What Is Art?

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Oil on canvas, 224 × 544 cm.
What is art, and why should we care?

In every large town enormous buildings are erected for museums, academies, conservatoires, dramatic schools, and for performances and concerts. Hundreds of thousands of workmen—carpenters, masons, painters, joiners, paperhangers, tailors, hairdressers, jewelers, molders, type-setters—spend their whole lives in hard labor to satisfy the demands of art, so that hardly any other department of human activity, except the military, consumes so much energy as this.

Not only is enormous labor spent on this activity, but in it, as in war, the very lives of men are sacrificed. Hundreds of thousands of people devote their lives from childhood to learning to twirl their legs rapidly (dancers), or to touch notes and strings very rapidly (musicians), or to draw with paint and represent what they see (artists), or to turn every phrase inside out and find a rhyme to every word. And these people, often very kind and clever, and capable of all sorts of useful labor, grow savage over their specialized and stupefying occupations, and become one-sided and self-complacent specialists, dull to all the serious phenomena of life, and skilful only at rapidly twisting their legs, their tongues, or their fingers.

Tolstoy, What Is Art? (1897), trans. Aylmer Maude, p. 2
• So in short, we should care because of the enormous amount of labour that goes into art. We should know what it is, that we can know whether it matters.

• We should also know what it is to prevent ourselves being hoodwinked by things that purport to be art, and which claim the financial and legal resources we have allocated to art, but which in fact are not art.

• And, obversely, so as not to be hoodwinked into not seeing art when it’s there!
Part I

Historical answers to the question
“What is art?” 

Ilya Repin, The Writer Leo Tolstoy in His Study (1891). Oil on canvas, 64 × 90 cm.
Pre-history of the question, ‘what is art?’

• Very few pre-twentieth-century philosophers have paid much mind to art as a unified and discrete part of life.
  • Plato talks about technê (profession? art? craft? skill?), especially in Books III and X of the Republic. But he doesn’t worry himself with the definition of the concept.
  • Aristotle talks about tragedy as a genre in the Poetics, but not about art as a whole.
  • Baumgarten (who coined the term “aesthetic” in its modern usage) and Kant (Critique of Judgement) were more interested in principles of taste that applied to the natural world as well as to artefacts.
  • As Kristeller shows (1951 and 1952), the “modern system of the arts” – painting, music, drama, etc. – is a modern historical artefact. “Art” as such did not exist before the eighteenth century.
History of the question

• So what happened in the twentieth century that people became interested in the definition of art?
Marcel Duchamp,
*Fountain* (1917)
Ceramic and gloss paint,
61 × 36 × 48 cm
The attack on taste

• Duchamp’s *Fountain* was pointedly not beautiful. It was aesthetically inert, “a work of art minus aesthetics” (Danto, *What Art Is*, p. 28).

• It was a *provocation* to the bourgeoisie who in 1917 were responsible for both “good taste” and twenty million deaths.

• *Fountain* is now almost universally recognised as art, and has done much to dictate the concerns of contemporary art. Yet it was submitted to an exhibition that purported to accept any artwork whatsoever, but which rejected it as not art.

• So is it art? If so, why, and if not, why not?
Let’s start fielding some theories.
“Art is that which is beautiful”

Robert Mapplethorpe, ‘Joe Rubberman’ (1978), from the X Portfolio. Gelatine silver print, 35.4 x 35.3 cm.


• Objections:
  • Some art is ugly
  • Some non-art things are beautiful
  • What does “beautiful” even mean?
“Art is that which represents”

- This is derived from Plato, who arguably defines art as *mimēsis*: imitation or representation.

- Objections:
  - What about abstract art?
  - What about music?

“Art is that which expresses emotion.”

• Powerful and influential; cf. especially Tolstoy’s *What Is Art?*, R. G. Collingwood’s *Principles of Art* (1938), and A. C. Danto’s *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* (1982).

• “Expression” is more general than “representation.” Maybe we can’t represent emotion, but we can certainly express it.

• Objections:
  • We express emotion every time we laugh or cry.
  • What about history painting, portraiture, etc.?
  • What do “expression” and “emotion” mean?

David Teniers the Younger, *The Archduke Leopold Wilhelm in his Painting Gallery in Brussels* (1647–51). Oil on copper, 104.8 × 130.4 cm.
All these theories are real bad :-(

- Our failure to agree upon any account of what art is by thinking *directly* about artworks has led many philosophers to turn to “conventionalist theories”: theories that try to define art in terms of its *context*.

- There are two main contenders here:
  - Institutional accounts
  - Cluster accounts
The “institutional” theory of art

• George Dickie (Art and the Aesthetic, 1974) argued that something is an artwork if it is accepted as such by the artworld.

• Advantage:
  • Anything, in principle, can be an artwork – even imperceptible things, such as Robert Barry’s All the things I know but of which I am not at the moment thinking – 1:36 PM; June 15, 1969 (1969).

• Objections:
  • Circularity: who gets to be in the artworld?
  • Groundlessness: why does the artworld grant arthood upon some things but not other things? Does it not need to justify its judgements?
  • Anything, in principle, can be an artwork – even imperceptible things!
Art as a “cluster concept”

- Wittgenstein, in his late *Philosophical Investigations*, develops the idea that some concepts don’t have “traditional” definitions in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions, but are instead “family resemblance” concepts.
  - Some games have competition, some have win conditions, some involve exercise, but no game needs to have any particular combination of these.
- Berys Gaut ("The Cluster Account of Art," 2000) ran with this, and argued that art is a *cluster concept*.

- Advantage:
  - Nicely accommodating.

- Objection:
  - Is it *too* accommodating? When everything is like everything else to *some* extent, where in this chain do we pull up the drawbridge?
These theories are also pretty bad! >:(

• One can easily be driven to despair. As Joseph Margolis put it:

  The philosophy of art may be doomed, again and again but always once and for all, to define what it is to be ‘a work of art,’ an ‘artwork,’ ‘art’ in the sense best suited to ‘the fine arts.’ Modern efforts seem to end in exhaustion or bafflement or sheer scatter or a sort of bad faith that assures us that it was never worth the bother in the first place.

  “The Importance of Being Earnest about the Definition and Metaphysics of Art” (2010), p. 215

• Despite all this, and despite increasing scepticism over the project, philosophers are still attempting to define art, and respond to the criticisms I’ve sketched out here.

• However, I think there’s a principled reason why the definitions all fail, and I will spend the rest of the talk sketching my own proposal.
Part II

Two concepts of art

Georgia O’Keeffe, detail from *Black Mesa Landscape, New Mexico / Out Back of Marie’s II* (1930). Oil on canvas, 61.6 × 92.1 cm.
Two ways in which we mean “art”

FIRST WAY

• The things on the walls and plinths of art galleries are artworks. They might be good or they might be bad, but they’re all artworks.
  • There are other things – metaphors, graffiti, whistling to yourself – that are similar to art, but they’re not art. You can’t get them insured and you can’t get royalties for them.
  • There is a threshold between art and not-art.
• However, a lot of the definitions (e.g., expression) we’ve relied on use scalar terms, and when we have scalar terms mapped onto thresholds (and all our definitions have been threshold-based), we’re inevitably going to find “edge cases,” and their inclusion or exclusion is going to seem arbitrary or unfair.
SECOND WAY

• We might look through a film director’s oeuvre, single out one, and say: “These are all good, but this one is a work of art!”

• Jonathon Jones, in a 2016 Guardian article about some royal portraits, says that they’re “not real art.”

• John Dewey writes that artworks are “refined and intensified forms of... the everyday events, doings, and sufferings that... constitute experience.” (Art as Experience, p. 2)

• Scott McCloud, in Comics as an Art: “[I]n almost everything we do there is at least an element of art.”

• Novalis (and through him Beuys): “Jeder Mensch ein Künstler.”

• How do we make sense of all this?
Art as a scalar concept I

• We don’t just speak of art in terms of what simply is and is not art. We also speak about art as something scalar, something which happens, or succeeds, to a greater or lesser extent.

• We do it in an odd way, though! Digression:

• On one hand, we talk of some things being better – that is, *more good* – than other things, or say that someone is *deeply* good or a *true* friend, or that Wu-Tang are *real* hip-hop, and so on.

• But as well as talking in this *restrictive* way, we talk in an *expansive* way: “Everyone is an artist,” “every metaphor is a little poem,” “there’s goodness in everyone.”

• So the scalarity is one of “nested contexts” rather than a simple linear scale.
Art as a scalar concept II

- Let’s make this more concrete: let’s return to a definition of art that didn’t work above – Collingwood’s theory that art is the expression of emotion.

- Emotions can be big or small, deep or passing. Art can express fleeting moods (a short poem) or an entire worldview (Ulysses).

- Expression can be a mere howl of rage or a thorough clarification and transcendence (Beethoven’s Fifth). It can even distort or bowdlerise the emotions so badly as to hardly be an expression at all:

  Beautiful Railway Bridge of the Silv’ry Tay!
  Alas! I am very sorry to say
  That ninety lives have been taken away
  On the last Sabbath day of 1879,
  Which will be remember’d for a very long time.

  William McGonagall, from The Tay Bridge Disaster (1880)
What art is

• When we use art in this scalar way, there is no threshold separating art and not-art. (Or more precisely, there are an indefinite number of context-sensitive thresholds, but none of them has priority.)

• So the answer to the question, “what is art?” is that everything is art that is to any extent an expression of emotion. Something is art to the extent that it is an expression of emotion. The question dissipates!
• We can think about art-like things plenty well without asking whether what we’re
talking about “is” art. Let’s consider an example: Patrick Rodriguez’s @IsItArtBot.

• This cleverly satirises the question (or worry) concerning whether certain things are art
as tedious and unhelpful. It refers to new and old arts, avant-garde and folk art,
philistine beancounting attitudes in the artworld, itself and liminality.

• But *is it art?*
  
  • In our scalar sense: sure! To an extent!
  • But in a threshold sense: who cares! What purpose would knowing the answer to this
question serve?
  • Dom Lopes (endorsed by Larry Shiner in ‘Art Scents’ (2015)): are we “likely to gain much
insight into that genre by campaigning for its art status, once its character and value have been
fully appreciated?”

Who needs thresholds?
Thresholds as harmful

• It’s not quite right to say that a fixation with thresholds serves no purpose. It serves quite powerfully to perpetuate the exclusion of new artforms, and the historically excluded people who are drawn to them.

• “Art” is an honorific, whose bestowment by governments etc. brings funding, prestige, physical safety, education and more in its wake. There is an ineluctable conservatism in large organisations’ responsiveness to new artistic developments, whether the birth of new art (e.g., hip-hop, webcomics), the death of old ones, or the overdue recognition of an ancient art as art (cookery).

• But no-one here is a large organisation. We have no scarce financial resources to distribute responsibly, and nothing to gain by pronouncing things as art or not art. Regardless of the threshold, we can be open to them as art, and take from them the art they have to share with us.
Thanks!

Thanks!

Left: Sam Keeper, untitled, in Sarah Zedig, godfeels 3, part 1, ch. 7 (2020). 3 .gifs, 650 × 1350 pixels.
Right: Portrait of Juice, extracted from Jon Bois’s 17776 (2016).
Further reading


—: *What Art Is* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013)

Dewey, John: *Art as Experience* (New York: Perigee, 1934)


McGuigagan, James Camien: *This Is Art* (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Southampton, 2017)