycle through the above action steps, each with a particular function that generates some capability that enhances wellbeing. Either the cycle is repeated or it snow-balls into something unimaginable. By now, the relationship (→) between each action's function and its particular capability begins to emerge: 1) agency → doubt, 2) participation → knowledge sharing, 3) envisioning together → re-imagine alternative possibilities, 4) DIWO ethos (Do It With Others) → strategize, fundraise, plan with others, 5) action → implementation/fulfillment, and 6) self-empowerment/autarky (repeat). Artists carrying out ameliorative art practices double as “agents of perceptual change,” since such procedures reorient people's preconceptions and perspectives (Spaid, 2002).

What interests me here is the way actions originally meant as healing acts incidentally facilitate survival skills. As we shall see, Kevin Melchionne recognizes such fringe-benefits as the “valuable compensatory role” of everyday aesthetic practices (Melchionne, 2014). This rarely goes the other way around, since one's acquiring survival skills doesn't necessarily foster wellbeing. For example, being an expert marksman rarely offers “compensatory values,” since superior skills don't necessarily assuage whatever fears/concerns drive people to require self-protection. I imagine, however, that those who learn how to *envision together* also develop a sense of belonging. Those who engage *teamwork* learn to trust others. Those who achieve *wellbeing* gain confidence. Those who experience *endurance* recognize the importance of seeing goals through to completion. Those who know how to *modify/moderate* goals are equipped to conserve energy. Those who *view* their glasses as half full/empty transform their futures into opportunities/losses. Those who *treat problems as opportunities for solutions* keep moving.

Since somaesthetics is primarily focused on individual achievements, rather than teamwork, one might argue that it cannot foster the notion of wellbeing described here. Being agency-oriented, somaesthetics tends to address subjects in the process of identifying, adopting, and cultivating particular skills that they value for their ameliorative outcomes. Problem is, somaesthetics is typically considered individualistic, rather than community-oriented, as Steiner and Beuys advised. A more accurate account, however, frames somaesthetics as teamwork, since it typically involves strivers working alongside some expert, all of whom stand to influence each other, similar in effect to Hegel's master-slave narrative, such that slaves mold the master, and vice versa. This analogy addresses the mutually-beneficial relationship between the master and the slave, not that of the master-slave and the expert-student.

One of the most important features of ameliorative practices is the way actor-producers recruit and inspire actor-recipients (audience members/participants) to perform particular actions that later inspire former participants to attempt actions in the company of new recruits. In this respect, ameliorative practices are not only generative, since actions beget further actions; but they extend beyond practitioners' bodies to reach other human bodies. One imagines somaesthetics experts playing similar roles when they lead participants to perform actions that they neither imagined nor dreamed of doing. Sometimes somaesthetic exercises even inspire participants to become expert leaders who eventually recruit more participants.

As briefly noted, one point that differentiates ameliorative art practices from most ameliorative practices is that artists typically recruit audiences to perform tasks about which they know little. Being strivers, artists are keen to adopt whatever skills said actions require. Since artists carrying out ameliorative art practices are in no position to share their nonexistent expertise, they must have something entirely different in mind. They either intend to try out healing exercises or instigate self-discovery. In initiating such actions, ameliorative art practitioners aim to strengthen the bonds between human beings with the view that reinforcing such bonds generates trust, openness, confidence, and most certainly, greater capacity and access. Moreover, artists who enact ameliorative art practices with people, rather than on behalf of degraded environments, as Beuys and eco-artists have done; reinforce the view that nature includes human beings, thus eliminating the “nature-culture divide.”

Although I formulated these six steps as a result of my having experienced ameliorative art practices over three decades, my description of how participants achieve wellbeing incidentally squares with both Shusterman’s characterizing somaesthetic practitioners as constantly pushing themselves to improve their capabilities and positive psychologist Martin Seligman’s PERMA model for wellbeing (positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning and purpose, and accomplishment) (Seligman, 2017). If wellbeing is grounded in accomplishment, as ameliorative practices suggest, then people who lose weight feel “great” not because they feel more attractive or are lighter on their feet, as the media purports; but because accomplishments that prompt self-esteem prompt wellbeing. This also explains why it’s erroneous to associate wellbeing with spa treatments, where participants are remarkably passive. I next explore why wellbeing is currently so topical.

3. When Wellbeing Became a “Thing”

Why has wellbeing become such a hot topic? One explanation is that the more freedoms people enjoy, whose fluctuations Gallup polls regularly; the more they expect to attain wellbeing. Every other year, Gallup interviewers ask about 1000 people from each of 140 countries one simple question, “In your country, are you satisfied with your freedom to choose what you do with your life?” In 2017, a record-breaking 80% of the world resounded affirmatively, the highest rate ever recorded in more than a decade of tracking freedom (Clifton, 2018). Uzbekistan and Cambodia topped this list at one and two, so wealth is clearly not the main factor. Unsurprisingly, all five Nordic nations are in the top eleven (>93% satisfaction rates), whose four other members are United Arab Emirates, Canada, New Zealand, and Costa Rica. I would argue that freedom is the cornerstone of wellbeing. And in fact, philosopher Ingrid Robeyns explores this relationship in her new book *Wellbeing, Freedom and Social Justice: The Capability Approach Re-Examined*, where freedom is gauged by people’s capabilities, what Martha Nussbaum defines as “what people are actually able to do and be” (Robeyn, 2017, p. 93). Robeyn further distinguishes achieved wellbeing (functionings), whereby one leads a flourishing life worth living; and the freedom to achieve wellbeing (capabilities). This approach slightly veers from mine, whose functions are capability-building actions steps that stimulate wellbeing (Robeyn, 2017, p. 26).

An alternative explanation is that people’s appetites for wellbeing increase whenever they feel particularly anxious about their future. In fact, Gallup’s 2017 “Negative Experience Index” indicates that “the world tilted more negative than it has in the past decade,” due to several nations experiencing greater discord, leaving their citizens to report upticks in “stress, anger, sadness, physical pain, and worry” (Ray, 2018). It’s important to note that only South Sudan

sits on both lists (“Least Satisfied with Freedom Worldwide” and “Highest Negative Experience Index Worldwide”), which indicates that one’s feeling a lack of freedom doesn’t always correlate with unhappiness, and vice versa. If people who report being unhappy sometimes feel free, the opposite must be true; people who are unsatisfied with their freedom also report happiness, which demonstrates this disconnect. This latter group likely represents the pool of people striving for wellbeing, since I imagine that it takes a certain amount of happiness to be able to do something about one’s sense of ill-being. By contrast, I worry that chronic depression prevents unhappy people from taking action. I return to the differences between happiness and wellbeing a bit later. But I remind the reader that this paper concerns wellbeing, and not happiness; so if you find them synonymous, my view is not nullified.

Yet another explanation for the sudden interest in wellbeing is that even as violent crime rates fall and the global economy booms, communities across the world experience ever more environmental degradation, planetary resource exploitation, and senseless hate crimes, which leaves people feeling increasingly vulnerable. Perhaps anxiety is actually aggravated by some historically novel combination of greater economic comfort across the board and falling precariousness. Until rather recently, extreme precariousness was the norm for most. As more and more people experience greater comfort, anxieties about deprivation are sure to rise.

I sometimes joke that Belgium is the “wellbeing capital” of the world, since everything seems marketed in terms of wellbeing. Even newspapers praise its importance. Its prevalence suggests that it remains out of reach for those yearning to achieve it. A little “history lesson” can explain this national obsession. On the occasion of the Battle of Waterloo’s bicentennial, journalist Pierre Havaux explained how Belgium’s multi-lingual inhabitants unified once they gained sovereignty in 1830: “The Belgian soul exists, like no other. It is recognizable by its taste in proportion and craft, individualism, the spirit of association, and the love of a comfortable life” (Havaux, 2015, p. 48). While the French bore the mantle of “Liberté, égalité, et fraternité,” their neighbors to the northeast embraced “Goût, Individualisme, et Confort,” thus securing happy people. Problem is, these values can end up displacing wellbeing, if individual will overrides the whole community. (Note: Belgium’s actual national motto is “L’union fait la force (Einigkeit macht stark)” *not* “Goût, Individualisme, et Confort.”) Suffice it to say, wellbeing becomes a “thing” whenever people’s deflated sense of capacity and/or access inspires them to do something novel that augments both. I next survey philosophy’s recent interest in this topic.

4. Philosophy’s Focus on Wellbeing

One must admit, however, that human beings’ aspiration for wellbeing is as old as philosophy itself, recalling Aristotle’s notion of *eudaimonia* (human flourishing/prosperity). He defined *eudaimonia* as “doing and living well” and considered it more comprehensive (God-inspired) than mere mortal happiness (Aristotle, 1980). When asked in 1935 how people might better their world, Ludwig Wittgenstein took a cue from fellow Austrian Steiner and stressed the individual’s role in shaping his/her community: “Just improve yourself; that is the only thing you can do to better the world” (Monk, 1991, p. 213). This suggests that those who manage to change themselves generate transformations across the board and set in motion a new series of actions that are generative like sound waves. Artist Yoko Ono’s *Mend Piece* (1966) follows a similar mantra, though hers flows in the other direction, from world to self: “When you go through the process of mending, you mend something inside your soul as well.”

Nearly sixty years after Wittgenstein, Shusterman revitalized *eudaimonia* when he wrote: “Philosophy aims at right action, for which we need not only knowledge and self-knowledge, but also effective will. As embodied creatures, we can act only through the body, so our power of volition, the ability to act as we will to act depends on somatic efficacy” (Shusterman, 2000b, p. 168.). In this context, “somatic efficacy” is effectively what I earlier identified as capacity and access, whose relationship to the body is implicit in my case, though explicit in his. He continues, “this synthesis of meliorism with experimental, pluralist individualism expresses the pragmatic spirit. So does the simpler, ordinary ways we live, coupled nonetheless with a desire to live better.” (Shusterman, 2000b, p. 215). Here, Shusterman captures both the striving toward (“a desire to live better”) and teamwork (“pluralist individualism”) that typically kindle wellbeing.

It may seem odd that Shusterman mentions “wellbeing” only three times in *Pragmatist Aesthetics* (1992), and most notably in the last chapter, which launched somaesthetics. Consider, however, that eight years later, “wellbeing” appears on only five pages of *Bowling Alone* (2000), sociologist Robert Putnam’s scathing indictment of the impact of declining societal participation on democracy (Shusterman, 2000a, pp. 261, 268, and 271). We can only surmise that wellbeing was not yet a “thing.” Shusterman stresses melioration, setting personal goals, and attaining ever higher levels of distinctions of achievement and fulfillment, in fields as diverse as martial arts, meditative practices, and cosmetology, yet barely mentions wellbeing, perhaps because it’s implicit in the “hedonic highs” he commends his readers for achieving (Paquay and Spaid, 2016, pp. 66-67). Every breakthrough to a new level incidentally confirms participants’ greater access and increased capacity.

Shusterman does, however, point out Aristotle’s ranking practical action (*praxis*) over poetic activity (*poiēsis*), since the former is “derive[d] from the agent’s inner character and reciprocally helps shape it. While art’s making has its end outside itself and its maker (its end and value being in the object made), action has its end both in itself and in its agent, who is affected by how he acts, though allegedly not by what he makes.” (Shusterman, 2000a, pp. 53-54). This point not only echoes Ono and Wittgenstein’s emphasizing the significance of ameliorating the self, but is reiterated by Melchionne who recognizes the “shift from external to internal factors or, in other words, how dispositions, inner resources, and coping tendencies support wellbeing” (Melchionne, 2014).

To my lights, the specifically philosophical interest in wellbeing has largely been developed by aestheticians working in everyday esthetics, whose ascent coincided with the rise of participatory art, public engagement practices, and socially-engaged art. Melchionne defines everyday esthetics as “the aspects of our lives marked by widely shared, daily routines or patterns to which we tend to impart an esthetic character” (Melchionne, 2013). It is the very *ordinariness* of the kinds of activities that everyday aestheticians muse over (“home-cooked meals, dining rituals, peeling oranges, packaging leftovers, packing picnics, garden[ing], homemade beer, and Japanese Tea Ceremonies”) that warrants their insistence that these kinds of activities exhibit invaluable esthetic properties, because they enhance wellbeing (Paquay and Spaid, 2016, p. 63).

In fact, Melchionne’s succinct abstract for his paper “The Point of Everyday Aesthetics” employs only eight words: “the point of everyday esthetic activity is wellbeing” (Melchionne, 2014). He goes so far as to argue that everyday esthetic activities have distinctive features that make them better suited for promoting subjective wellbeing than even the fine arts, presumably because everyday esthetic activities are readily available, comport to users’ skills and interests, and “are practiced by nearly all as a matter of everyday life” (Melchionne, 2014). He makes a second, even more important point: “Everyday esthetic practices *of our own design* [emphasis

mine] stand a much better chance of influencing wellbeing than the occasional encounter of high or popular art, such as attending museums or concerts from time to time. Fine art activities are intermittent for all but the makers and some attendant professionals.” Being “of our own design,” everyday aesthetic practices double as expressions of freedom, since they prove our capacity to enact something of value, which is why they stand a “much better chance of influencing wellbeing” than culture created by others, though selected and/or purchased by us. This coheres with both my initial claim that actions indicative of access and capacity, not lifestyle purchases, enhance wellbeing; and Shusterman’s privileging *praxis* over *poiēsis*.

I imagine that most people engaged in somaesthetic practices identify wellbeing as more or less a given, a veritable by-product of the “hedonic treadmill.” Moreover, when we aim too high, we risk *illbeing*. As Melchionne warns, “We may rise to euphoria or sink to depression because of the outcomes of our endeavors, but we typically adapt to changes in circumstances so that good and bad emotions eventually run their course....[Still], self-concordant activities often play a valuable compensatory role in our inevitably difficult lives” (Melchionne, 2014). It’s relevant that he emphasizes both “self-concordant activities” and “valuable compensatory roles,” since the former indicates capacity and access, while the latter suggests amelioration. Exemplary of their compensatory roles, he notes that they reduce “anxiety and depression while increasing focus and efficacy. In turn, the improved mood achieved through activity may help individuals face the larger challenges in their lives” (Melchionne, 2014). This is characteristic of the way healing acts occasion survival skills, an attribute of ameliorative practices discussed in Section II.

The view advocated here veers slightly from that of Melchionne, who doesn’t necessarily associate wellbeing with ameliorative outcomes. For him, wellbeing arises when individuals: “1) enjoy a steady flow of positive feelings, 2) have few negative ones, 3) are satisfied in their main pursuits, such as work and relationships; and 4) give their lives overall positive evaluations. The high incidence of positive emotion, low negative emotion, satisfaction in key domain, and positive overall assessments are four distinct factors in wellbeing.” Melchionne tends to use wellbeing and happiness interchangeably: “I use them pretty much interchangeably and don’t worry about it too much” (Melchionne, 2017). For me, wellbeing reflects people’s beliefs (more an attitude than a mood) about their personal potential (capacity) and what they deem possible (access), which is why wellbeing coheres better with freedom than happiness.

Melchionne associates everyday aesthetics with five areas: “food, wardrobe, dwelling, conviviality, and going out (running errands or commuting)” (Melchionne, 2014). Although songs of rebellion and traditional dress, mentioned at this paper’s onset, prove a fit; he likely excludes popular culture and exercises familiar to somaesthetics from everyday aesthetics. By now, however, it should be clear that all three are ameliorative practices, since they have wellbeing as their goal. He qualifies everyday aesthetic activities as:

common but unimportant while, by contrast, works in the fine arts merit our attention because they reflect skill and insight. ...By contrast, most everyday aesthetic activities do not inspire critical reflection or arthistorical study. Rarely do they reflect great skill or insight. They are pursued in private and, when there is a public conversation, it is largely consumerist (Melchionne, 2014).

These points apply equally to somaesthetic practices and popular culture alike.

Melchionne remarks that only when everyday aesthetic practices are displayed in a fine art context do they receive the recognition they deserve. This recalls the current debate roiling

France, where a recent government report recommends the return of all African treasures obtained via colonialism to their nations of origin. Instead of claiming that everyday aesthetic practices tend to fall under the radar until museums shine a light on them, I would counter that everyday aesthetic practices merit our attention when they garner ameliorative outcomes, and thus enhance wellbeing. With this in mind, perhaps the best reason to reconstitute objects to nations whose ancestors created them is that it is in this context that their ameliorative potential shines brightest. In other nations' museums, they are objects whose significance reflects institutional valorization, if not the glory of past conquests.

In the presence of those whose ancestors fabricated them, such objects both affirm daily that society's rich cultural heritage and manifest its autonomy. Nicholas Thomas, Director of Cambridge's Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, adds, "[I]t is not imaginable that peoples would surrender their heritage if they were *truly free* [emphasis mine] to retain it. Yet material culture was not always, for everyone 'heritage'" (Hunt, Dorgeloh, and Thomas, 2018). In blaming Africans for letting colonizers buy/steal/take their material culture on their lack of freedom, he disregards the firepower imbalance. His suggestion that the Africans didn't realize the value of what they let go begs the question: "Who gets to decide which material culture ranks as heritage?" and circles back to Melchionne's point about museums. Finally, Melchionne remarks that material culture arising from everyday aesthetic practices is by definition "common and unimportant," so it's rather disingenuous for Thomas to claim that Africans didn't recognize "heritage." He knows full well that the transformation of material culture into cultural heritage is a sluggish procedure. Such attributes are not immediately obvious to anyone, whether *free* or oppressed.

The clearest example of a nation deploying material culture to weave its national identity in terms of cultural heritage is the Museo Nacional de Antropología, built in 1963 in Mexico City (Vackimes, 2001, p. 30). Rather than merely shine a light on practices previously underappreciated, MNA inspires national pride in Mexico's rich history and warrants international admiration. Displace people from their material culture, and you strip them of any possibility for wellbeing, since they lose access to their history, cultural heritage, creative talent, and ingenuity. No wonder Cameroonian Prince Kum'a Ndumbe III finds the trafficking in African art so disconcerting: "This is not about the return of African art. When someone's stolen your soul, it's very difficult to *survive* [emphasis mine] as a people" (Nayeri, 2018). I have little doubt that the US government's historical efforts to limit Native Americans' ability to engage everyday aesthetic practices (crafts, rituals, ways of life) was first and foremost a strategy to defuse their capabilities, thus eroding their wellbeing (fomenting *demoralization*) and neutralizing their will. Cultural heritage exports can be a form of psychological warfare, not unlike strategies meant to destroy fighters' morales in hopes that they surrender, give up or runaway, rather than engage in physical warfare. I next develop the relationship between popular culture and wellbeing

5. Popular Culture's Ameliorative Potential

Given the consumerist nature of much of what is marketed as popular culture, as well as the fact that it is typically consumed in private by individuals who aren't expected to exert much effort, it's hardly surprising that aestheticians have overlooked the potential for popular culture to enhance wellbeing. Here, I lump sports and leisure in with popular culture, since town governments often have Sports, Culture and Leisure Departments, presumably because they are linked to community wellbeing. As for such activities' compensatory roles, consider the way

singing along with the radio or in a choir enhances breathing, joining a street protest promotes identity, attending rock concerts releases steam, dancing in a nightclub expends extra energy, meditating while waiting proves relaxing, practicing martial arts with experts enhances self-esteem, following yoga/pilates/T'ai chi classes builds core strength, exercising/doing sports burns calories, taking pit stops/breaks helps people refocus, while attending a coffee klatch/tea party generates feelings of connection, especially when a book read jointly is under discussion.

Applying Melchionne's prescription for everyday aesthetic practices as common and ordinary, I imagine community members participating in long-term, low-key, yet truly rewarding activities, otherwise said programs wouldn't survive year after year. Consider that Robert Putnam's millennial treatise *Bowling Alone* not only linked people's no longer participating in group activities to their increasing disconnection from family and friends, but it also claimed that democracy was in jeopardy. Years since, dozens of papers and books have challenged his assessment. Although the goal here is self-improvement, rather than mastery, let alone training for the Olympics or a college scholarship; I imagine some participants occasionally becoming experts. With community-oriented popular culture, participants need not assess some cultural event's accessibility, primarily because accessibility is presumed (typically affordable and publicly accessible), which makes it closer in kind to everyday aesthetic practices than somaesthetic practices, which tend to segregate according to skill levels. Being open to everybody, popular culture avails access and capacity in spades, yet it must require some effort for participants to achieve wellbeing.

Consider carnival parades like Mardi Gras in New Orleans, US; Le Carneval de Binche en Belgique; or Carnaval de Trinité-et-Tobago. One might not know anything about these different, though related parades, their history, or traditions underlying their vastly different costumes and rituals/festivities, let alone speak their participants' languages; but one doesn't imagine them to be inaccessible, which is why they qualify as popular culture (Spaid, 2018). Most people consume parades as bystanders, not as participants, yet parade watchers also carry out "self-concordant" activities. After all, they have had to organize their families/friends to arrive on time and everyone has walked from either the public transport or a nearby parking lot. Presumably, group members will either stay for local activities after the parade or return home for some pre-arranged get-together such as a family dinner. I imagine many more slipping back into their daily routines, which may or may not qualify as everyday aesthetic activities; as they prepare for their next day's school, work, or day off.

Not all candidates for popular culture offer ameliorative outcomes, but many do. Consider outdoor events such as fireworks, a sea of protestors sporting pink pussy cat hats, or Burning Man. Even though these lack immediately-obvious compensatory roles, participants routinely select these events for their ameliorative outcomes. Although the chemical toxicity of fireworks is quite worrisome, plenty of people find the loud booms and crackling noises relaxing (youtube's firework sound tracks suggest this) accompanied as they are by the awesomeness of massive sprawls of spirals and sprays of stars across the night sky. In this context, firework watchers are on par with parade goers, who've made a physical effort to attend some community-wide event, and are thus self-concordant consumers. By contrast, greeting the wave of like-minded supporters of women's rights connects protestors to strangers in ways that attending a symphony or even a rock concert wouldn't. Past Burning Man participants routinely comment that they really liked purchasing goods with their labor, rather than money/credit, since it lends everybody a special role in this temporary tent city.

By contrast, consider indoor activities that are not necessarily publicly accessible, but are widely accessible, such as watching stand-up comedy, being a die-hard band groupie, or binge-watching a television series; whereby repeat actions indicate participants' capacity for appreciation. As compared to singing, protesting, dancing, meditating, martial arts, doing pilates, or discussing books; laughing at comedians, attending several gigs each month, and staring at a screen for hours on end is comparatively passive and individualistic in scope. Although it may require some amount of scheduling management to perform such self-concordant actions, teamwork seems to play a greater role for those performers, whose success at engaging their audiences necessitates collective action (comedians, musicians, and actors working alongside respective stage crews).

Laughter is widely considered “the best medicine,” given its scientifically-proven benefits (lowers blood pressure, reduces stress hormones, works abs, improves cardiac health, boosts T-cells, triggers release of endorphins, and produces a general sense of wellbeing).² One's attending either a comedy show or a funny film hardly guarantees laughter. If or when one does laugh, laughing alongside others generates feelings of belonging that often augment one's overall enjoyment, transforming public laughter into a shared exercise. Like bowling alone, laughing alone indicates polarities. One suddenly feels superior to those who “don't get it” or inferior to the mob whose stares suggest that only an idiot would consider this hilarious.

Similarly, seeing oneself as a band groupie not only provides a sense of belonging, but groupies exhibit dependability and commitment, making them vital team players on par with second string athletes who mostly watch during matches. Elsewhere, I've argued that Nirvana's original fans eventually decided the band sucked because they felt shame once they realized the music's universal, rather than uniquely Seattle, appeal (Spaid 2018). I now wonder whether Nirvana's fans rather lost their sense of belonging once their access no longer seemed special. By contrast, those who endure binge-watching multiple seasons (60+ hours) of *The Wire*, *Breaking Bad*, or the *Americans* not only emotionally engage with complicated characters, but earn the right to retain their access, and most likely forever. All of these actions are generative, in the sense that one actively recruits people to check out those comedians, bands, and TV series one appreciates.

It thus seems that the more users double as doers, the more actions associated with popular culture trigger wellbeing. As Three Day Weekend founder and artist Dave Muller observed over two decades ago, “the alternative is the alternative to doing nothing” (Spaid 1998). The key component is thus *doing something meaningful*, which of course begs the question, “Which activities prove meaningful?” Consider bands like Fela Kuti and his Africa 70 (*Confusion*, 1975) or Queen, who spontaneously performed “Eeee ooo” at LiveAid in 1985. By engaging their fans in “call and response” schemes, they knowingly transformed listeners into necessary doers. In order to discover this, one must stop being a bystander, and “just do it.” I next review several recent criticisms of art's ameliorative potential, which I imagine apply to all practices whose aims are ameliorative.

6. Concluding Remarks: Fears, Foes, and Friends of Art's Ameliorative Potential

A full decade before I developed the notion of ameliorative art practices (AAPs), art historian Claire Bishop railed against artworks aiming for ameliorative outcomes. It is unlikely that the

² I thank an anonymous reviewer for suggesting that I consider stand-up comedy. This website lists laughter's benefits: <http://mentalfloss.com/article/539632/scientific-benefits-having-laugh> Accessed 18 February 2019.

above artists whose works I characterize as ameliorative necessarily intended such outcomes. What makes such works ameliorative is that they enhance wellbeing, so it is a property whose effect might be anticipated, though not realized until much later. Even Beuys created his poster two years after his forest action, so he too likely grasped this action's particular outcome in hindsight. Although most of the examples Bishop cites are collaborative and relational, they primarily reflect social situations, as opposed to actions. She recognizes this, since one of her main bones of contention is their focus on discourse, whose immateriality she finds aesthetically insubstantial. By contrast, ameliorative practices demand material settings and necessitate action.

Bishop's 2006 *Artforum* exposé mentions only two artists who have influenced my understanding of the relationship between AAPs and wellbeing, so her criticisms don't necessarily apply here. She names Tiravanija in passing and credits Höller for not making artistic decisions that are motivated by ethical considerations, but this shouldn't be too surprising since nowhere does this paper address ethics. Thus far, aesthetic issues have been front and center: the importance of having access to one's "heritage;" the way somaesthetic practices, everyday aesthetic practices, and popular culture enable people to freely participate in actions with aesthetic import; and finally the significance of artistic practices that challenge and reward participants. These enhance capacity, while affirming access.

Bishop frames art that is meant to heal in agonistic terms, precisely because she considers such works driven more by ethical than aesthetic considerations. She claims that the best collaborative practices need to be thought of in terms other than their *ameliorative* consequences. She adds, "The ethical imperative finds support in most of the theoretical writing on art that collaborates with 'real' people.... Emphasis is shifted away from the disruptive *specificity* of a given work and onto a *generalized* set of moral precepts" (Bishop, 2006). Following Rancière, she emphasizes, "[T]he aesthetic is the ability to think contradiction: the productive contradiction of art's relationship to social change, characterized precisely by the tension between faith in art's autonomy and belief in art as inextricably bound to the promise of a *better world to come* [emphasis mine]. For Rancière, the aesthetics doesn't need to be sacrificed at the altar of social change, as it already inherently contains the ameliorative promise" (Bishop, 2006). But as noted above, the artwork's autonomy (its end and value residing outside the maker and in the object) originally inspired Shusterman to privilege *praxis* over *poiēsis*.

I actually share many of Bishop's criticism of what passed for collaborative art in the early aughties, most specifically their overly social dimension, focus on public discourse as artistic practice, immateriality, moralizing goody two-shoe attitudes, and lack of radical proposals. However, I rather admire artists who carry out projects with the view to express freedom, which alters participants' well-being and inevitably changes the world. Such impressive artworks demonstrate why works rejected by Bishop leave her feeling dissatisfied. Moreover, AAPs point to the relevant features of everyday aesthetic practices, somaesthetic practices, and popular culture that are most likely to enhance wellbeing.

At the very moment when artists were trying to find ways to bridge antinomies, Bishop was encouraging the "contradictory pull between autonomy and social intervention... It is to this art—however uncomfortable, exploitative, or confusing it may first appear—that we must turn for an alternative to the well intentioned homilies that today pass for critical discourse on social collaboration" (Bishop, 2006). She claims that these kinds of works push us toward a Platonic regime in which art is valued for its *truthfulness and educational efficacy* [emphasis mine] rather than for inviting us—as *Dogville* did—to confront darker, more painfully complicated

considerations of our predicament” (Bishop, 2006).

Bishop calls for “greater darkness” in the arts, yet she fails to distinguish between live actions and virtual pictures. This matters of course, since numerous artists have explored live actions that are far darker than any film. Recall Marco Evaristti, who in 2000 invited people to turn on ten blenders housing gold fish, while Santiago Sierra has paid human beings to do all manner of inhuman things, including sitting in cardboard boxes for eight hours, bleaching their black hair blond, tattooing a horizontal line across their backs, and lying in a box in a car trunk.

Three months after Bishop fired her salvo, Grant Kester struck back, noting that the:

normalization of paranoid knowing as a model for creative intellectual practice has entailed ‘a certain disarticulation, disavowal, and misrecognition of other ways of knowing, ways less oriented around suspicion’. Sedgwick juxtaposes paranoid knowing (in which ‘exposure in and of itself is assigned a crucial operative power’) with reparative knowing, which is driven by the desire to ameliorate [emphasis mine] or give pleasure. As she argues, this reparative attitude is intolerable to the paranoid, who views any attempt to work productively within a given system of meaning as unforgivably naive and complicit; a belief authorized by the paranoid’s ‘contemptuous assumption that the one thing lacking for global revolution, explosion of gender roles, or whatever, is people’s (that is, other people’s) having the painful effects of their oppression, poverty, or deludedness sufficiently exacerbated to make the pain conscious... and intolerable’ (Kester, 2006).

At first glance, it looks like Kester is typecasting Bishop and Rancière as paranoid. To my lights, he rather means to relay gender theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s distinction between paranoid knowing and reparative knowing, which “is driven by the desire to ameliorate or give pleasure.” Moreover, the “reparative attitude is intolerable to the paranoid,” who tends to blame the lack of revolutionary progress/advancement on other people’s inability to see beyond some sense of *illbeing*. If “paranoids” really do belittle others’ pain, as Sedgwick suggests, then nothing seems more relevant than participants allied with somaesthetics, everyday aesthetics, ameliorative art, and even popular culture. Anything that people can do to get others to engage in activities that require effort, are self-concordant, and compensatory sounds exciting. As one American-TV PSA (“public service announcement”) used to say, “Don’t get under a rock, Get into action!”

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