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ART AS DISPLAY

by

FRANK BOARDMAN

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Philosophy in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

2016

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by

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Philosophy in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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Art as Display

Abstract

Art is essentially a type of display. As an activity, art is what we do when we display objects with certain intentions. As a set of objects, art is all of those things that are displayed for those purposes. The artworld is the social atmosphere that surrounds this particular activity of display. And a history of art is an evolving narrative of change in the practice of this sort of display.

Specifically, to focus for convenience on art as a set of objects, this is what we can call the “displayed-object thesis”:

x is a work of art iff: (a) x is presented to a public audience for the purpose of their appreciation or contemplation of x and (b) a proper understanding of x requires recognition of (a).

This dissertation is an attempt to articulate, explain and justify the displayed-object thesis.

At the moment, there is probably an air of temerity about offering another definitional theory, much less an essential one. The last fifty or so years have seen less disagreement about the (dis)value of such an ambition than about the reasons for its retrograde status. In the first few chapters, then, I offer a number of defenses of the project itself against claims that a successful essential definition is impossible, improbable, or redundant.

I then turn to the displayed-object thesis itself, explaining and arguing for its key components as well as responding to objections to it. In the final chapters, I turn our attention forward, toward certain practical and theoretical benefits of the theory.

Acknowledgements

Were I to try to thank everyone who had some part in helping me formulate, craft or complete this dissertation, I would undoubtedly leave out half the deserving. But there are many without whom this thing would not be possible - I leave it to them to decide if this is praise or blame. So I'll adopt these criteria: the following people have knowingly played a significant role in the creation of this dissertation (or at least its content), this dissertation would be substantially different were it not for their involvement, and it is better for their contributions.

Noël Carroll has been with this project since its beginning, providing more excellent advice, suggestions, objections, help and inspiration than I can name or even recall. Nick Pappas too has played a significant part in making each part of this dissertation better. I can't thank them enough for all of their time, patience, kindness, attention and skill. Jesse Prinz, Iakovos Vasiliou, Peter Godfrey-Smith, and Alan Hausman have all made invaluable comments and criticisms on the dissertation in one form or another.

A few arguments I make here have appeared or been delivered elsewhere, and I thank the editors and anonymous reviewers as well as the organizers and commenters at those journals and conferences.

None of this would be possible without all sorts of help from my wife Samantha – most notably long meandering conversations wherein a number of the central ideas of this dissertation were worked out. And finally thanks to my daughter Eleanor, for reminding me of the pleasure, amazement and joy art can produce as well as the (sometimes pressing) need to find and figure out – all of which constitute the only decent motivations for this whole endeavor.

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Chapter One: Introduction

I. Confessing and wagering

Let's begin in the middle, work our way back to it, and see where we can go from there.

This is a definition of art, and the one I think is correct:

x is a work of art iff: (a) x is presented to a public audience for the purpose of their appreciation or contemplation of x and (b) a proper understanding of x requires recognition of (a).

There is a kind of confessional relief in having that out and in the open, in there being no secrets between us. It feels like a good confession because it sounds absurd once it's said. What right do I have, after so many others' failed attempts to define art and so many attempts to show that we *cannot* define art, to offer one more? None, except that I think it is the right one. And if there's some hubris in offering such a theory, there's something Quixotic about trying to convince you that it's the right one. But I'm going to do that too.

A lot has to happen between now and then. I'm going to have to argue that a definitional theory of art is possible, that we don't have the right one yet, that this one is explainable and plausible, that there is at least one good justification for it, and that we can do something useful with it. We'll have to see, of course, about the logical and truthful quality of these arguments - but at least these qualities have soundness as a clear and obvious (if likely unattainable) standard. I want the arguments to be not just sound but *convincing* as well, and rhetorical success does not have such a clear standard.

So what will count as a victory for me? As at the track, "winning" is relative to the wager. On the win ticket, I convince you that the definition above uniquely captures necessary

and sufficient conditions for art status, and also that this is a valuable thing to know. No other theory succeeds in this way. On the place ticket, I win or you're convinced that the theory provides a valuable contribution to an evolving conversation about what constitutes art status. Some other theories do this. On the show ticket, I win, place, or you're convinced that the theory brings to light certain under-appreciated features of art, and that doing so is valuable. More theories do this. A placing or strong showing would be enough to warrant our efforts and time. But a horse shows by trying to win, so let's aim for a win.

II. Why a philosophy of art?

We will come to the question of whether or not a *definitional* theory of art specifically can be warranted or useful.¹ But there may be two forms of resistance to *any* philosophy of art, to engaging with art philosophically. The first form asks why we should philosophize about *art* as opposed to other things? I get the sense, for instance, that it is often assumed that there is an extra burden on the aesthetic theorist to justify himself even above that which falls on all philosophers. Perhaps the kind of “dreariness” J.A. Passmore ascribed to many theories of art criticism is thought to infect all of aesthetics. Passmore's concern, though, was explicitly with those theories that expressed a certain “wooliness” of thought, especially that they “fail to reveal with any sharpness the characteristics of [their] subject matter.”² It sounds as though a rigorous attempt at a philosophically illuminating theory of art is just what was needed in 1951.

Also, some seem to think that art is somehow unworthy of rigorous analysis because (and here I'm speculating in the absence of any better reason) it is merely a cultural phenomenon.

¹ In Chapter Two

² J.A. Passmore, “The Dreariness of Aesthetics” *Mind* Vol. 60, No. 239 (Jul., 1951, 318-335) P. 320

This is at least an unfair criticism unless and until it is applied equally to the philosophies of history, politics, and (probably) language and ethics. Were we to consistently abandon all these philosophical projects, we'd be left with an impoverished "philosophy," sadly disconnected from our actual ways of life. Still, it may be imagined that art, unlike (at least) politics or ethics, is unworthy of philosophical treatment because it is not only a cultural phenomenon, but a relatively unimportant one at that. It is, as Hegel once imagined this sort of objection going, "a fleeting pastime, to serve the ends of pleasure and entertainment, to decorate our surroundings, to impart pleasantness to the external conditions of our life, and to emphasize other objects by means of ornament."³ But as Hegel then points out, this is not a description of art as we mean to investigate it. This is something more like decoration or design. For many of us, art has a central, significant and unique place in our cultural lives.

Art, that is to say, is important because it is important to us. And that importance would be difficult to overstate. No one tries to make great art without some psychological stress and pain. No one tries to perform great art without the same, and often some physical exertion as well. Most of us cannot escape exposure to art for more than a few hours a day, and few of us would want to. Many of us organize our little "free time" – weekends, evenings, and vacations – around experiencing art. We contribute money and time to the arts the way we do charities that feed, clothe and protect vulnerable people because, presumably, art can be a public good as well. We worry constantly about the potential dangers of art, and still fiercely protect its freedom. If

³ G.W.F. Hegel, *Introductory Lectures on Aesthetics*, Bernard Bosanquet Trans. (London: Penguin Books, 2004 – original publication 1886) P. 9.

Here and elsewhere in references to this text, I will ignore all the difficulties of attribution involved in a text compiled mostly from others' notes of what Hegel said that has then been translated.

philosophy cannot be useful in helping us figure out just what in the world we're up to here, then we should wonder about the usefulness of philosophy.

On the other side of a spectrum of attitudes, we find resistance in the form of a question about why we should *philosophize* about art as opposed to approaching it in some other way(s). In a particularly virulent negative answer to this question, I've heard it said that to subject art to such analysis somehow robs it of a mysterious dignity. But this is just too strange and superstitious a claim to take seriously. The dignity of art does not suffer from investigation any more than the dignity of a body suffers from an x-ray.

A somewhat more sober objection might be that philosophy has nothing more to add to the subject of art once the art historian, the art critic and the artist have all done their work. In fact, if art is too unruly and disunited a practice (or set of practices) to submit to rigorous analysis, then the philosopher of art is not only late to the game but has brought the wrong equipment. But consider the kinds of questions with which we wrestle in the philosophy of art: what it means to be an artwork, what sort(s) of thing(s) artworks are, our moral and affective responses to art, the nature and ultimate justification of aesthetic, artistic, and interpretive judgments, etc. To think carefully and systematically about these and similar issues is just what it means to be engaged in the philosophy of art, and this sort of engagement is as common among artists and art critics as it is among philosophers.

At the same time, we should reject the image of the philosopher of art standing at a polite (and sometimes decidedly impolite) distance from the artworld, examining its imaginary contours and asking unwelcome, unanswerable questions of it. Asking such questions – and more importantly, actually wrestling with them – has for some time been an artworld practice. This dissertation is meant to be as much an incremental contribution to that practice as it is a

quiet contribution to the larger conversation of philosophy.

III. Plan of the dissertation

There are a few different ways of organizing the following chapters, a few different ways of describing the development of themes, explanations and arguments. Chapter 6, for instance, could be grouped with those that come before it just as easily as with those that come after. But the following provides, I think, the most obvious organization of the dissertation and, I hope, a helpful roadmap to where we are going.

1. Chapters Two And Three – Justifying the Question

Some questions need to be justified before they're answered, usually the very new, the very old, and the very well-trodden. The present question calling for an adequate, informative and useful definition of art is neither ancient nor innovative, but it is so well-covered that a certain pessimism about an adequate answer has attended some fatigue at its being asked. The first two substantive chapters here contain my attempt to provide a justification for asking it.

I'll consider a number of sources of doubt about the value of trying again to define art. I'll begin in Chapter Two by responding to the (broadly) Wittgensteinian mid-century challenges to the *possibility* of successfully defining art, as well as to claims that there is no top-level concept of art in the first place. Even if the structure of the concept does not necessarily preclude a successful definition of art, we may have reason to think such success so improbable that the effort should be abandoned. This concern usually takes the form of a kind of pessimistic induction from the past failure of definitional theories. I'll provide some reasons to question both the strength and value of this inference. Next, it would be problematic if we could not identify the right theory even if it were presented to us. So I'll conclude Chapter Two by

offering some (as far as is reasonably possible) theory-neutral criteria for selecting definitional theories.

I'll use Chapter Three to address a different sort of concern, not so much about asking the question as about asking the question *again*. We would have no use for a new definitional theory of art if we already have the right one. I'll suggest some reasons to believe that we do not. The prior theories I'll address here are those that are among the most plausible, the most historically significant, or the best at indicating important features of art.

2. Chapters Four and Five – Answering the Question

If a successful definitional theory of art is neither impossible nor improbable, is identifiable, and we don't have one yet, then we don't have any principled reason to avoid seeking out a new one. In Chapter Five I'll motivate, offer and explain the "displayed-object thesis," the definitional theory you see above. As you can see from that, I have quite a bit of work to do in the way of explication and clarification. Most of Chapter Four will be the result of those projects.

The goal of Chapter Four is explanatory; the goal of Chapter Five is argumentative. Those arguments will largely build on the work of the first few Chapters. I'll make the case that the displayed-object thesis meets skeptical challenges presented in Chapter Two while accounting for the intuitions that drive them, preserves the advantages and avoids the pitfalls of the theories considered in Chapter Three, and does a better job than those theories at satisfying a preponderance of the criteria for theory selection laid out in Chapter Two.

3. Chapters Six and Seven – Using the Answer

The strategy shifts a bit in Chapters Six and Seven. Here I'll assume the displayed-object thesis and attempt to demonstrate what can be done with it. The first task of Chapter Six will be

applying the thesis to various art forms. The most important part of that will be providing candidates for the kinds of objects that are displayed in each form. This conversation will involve us to a somewhat limited extent in questions normally addressed in the ontology of art. I will then articulate some of the ways that the displayed object thesis can be useful in various aspects and domains of art research.

This last point is meant to highlight the practical benefits of the theory. But a theory can also help with other theoretical concerns (I can't decide if helping settle other issues is better called a "theoretical" or "practical" benefit). In Chapter Seven, I make the case that the displayed object thesis can help us work through two central problems of aesthetic value.

That's the plan going forward, let's try it working backward: I'm making the claim in the latter chapters is that the displayed-object thesis has a number of benefits beyond the correctness of the claims it immediately makes. But I can't imagine accepting a theory – even provisionally – if the immediate claims it makes are false. So I offer in Chapter Five evidence that they are true. But arguing for a claim that is insufficiently explained is no more helpful than offering a recipe without a list of ingredients. So I need Chapter Four to first make the theory clearer. But a clear answer to a question that has already been adequately answered is no more valuable than an unclear one, so I have Chapter Three to show that such an answer has not yet been provided. And finally a new and better answer turns out no more useful or valuable if its question is a bad one in the first place. So I'll try in Chapter Two to show that it is a reasonable question that can be answered. Let's turn to that discussion now.

CHAPTER TWO: Challenges To the Definitional Project

There are many useful ways of thinking philosophically about art other than producing a definition, much less an “essential” definition in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions.⁴

In the previous chapter, I responded to some objections to *any* philosophical treatment of art.

But it is not at all uncommon to think that the philosophy of art in general is valuable, but not our current definitional task. Therefore, that specific project – and not just its result – requires some justification. In this chapter and the next, I’ll try to provide some warrant for a new definitional theory.

Broadly speaking, there are two sorts of reasons this project may appear unwarranted. First, it may be thought that “art” cannot be successfully defined, that it probably will not be defined (at least via an essential definition), or that we lack the criteria to know if and when it has been successfully defined. I’ll take up these challenges in this chapter. Second, if we already have a satisfactory definition of art (essential or otherwise), then providing a new one is at least superfluous. So I’ll use the next chapter to suggest some reasons for thinking there is still room for improvement on the theories we have so far.

Let’s start, then, with three objections that reveal substantive and potentially damaging challenges to my project: (1) a successful definition of “art” is impossible; (2) a successful (essential) definition of “art” is improbable; (3) we do not know what we want from a definition of “art.” I will try to formulate and answer these objections in ways that are as specific-theory-neutral as possible.

⁴ We will consider some other fundamental philosophical problems and their relations to the theory to be developed. See Chapters Six and Seven especially.

I. A successful definition of “art” is impossible.

Arguments directly opposing the definitional project are far less common today than they were in the 1950s and ‘60s when some philosophers of art – under the influence of Wittgenstein’s attacks on referential semantic theory (as well as his positive “use” account of meaning⁵) – argued for some kind of instability in our concept of art that precluded its classical structure. Morris Weitz provides what has come to be the most well-known and often-discussed of these arguments. For Weitz, the central feature of art that makes essential definition impossible is its “openness.”⁶ A concept is open if its “conditions of application are emendable and corrigible.” Specifically, when presented with a candidate x for inclusion in the set of objects α that fall under concept A , a *decision* must be made to either

(i) apply existing criteria for inclusion in α to x or

(ii) alter those criteria so as to insure x ’s inclusion in α .

(i) is a process of discovery, (ii) is a process of creation. If we keep fixed the criteria for being A , we can discover whether or not x is a member of α by investigating x . If instead we decide that x should be a member of α regardless of whether or not it satisfies the heretofore-appropriate criteria, our task becomes the creation of new criteria that x can satisfy. Crucially, we do not learn from x that our criteria was wrong, we create new criteria in order to bring x into α . There is no fact of x ’s being A until we change the criteria for inclusion in α . If (ii) is ever an

⁵ I’m referring mainly of course to ideas in *Philosophical Investigations*, which was published concurrently – or nearly so – with some of the work I claim here was influenced by those ideas. The leading relevant ideas, however, were (at least arguably) present and available at least as early as 1929 in his “Some Remarks on Logical Form.”

Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, G.E.M. Anscombe, Trans. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997 – original publication 1953) and “Some Remarks on Logical Form” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supplementary Volumes* Vol.9, Knowledge, Experience and Realism (1929, 162-171)

⁶ Morris Weitz, “The Role of Theory in Aesthetics” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* Vol. 15, No. 1 (Sep., 1956 27-35) 31-33

appropriate response to the question of x 's membership in α , then A is open. So "partner" (in a few different senses, actually) may plausibly be an open concept. Presented with a new pair, we may have political, legal or ethical reasons for including their relation in the "partner" class and therefore alter our criteria for "partner" in some way that allows the inclusion.

Though there is not much vocal support these days for Weitz's argument, it is commonly thought that it successfully rules out those theories that do not have some mechanism for accounting for art's openness. Thus it rules out, for instance, mimetic and expression theories but not institutional or historical theories. So whereas Weitz fails to show essential definition impossible, he succeeds in severely limiting the kinds of essential definitions that may work.

I tend to think, however, that Weitz's theory is not even this helpful. It is instead either trivial or incoherent. All depends here on whether or not we take "conditions of application" to be (a) a set of properties *thought* to be definitive of art at a given time or (b) a set of properties *actually* definitive of art at a given time. Despite his "emend" and "corrigible" language, Weitz can't mean (a) – otherwise the appropriateness of (ii) above shows no more than that the properties at the time of decision were inadequate. This is really just the comparatively weak observation that we have not yet come up with the right set of criteria.

He must then mean (b), that we have the right criteria in mind at the moment of decision and that it may still be appropriate to change the criteria in order to include the new candidate. But if we have the right set of criteria at the moment of decision, then we had, prior to the decision, an adequate essential theory of art – just what Weitz denies we *can* have.

Try it another way: Let's say we really accepted Weitz's anti-definitional theory for all the reasons he employs. We would then have no reason to look for appropriate conditions of application (i.e. craft a definition) at any given time and thus no decision to make about

extending those conditions. “Art” would no longer be open and we would have no reason to accept Weitz’s anti-definitional theory.

A defender of Weitz’s anti-definitionalism will have a number of responses to this objection. First, it may be that a theory of art is just fine so long as it is indexed to a particular time. But then an initial condition plus rules for extension would constitute necessary and sufficient conditions. The only question then becomes how specific we can be about those rules for extension.

Perhaps it may be claimed instead that it is part of the art concept that it may be altered *in any way whatsoever* so as to allow new candidates (or not). This version of “openness” is more consistent, perhaps, but it is stronger than the one Weitz suggests and certainly a stronger one than is typically ascribed to him. This is clear, for instance, from the fact that Weitz frames the problem in terms of decisions to alter the criteria for inclusion within a concept in order to allow for a new candidate rather than decisions to allow candidates without consideration of any criteria. But this kind of radical openness is implied by there being no limits whatsoever on the sorts of alterations that can be made to the concept.

In fact, radical openness relies on a stronger version of Wittgensteinian skepticism than Weitz was likely to hold. On this view (roughly Kripke’s⁷), Wittgenstein’s worries about reference are special cases of a general skepticism about rule-following. This rule-following skepticism may generate a more problematic skepticism about defining “art” than Weitz’s. This may in fact be a universal problem. As such, the hitherto-correct application of any concept will be consistent with an infinite number of mutually-inconsistent sets of criteria for its application. The concern here is not the epistemic problem that we cannot know which criteria we have been

⁷ Saul A. Kripke, *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998 – original publication 1982)

using (this is a separate issue – akin to Nelson Goodman’s “new riddle”⁸) so much as the metaphysical problem that there is no fact of the matter about which criteria we have been using. Thus there is nothing *per se* to govern correct use other than convention. I’m neither inclined nor qualified to help decide this global issue. But there may be a concern that even if the problem is not pervasive, it is present for or especially pressing in the case of art. The worry may take the following form: “The application of ‘art’ may *appear* to have a governing set of criteria. But let’s say those criteria pick out a set of objects Δ at time t and at $t+1$ a new object x is offered as a candidate for art status and x does not satisfy the criteria that defined Δ . There is nothing whatsoever to say that x is not art because there is nothing whatsoever to say that the criteria at t was not *in fact* those that pick out $\{\Delta, x\}$. We just had no way of knowing that at t because x had not yet been considered.”

This sort of concern *could* apply to art and not other (or at least not all other) concepts. The seeming intractability of debates over borderline cases may even suggest it. But three observations ought to give us pause. First, many of us are comfortable arguing about what is and what isn’t art. We may of course do so in error, but if art is particularly susceptible to this kind of skepticism, some presently non-obvious diagnosis for our behavior is required. Second, while Danto and others have shown that anything can be art, very few of us would be willing to say that anything could be art *in any circumstance* or that something could become art simply by decree. Third (and this is a theme to which I will return later), the plausibility of this view of art seems to rest in large part on the fact that what counts as art is largely determined by social custom and convention. But the fact that the applications of a given practice (and therefore the objects that figure into the practice) are conventionally determined does not mean that the nature

⁸ Nelson Goodman, *Fact, Fiction & Forecast* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1955) Pp. 73-80

of the practice itself is also (merely) conventional. More unions fall under the concept “marriage” today than they did twenty years ago, yet what marriage *is* (something like: the socially and/or legally recognized union of consenting adults into a domestic partnership) remains the same. Thus we can argue about what sorts of unions ought to count as marriages without (contra some unfortunate rhetoric) arguing about the *definition* of “marriage.”

For Weitz, the class of “artworks” is determined by “family resemblances” rather than shared properties. Thus “art” receives the same sort of analysis that Wittgenstein provides for “game.” Instead of criteria for application, we find “a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing: sometimes overall similarities, sometimes similarities in detail.”⁹

The problems with this sort of approach are fairly well-known and well-established¹⁰ at this point, and I don’t have a lot to add to them. But just to rehearse a bit: it is worth noticing that “family” resemblance isn’t the right metaphor. Family-members resemble one another because they share certain genetic characteristics. Those characteristics are what separate *family* resemblances from other resemblances. So we have some clear criteria by which to separate one class from another, just what the theory in question wants to deny. This objection may sound picky at first, but I believe it is indicative of the problem central to the whole account. Even if it isn’t necessary to think of the relevant resemblances among artworks as being like “family” resemblances, there does need to be some kind of resemblance. And that resemblance must be picked out in some way. Mere resemblance is not going to cut it, as everything that exists

⁹ Wittgenstein (1953/1997) §66

¹⁰ See, for instance: Maurice Mandelbaum “Family Resemblances and Generalization concerning the Arts” *American Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. 2, No. 3 (Jul., 1965, 219-228); Stephen Davies, *Definitions of Art* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991) P. 11-13; George Dickie, *The Art Circle: A Theory of Art* (Evanston, IL: Chicago Spectrum Press, 1997) 30-45; Harold Osborne, “Definition and Evaluation in Aesthetics” *Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. 23, No. 90 (Jan., 1973, 15-27) Pp. 16-20

resembles everything else that exists in one way or another. And to see why this is problematic, we do not need to jump ahead to extreme cases like those in Danto's indiscernible counterpart argument (though I don't think we should be afraid to do so). To take one of an inexhaustible set of possible examples, short films that anyone (in the 21st century) would call art resemble television commercials in more ways than they do paintings, photographs or even feature length-films, much less poems, songs and ballets.

Now it is important to note that Weitz's negative anti-essentialist argument can be divorced entirely from his positive family-resemblance analysis. So a refutation of the positive account does nothing to the standing of the negative or vice-versa. The positive account is offered in order to ground our ascriptions of art status in the absence of applicable definitions, so if Weitz's negative charges don't go through, perhaps he has lost some motivation for the resemblance-account. But I don't see why he couldn't hold the latter without the former. My concern in this chapter is with the negative account, as it provides a serious problem for the larger task at hand. Weitz's challenge, though, is only one of a number like it.

Paul Ziff, equally (though perhaps somewhat differently) influenced by the later Wittgenstein, presents another direct challenge to the definitional project. Instead of thinking (with Weitz) that the operative sense of "work of art" is open and therefore not amenable to analysis via necessary and sufficient conditions, Ziff instead claims that it is a mistake to think there is one operative sense of "work of art" to analyze. Instead, artistic "revolutions" necessitate "a shift in the uses of the phrase 'work of art'."¹¹ As such, different critical approaches constitute different *uses* of "work of art." Disagreements about art status, however, are not merely verbal. They are ultimately disagreements about the appropriate social role of art.

¹¹ Paul Ziff, "The Task of Defining a Work of Art" *Philosophical Review* Vol. 62, No 1 (Jan., 1953, 58-78) 67

To see the difference between Ziff's and Weitz's approaches a bit more clearly, we can imagine their respective diagnoses of the controversy Duchamp's *Fountain* created in 1917. Weitz would say that the curators, critics and audience at the Society of Independent Artists exhibit struggled collectively with the *decision* to expand (or not) the use of "work of art" in some way that would include *Fountain*. Ziff, on the other hand, would say that those who would include *Fountain* and those who would not argued over which of two different senses of "art" capture a more worthwhile social practice. Perhaps an opponent of *Fountain* favored a practice that privileges the production of beauty and a proponent one that privileges conceptual contemplation. They argued, then, about which practice is better in the guise of arguing about which is really "art."

One oddity of Ziff's view may seem to be that it does not explain the way we come to distinguish works of art from other things. We do not typically in a self-conscious way run through the social implications of using a sense of "work of art" that would include a given candidate rather than a sense that does not. Instead, our attention is usually more narrowly focused on the object itself and its context.

Here Ziff offers a different account for those more common circumstances where art status is not so much in doubt (though, as he points out, it is always *possible* to doubt that an object is a work of art). What *normally* constitutes art status is resemblance to paradigmatic cases. By focusing our attention on an object that is least likely to be considered non-art, we can enumerate a set of un-controversially sufficient (but not necessary) conditions for art status. Having some subset of those properties found in the paradigm will then normally be sufficient for art status. In this way, Ziff provides a characterization of our application of "art" in the absence of controversy.

Ziff's account, then, is doubly problematic for definitional theories. First, given his diagnosis of critical disagreement about art, the kinds of justification we tend to give for definitions are no longer germane. While we could advocate for a given definition, our grounds would have to be the favorable effects of adopting the definition rather than, for instance, its extensional, intensional or modal adequacy. As such, there is absolutely no reason to prefer a theoretically useful definition over any kind of characterization whose adoption would produce more desirable effects.

Second, if Ziff is right about the correct application of "art" in non-controversial circumstances, we would do well to give up entirely the search for necessary conditions. And if, as Ziff says, "[n]o rule can be given to determine what is or is not a sufficient degree of similarity to warrant [a claim to art status],"¹² then it seems that even in ordinary cases theory will never be able to adequately correspond to our intuitive judgments about art status.

However, like appeals to family resemblances, resemblance-to-paradigm accounts are subject to well-known and fairly conclusive objections. Chief among these, probably, is that the theory turns almost everything into art. Ziff offers a number of candidates for the properties of paradigmatic cases that might count as jointly sufficient for their art status¹³, but nowhere does he claim that they constitute a minimal sufficient set. It would, in fact, be inconsistent for him to do so given his "no rule" claim quoted above. If possession of some proper subset of those properties is sufficient for art status in other objects (as the theory goes), then the same subset would be sufficient in what he thinks of as the paradigmatic cases as well. Now if some proper subsets of the properties he identifies as sufficient for art status in paradigm cases would *also* be sufficient and there is no rule to determine *which* such subsets would be, then the only

¹² *ibid.* 67

¹³ including one that looks very much like the core of my own preferred definition of "art."

justification for the use of Ziff's particular set of properties is that its members characterize some objects generally-accepted as artworks. But of course there are all kinds of properties instantiated by some generally-accepted artworks. An argument no better or worse than Ziff's could make use of any alternative properties of artworks, including properties (being extended, being the referent of a name, etc.) that are shared by all sorts of things that we do not want to call "art."

Ziff's larger concern about the meaning of our disagreements about art status rests on a different kind of mistake. It cannot be the case that those who would include *Fountain* among the works of art and those who would not *only* disagree about the most socially efficacious use of "art" or about what we should want art to be. It seems to me that were either of the disputants to make *that* kind of point plainly, it would be entirely reasonable for the other to agree and still to disagree about *Fountain's* inclusion. For instance, the more inclusive critic could say that we want more than anything for "art" to refer to a social practice that encourages the creation of objects that force us to reflect on the nature of certain kinds of social practices, especially art itself. It would not be *inconsistent* for the conservative critic to agree with that and to agree that *Fountain* is just such an object, but to still disagree that it is art. He could think, for instance, that that is what we would like art to be, but that art is in fact limited by aesthetic or other institutional concerns. This may be a pessimistic position for the conservative critic to take, but it is not –as it must be on Ziff's account – an incoherent one.

Even if Weitz is wrong that "art" refers an open concept and Ziff is wrong that its reference changes with critical approaches, "art" still may be undefinable if it does not refer at all in the way we typically think it does. This sort of challenge to the definitional project might be suggested by Paul Oskar Kristeller's argument that our grouping the "five major arts" (painting,

sculpture, architecture, music and poetry) as the “nucleus” of what we call “art” is a historically contingent invention of the eighteenth century.¹⁴ Not only are we guilty, then, of a kind of anachronism when we place Plato and Aristotle in our philosophy-of-art histories, we are more generally mistaken when we attempt to explicate philosophically what ought to be described historically.

However, Kristeller (and others) have shown only that the ancients did not have the *aesthetic* conception of art that emerges in the eighteenth century – and that is not at all the sort of conception of art I (or many others today) mean to defend. Of course it is not surprising that the eighteenth century conception of art did not emerge until the eighteenth century. The twentieth century conception of art – one that includes urinals and inert gasses – did not emerge until the twentieth century. That does not mean that there was no art prior to the twentieth century.

Perhaps more to the point: even if a unified “art” concept did not develop in people's minds until the eighteenth century, that is no evidence that there was nothing prior to unite the practices and products of those practices. Similarly, there was surely plenty of diverse market activity before anyone managed to provide a single theory for that activity. But that does not mean that economic principles were not at work from the beginning. Art practices, like economic practices, can appear without being named or recognized.

More recently, Dominic McIver Lopes has offered a somewhat similar kind of skeptical answer to the “what is art?” question. For Lopes, an object is a work of art if it is a work within

¹⁴ Paul Oskar Kristeller, “The Modern System of the Arts: A Study in the History of Aesthetics Part I” *Journal of the History of Ideas* Vol. 12, No. 4 (Oct., 1951, 496-527), esp. Pp. 497-8

one of the arts.¹⁵ The classes to be defined are the products of individual social practices rather than a larger class of art. There may be defining opera qualities, poetry qualities, and film qualities, but not art qualities. Lopes' argument against theories of art is not so bold as Weitz's or Ziff's – he does not claim that a successful definition is somehow impossible – and his case is all the better for it. Instead, he argues that what he calls his “buck-passing” strategy is (a) preferable to “buck-stopping” strategies (roughly those that seek a top-level theory of art rather than of the individual arts) and (b) capable of providing what we most wanted from a theory of art in the first place.

Lopes' main argument for the superiority of his buck-passing theory begins with a diagnosis for the attractiveness of buck-stopping theories. Their primary claim, he thinks, is that they provide us with the means to adjudicate hard cases by focusing our attention on individual artworks. But Lopes thinks this is not really an advantage that belongs to buck-stopping theories. He divides buck-stopping theories into two types: “traditional” (formal or aesthetic for example) theories that identify artworks via certain exhibited properties and “genetic” (i.e. institutional, historical etc.) theories that identify art via properties that “have to do with the circumstances or context of its making.”¹⁶ Now a traditional theory will deny certain hard cases – *Fountain* is a fine if already overused example – and adherents count it as a virtue of the theory that it does so. The genetic theorist will likewise count it as a virtue of *his* theory that it admits such cases. The data on which we mean to adjudicate between these competing theories is determined entirely by competing intuitions. We are at a stalemate. Lopes thinks his buck-

¹⁵ Dominic McIver Lopes, “Art without ‘Art’” *British Journal of Aesthetics* Vol. 47, No. 1 (Jan., 2007 1-15); “Nobody Needs a Theory of Art” *The Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 105, No. 3 (Mar., 2008, 109-127); and *Beyond Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014) Nook E-Book
E.J. Bond makes an awfully similar point in E.J. Bond, “The Essential Nature of Art” *American Philosophical Quarterly* Vol. 12, No. 2. (Apr., 1975, 177-183)

¹⁶ Lopes (2014) P. 47

passing strategy saves us from this impasse by identifying art with a property that is neither exhibited nor genetic: i.e. being in one of the arts. We need not rely on any unshared intuition about art-status because the need to determine art status disappears in favor of determining membership in *an* art.

In essence, Lopes has attempted to solve this (alleged) problem with theories of art by asking us not to look for one in the first place. But this of itself is not a viable strategy. It would not do to replace a question about the movement of heavenly bodies with questions about the movements of stars, planets, comets etc. We would lose what we wanted in asking the more general question. And this brings us to the second part of Lopes' argument, that in addition to the advantage that is gained in abandoning buck-stopping theories, his buck-passing theory gives us everything we could reasonably want from a theory of art. How, then, can the buck-passing theory be sufficiently informative? Lopes thinks it can be, crucially, because it informs empirical research into art. It can do this either through a theory of the arts – i.e. a theory about what makes something (painting, poetry, music etc.) an art – or through theories of the individual arts. But Lopes thinks ultimately that “[w]hile the fact that painting and dance have been classified as arts can be explained historically and sociologically, it is unlikely that the classification can be given a principled foundation.”¹⁷ Lopes then makes explicit use of Kristeller's argument in this making this claim.¹⁸ Because Lopes is pessimistic about the prospects for a theory of the arts, the buck is ultimately passed on his account to theories of the individual arts. And this, he thinks, is all we ever really need. We need never study *art* when we can say whatever is interesting about an artwork in terms of its being a member of an individual art form. Then what makes it an artwork? Simply that it is in a form that has been historically

¹⁷ *ibid.* 21

¹⁸ *ibid.* 25-29

grouped with other forms as art. Thus the buck-passing theory is just as informative as buck-stopping theories, which can do no better at providing a theory of the arts; and “[a] theory of art is systematically informative if it yields an informative theory of the arts.”¹⁹

Lopes’ skeptical argument is no doubt an improvement on prior versions. Still, I think we may have good reason to question both of its main pillars. First, regarding the preferability of his account: I think that Lopes has identified a genuine problem with the way arguments for competing theories have often been made, but I’m not sure this problem is as damning for buck-stopping theories as he thinks. First of all, the kind of “dialectical impasse” that Lopes describes is only insurmountable when we imagine each opposing side merely *insisting* that the set of art objects their theory picks out is the right one. But it is not hard to imagine certain additional theory-neutral considerations that could be brought to bear on the issue. It is at least worth recognizing, for instance, that the art status of *Fountain* remains a theoretical challenge but it does not remain a controversy. Someone may very well complain that readymades, conceptual art and their like are evidence of a decline in the value of art in its modern and contemporary eras, but their art status (whatever that turns on) does not seem to be in question.²⁰ More importantly, I think we can have genuinely informative buck-stopping theories that do not *rely on* intuitions about hard cases, but rather explain our differing intuitions by focusing our attention on what underwrites them. I hope to provide just such a theory and will go to some length to show that I do. That is, I hope to provide a buck-stopping theory that can be held by

¹⁹ *ibid.* 21

²⁰ I should have evidence for this claim and I do not. I do not think a random poll of Americans would bear me out. But I do not think a poll of random Americans would find a widespread grasp of the distinction between art status and art value that this question requires. Limiting the population to curators, artists, and philosophers of art wouldn’t do either. Some cleverly controlled experiment may show that the issue is much more controversial today than I think. If so, I’d be happy to abandon this (less significant) criticism.

people with differing intuitions about individual candidates. I will have a good deal more to say about this in Chapters Four and Five when I provide a fuller defense of my own preferred theory of art.²¹ Until then, it is enough to say that if we can provide such a theory, we have no special reason to prefer a buck-passing theory, so let us wait and see.

The other pillar of Lopes' argument, that the buck-passing theory is equal to buck-stopping theories in its (un)informativeness is also questionable. First of all, for all the reasons discussed above regarding Kristeller's argument, I do not think we can conclude that there is nothing to unify the arts other than historical contingency from the fact that our recognition of that grouping is historically contingent. But let's set that issue aside. Even if neither a buck-passing nor a buck-stopping theory can deliver a theory of the arts, I think Lopes is wrong to think this is a requirement of any informative theory of art. Unlike Lopes' theory, a buck-stopping theory can separate theory of art entirely from theories of the individual arts. It does not need the bridge of a theory of the arts the way Lopes' does. On Lopes' account, what makes a painting P an artwork is that it is a painting and paintings are artworks. And if we are to know that P is an artwork, we must know that P is a painting and that paintings are artworks. But on a buck-stopping account, the properties that make P an artwork (the nature of its history, creation, display, etc.) may have absolutely nothing to do with the purely manifest properties that make it a painting. In short, only Lopes needs a theory of the arts. It is no fault of buck-stopping theories if they cannot provide one. The informativeness of Lopes' account suffers from the absence of a robust theory of the arts while buck-stopping theories do not.

One final concern about the possibility of a successful definition may be that "art" is one of what W.B. Gallie calls "essentially contested concepts." These are "concepts the proper use

²¹ As will (I hope) be seen, the key move will be challenging Lopes' identification of "genetic" theories with those that focus exclusively on art *making*.

of which inevitably involves endless disputes about their proper uses on the part of their users.”²² The seemingly endless disputes about what constitutes art and what counts as art may suggest as much, and Gallie himself uses art as a prime example of such a concept. But that such disputes have not yet ended does not itself show that the concept *inevitably* involves such disputes. Gallie identifies five necessary conditions for a concept to be “essentially contested.” His own application of these criteria to “art”²³ does not go much beyond the claim that they do, so it is worth examining each in turn to see if art really satisfies the criteria. In order to show that “art” in the sense with which we are presently concerned is not essentially contested in the way Gallie has in mind, it is enough to show that art does not satisfy just one of these conditions, and I think we have reason to think it fails on all five:

“(I) it must be appraisive in the sense that it signifies or accredits some kind of valued achievement.”²⁴ Now art itself (whether seen as a cultural practice or a set of objects produced within that practice) is certainly highly valued, but this is not quite enough for art to be “appraisive” in the sense Gallie needs. The *contest* must be over the application of the concept so as to admit certain candidates (or not). At the level of individual works, however, valuations and appraisals do not attach to art status. Surely we all have examples of works we would not hesitate to call “art” in which we see little value and no achievement. Otherwise, there would be no truly bad art. What Gallie (I think) has in mind is an evaluative rather than descriptive sense of “art.” Briefly, we use “work of art” in a descriptive sense when we mean to classify (it is often called the “classificatory” sense as well) an object without saying anything about its

²² W.B. Gallie, “Essentially Contested Concepts” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* New Series, Vol. 56 (1956, 167-198) 169

²³ *ibid.* 181-3

²⁴ *ibid.* 171

relative value. But we also use “work of art” to evaluate, praise, or recommend. It is only the descriptive sense that concerns us here.

“(II) This achievement must be of an internally complex character, for all that its worth is attributed to it as a whole.”²⁵ At this point it is worth comparing “art” to the “artificial” example Gallie provides to illustrate essential contestedness: that of being a “champion” in a competition without explicit criteria for championship. When a team is “champion” in such a condition, their supporters will provide their own criteria and (necessarily it seems) contest with one another over what it *means* to be a championship in order for their favorite to be the champion. Now whatever a team does in this competition will surely be complex as will the activities (whatever they are) that go into the creation of an art object. But there is a key difference in the two cases. The activities in which two would-be “champion” teams engage must be roughly the same. What is contested is which aspects of the activity ought to count as champion-making. If the activities were radically different, they would not be playing the same game at all. But the activities of art-making are much more varied. What a ballet dancer does is radically unlike what a poet does to create art. In a word, complexity itself is not enough for the kind of *necessary* contest Gallie has in mind. The complex whole must be (at least to a large extent) the same sort of thing across competitors for inclusion within the concept.

“(III)...the accredited achievement is *initially* variously describable.”²⁶ This seems to follow from the complexity described in (II). The difference between the kind of complexity Gallie requires and the kind we see in would-be artworks should cause us to have similar concerns with (III).

²⁵ *ibid.* 171-2

²⁶ *ibid.* 172

“(IV) The accredited achievement must be of a kind that admits of considerable modification in the light of changing circumstances; and such modification cannot be prescribed or predicted in advance.”²⁷ This should remind us immediately of Weitz’s argument discussed above. Gallie actually refers to this as the “open” nature of the concepts in question. Whatever differences there may be between Weitz’s “openness” and Gallie’s, it is clear enough I think that my objections to the former (see above) apply to the latter as well.

“(V) ...each party recognizes the fact that its own use of it is contested by those of other parties, and that each party must have at least some appreciation of the different criteria in the light of which the other parties claim to be applying the concept in question.”²⁸ It is really this fifth condition that *defines* essential contestedness, though the others are equally necessary. Once again, I’m tempted to think that this criterion may apply to an evaluative sense of “art” but I do not think it applies to a descriptive sense. When I claim that an object “is a work of art” in an evaluative sense and someone disagrees with me, my first thought is that we disagree about what constitutes being a work of art in this sense. We can then argue about what the proper criteria should be. But it seems that I *have* to recognize other uses in order to understand the concept. Though others operate with different evaluative uses of “work of art,” it would be absurd to think they do not understand the concept. But when we claim that an object “is a work of art” in a descriptive sense, we need not know or imagine that others have different criteria of application or other definitions in mind. And when someone does indicate another use, we are tempted to think that they have misunderstood the concept.

It is possible, of course, that “art” is somehow essentially contested and Gallie just has the wrong set of criteria in mind. I doubt this is the case, however. Notice, for instance, how

²⁷ *ibid.* 172

²⁸ *ibid.* 172

well Gallie's other examples – “democracy” and “adherence to [a particular] religion” – satisfy the criteria he provides. Even the *evaluative* senses of “art” and “work of art” seem to be genuinely “essentially contested” and for just the reasons Gallie gives. So because a descriptive sense of “work of art” does not satisfy Gallie's criteria, I think we can safely rule this out as a reason to think an essential definition impossible.

A serious problem for this response to Gallie arises, though, if we cannot adequately keep evaluative and descriptive senses of “art” separate. This distinction has been critical to theorists as diametrically opposed as Weitz and Dickie, but it has also come under attack.²⁹ And we may have some evidence for thinking that the distinction is not always carefully maintained. In most normal conversations in which someone claims something is a “work of art,” we can probably get by without finding out which sense they were using. More importantly, we may also be able to meaningfully make such a claim without having one or the other sense in mind.

There are at least two available responses to this objection. First, providing any sort of account of a given concept (definitional, anti-definitional or otherwise) is just not like using that concept in everyday discourse. We can and often do use expressions much more vaguely than we probably should, even though we often get away with it. I might ask my daughter if she'd like to visit her grandmother sometime this year without really having in mind either my wife's mother or mine. She may answer the same way and give me all the information I need. But this is obviously not evidence that there isn't a genuine and important distinction between the two women.

Second, it is important to distinguish the two senses because we want to be able to discuss *bad* art, and in a purely evaluative sense of “art,” “bad art” is a contradiction. Now there

²⁹ See, for instance, M.W. Rowe “Why ‘Art’ Doesn't Have Two Senses.” *British Journal of Aesthetics* Vol. 31, No. 3 (Jun., 1991, 214-221)

are some concepts for which we'd want just this result. We talk about "bad friends," but it seems perfectly reasonable to also say "a bad friend is no friend at all." And we may say that an attempt at a proof that fails is a "bad proof" but it seems better to say that it is not in fact a proof. But in both of these cases, if I were to correct your claim and say "so and so isn't in fact a friend" or "that isn't actually a proof," I'm in effect saying that the friend and the proof are somehow masquerading as something they are not. Saying someone is a "bad friend" or something is a "bad proof" are perfectly synonymous with saying someone is "not a friend at all" or something is "not a proof." "Bad art" and "not art" are not similarly synonymous. They both might be levied as criticisms, but they are criticisms of two different sorts.

One final point on this subject. It may be alleged that there is no truly classificatory sense of art because being art – even being *bad* art – is a good thing, perhaps because making art is always a good thing to do. So to say that something is "a work of art" in even the most classificatory-seeming sense is still to provide a *kind* of evaluation of it. I'm not unsympathetic to this, though I'm not sure how much hangs on it. If this sort of claim turns out to be evaluative, it is a different kind of evaluation than the "evaluative" claims I've been discussing. By the same reasoning, we turn any classificatory judgment into an evaluative one any time we have a pro-or-con attitude toward the class or classes in question. I happen to prefer the company of dogs to cats. But only in a very weak sense of "evaluation" am I evaluating an animal by noticing that he's a dog rather than a cat. The issue here ends up no more than terminological. If you prefer to talk about two types of evaluative claims rather than evaluative and classificatory claims, fine. But there is still a relevant distinction between the two types of evaluation and the objection to Gallie above still goes through.

Generally speaking, skepticism in this context is inappropriate until (a) we have some

principled reason to think an essential³⁰ theory of art impossible or (b) we are sufficiently confident that we have exhausted our theoretical resources. I do not think we (as yet anyway) have a good reason to accept (a). Whether or not we should accept (b) is a different sort of question to which I'll now turn.

II. A successful (essential) definition of "art" is improbable.

Many do not go so far as to think that "art" cannot or should not be rigorously defined, but do think that the structure of "art" is in one way or another non-classical. Jeffrey Dean and Berys Gaut, for instance, both think that the attempt to find individually necessary and jointly sufficient conditions is misguided because we have reason to prefer another incompatible conceptual structure (prototype for Dean, cluster for Gaut).³¹ Others argue that the attempt to find an essential definition is unnecessary because any significant purpose we could have for looking for such a definition can be met in some simpler or more obviously available way. Noël Carroll, for instance, argues that his historical/narrativistic theory of art provides all we really need of a theory of art because it provides sufficient conditions, applying sufficient conditions allows us to determine art-status for any candidate object or practice, and that project is (at least) at the center of our motivation for providing a definitional theory.³²

I will return to all these (and other) theories in the next chapter. For now I'd like to focus on a motivation that is often given for turning away from the search for a classical/essential definition of art and toward these kinds of replacements: the inability of any essential definition

³⁰ or classical, or "buck-stopping"

³¹ Jeffrey T. Dean "The Nature of Concepts and the Definition of Art" *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* Vol. 61, No. 1 (Winter, 2003, 29-35); Berys Gaut "'Art' as a Cluster Concept" in *Theories of Art Today* Noël Carroll, Ed. (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2000, 25-44)

³² Noël Carroll, "Historical Narratives and the Philosophy of Art" *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* Vol. 51, No. 3 (Summer, 1993, 313-326) and elsewhere

thus far to generate any lasting consensus. Often implied rather than stated outright, the argument is that (1) all prior essential definitions of “art” have failed, so, probably, (2) all subsequent essential definitions will fail, and therefore (3) we should seek elsewhere for whatever we wanted from essential definitions in the first place. This kind of criticism has appeared so many times that it seems to have the force of a truism, repeated only for style and persuasive effect.

Of course I have no issue with the inference of (3) from (2), and though a lack of consensus is not proof of (1), I am happy to admit it. But the warrant of the move from (1) to (2) is somewhat lacking. First, it is worth noticing that the inference is a cousin of sorts to the so-called “pessimistic induction from past failure” argument for anti-realism about scientific theories.³³ Though there are some important differences in the two applications,³⁴ both reason that we should doubt the veracity or usefulness of a particular sort of theory on the basis of past failures of other theories of the same type. The key assumption in both cases is that a correlation between theories of the type and failure will continue.

But there are two ways for a series of theories to fail over time. They may fail stagnantly, so that no progress is made; the theories either do not in the main get better over time, or they do not significantly change over time. But theories may also all fail and yet fail dynamically, so that (at least some of) them do make progress, and better theories tend to replace worse ones. Stagnant failure is reason for pessimism, but dynamic failure is not. In fact, dynamic failure is reason for optimism – not, perhaps, that we are particularly close to a firm and lasting solution

³³ See, for instance, Larry Laudan’s argument against “convergent epistemological realism” in Larry Loudan “A Confutation of Convergent Realism” *Philosophy of Science* Vol. 48, No. 1 (Mar., 1981, 19-49), especially Pp. 24-26 and 33-35

³⁴ There is nothing in art theory, for instance, to correspond to the emphasis on reference or the problem of unobservable phenomena.

but at least that we are on the right track. That scientific theories – even if they all “fail” in some strict sense – are dynamic in this way is often the best defense available to the realist. It is not clear how we can explain the predictive success of the sciences without genuine scientific knowledge and the ability of at least some scientific terms to genuinely refer. Also, failed scientific theories tend not to come back without significant reform.

If essentialist theories of art are failing, is there any evidence that they are failing dynamically? Well, it certainly isn't as clear as it is in the sciences. Definitional theories of art are neither predictive nor technologically useful³⁵, so we need a different sort of standard. I suggest that one place to look may be in the number and significance of the counterexamples to the definitions that have been offered by or implied in prior theories. We do not have quite the same ease in providing counterexamples to the expression theories of Collingwood and Tolstoy that we do to Kant's and Hutcheson's formalist approaches, which were in turn improvements (on this score) on the mimetic theories of art we see in Plato and (more explicitly) Aristotle. And our difficulties in finding counterexamples increases (consistently if unsteadily) as we go forward through the twentieth century. Institutional and historical definitions are – at least on this one marker – improvements on their predecessors. Furthermore, while someone may present a mimetic, formal or expression theory of art today, to gain any traction it will have to be a more subtle, sophisticated version. Crucially, it will have to be so *in order to* meet the challenges and (even more importantly) take on the virtues of other subsequent theories.

One possible way to strengthen the pessimistic claim is to say that we've exhausted the search and found nothing. This is stronger evidence if true, but it is clearly false. I know that my keys are not in my apartment when I know that I've looked everywhere in the apartment and

³⁵ This is not to say, of course, that a definitional theory can't be useful. I devote the latter third of this dissertation, in fact, to demonstrating a number of uses for the definition I endorse.

not found the keys. When I discover a whole new closet I haven't considered before, I no longer know that my keys are not in the apartment. I cannot just say that the keys aren't there because I've been looking a long time. New sorts of definitional theories appear with enough regularity that we should stop summarily declaring the search over.

III. We do not know what we want from a definition of art.

A third and final type of objection may be that whatever value the definitional project has, it is somewhat premature. Perhaps we will not be able to agree on a definitional theory of art because we lack prior agreement on the criteria by which the correct theory should be identified. It may be wrong to expect more agreement on the criteria than the theories they help us judge. At the very least, the risk of question begging is awfully high. I will attempt, however, to briefly outline what I take to be appropriate (mostly) specific-theory-neutral criteria. Specifically, I think the correct definition of art – whatever it is – will satisfy some properly-weighted sum of the following:

Extensional Adequacy

No actual object that is clearly an artwork should be ruled out by the theory and nothing that is clearly not an artwork should be ruled in. This is a minimal condition for an essential definition. And as I've argued already, an essential definition ought not to be rejected in favor of any other sort of definition in the absence of some compelling reason. However, this should not be understood to imply that we have anything like prior agreement on an exact class of artworks. But I do not think it is controversial to say that we do have rational agreement on the status of some objects, and a definition of art ought not to contradict that agreement.

Intensional Adequacy

No hypothetical object that clearly would be an artwork (were it to exist) should be ruled out by theory and no hypothetical object that clearly would not be an artwork should be ruled in. This requirement may be a bit more controversial. We can (and many have) come up with scenarios that seem in their strangeness to dissolve rather than test our intuitions about what is art and what isn't.³⁶ But if we can describe an imaginary object in some way that it would be *unreasonable* to think of it as art, we do not want a definition that would have us think of it as art – and so too for imaginary non-art objects. We should be able to apply the correct definition of “art” to a world entirely unlike ours – i.e. with an entirely different set of cultural objects – and return an appropriate³⁷ set of art objects, even if that set is empty. All this is to say, we want a definition that captures not only *what* is art, but also what art *is*.

Modal Adequacy

³⁶ One example might be Levinson's “solitary Indian along the Amazon, who steals off from his non-artistic tribe to arrange coloured stones in a clearing,” [Jerrold Levinson, “Defining Art Historically” *British Journal of Aesthetics* Vol. 19, No. 3 (Summer 1979,232-250) P. 233] which he offers as a counterexample to Dickie. This is similar in some ways to cases that I will discuss in the next chapter, but I have to confess that my own experience with it is less than telling (for me). Whether or not it would be a counterexample to Dickie were it art, I'm not sure what I think about its (hypothetical) art status. I have thought it art on a Monday and not on a Tuesday. By Wednesday, I no longer have a clear intuition about it at all.

³⁷ Two quick words about “appropriate” here. First, I mean to indicate that the set returned should be appropriate to our understanding of art – not necessarily to the understanding of “art” common among the denizens of this world (if they have one). Second, appropriateness need not be judged – at least given this criterion alone – by both exclusivity and exhaustiveness. A theory that provided only sufficient conditions for art status should be able to return an exclusive set art objects in counterfactual conditions, though if it is no requirement of the theory that it provide necessary conditions in the actual world, surely it should not be required to return an exhaustive set of objects in a merely possible world.

This requirement is somewhat akin to intensional adequacy, though the focus here is on the status of objects rather than the definition itself. A theory of art ought not to contradict certain facts about the *possibility* of objects being art. First, everything is such that it is possible that it is art. In the standard Kripke semantics, take any object here in our world and there is a suitably accessible world in which that object is a work of art. Under the right conditions, anything could be art. I am privileging a fairly liberal conception of art here, but (again) I do not think that the twentieth century's avant-garde still needs to fight for a place in the artworld. And if that battle is in fact won, then (as Danto pointed out decades ago) art can look, sound, feel etc. like anything. Therefore, in theory, anything can now be art.

Second, nothing is necessarily art. There is no object – not the *Mona Lisa*, not *Hamlet* nor Mahler's *Fifth* – that is an artwork in all accessible worlds - and this is not only (and trivially) true because the objects may not exist in a given world. “The *Mona Lisa*” refers to the same object here as it does in a possible world in which it was created by accident and destroyed without being displayed; “*Hamlet*” refers as well to a play written accidentally by the thousand chimpanzees at their thousand typewriters; and Mahler's *Fifth Symphony* could be produced by just the right succession of car horns on the Brooklyn Queens Expressway.

Finally, it is possible that there is no art at all. We do not want a definition of art that makes art itself into something necessary. It is an entirely contingent fact of our cultural history that we engage in the kinds of practices that we rightly call “art.”

Categorical Accuracy

A definition of art ought to both distinguish and explain the connection between the practice of art and its objects. As Carroll³⁸ and others have emphasized, “art” may refer to a set of cultural practices *or* to a set of art objects. A definition of art should not conflate these senses, but neither should it deny their connection. Either the practice should be defined in terms of the objects it produces or (I think more plausibly) the proper set of objects should be determined by their role in the practice.

Specificity

Ceteris paribus, of two theories that meet other criteria, we ought to choose the one that provides more insight into the nature of art. I will discuss this particular criterion in more detail in the next chapter in my discussion of institutional and historical theories.

Cultural Invariance

This criterion more or less follows from what I’ve said above. Some cultures may not have art. Various cultures have very different art traditions that produce different sets of objects. Many may place different cultural significance on art practices. And some cultures may have no term that translates to “art” or no recognition of the practice. None of these mean that art itself is somehow culturally relative. The cultural relativity of artistic norms, practices and values is an entirely different question. The definitional project picks out a particular cultural practice and the objects it produces and/or advances to art status. It is successful to the extent that that practice and those objects are those we correctly call “art.” If it picks out only European or Western art, then that is a problem for the theory, not the definitional project.

³⁸ Noël Carroll, “Art Practice and Narrative” *The Monist* Vol. 72, No. 2 (April 1988, 140-156) P. 140 and elsewhere

Explanatory Power

We should not require a theory to explain everything that is true of art, but we ought to be able to reason from the definition to certain crucial things:

(1) Art's significance – Tolstoy³⁹ was correct to place this condition on theories of art. Whatever art is, it is of enormous cultural (and almost universal personal) importance to us. If art is essentially a set of formal properties, it is not like other sets of formal properties. This one set has a unique ability to engage, motivate and inspire. If it is a mode of communication, it is not like other modes of communication. It demands a depth of attention and interpretation that would be entirely inappropriate if applied to everyday discourse. If art is essentially institutional, the unique set of freedoms, expectations and responsibilities that attend participation in an artworld distinguish it from other cultural institutions. If it is primarily a cultural history, the nature of that history must be articulated in a way that preserves art's particular historical significance. Art has played a key part in all of our best and our worst historical moments. It has been more than just an expression of our lofty ideals and base instincts, it has been their catalyst and teacher. And to return to Tolstoy again, there is a sense in which art *must* be significant given the great burdens and detriments it causes for its practitioners. Art is a thing “which demands such tremendous labor sacrifices from the people, which stunts human lives and transgresses against human love.”⁴⁰ And yet it is everywhere in our culture. A theory of art that does not explain its significance leaves the sacrifices so often made on its behalf either irrational or mysterious.

³⁹ Leo Tolstoy, *What Is Art?* Aylmer Maude Trans., (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1996 – original publication 1896) Pp. 15,70, 142-3

⁴⁰ *ibid.* 15

(2) Historical change within an ahistorical concept – Just as what art *is* is culturally invariant, it is temporally invariant in our own cultural history. And yet the sorts of things that count as art are constantly changing. The objects that count as art may be entirely different one art-historical era to another or the set of art objects may expand in each successive era. Either way, the class of artworks changes and a theory of art should be able to account for such changes. But those changes do not mean that we do not have a stable concept “art” to consider. Just as a biological theory considers animals throughout and across different evolutionary periods, so too should an aesthetic theory (of the kind under consideration) consider art throughout and across different art-historical eras.

(3) The institutional nature of art – Though I will argue that art cannot be defined solely by appeal to an artworld institution, a definition of art should account for the fact that art is in fact a cultural institution⁴¹. Art is something that we do, something we create and display through an evolving system of cultural norms.

(4) The difficulty of borderline cases – Reasonable people will reasonably disagree about the art status of certain objects. This should be explained by a definition of art. That is to say, such disagreement should be facilitated by (not precluded by) agreement on the best definition of “art.” However, there are in general two ways to explain borderline cases, only one of which is appropriate. Specifically, borderline cases indicate indeterminacy either in the sufficiency or necessity of definitional properties *or* in the capacity of the “borderline” object or practice to

⁴¹ Jeffrey Wieand provides a useful distinction between action-institutions and person-institutions [Jeffrey Wieand, “Can There Be an Institutional Theory of Art?” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* Vol. 39, No. 4 (Summer, 1981, 409-417) P.409; see also Dickie (1997)]. When I say that art is a cultural institution, I mean “institution” strictly in the sense of an action-institution, a specific kind of rule-governed practice in which people participate rather than a body of participating people.

exemplify those properties. In order to be satisfactorily informative, the best definitional theory will only appeal to the latter form of indeterminacy.

(5) The unity of artforms – Within and beyond the “modern system,” a definition of art should not only allow for but *explain* the fact that such ontologically diverse things as poems, paintings, songs and even ideas can be works of art.

In the next chapter, I will consider a number of candidate definitional (and quasi-definitional) theories on just these lines. If the definitional theory of art that I present in detail in Chapter Four does not satisfy all these conditions better than all of these alternative accounts, it does, I think and hope, do a better job of satisfying more of them.

CHAPTER THREE: Prior Definitional Theories

If, as I tried to show in the last chapter, finding a satisfactory definition of art is neither impossible nor (clearly) improbable, it is reasonable to ask if we already have one – or if we already have a theory of art that supplies everything we could reasonably want from a definition. In this chapter I'll suggest reasons to think some available theories of art are not as successful as we would like. I've tried to focus here on theories that are either historically significant or ones that I take to be the best current candidates.

I. Representational (mimetic) theories

Something like a mimetic theory of art seems to have been *assumed* in antiquity and (perhaps surprisingly) well beyond.⁴² For Plato, the arts were dangerous *because* of their mimetic nature, both because mimesis has a particularly subtle, effective and likely deleterious influence on our souls and because the mimetic object is inferior in truth to both the Forms and the appearances that the mimetic object imitates.⁴³ Though his focus in the *Republic* and the *Ion* (the dialogues in which Plato is most concerned with art) is on poetry and Homer especially, he makes it clear that what he says applies to painting as well. Aristotle, in his attempt to rescue (what I have argued we call⁴⁴) art from Plato, does not differ significantly in his understanding of what art is. As he says in the beginning of the *Poetics*, “Now epic poetry and the making of

⁴² Vasari, for instance, at least makes mimesis central to the history of visual art that he tells. From the preface of his *Lives*: “[O]ur art consists entirely of imitation, first of Nature, and then, as it cannot rise so high of itself, of those things which are produced from the masters with the greatest reputation.” [Giorgio Vasari, *Lives of the Painters, Sculptors and Architects Volume 1* A.B. Hinds, Trans., (London: J.M. Dent and Co. 1900 – First Published 1550)] P. xvii]

⁴³ These are of course significant themes of books II, III and X of the *Republic*, but see especially *Republic X*, 605b-c for both sides of the criticism along with its inclusive application to both painting and mimetic poetry.

⁴⁴ See the discussion of Kristeller in the previous chapter.

tragedy, and also comedy and dithyrambic poetry, as well as most flute-playing and lyre-playing, are all as a whole just exactly imitations...”⁴⁵ In addition, the ways in which the arts imitate provide a basis for their division. The intended object of imitation even distinguishes tragedy from comedy.⁴⁶

The advent and then dominance of absolute music⁴⁷ and abstract expressionism within their respective artworlds initially seem to preclude representational definitions’ ability to provide necessary conditions for “art.” Yet we can imagine someone (and there are probably actual examples⁴⁸) extending the objects of representation to affective states or even propositional attitudes in an attempt to recapture at least a large part of modern art for mimetic theory. But no amount of such adjustment would enable such a theory to provide sufficient conditions (without the addition of some radically different criteria). Depictive advertising and pictographic street signs, for instance, clearly involve representation without therefore being “art.”

II. Art as the beautiful or revelatory

Whatever else changed in artistic practice and criticism over the two-plus millennia after Aristotle, by 1896 Tolstoy was able to write (at least of Russia) that the “ordinary man” would

⁴⁵ *Poetics*, 1447a

⁴⁶ *ibid.* 1448a

⁴⁷ Both “advent” and “dominance” may seem a bit out of place. “Advent” may not do justice to the messy and organic emergence of the style and its “dominance” may be apparent only in its progeny. Modestly, I’m only describing a significant and lasting departure from representational (or programme), accompanying and functional (i.e. dance) music.

⁴⁸ It may be tempting at first glance to view Susanne Langer’s position somewhat this way. For reasons that I will explore more when I give her work more consideration below, I think this would not be a proper reading of it.

say that “Art is such an activity as produces beauty.”⁴⁹ Tolstoy traces this ordinary man’s error to Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten, who was famous at the time for having founded aesthetics (fame often attends the originators of terms rather than the originators of ideas) as the study of beauty and the theoretical study of art as a special case.⁵⁰ Kant could as easily have served as Tolstoy’s culprit. Kant had a “general” conception of art as a practical skill (distinct from theoretical knowledge) that is doubly free (i.e. the product of a reasoning will and done for its own sake). The arts are then divided into the mechanical (crafts, designed merely for realization) and aesthetical (designed for a feeling of pleasure) and the latter into the pleasant (lively conversation, merely pleasant noises) and the beautiful. Only beautiful aesthetical art really corresponds to the sense of “art” under consideration. Beautiful art must be understood to be art – that is we must know that it satisfies the “general” conditions described above, “but yet the purposiveness in its form must seem to be as free from all constraint of arbitrary rules as if it were a product of mere nature.”⁵¹ In a sense the artist *hides* from us his adherence to the rules of design that make art possible. It is appearing like nature in this sense – rather than, for instance, mere verisimilitude – that distinguishes art. Though conceived differently, it is still “beauty in nature” - for Kant the object of our disinterested satisfaction⁵² – in which an object must participate in order to be art.⁵³

⁴⁹ Tolstoy (1896/1996), 17

⁵⁰ *ibid.*, 25. I would love to cite Baumgarten directly, but I don’t believe there is as yet an English translation of his *Aesthetica*, and my Latin isn’t up to the task. *Mea culpa*. For what it’s worth, Tolstoy himself references an M. Schasler on behalf of Baumgarten [*ibid.*, P.25n1].

⁵¹ Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgment* J.H. Bernard, Trans. (Amherst, NY: Prometheus, 2000 – First published 1781) P.187/§45

⁵² *ibid.* Pp. 46-48/§2

⁵³ There is another sense in which nature and art are connected in Kant’s aesthetics. The rules that allow for the production of beautiful art are not concept-based and therefore not teachable. Instead they are learned from exposure to beautiful art. The rules *originate* in acts of genius, and genius is an innate gift of nature. [*ibid.* Pp. 188-193/§46-47]

There are things other than beauty that art may produce that suggest alternative ways of understanding what art is. Hegel, for instance, also begins with a conception of art via its connection to “beauty,” but we quickly find in Hegel radically different pictures of both art and beauty. For one thing, he thinks that – as it is a product of the mind rather than an “appearance” of nature – “artistic beauty stands *higher* than nature.”⁵⁴ Second, Hegel characterizes his conception of the work of art as an artifact addressed to man’s senses for a particular end.⁵⁵ It is that third condition, the end of art⁵⁶ that distinguishes his account. Hegel considers and rejects the imitation of nature, mimesis, evocation and moral improvement as ends of art.⁵⁷ The real purpose of art, Hegel thinks, is “revealing *the truth* in the form of sensuous artistic shape, of representing the reconciled antithesis [of the will in its spiritual universality to its sensuous natural particularity] and, therefore, has its purpose in itself, in this representation and revelation.”⁵⁸ Art is thus *opposed* in a sense to the moral point of view which takes universal law and particular inclination to be necessarily at odds. But Hegel has in mind here a more general reconciliation between universal idea and particular sensuous instantiation that art presents (rather dramatically as it sounds) to us. Whatever the particular *content* of an artwork, that reconciliation is its subject, and the revelation of it is its aim. What sets art apart from other presentations of truth (philosophy or religion, say) is its form. Revelation is artistic when that form is sensory and the form is revelatory when it is adequate to our understanding of “the absolute” (i.e. the absolute *idea*). As the latter undergoes historical change – especially in the form of an expansion of the idea of freedom - so too, essentially, will art.

⁵⁴ Hegel (1886/2004), 4

⁵⁵ *ibid.* 30

⁵⁶ Read “end” here as in “purpose,” not to be confused with Hegel’s quite separate “end” as in “conclusion” theory of art history to which I turn in a moment.

⁵⁷ *ibid.* 47-60

⁵⁸ *ibid.* 61

Theories that identify art with a kind of beauty will naturally have some difficulty with works that are either intentionally grotesque or absent the kinds of qualities to which we're inclined to attach beauty. Calling Damien Hirst's *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living* "beautiful" at least stretches the language. And if Robert Barry's *Inert Gas Series* has any beauty to it, that beauty is supplied by the settings of the piece, not – and in fact in stark juxtaposition to – the work itself. So it appears that beauty is not necessary for art. Nor will such theories prevent Lincoln's *Gettysburg Address*, *The Book of Psalms* or even certain travel brochures from being art, so beauty is not sufficient either.

The larger problem with these theories is that the assumption of some connection between art and natural beauty is treated in them as explanandum rather than conclusion. Kant does not appear uncomfortable assuming that his audience would so easily and immediately see a connection between natural beauty and art that the project became explaining how the latter could be understood in terms of the former rather than arguing that it should be. Now it may have been true in the 18th Century that a principal function of the art of the time was to display the beauty or sublimity⁵⁹ of nature. But identifying the principal function of art at a given time is by no means a definition. For one thing, change in the set of artworks – including significant change in features common among artworks – does not mean change in the meaning of "art." It

⁵⁹ Kant himself is oddly quiet on the question of *sublime* art. See Robert Wicks's and Paul Guyer's discussion in the *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* for a couple interesting perspectives on this. [Robert Wicks, "Kant on Fine Art: Artistic Sublimity Shaped by Beauty" and Paul Guyer, "Beauty, Sublimity, and Expression: Reply to Wicks and Cantrick" *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* Vol. 53, No. 2 (Spring, 1995, 189-193; 194-195)]

It is enough for our present purposes to notice that while Kant may have focused on "beautiful" art, there is plenty in the Third *Critique* to suggest that a parallel account of sublime art could be crafted just as sublimity in general has a treatment parallel to beauty in general. As such, some rather grotesque art may be examples of sublime art rather than beautiful art and fall neatly into this expanded version of Kant's account. But I doubt still that anyone would think a bisected shark or invisible gasses being released into the atmosphere productive of genuine feelings of sublimity.

is easy to see, however, how concepts of art at a given historical moment may be confused for concepts of art in general - especially when those moments do not see much diversity in artistic functions.

Yet if these criticisms are damning to the applications of Kant's theory to modern art, they are not so to Hegel's. Hegel's theory of art is subtler, stronger, and more capable of longevity.⁶⁰ For one thing, Hegel's conception of art explicitly makes use of some of the changes within the arts that prove so troubling for Kant. Second, it is no objection to Hegel's account that it does not capture recent art. Crucially, Hegel thought that art history (at least in the fullest or most significant sense of "art") had come to an end in his own era.⁶¹ It is not immediately clear, however, whether this last point is a virtue or a vice of his theory. We have turned away from the representation of the idea of freedom through the personalization of objective will. And yet we seem to have another couple centuries of art history. The object of that history seems – depending, I admit, on how widely we understand it – to be as lively and as culturally significant as ever. However, Hegel may be right on this score despite our continuing to attribute art status to certain significant cultural objects. It may be that we in fact had one practice to define before "the end of art" and another since. I will only suggest here that we ought – *ceteris paribus* – to prefer the theory that causes less reformation of our language and less damage to our pre-theoretical uses of the concepts in question. Otherwise, we run the risk of being able to identify any cultural practice with a project taken up within the history of that practice and then declare the practice over and done whenever that project is completed. We could just as well, for instance, identify government with monarchy and declare government dead along with the era of monarchy.

⁶⁰ This should not be surprising, as Hegel was far more concerned with art.

⁶¹ Hegel (1886/2004) Pp. 12-13 and elsewhere

Let us say (for now for the sake of argument) that there is after all some identifiable features exclusive to and exhaustive of the objects belonging to the history of art as we normally understand it – including cave paintings, readymades and everything in between – that accounts not only for the longevity of art but also for its continuous significance. It will be obvious that certain projects have been taken up and either abandoned or completed within that long history. So, even if Hegel has identified a significant project within that history, he has only *identified the essence of art* in the absence of a more inclusive definition. Or, perhaps more exactly, his theory ought to be preferred only given such an absence. We should put off an adjudication of Hegel’s theory of art, then, until we see if we can produce just such a more inclusive account. If we can, then Hegel wasn’t necessarily wrong, but the object of his theory was not expansive enough to satisfy our desire for a definition.

At least two responses on Hegel’s behalf may seem warranted at this point. First it may be objected that my reading of Hegel is too influenced by Danto’s⁶² and that Hegel does not *identify* art with a project that has ended. Perhaps, then, Hegel’s claims that “art is, and remains for us, on the side of its highest destiny, a thing of the past” and that it has “lost for us its genuine truth and life, and rather is transferred into our ideas than asserts its former necessity, or assumes its former place, in reality”⁶³ belong to a discussion of the value of art or even art criticism more than to the nature or essence of art. If so, then I’m content to leave an answer to Hegel for another day and another discussion. The present question is whether or not there is already a successful theory of art. If I’m wrong that Hegel provides a theory of art at all, then I’m only right for the wrong reasons that he has not provided a successful one.

⁶² In, for instance, Arthur C. Danto, *After The End Of Art: Contemporary Art and the Pale of History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997) Pp. 30-31

⁶³ Hegel (1886/2004) P. 13

It may be objected instead that Hegel correctly identifies the nature of art with the project of “revealing the truth” and is indeed claiming that that project has come to an end, but is wrong that it has ended. Perhaps Hegel was better at art theory than he was at recognizing the role of art in his own era. We should wonder, then, if art over the last couple centuries has engaged in this project after all. It would not be not quite enough to simply point out that artists today do not typically have Hegel’s spiritual project in mind and so the subject of art cannot be the reconciliation of universal will and its particular instantiation and the aim of art cannot be revelatory. Revelation could, for instance, be a net effect of artistic activity without being part of any artist’s intentions – somewhat like *playing baseball* is not exactly part of a pitcher’s intent in throwing or a batter’s intent in swinging, yet a game emerges all the same. Alternatively, revelation could be part of an artist’s intention without her being aware of it.

What we should do, then, is determine the ways in which art *could* have this spiritual subject and then ask if modern and contemporary art is capable of any of them. There are, I think, three clear candidates. First, the spiritual subject may be revealed through an artwork’s representational content. Perhaps when art was both predominantly representational and inextricably tied to religious life, this could be said of most art in general. But surely this is not the case today. The second way art could reveal its subject is through the significance of its content. For instance, the claim that there is great value in pastoral life is no part of the representational content of a given landscape painting, and yet that claim could reasonably be thought to be part of the meaning of the painting. Of course we *could* simply choose to interpret any given artwork as having the kind of grand significance Hegel describes. But *correct* interpretation (whatever we think the proper criteria) requires reason rather than free choice. It is difficult to imagine what reasons we could provide for such interpretations of much of modern

and contemporary art. These first two modes of presentation correspond to what Paul Grice called “non-natural” meaning and are proper objects of interpretation.⁶⁴ The third way an artwork could be revelatory for us corresponds rather to “natural” meaning and is not the subject of interpretation per se. We might say, for instance, that “*The Iliad* reveals three competing ancient conceptions of citizenship” or “The style of *Nude Descending a Staircase* means that Duchamp was influenced by Picasso.” So perhaps art demonstrates the condition of the idea of freedom in this way. Maybe the condition of the artworld today therefore reveals a deteriorated condition of that idea in our culture. But if art is revelatory only in this sense, then it is no different from any other sort of artifact. All of material culture is capable of revealing a great deal about the people who produce it. What we are after (and something Hegel himself wanted⁶⁵) is a theory of art that distinguishes it from other cultural practices. Finally, it may be that Hegel has in mind some fourth sort of revealing that I have not considered. The “absolute truth” is itself so mysterious, maybe it is necessary that its mode of revelation be mysterious as well. But if so then our mysteries are compounding and we are no further along in saying what art is.

III. Expressivist theories

Tolstoy’s response to Baumgarten and the “common man” is his own theory of art as the expression of emotion: “Art is a human activity,” Tolstoy says, “consisting in this, that one man consciously, by means of certain external signs, hands on to others feelings he has lived through, and that other people are infected by these feelings and also experience them.”⁶⁶ For Tolstoy,

⁶⁴ H.P. Grice, "Meaning," *Philosophical Review* Vol. 66, No. 3 (Jul., 1957): 377-388

⁶⁵ Hegel (1886/2004), Especially Pp. 55-61

⁶⁶ Tolstoy (1896/1996) P. 51

what crucially sets the expressivist account apart from its predecessors is its focus on the communicative nature of art, which is ultimately “the purpose it may serve in the life of man and of humanity.”⁶⁷ The communication, of course, is of a very particular kind. Art is the expression of an emotion felt by an artist in order to evoke the same emotion in an audience. The work of art is the mechanism of this communication. Tolstoy’s account thus expands in one direction and contrasts in another the class of genuine (and not “counterfeit”) art in a way that would be encouraging to someone of his political bent. Many of the beautiful objects cut off from the lower classes cease to be art while the more evocative storytelling and music of Russian peasants become exemplary cases of art.

R.G. Collingwood, writing some forty years later, presents another expressivist account that is more complicated than Tolstoy’s in a number of dimensions. For Collingwood, the expression of emotion is necessary but not sufficient for artistic communication. The artistic activity must involve imagination as well. What is crucial for “art proper” is not the expression of emotion so much as the *experience of* expressing emotion through the imagination.⁶⁸ Collingwood’s “imagination” is something like active consciousness, something intermediary between emotion and the intellect.⁶⁹ Collingwood calls the activity of this imagination “aesthetic experience” and it – when shared by artist and audience – is what we ought to refer to as “art proper” rather than any physical art object.⁷⁰ This is not a change in conversation for Collingwood. He thinks that whatever we have previously taken ourselves to be saying about art objects was *in fact* about aesthetic experience.

⁶⁷ *ibid.* 49

⁶⁸ R.G. Collingwood, *The Principles of Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972) P. 275

⁶⁹ *ibid.* 215

⁷⁰ *ibid.* 37

Extending expressivist theories into the present artworld will in many ways be as difficult as with the formalist accounts described above. Warhol's *Empire* does not seem to express an emotion so much as an idea. It is difficult to imagine, in fact, Warhol's activity of imagination as Collingwood describes it involving an aesthetic experience of the kind he describes. Nor will expressivist accounts (at least without some considerable and probably ad hoc reformulation) be able to supply sufficient conditions. Our letters to friends and family and even mass-produced greeting cards are often the products of imaginative processes that also produce aesthetic emotions expressed through the process and its product. They certainly can be artifacts through which a single emotion is expressed and evoked. It is much to Tolstoy's and Collingwood's credit that they make explicit the communicative function of art. The problem is that they limit the nature of what is communicated by art too narrowly. Let's turn, then, to some theories that broaden that scope considerably.

IV. Art as language

Naming this section in which I'll discuss the theories of Nelson Goodman, Susanne Langer and Arthur Danto "Art as Language" may seem odd for a number of reasons. For one, Collingwood is explicit about thinking of art *as* language⁷¹ and I do not include him here. For another, the philosophers discussed here are not so explicit and Goodman at least is explicit (despite the name of his book) that art is best thought of as a kind of symbol system *other* than language.⁷² What unites the theories I will consider here is that they characterize art in terms of its communicative role in human life *without* placing constraints on what is communicated. So art does what language does. In each, art is thought of as being (a) essentially communicative

⁷¹ *ibid.* 273

⁷² Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1968) Pp. xi-xii

and (b) distinguishable from other communicative practices on the basis of the way it communicates. It is (b) that separates these three (and others, of course) from expressivists like Tolstoy and Collingwood, both of whom distinguish art from other communicative practices based on *what* rather than the *way in which* it communicates.

Goodman does not attempt a real/essential definition of art but instead provides three “symptoms of the aesthetic” that distinguish art as a symbol system: syntactic density (small – perhaps infinitesimally small – changes in marking will result in change in the character marked), semantic density (such changes in character can result in a different referent being picked out), and syntactic repleteness (marks will have a greater – perhaps exhaustive – set of properties which will bear on the character they mark).⁷³ Art is distinguished, then, by the particular way in which it represents. A figure in a drawing is not like a printed word. If this page is printed on two different printers, there will be minute differences in the marks, but it would be absurd to think that different characters are used or that the meaning somehow changes. In a painting, similarly small differences may mean differences in both the means of reference (because it is syntactically dense) and the referent (because it is semantically dense). Repleteness, then, allows Goodman to distinguish a drawing from (say) a subway map. Not all features of a line between two dots on the map refer to features of subway track between two stations. Absent an indication in the legend, we are not entitled to assume, for instance, that a thicker line means a wider track. But say the two lines instead appeared in a very simple drawing of snakes. We would be entitled to think that the thicker line depicted a wider snake. Goodman identifies art with a kind of representation, but he does not limit “representation” to denotation, so he is able to account for art forms that we sometimes think of as “non-

⁷³ *ibid.* 252-253.

representational.” Architecture, for instance, may be art by virtue of its representing a particular artistic style – “representing” here in the sense of exemplification rather than denotation.⁷⁴

In *After The End Of Art* Danto makes explicit the theory of art for which he was arguing at least as far back as *The Transfiguration Of The Commonplace*. “To be a work of art,” he says there, “is to be (i) *about* something and (ii) to *embody its meaning*.”⁷⁵ (i) and (ii) provide necessary and not sufficient conditions. Danto then quickly and somewhat puzzlingly compares the way something embodies its meaning to Frege’s “coloring” or “tone.” What Danto has in mind, I think, is that art is distinguished as a mode of communication because understanding the meaning of an artwork – to know what it is *about* – requires special attention to the coloring of the art object. In Fregean terms,⁷⁶ the sentences “The crucifixion of Christ was terrible and holy” and “The crucifixion of Christ was terrible but holy” have the same reference (the truth value of the conjunction) and sense (propositions expressed) but not the same coloring. To see the distinction here is just not the same sort of thing as seeing the distinction between, say, Rembrandt’s *Raising of the Cross* and Dali’s *Christ of Saint John of the Cross*. The two paintings hardly express the same thing the way the two sentences do.

Unlike Goodman or Danto, Susanne Langer does offer necessary and sufficient conditions. In *Feeling and Form* she says that the work of art can be distinguished “from everything else in the world” this way: “Art is the creation of forms symbolic of human

⁷⁴ Nelson Goodman, “How Buildings Mean” *Critical Inquiry* Vol. 11, No. 4 (Jun., 1985, 642-653) especially Pp. 645-648. I’ll have a bit more to say about this move in Chapter Six.

⁷⁵ Danto (1997), P. 195

⁷⁶ Michael Dummett’s explication of “*farbung*” was a help to me. [Michael Dummett, *Frege: Philosophy of Language*, Second Edition (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993) P. 2]

feeling.”⁷⁷ This may at first sound exactly like the kind of expressivist theory I said I will not describe here. What sets Langer apart from the expressivists is the wide domain of “human feeling” in her theory. Unlike with Tolstoy or Collingwood, what is communicated here is not necessarily or even predominantly the artist’s *actual* emotions. “Anything an artist can envisage,” she writes, “is ‘like’ his own subjectivity, or is at least connected with his ways of feeling.”⁷⁸ Art can communicate many things, many *sorts* of things. What distinguishes art is the nature of the symbol system developed for representing those things.

Both Goodman’s and Langer’s accounts seem to be more at home in visual and musical arts than in other forms, even if “reference” captures more than just denotation. They both need art forms to be essentially (if broadly construed) symbol systems with semantic and syntactic rules that distinguish them from ordinary language. There will be at least two sorts of problems with generalizing their accounts much beyond paradigmatic forms and cases. First, literature and poetry are already in ordinary language. It seems odd at least to think that Emily Dickinson’s poems are simultaneously well-formed structures in two different symbol systems, but we should be equally reluctant to think that their art status is closer to that of a gallery catalogue than the works discussed in the catalogue simply because they share a symbol system with the former and not the latter. Second, some visual artists employ other symbol systems as part of their work. It would be one thing if works only used shapes indistinguishable from printed letters and words – then we could happily say that the shape is not the same character in its new (artistic) system. But consider Christopher Wool’s works that consist of block-letter printed text often with mid-word enjambment on white canvases. It is true that the positioning of letters is vastly more

⁷⁷ Susanne Langer, *Feeling and Form: A Theory of Art Developed from Philosophy in a New Key* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953) P. 40

⁷⁸ *ibid.* 391

significant in a Wool painting than in the typesetting of a novel, but that fact is not enough to demonstrate that Wool's work is in a different symbol system than the novel. Crucially, understanding the Wool painting involves understanding what it says *in English*.

Neither Goodman's "symptoms" nor Langer's symbolic forms seem much more capable as sufficient conditions. Just as we might want to count the art status of Dickinson's poems as akin to that of a representational painting in a gallery or museum, we might want to distance the status of that painting from that of an advertisement, even if that advertisement is syntactically indiscernible from the painting.⁷⁹

It is natural here, in a discussion of the indiscernible, to return to Danto, whose theory of art cannot be dismissed as quickly. For one thing, it is not always clear – and there is no consensus about – what "Danto's theory of art" ought to mean. I have chosen for my own purposes to focus here on what we might call his "semantic" theory of art. But his (only somewhat Hegelian) "end of art" historical thesis⁸⁰ and his "artworld" institutional thesis⁸¹ may be equally deserving of the title. It is not always clear how these ideas fit together. Limiting our focus to the semantic thesis, though, it is worth asking if it provides or could provide the basis for an essentialist definition of "art." There are at least two reasons to think it may not. First, "embodiment" is – despite Danto's claims otherwise – fundamentally evaluative. Good, compelling and significant art probably does need to embody its meaning in this way, and we're all beneficiaries of Danto's own use of embodiment as a critical criterion. But hotel lobbies, waiting rooms and (alas) galleries are filled with artworks whose meaning is quite literally the same as other artworks with radically different coloring. Imagine, for instance, two very

⁷⁹ Note that all that is required for the objection to go through is that artwork and non-artwork be indiscernible for all intents and (communicative) purposes.

⁸⁰ Danto (1997) and elsewhere

⁸¹ Arthur Danto, "The Artworld." *Journal of Philosophy* Vol. 61, No. 19 (Oct. 15, 1964): 582-4.
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ordinary but very different pastel landscape paintings by a competent but unimaginative painter hung in a gallery by a daring and incompetent curator. If the two paintings embody their meaning the way Danto describes, then they have two different meanings. Otherwise, art loses what is special and particular to it on Danto's account. Unlike other semantic systems, in art coloring has got to be determinative of meaning. But the two pastels have different coloring and the same meaning. It may be tempting to bolster the account with a kind of intentionality clause, so that what is crucial is not a work's successful embodiment of its meaning but the artist's attempt to create it. But this is not Danto's theory, and it would not help much if it were. It is exactly as implausible to think that the two pastels have two different intended meanings as it is to think they have two meanings. As such, then, it is not clear that Danto makes room here for the possibility of bad (truly *bad*, not just not-as-good-as-other) art.

Second, I'm not sure that Danto's response⁸² to Carroll's claim that Danto's account does not properly distinguish art from non-art is entirely successful.⁸³ Carroll's objection, in essence, is that things like cereal boxes embody their contents which are contained therein. Danto's response is that there are two senses of "embodiment" and "containment" at work. This is obviously the case, but it seems to me that the cereal boxes "embody" their "contents" in both senses. A picture of the cereal on the box lets you know what is inside the box, but the *meaning* of that picture also may depend greatly on its coloring in addition to its reference and sense. To take one of many possible examples, soft lighting in the picture may suggest in some very subtle way that the cereal is being offered more for its health benefits than its taste. Crucially, this suggestion may have absolutely nothing to do with the product inside the

⁸² Arthur Danto, "Art and Meaning" In Carroll (2000, 130-140), especially Pp.133-138

⁸³ As I mention above, Danto's not claiming to provide a sufficient condition for art. Still, it is fair to ask of his account that it do *something* to meaningfully distinguish art objects from non-art objects. If for no other reason, we want to avoid necessary but trivial conditions.

box. What Danto does clearly provide is just what most motivated him in the first place – a principled philosophical attempt to distinguish art from non-art when no manifest properties of the objects do so. Danto has at the very least set this as a bar for subsequent theories.

V. Aesthetic theories

I'll consider in this section the theories of Clive Bell, Monroe Beardsley, Gary Iseminger and Marcia Muelder Eaton. Bell could just as well be thought of as continuing a Kantian tradition of formalism and grouped in that earlier section. My reasons for including him here are more pragmatic than theoretical. For Bell, something is a work of art just in case it has “significant form” which Bell construes sometimes narrowly as lines and colors combined in a certain (kind of) relation⁸⁴ and sometimes more broadly as including observer-involved relations such as three-dimensional appearance.⁸⁵ Significant form defines the class of artworks because significant form produces aesthetic emotion and the production of aesthetic emotion is necessary and sufficient for something being an artwork. Few historically significant theories of art since Plato's have been as roundly and thoroughly criticized as Bell's.⁸⁶ The most common criticism is that his argument for his definition is viciously circular: the characteristics described above constitute significant form only because they are necessary for appreciating artworks, artworks are the things that produce the “peculiar” aesthetic emotion, aesthetic emotion is the emotion produced by significant form.⁸⁷ Another problem with Bell's theory is that it – more obviously than Danto's – does not seem to allow for the possibility of bad art. Quality art is that which

⁸⁴ Clive Bell, *Art* (Book Jungle, 2009 – First Published 1914) P. 57

⁸⁵ *ibid.* 17

⁸⁶ For instance, R. Meager references the “familiarity” of objections to Bell as early as 1965. [R. Meager, “Clive Bell and Aesthetic Emotion” *British Journal of Aesthetics* Vol. 5, No. 2 (1965, 123-131)

⁸⁷ Bell (1914/2009) P.13

produces an aesthetic emotion. But objects must have significant form in order to produce an aesthetic emotion and an object must have significant form to be art at all.

One way of avoiding both of these faults while retaining the significance of aesthetic emotion is to replace the formalism in the account with intentionalism – that is, to shift the definitional burden away from the cause of the emotion (for Bell, significant form) to the intent to create it. Monroe Beardsley, for instance, offers the following definition of “artwork”: “I say that an artwork is *either* an arrangement of conditions intended to be capable of affording an experience with marked aesthetic character *or* (incidentally) an arrangement belonging to a class or type of arrangements that is typically intended to have this capacity.”⁸⁸ Three things stand out in Beardsley’s favor. First, Beardsley’s account is not circular in the way that Bell’s is. An aesthetic experience (an obviously stronger condition than one with “marked aesthetic character,”) is not merely that which is produced by art or by the result of the right kind of intention. Beardsley writes elsewhere that “a person is having an aesthetic experience during a particular stretch of time if and only if the greater part of his mental activity during that time is united and made pleasurable by being tied to the form and qualities of a sensuously presented or imaginatively intended object on which his primary attention is concentrated.”⁸⁹ Now I’m not sure what all of that means⁹⁰ but Beardsley at least attempts to explicate aesthetic emotions in terms of what it is to have them rather than the objects that generate them. Beardsley also avoids Bell’s “no bad art” problem. As anyone who has heard The Clash’s last album, read Denis

⁸⁸ Monroe Beardsley, *The Aesthetic Point of View: Selected Essays* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1982) P. 299

⁸⁹ *ibid.* P. 81

⁹⁰ For instance, what does it mean for a “greater part” of one’s mental activity to be united? Do *parts* of our mental activity become pleasurable or is pleasure a part of our mental activity? What does “primary attention” mean? What are secondary or tertiary attentions on in these cases?,

Johnson's *Tree of Smoke* or seen Martin Scorsese's *The Departed* might be able to tell you, the attempt to afford an experience with marked aesthetic character, even when coupled with an extraordinary ability to do so, is not sufficient for affording such an experience. Thus just the addition of intentionality means that Beardsley's account is a vast improvement on prior aesthetic theories.

Gary Iseminger provides (not exactly a definition but) a characterization of works of art that treats them as both cultural-institutional and aesthetic artifacts. I include a discussion of Iseminger here rather than elsewhere because unlike what we might think of as institutional theories proper, he makes explicit the purpose or function an institution must have to be or count as an *artworld* institution. That function, Iseminger thinks, is "to promote aesthetic communication."⁹¹ Aesthetic communication, then, is tied to the capacity to afford appreciation, and appreciation is "finding the experiencing of a state of affairs to be valuable in itself."⁹² So a work of art turns out to be (roughly) something made by an artist in his or her role in the artworld, i.e. making something that has the capacity to afford the experience of finding that work in that context valuable in itself. There is much in Iseminger's account that requires further description, much that deserves significant praise and still much that does not quite add up. For our present purposes, I'll just point out that Iseminger also manages to account for what Bell thought was important about art while both avoiding Bell's circularity problem and missing Weitz's "open concept" argument. Iseminger avoids circularity (we might say) by interweaving the institutional and aesthetic features of his account. An object is not an artwork because it has features ultimately characterized only in terms of being features of art (as we see in Bell). An

⁹¹ Gary Iseminger, *The Aesthetic Function of Art* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004) P.23

⁹² *ibid.* P. 36

object is an artwork because it is created in an artworld-context that is in turn given a sufficiently independent characterization.

Iseminger also misses Weitz's "open concept" argument, then, because on his view the artworld and specifically its modes of communication can change in ways that allow for the expansion of the class of art as a response to certain new candidates. That is to say, a new candidate for art status can change the sorts of experiences that count as valuable in themselves simply by being so valued and being of a type that was not so valued before. A new type of art-candidate can therefore change the sort of communication that will count as *aesthetic*. But what art *is* – the product of the institution that facilitates this sort of communication (whatever its appropriate forms at a given time) – is unchanged in this process. Therefore, Iseminger's account is able to help us explain the sorts of changes that lead Weitz to attribute "openness" to art while still maintaining the consistency in our concept of art that Weitz denies.

One more way of preserving the intuition that the aesthetic nature of art is essential to its definition without falling into Bell's difficulties is to define art in a way that emphasizes its aesthetic qualities without specifying or otherwise restricting what those qualities are *or* the effect they have on an audience. Marcia Muelder Eaton, for instance, defines "work of art" this way: "x is a work of art if and only if (1) x is an artifact and (2) x is discussed in such a way that information concerning the history of production of x directs the viewer's attention to properties which are worth attending to."⁹³ For Eaton, the properties worth attending to are "the things people mention when they give us reasons in support of the claim that the thing they are talking about will give us satisfaction; and these things may differ from culture to culture, period to

⁹³ Marcia Muelder Eaton. *Art and Nonart: Reflections on an Orange Crate and a Moose Call*. (Rutherford, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1983) P. 99

period. It includes formal as well as affective and abstract intellectual properties.”⁹⁴ These properties are aesthetic because they give us satisfaction and because they are “intrinsic [so not relational w/ institutions, communicative practices, etc.] and directly perceivable.”⁹⁵ Let’s set aside the question of whether or not Eaton’s definition can handle bad art.⁹⁶ The more interesting point is that Eaton presents a third way of avoiding Bell’s circularity. Instead of *replacing* formal properties in the account with either intentions (Beardsley) or an institution (Iseminger), she makes formal properties part of a family of properties that may be seen at a given time and place as being determinative of the aesthetic nature of art.

As I’ve suggested above, other theories fail to provide necessary *or* sufficient conditions for “x is a work of art.” For both Beardsley and Eaton, however, it seems plausible to interpret their accounts in such a way that they can provide sufficient conditions and another way such that they provide necessary conditions. The problem is rather that neither can provide necessary *and* sufficient conditions on the same interpretation. What is really at issue here is that the vagueness of the concepts involved in the definitions make them somewhat slippery. Consider especially “marked aesthetic character” and “properties worth attending to” in Beardsley’s and Eaton’s respective definitions. A narrow reading of these phrases might exclude some cases where we are capable of focusing on or attending to the aesthetic qualities of an object or even cases where we are inclined to do so, and include only those cases for which aesthetic character or properties dominate⁹⁷ our attention when that attention is appropriate. On narrow readings

⁹⁴ *ibid.* 111

⁹⁵ *ibid.* 110

⁹⁶ “Worth attending to” certainly sounds evaluative, but Eaton claims that it is not because an object can have these properties and not have them “well.” [Marcia Muelder Eaton, “A Sustainable Definition of ‘Art’” in Carroll (2000, 141-159) P.143]

⁹⁷ “Dominate” is vague as well, but this is to be expected – the vagueness of these accounts are ineliminable from them.

Beardsley and Eaton seem to be able to limit the extension of “art” to one that excludes things like everyday conversational utterances, but then it would likely not include many of the works I’ve mentioned – Warhol, Barry, Wool etc. A wider reading might include in the objects that have “marked aesthetic character” or “properties worth attending to” all those whose aesthetic qualities we are inclined or likely to consider or remark upon. Thus a wider reading may allow us to capture more of contemporary art, but then we could not rule out everyday communication the way we want and were able to under the narrow reading. For instance, I’m often pleased and impressed by my wife’s turns of phrase in conversation, but no amount of pleasure or impression would make them artworks.

To evaluate Iseminger’s account as an aesthetic theory (I think we could equally well view it other ways that would call for other evaluations), we ought to focus on that feature of the theory that places it in dialogue with Bell’s and other aesthetic theories – namely Iseminger’s claim that the function of the artworld is to promote the capacity to afford appreciation (aesthetic communication). His argument is essentially this: (1) if an artifact (including an institution or practice) is good at doing what it was made to do, then doing that is the artifact’s function. (2) If an institution or practice does something better than any other institution or practice and the institution or practice does that thing better than it does anything else, then the institution or practice is sufficiently good at that thing. (3) The artworld promotes aesthetic communication better than anything else does and it promotes aesthetic communication better than it does anything else. (4) The artworld was designed and is maintained to promote aesthetic communication.⁹⁸

⁹⁸ Iseminger (2004) Especially Pp. 94-120

The first issue I take with this argument is that I do not think being good at what something was designed to do is sufficient for that being *the* function of something so much as *a* function of that thing. It would not be unreasonable to say that the practice of running is maintained primarily for the sake of people's fitness and that it promotes fitness better than anything else (in both senses) but it would sound awfully odd to say that fitness is *the* function of running or the "running world."

Also, I think there are plenty who would reasonably disagree with (3). The Marxist, for example, might point out that the artworld imbues the bearers of little use value with exorbitant exchange value better than anything else does and better than it does anything else. For instance, the artworld allows Damien Hirst to inflate the exchange value of diamonds above even what the rare gem market can do; and while the artworld may be able to facilitate aesthetic communication, I'm not sure it actually does that as consistently as it brings about these kinds of (possibly absurd) economic conditions. Carroll suggests the communication of culture as another candidate for the primary function of art.⁹⁹ While the best art may be better at aesthetic communication, cultural communication is something that *more* art does.

Finally, Iseminger's historical argument for (4) and particularly its second conjunct must be reconsidered. *A lot* will depend here on the boundaries of the artworld. Even if it is true of the Met that its purpose is the promotion of aesthetic communication, is this as clearly true of MoMA? The New Museum? HBO? For all that, I think that Iseminger's account is a

⁹⁹ See, for instance Carroll's review of Iseminger's book: Noël Carroll, "On The Aesthetic Function of Art" *The Philosophical Quarterly* Vol. 58, No. 233 (Oct., 2008, 732-740).

significant step forward for aesthetic theories of art and there is much that he gets right about artistic communication¹⁰⁰ which will be important in later chapters.

VI. Institutional Theories

I think it will be most instructive here to discuss two different versions of the institutional theory of art, both from George Dickie. The first formulation is this: “A work of art in the classificatory [i.e. not evaluative] sense is (1) an artifact (2) a set of the aspects of which has had conferred upon it the status of candidate for appreciation by some person or persons acting on behalf of a certain social institution (the artworld).”¹⁰¹ Dickie’s “artworld” is of course borrowed from Danto, though because he needs it to provide a definition of art in a way that Danto never does, he attempts to provide a more exact specification of it. Dickie’s “artworld” is an established cultural practice, a “bundle” of individual artworld systems, each of which is “a framework for the *presenting* of particular works of art.”¹⁰² To anticipate a little bit, I think it is right here in Dickie’s emphasis on the practice of presenting objects in certain ways that a theory of art has come closest to articulating what art most essentially *is*.

Dickie’s later attempt at an institutional theory consists of definitions of “artist,” “work of art,” “public,” “artworld,” and “artworld system.”¹⁰³ These definitions are interrelated and

¹⁰⁰ especially that it *is* a type, that it has a function, and that focusing on it will help us formulate the right sort of definition of “art”

¹⁰¹ George Dickie, *Art and the Aesthetic: An Institutional Analysis* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1974) P. 34. This is actually Dickie’s second formulation. The first was similar, though in it he did not emphasize that the object of conferral is a “set of aspects” rather than an entire object. [George Dickie, “Defining Art” *American Philosophical Quarterly* Vol. 6, No. 3 (Jul., 1969, 253-256) P. 254] Also, in that 1969 text Dickie is clear that the institutional context in question is the artworld, though the expression does not appear explicitly in the definition. Both of these mean that the 1974 definition is a distinct improvement.

¹⁰² *ibid.* 31

¹⁰³ George Dickie, “The Institutional Theory of Art” in Carroll (2000, 93-108), 96

circular (Dickie thinks virtuously so). For our present purposes, we may focus just on the definition of “work of art”: “A work of art is an artifact of a kind created to be presented to an artworld public.”¹⁰⁴ Two things should jump out to us about this new formulation. The first is that the conferral of art status now happens in the creation of an object rather than its reception. The second is Dickie’s use of the phrase “of a kind.” About this he says only that “in using the word ‘kind’ here, I am using it in a very general way and am not using it to suggest kinds or genres within art such as novels, paintings, or the like.”¹⁰⁵ I am somewhat perplexed by the “general way” he is using this phrase. Dickie does not want to say that the artifacts actually created to be presented to an artworld public form base cases or paradigms similarity to which determines art-status in general. But what *else* does he mean?

Dickie’s second clause of his first formulation does provide a necessary condition for “x is a work of art.”¹⁰⁶ The second formulation *may* provide a necessary condition as well, just so long as the word “create” can cover activities like repurposing and re-contextualizing in addition to physically making. Jerrold Levinson gives voice to what I imagine is a fairly widespread concern about institutional theories when he argues that art is possible outside of an institution. As I mentioned earlier, Levinson has us imagine cases of artists working in total isolation and concludes that “in no case *must* one invoke or accord with the shadowy infrastructure of the artworld to make what one makes into art.”¹⁰⁷ Quite a bit depends here in how isolated we take

¹⁰⁴ *ibid.*

¹⁰⁵ *ibid.* 99

¹⁰⁶ I am not as sure about the artifactuality requirement. Brutus.1, a computer program, famously “writes” sudden fiction. [Michael Hill, “Computer Writes Fiction, But It Lacks a Certain Byte” *Los Angeles Times* May 28, 2000 (AP)] Is something made by an artifact an artifact? But because so many of the definitions we’re considering have such a clause, that discussion can be had at just about any point.

¹⁰⁷ Levinson (1979) P.233

the artist in the example to be. Crucially, the framework that the institutional theory requires¹⁰⁸ must consist of different sorts of artworld activities: art creation, display, observation, appreciation etc. but it should not be assumed that these activities cannot be accomplished by a single person. Obviously, the institutional theory is not committed to there being a monolithic artworld. Artworld systems may be entirely isolated and in fact extremely small. One person may create, display, observe and appreciate her own work. So, if Levinson means a kind of *personal* isolation, it seems the institutional theory can handle the examples just fine. If instead he means an isolation of *activity*, then I'm not sure we have genuine examples of art. If someone creates an object, does not display it (even for himself) or look at it afterward, it seems to me that the object cannot be art, no matter what form it happens to have.

But neither of Dickie's formulations – to quickly rehearse another well-known criticism – seems to work as sufficient conditions. Gallery programs, descriptions of paintings, book jackets, probably even gravel walkways in private sculpture gardens are all candidates for appreciation within various artworld systems and are created to be presented to an artworld public. The problem in general is that neither definition appears capable of adequately distinguishing artworks from other things that are (loosely speaking) within the traditions and practices that surround artworks.

I think it may be more than just these ancillary artifacts that may figure into an artworld institution (as Dickie describes) without actually being works of art. In 2013 MoMA exhibited Random International's "Rain Room" to much hype and mostly poor reviews. One critic for the Times went so far as to say that "'Rain Room,' for all its entertaining ingenuity, seem little more

¹⁰⁸ I'm not sure that Dickie himself would see it quite this way. I'm giving the institutional theory the best hearing I think I can, and this reply is at least consistent with Dickie's two basic articulations of it.

than a gimmicky diversion.”¹⁰⁹ This sentence may be about the value of “Rain Room.” But it may also plausibly be read as expressing the claim that “Rain Room” is a “gimmicky diversion” *instead of* a work of art. I’m not passing judgment on either “Rain Room” or the Times. I do think it is *possible* for MoMA – perhaps in need of the kind of funds and publicity an “event” like “Rain Room” produces – to have presented a non-artwork to its artworld public. Therefore, even if the critic is wrong or if he did not mean it, the stronger claim is not incoherent (as it would have to be on a strictly institutional theory like Dickie’s).¹¹⁰

Finally and probably most importantly, Dickie’s institutionalist theories (and others like them) are designed in large part to respond to the Wittgensteinian skepticisms described in the previous chapter while taking their challenges seriously. Dickie shows – contra Weitz and Ziff – just how an essential definition of “art” can be consistent with its “open” nature. Specifically, the decisions to include or exclude certain candidates are made from within the institution whose membership determines art status. But Dickie was wrong, for all the reasons I suggested in the last chapter, to take the skeptical position on board to the extent that he does. In a sense, Dickie merely moves indefinability (at least for any instructive definition) one stage upward, from the artwork to the artworld. The result is a residual pessimism that drives a lack of specificity about the nature of art and its institutions. The pessimism in Dickie shows up in his view that art is an “inflected” concept, one not properly definable *without* circularity.¹¹¹ Thus institutional

¹⁰⁹ Ken Johnson, “The Natural World: Here, Its Had Work” *New York Times*, May 30, 2013.

¹¹⁰ Admittedly, this example is tricky, and there may be very limited circumstances in which MoMA could present something as an artwork without it in fact being an artwork.

¹¹¹ Actually, Dickie initially denies the account’s circularity in his first articulation [Dickie (1969) P. 255]. At the time, Dickie argued that he avoids circularity by not explicitly referencing the definiendum (“work of art”) in his explanation of “appreciation”: “the kind characteristic of our experiences of paintings, poetry, novels and the like” [ibid.] but there seems to be nothing to collect “the like” here other than their being products of an artworld. What makes them (or their creation, display etc.) part of the artworld and not some other institution cannot be that they are

accounts¹¹² maintain in their circularity the safety of triviality. But the triviality is unnecessary. Just like “artwork” we might think that (these days, anyway) nearly anything can exemplify “university course” so long as it has the right role in a university institution. But that does not mean that we can’t do better by defining the institution itself and thereby providing specificity and avoiding circularity. I think – at least to a greater extent than we see in the strictly institutional accounts – we can do better with “artwork” as well.

VII. Historical theories

Another group of theories takes the essential feature of artworks to be their relation to a particular history or historical moment instead of a particular institution. I’ll consider three such theories here: those of Jerrold Levinson, Robert Stecker and Noël Carroll. First, Levinson defines “artwork” as “a thing (item, object, entity) that has been seriously intended for regard-as-a-work-of-art, i.e. regard in any way *preexisting artworks are or were correctly regarded*.”¹¹³ “Regard” in the definition is meant to cover a wide range of activities, up to and including “any mode of interaction with an object which could be proper to some work of art.”¹¹⁴ The leading idea seems to be that we can characterize “art” at a given time *t* by (1) determining the extensions of “art” at *t* and all prior times, (2) determining the proper modes of interaction with those sets of objects at those times and (3) determining at *t* which objects were intended to have at least one of those sorts of interactions. There are two sorts of intentions that will work in this

conferred the status of candidate for appreciation unless and until the appropriate sense of “appreciation” is given in terms that do not implicitly refer to the same artworld institution(s). It is to Dickie’s credit, then, that he later acknowledges the circularity of his theory.

¹¹² These same concerns are applicable, for instance, to David Graves’ “new” institutional theory. [David Graves, *The New Institutional Theory of Art* (Champaign, IL: Common Ground, 2010)]

¹¹³ Levinson (1979), 21

¹¹⁴ *ibid.* 31n7

context. In the first - which Levinson calls "intrinsic"¹¹⁵ - a creator intends for her object to be regarded in ways a, b, c, d.... and a, b, c, d... happen to be correct regards of prior artworks, but she is not intending (per se) that her object be regarded as prior artworks have been. Someone could - in theory if not terribly likely - paint figures on a canvas with the intention that the result be regarded for its form, color, beauty, representational content, etc. without being aware that these are ways that paintings have traditionally been regarded. The resulting painting would be no less an artwork for it. For Levinson, the relevant regards must be sufficiently "complete."¹¹⁶ For instance, a stop sign is not a work of art simply because it was created with the intention that it be regarded for its color, shape and symbolic meaning and these are correct regards for prior artworks. The stop sign as a whole is intended to be regarded in a way that previous artworks have not been correctly regarded. The other sort of intention - "relational" in Levinson's vocabulary¹¹⁷ - does involve the explicit intention that an object be regarded as prior artworks have been.

Robert Stecker's theory is a very different kind of historical account. He writes that "An item is a work of art at time t if and only if (a) either it is in one of the central art forms at t and is intended to fulfil a function art has at t or (b) it is an artefact that achieves excellence in fulfilling such a function (whether or not it is in a central art form and whether or not it was intended to fulfil such a function)."¹¹⁸ We may think of the difference between Levinson's definition and

¹¹⁵ Jerrold Levinson, "Refining Art Historically" *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* Vol. 47, No. 1 (Winter, 1989) P.21

¹¹⁶ *ibid.* P. 24

¹¹⁷ *ibid.*

¹¹⁸ Robert Stecker, "Historical Functionalism Or the Four Factor Theory" *British Journal of Aesthetics* Vol. 34, No. 3 (1994, 255-265) P. 255

Stecker's using the functional/procedural distinction Stephen Davies develops¹¹⁹. Levinson's theory is a historicized proceduralism and Stecker's a historicized functionalism.¹²⁰

There is a sense in which Carroll's theory of art (with which he intends to provide sufficient but not necessary conditions) is more properly called a "historical" account than either Levinson's or Stecker's. Carroll thinks the central point of offering theories of the kind we have been considering is to provide a means of properly identifying new candidates as art (or not).¹²¹ Instead of providing a real/essential definition and then seeing if practices satisfy the definition, Carroll suggests that we "identify works as artworks – where the question of whether or not they are art arises – by means of [true] historical narratives that connect contested candidates to art history in a way that discloses that the mutations in question are part of the evolving species of art."¹²² We properly come to decide that x is a work of art, then, on the basis of certain "rational strategies." Carroll suggests, for instance, that "we might argue that [an object] is an artwork on the grounds that it is a repetition, amplification, or repudiation of the works that are already acknowledged to belong to the tradition."¹²³ I say that Carroll's account is more properly called "historical" because it makes central to art theory what is central to art history – constant change within a single "self-transforming tradition."¹²⁴ Levinson, on the other hand, would have us

¹¹⁹ In Davies (1991) and elsewhere

¹²⁰ It's possible that the lines get blurry here with Stecker since at certain recent times, the function of central artforms has been to take part in certain procedures (i.e. having a place in an artworld dialogue). But this is a highly contingent and probably temporary art-historical wrinkle. The core of his theory remains functional nonetheless.

¹²¹ Carroll's strategy here is reminiscent of Wollheim's in *Art and Its Objects*. In some ways, in fact, Carroll's narrativistic theory is just the kind of theory Wollheim pictures but is himself ultimately unable to produce. [See especially Richard Wollheim, *Art and its Objects* Second Edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980 – original publication 1968) Pp. 143-146]

¹²² Carroll (1993), P. 315

¹²³ Carroll (1988), P. 145-146

¹²⁴ *ibid.* P. 145

determine new artworks today not through an appeal to those changes but instead to a union of their results. And Stecker would have us do so without appeal to either. In light of this, it might be better to think of Levinson's account as *historically-encompassing* rather than historical and Stecker's as only *historically pluralistic* but for any given time entirely *ahistorical*.

Though they each avoid the circularity that attends Dickie's institutional accounts, these historical definitions (or alternatives thereto) suffer somewhat from the same sort of pessimism. Before getting to that diagnosis, I'll consider the prospects for these theories as essential definitions. First, while Carroll is explicit about not attempting to provide necessary conditions for "x is a work of art," we should wonder if either Levinson or Stecker succeed in doing so.

Because Levinson thinks that an artwork may be the product of either the intrinsic or the relational kind of intention, a counterexample showing that his account does not provide necessary conditions would be an artwork that is the product of neither sort of intention. This would be an awfully difficult thing to show in actuality. For one thing, while we can and should treat artworks as evidence of artists' intentions, they are not transparently so. For another, Levinson is quick (and astute) to point out that the requisite intentions need not be explicit or even consciously apparent to the artist who has them.¹²⁵ So it is possible that an artist could be unaware first that the regards for which she intends her object are/were correct art regards and second that she had those intentions at all and *still* satisfy Levinson's formula. Given this, even if I had an artwork that did not seem to me to be the product of the right kind of intention and an artist who swears up and down that she had no idea that she was creating an object to be regarded as prior art had been (in either sense), I would still not be able to definitively say that

¹²⁵ Levinson (1989) P.30

the object was actually a counterexample.¹²⁶ By the same token, we cannot ever know for sure that any given artwork actually is the product of right sort of intention. If an artist can fail to be aware of her creative intentions, so too can she have the sensation of remembering intentions that she did not have. None of this should be taken as a criticism Levinson's theory. All I mean to suggest is that we should not be surprised if we cannot definitively point to actual counterexamples showing his account extensionally inadequate on grounds of necessity. We couldn't show the contrary either. But we can, I think, try to show that Levinson fails to provide intensionally necessary (even disjunctively necessary) conditions. We could either imagine an artwork created without the requisite intentions or take an actual artwork and imagine that it was created without those intentions. This does not seem all that difficult. Take any artwork you like and imagine it being the result of a great fit of madness – perhaps even the kind of “divine madness” we once called “inspiration.”¹²⁷ However, though Levinson’s focus is most often on the *creators* of artworks, his preferred definition does not itself single them out. The passive voice in which it is articulated leaves open just whose intentions ought to count. As such, it would be enough for a curator, patron, displayer or other figure attached to the work to intend that it be regarded as some other works correctly had been. Now it seems that Levinson’s account really does provide us with necessary conditions for art. I for one cannot imagine an artwork that *no one* at *any point* intended for regard as some prior artwork had been regarded. For now it is worth noticing, though, that this success can only come by widening the class of people capable of having the requisite intentions. And this class must be very wide indeed. If a mad artist can fail to have the right intentions, so could a mad curator, critic etc. etc. Still it seems that any time a hypothetical case comes before me, *I* somehow intend that it be regarded

¹²⁶ Of course we may have no reason to think it is a work of art either.

¹²⁷ See, for instance, Plato’s *Ion* 533e-534a

in some way as prior artworks have been regarded or at least I must imagine someone asking me to regard it in one of those ways.

But now, once we expand the class of those whose intentions will qualify, Levinson's account appears unable to supply sufficient conditions. Were it just the creator who is capable of providing the requisite intentions, it would be obvious – once we add the “completeness” requirement discussed above – that anything so intended (and therefore created) is an artwork. But I can seriously intend that anything in the world be regarded as prior artworks have been correctly regarded. But I can't thereby make them art. I can, in reality but not on Levinson's account, be quite wrong that a given object ought to be regarded despite my sincere desire that it be so. Now of course, Levinson's defender may want to limit the class of intention-holders in order to avoid this problematic result. But in doing so he ruins the account's ability to provide necessary conditions. Thus we seem to have another dilemma in which one interpretation of a theory yields necessary conditions, another sufficient conditions, but no interpretation that allows both.

For Stecker, a lot depends on how narrowly or broadly we consider the “functions” of art at a given time. Usually, I'm sure, there will be overlap in artistic function, so for some periods artworks will fulfill the old function of art at the same time that they exemplify the new. Thus we have Cezanne between Manet and Kandinsky, Beethoven between Bach and Berlioz, etc. But we can imagine those transitions happening more abruptly. So we can imagine objects created to be art and displayed as art which are not in a central art form and which perform a function that is entirely new to the artworld. It is not clear that Stecker can say that such an object is a work of art at the moment of its first display. I also do not think he wants to say that it fulfills an art-function that it creates. This would open the floodgates a bit too wide.

It remains to be seen just how Dickie's pessimism infects these theories. With Stecker the account is so divested of specificity that we do not seem to have an instructive definition of "art." Rather, Stecker is spelling out the claim that "art" must be defined in such a way that doing so yields different extensions at different times – even given a consistent set of objects or object-types (i.e. even with a constant domain). Levinson's pessimism manifests in the dilemma described above. What is ultimately lacking is an account of (a) just which sorts of intentions produce art and (b) in which activities or offices these intentions are efficacious in doing so. Of course Levinson is not attempting to provide a theory that supplies these features, leaving such details to a particular art history. He thinks that art is essentially about an object's intended relation to that history. But until we know what makes the history of these particular (intended) regards a history of art and not something else, we do not have a sufficiently informative theory of art.

Replace "art" and "artwork" in the definition with any number of activities or artifacts and we get similarly successful, though similarly limited results. Consider "baseball" for instance. Were we to say that "baseball" is "a game seriously intended to be regarded as baseball games have in the past," we'd speak the truth and provide a genuinely necessary and sufficient condition for baseball. But we would not provide much in the way of illumination. This is not to say that Levinson's account is utterly trivial or devoid of informative content. Far from it. Only when we distinguish art from other things by virtue of its relation to art history, we should want to know which history is art history. Of course there may be no answer to the latter question and Levinson may provide all we could want from a theory of art, but that is to take on board just the sort of pessimism I claim too many inherit from Weitz's skepticism.

Finally, just the fact that Carroll feels the need to replace the essentialist question with

one about sufficient conditions for artwork-identification also demonstrates some pessimism inherited from Dickie's response to Weitz. However, Carroll does not merely present his theory as the best alternative to an essential definition in the face of past failure. He thinks it also provides everything we really want from a definitional account in the first place. I agree with Carroll both that identifying artworks (especially in hard cases) is an important function of definitional theory and that his narrative-historical account does a fine job of fulfilling that function. I disagree, however, that this is a uniquely important function of a theory of art. I think we have at least three other significant reasons for defining "art." First, even if the definitional project is something of an academic exercise, not all academic exercises are created equal. Art happens to be a crucial (if not central) feature of and practice in our culture. A deeper understanding of art is ipso facto a deeper understanding of our cultural lives – and not in a trivial way. Second, whatever art is, or whatever *else* it is, it is a communicative practice.¹²⁸ A theory of communication is not complete without a theory of art. Therefore, whatever purposes theories of communication have – which can be fairly far-reaching¹²⁹ – are shared by theories of art. Finally, art has a special – one might even say even *peculiar* – place in our moral reasoning and policymaking. We are, for instance, more accepting of certain forms of expression when we can call them "art." We are (or maybe were) also more inclined to fund or support certain forms of expression when we think they're "art" – there is no National Endowment For The Crafts. A proper understanding of what art is should thus inform (though not determine) our thinking about censorship, patronage and public value.¹³⁰ We need more than just a list of art objects and a

¹²⁸ See Chapter Four for much more on this claim.

¹²⁹ Consider for instance Grice who made the pragmatics of communication central to the theory of language, and Jurgen Habermas for whom a theory of communication underwrites a theory of rational consensus, which in turn forms the basis of a theory of proper political arrangements.

¹³⁰ This is not meant to be an exhaustive list of the additional benefits of theories of art.

method for identifying new ones. We must also understand *why* art has these special positions in our culture.

Despite the recurrent pessimism, and as I suggested in the previous chapter, I tend to think of these sorts of theories as improvements on Dickie's institutionalism and Dickie's institutionalism itself a great improvement on prior theories. Yet there is one fundamental shortcoming that runs through them all. Institutional and historical accounts do a good job (naturally, I suppose) of accounting for art's institutional and historical natures. These were two important tasks I set out for art theory in the previous chapter. But they do not fare as well on the (at least) equally important criterion I called "categorical accuracy." To be sure, none of the theories conflate art-as-a-practice with art-as-a-set-of-objects, and they all manage to say - with one degree of success or another - what makes something an art object. But we still lack an account of what art as a practice *is*. Yes, a particular art institution and a particular art history grow up around the cultural practice of art, and understanding these is crucial to understanding art, but it is not the whole ball game. We do not have a complete or even robust or sufficiently explanatory understanding of art until we know what that core practice is. Circularity, vagueness and quasi-definitions are fine strategies only given justified pessimism about the project of understanding that core practice. And as I've tried to show, such pessimism is not currently justified.

VIII. Alternative-structure theories

Each of the last few theories I'll consider in this chapter begin with the claim that the conceptual structure of art is in one way or another non-classical. That is, "art" does not admit of individually necessary and jointly sufficient conditions. Jefferey Dean, for instance, argues that

art's conceptual structure is "radial" rather than classical.¹³¹ Application of a concept with radial structure involves recognizing similarities between a candidate for inclusion within the concept and a certain central case or cases. There will not be any general rule for which similarities should count in making the decision for inclusion. At first glance, Dean's "prototype" theory may look like Ziff's resemblance-to-a-paradigm theory discussed in the previous chapter. There are two significant differences, however. First, recall that for Ziff the primary mechanism by which we come to call a new object "art" is our recognition that the object has a certain subset of the properties that we recognize to be indicative of art in certain paradigmatic cases.¹³² These properties are – in a manner of speaking – intermediary between the paradigms and the candidates. There is no such intermediary in Dean's account. What we recognize is simply a similarity relation between the prototype and the candidate, not necessarily any particular properties held in common. Second, Dean takes his theory to be a non-classical definition whereas Ziff meant for his resemblance-to-a-paradigm account to be a replacement for definitional theory in general.¹³³

Dean's claim is that the application of "art" is determined via reference to a single prototypical instance. This instance is not an actual piece of art, of course, but an abstraction from recognized cases of art – perhaps, though not necessarily as a kind of theoretical average of features.¹³⁴ It may be that instead our application of "art" depends instead on our recognition of similarity to a set of exemplary actual cases rather than a single hypothetical case. If this sort of "exemplar" model (rather than a prototype model) in fact gives us all we could ask or expect from a definitional theory of art, then Dean is only wrong about the details of the relevant

¹³¹ Dean (2003) Especially Pp. 31-33

¹³² Ziff (1953)

¹³³ *ibid.*

¹³⁴ Dean (2003) Pp. 31-2

psychological mechanism, but correct still about art's radial structure. Therefore, I'll use the term "radial theories" to cover prototype, exemplar and any other similar account.

Objections to radial theories of art are fairly well established at this point.¹³⁵ I find a few especially convincing. First, radial theories in general do not seem to be able to explain our application of a great number of concepts. Even setting aside obvious cases from mathematics and logic, it seems highly unlikely that I have any prototype or set of exemplars in mind when I determine that my new friend is a bachelor, that a piece of mail I receive is a bill or that the person who delivered it is a letter carrier. In each case we apply certain criteria to a candidate object rather than compare it to any other object(s). Knowing how to apply the concept is just to be able to apply the criteria. So we should not think that art is a radial concept because all concepts are radial.

Still, a radial theory may work for art even if it does not work elsewhere. And maybe there is some evidence that it does within the individual arts. Consider something like genre-identification. Someone may correctly identify a "western" movie via some unidentified (and maybe even for them *unidentifiable*) resemblance to central cases of westerns or an abstraction from them. Whatever plausibility this picture has seems to disappear, however, in artwork-identification across art forms. It may be easy to see how *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valence* could be one of many exemplars that allows us to identify *3:10 To Yuma* as a western. Alternatively, we may have a concept of a prototypical *western* built out of similarities between

¹³⁵ See especially Thomas Adajian, "On the Prototype Theory of Concepts and the Definition of Art" *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* Vol. 63, No. 3 (2005, 231-236); George Dickie, "Dean, Definition, and the Romantic Artist" *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* Vol. 62, No. 4 (2004, 389-391); Francis Longworth and Andrea Scarantino, "The Disjunctive Theory of Art: The Cluster Account Reformulated" *British Journal of Aesthetics* Vol. 50, No. 2 (2010, 151-167).

The Man Who Shot Liberty Valence, Shane, etc. etc. But what prototype or set of examples could we possibly have in mind when we identify *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valence*, *Fern Hill* and *Starry Night* as works of art? Well, the radial theorist can certainly say that what we have in mind is either a set of objects (exemplars) that are relevantly similar or a prototype built out of those similarities. And in the radial theorist's favor this may very well be how we are typically introduced to the concept of art. This makes art somewhat unlike "bachelor" to which we are most plausibly introduced *via* a definition. We are obviously not introduced to art via a definition since there is far more consensus about what is art than there is about what art is. And yet we should not identify the method by which we are introduced to a concept with the method by which we apply the concept.

Consider "bill" again. It's very likely that I was introduced to the concept while sorting mail with my mother. I probably got pretty good at identifying which pieces of mail were bills by the window envelopes in which they came, the formal style in which they were written, and the return envelopes enclosed with them. But I had not mastered the "bill" concept until I saw what was essentially common among bills – that they were written demands for payment – until I was able to apply that essential feature as a criterion.

It seems likely that we do something similar in applying "art." Given a class of seemingly dissimilar objects, we can identify new members because we have learned to apply as criteria certain relevant similarities among the prior members. But the initial class is too diverse to form a prototype, and an exemplary class would itself have to be too diverse to be truly helpful. This is not to say that there are not helpful cognitive shortcuts that do rely on radial structures. We may think (a) that *Fern Hill* is a poem because it is relevantly like other writings we know to be poems and (b) that poems are art and then *reason* that *Fern Hill* is art; but if "art"

were truly radial in structure, we would have to do this with all art candidates, and we do not. As I've discussed already¹³⁶, it is not necessary that an object be in an already-established art form or art-genre in order for it to be art.

Most importantly, however, radial theory seems to be the wrong *kind* of theory. The definitional theory answers the “what is art?” question, not “how do we typically identify art?” Consider the difference between a theory like Carroll’s that places the ability to identify art at the center of our interest in saying what art is and Dean’s that identifies art with the means by which we identify it.¹³⁷ On Carroll’s view, there is room for misidentification of art. We may think that a given object has a place (via amplification, repudiation etc.) in a correct art-historical narrative but we may be wrong either about the object or the correctness of the narrative. It is not at all clear how – on a radial theory – we can be *wrong* about an object’s art status once we have identified it as such. After all, we can fail to see a resemblance between two objects, and we can be wrong about the way in which an object resembles another but we can’t be wrong *that* a given object resembles another since everything resembles everything else in some way or other. Radial theories cannot tell us what the *correct* identification of art is unless they say what the correct prototype or correct set of exemplars is. But if we have that, then we should rightly ask what makes this (or these) the right one(s). And then whatever answer we give to that question would give us a whole other sort of theory of art. A radial theory cannot deny that there are properties that determine the proper art-prototype or set of art-exemplars, otherwise there would be no correct or incorrect application of “art.” All the radial theory denies is that we use these properties *directly* in identifying art. So let’s say – despite much of what I say above – that

¹³⁶ See the discussion of Lopes in the previous chapter.

¹³⁷ Dean, it is worth noting, thought his prototype theory was evidence for Carroll’s narrative-historical view. Dean (2003) Pp. 32-33

this is in fact how we operate with the “art” concept. That is not at all inconsistent with there nonetheless being underlying necessary and sufficient conditions for “art” determined by those properties that are common and exclusive to all artworks.

Cluster theories offer a different account of art’s non-classical structure. According to the cluster theory, “art” ought to be analyzed the way John Searle¹³⁸ suggests we analyze proper names – via inclusive disjunction rather than a conjunction of properties. “Art,” then, does not have a set of individually necessary and jointly sufficient conditions, but instead a set of individually sufficient and disjunctively necessary conditions. Berys Gaut provides a theory of this type along with a suggestion for ten properties that “count toward something’s being a work of art, and the absence of which counts against its being art.”¹³⁹ The leading idea is that some disjunction of conjunctions of these properties or others like them will adequately define “art.” It is worth having a look at them in detail, then:

(1) possessing positive aesthetic properties such as being beautiful, graceful or elegant (properties which ground a capacity to give sensuous pleasure); (2) being expressive of emotion; (3) being intellectually challenging (i.e. questioning received views and modes of thought); (4) being formally complex and coherent; (5) having a capacity to convey complex meanings; (6) exhibiting an individual point of view; (7) being an exercise of creative imagination (being original); (8) being an artifact or performance which is the product of a high degree of skill; (9) belonging to an established artistic form (music, painting, film, etc.); and (10) being the product of an intention to make a work of art.¹⁴⁰

Francis Longworth and Andrea Scarantino offer a number of clarifying improvements on Gaut’s theory, particularly by placing some important conditions on the disjuncts in question. The result is their “Disjunctive Theory of Art”:

¹³⁸ John Searle, “Proper Names” *Mind* Vol. 67, No. 266 (1958, 166-173) especially Pp. 170-2

¹³⁹ Berys Gaut “Art as a Cluster Concept” in In Carroll (2000, 25-44) P. 28

¹⁴⁰ *ibid.*

(DTA): $\exists z\exists y(\text{Art} \equiv (Z \vee Y))$, where (i) Z and Y are either non-empty conjunctions... or non-empty disjunctions of conjunctions... (ii) there is some indeterminacy over exactly which disjuncts are sufficient; (iii) Z does not entail Y and Y does not entail Z; (iv) Z does not entail Art and Y does not entail Art.¹⁴¹

Longworth and Scarantino are explicit that the sorts of properties that figure into the account (i.e. that appear in Z and Y) are just the sort Gaut lists above. So I feel confident that the structure Longworth and Scarantino provide and the content Gaut provides constitute more or less the best version of a cluster theory we currently have. To be sure, there is something intuitively appealing about the cluster theory. It does an admirable job of accounting for the fact that there are myriad ways in which we identify and describe art and obviously it is not nearly as easy to find counterexamples to the cluster theory as it is to many classical definitions.

There are, however, a number of concerns we ought to have with cluster theories. First, a number of Gaut's properties, especially 9 and 10, are circular to the point of producing triviality in the theory. He acknowledges this circularity but thinks that circularity is ok as long as the definition is informative (presumably more so than, say, institutional definitions).¹⁴² But 9 and 10 surely do not contribute to whatever is informative in the theory – only the other properties do that. So let's look at just the informative part of the definition (why are we interested in anything else?). Once we omit 9 and 10, counterexamples abound. A counterexample is an artwork that has none of the properties (since no disjunct would be true of it) or a non-artwork that has them all (since it would satisfy any disjunction containing them even given the "indeterminacy" of clause (ii)). It is not hard to imagine, then, some particularly bad art on the one hand and some particularly good advertising or propaganda on the other working as counterexamples¹⁴³.

¹⁴¹ Longworth and Scarantino (2010) P.163

¹⁴² Gaut (2000) Pp. 28-29

¹⁴³ I am not claiming here that advertising and propaganda cannot *also* be art, only that not all are and it is not quality that makes the key difference.

Now the recognition of counterexamples given Gaut's properties does not necessarily mean that the cluster theory is wrong – maybe these just aren't the right properties to figure into it. Both Gaut and Longworth and Scarantino mean for these properties to be suggestive of the *kinds* of properties that might figure prominently in a cluster theory. Their concern is with the structure of the theory. But then another concern arises. In the absence of an example with actual content, what reason do we have for preferring the cluster theory? Gaut and Longworth and Scarantino appeal to the kind of “pessimistic induction” that we discussed in the previous chapter.¹⁴⁴ But what is that appeal *to* except the claim that we do not have a successful classical definition? Until we have a content-rich cluster theory, we obviously have no successful disjunctive definition either. Dialectically, we are at best at a stalemate.

Finally, we might be concerned that the cluster theory (as formulated anyway) not only *is* not terribly informative about what art is, but that it *cannot* be sufficiently informative. Let's focus on Longworth and Scarantino's second and fourth clauses. The “indeterminacy over exactly which disjuncts are sufficient” is necessary, they think, in order to explain borderline cases – objects or practices whose art status is (essentially) unclear.¹⁴⁵ Borderline cases are certainly something a theory ought to be able to explain (and not explain away), but as I suggested in the last chapter, this is not the kind of indeterminacy we want. Borderline cases are “borderline” because we cannot (for whatever reason) tell if they instantiate the properties that define “art.” Indeterminacy *within* the properties that define art (as Longworth and Scarantino have it) means that what art *is* is indeterminate. There will be borderline cases too in our application of “bachelor” when a given man's marital status is questionable. But that does not

¹⁴⁴ Gaut (2000) P.25; Longworth and Scarantino (2010) P.151

¹⁴⁵ Longworth and Scarantino (2010) P.162-163

mean that there is anything indeterminate about which properties are constitutive of bachelorhood, only that it is sometimes indeterminate if a given person satisfies them.

Longworth and Scarantino provide the fourth clause (that neither disjunct entail art status) in order to rule out the case of a disjunction of all types of art.¹⁴⁶ Though extensionally adequate, such a “definition” would either be entirely trivial or indicative of a kind of skeptical theory akin to Lopes’. This is also a laudable move, but I’m not sure it saves the account from (even greater) triviality. Being in a type of art implies art status, but being a particular object does not. How does the theory rule out a disjunction consisting of all works of art? That is to say, Z and Y could be disjunctions of properties true of one and only one artwork, namely being identical to a given artwork. So the “Disjunctive Theory of Art” *could* be that something is a work of art iff it is identical with the Mona Lisa or identical with *Moby Dick* or identical with *Carmen* etc. etc. Being identical to *Moby Dick* does not imply being art. It is difficult to imagine a less informative theory.¹⁴⁷ This sort of concern might be resolved by the insistence that the disjuncts consist of (some arrangement of) the kinds of properties that Gaut lists. But what exactly is the *kind* in question here? Under what conditions is a property relevantly like Gaut’s?

Once again, it is apparent that we are not in any position to determine the value of “the cluster theory” in the absence of *an actual* cluster theory to evaluate. Far better to determine the right (or the best possible) definition of “art” and then look to see what logical structure that definition has, than to try to determine the right structure prior to any definite content.

¹⁴⁶ *ibid.* P.163

¹⁴⁷ Notice that the additional requirement that Z and Y consist of conjunctions does not help matters. True, we must have more than one property involved, but an additional property can be added to each disjunct simply by conjoining each “is identical to...” with “is an object.”

I have not considered all viable candidate definitions of “art,” nor have I said all that might be said on behalf of the theories I’ve considered. Still, I hope I have provided enough reason to provide an alternative definitional theory and some grounds on which it can be an improvement. I’ll turn to these projects in the next chapter.

Chapter Four: Art as Display, Art as Displayed Object

The last two chapters included attempts to justify my offering a new definitional theory of “art” in light of two sources of skepticism about such a project: first, that success in this project is impossible either because “art” does not admit of this sort of analysis or we do not have criteria sufficient for deciding when such analysis is correct (Chapter Two); and second that we needn’t look for a new definition of “art” because we already have a successful one (Chapter Three).

Even assuming they were successful, these arguments do not justify any new definitional theory whatsoever. There is no call for a theory – no matter how original – for which there is no motivation other than providing *yet another* definition. Nor should we waste our time on a theory that is plainly worse in important respects than the ones we’ve already considered. In this chapter, then, I will try to articulate a new theory of art and describe the principal motivation for it.

Of course I hope that this theory of art is both immediately recognized as *the* correct one and that a general consensus on it enriches our collective understanding of art. But this fantasy need not come true in order for the theory to be valuable. Rather, it need only participate in the slow evolution of our understanding via some small contribution to the dynamic failure of theories of art. Thus I will argue in the next chapter that the theory (a) meets the most serious challenges to essential definitions, (b) satisfies (at least a preponderance of) the criteria I’ve offered for selecting such a theory, and (c) maintains the most significant advantages while avoiding the most significant problems of the theories considered in Chapter Three.

I. Motivation

A common and fundamental problem infects most of our thinking about art: we just don't know what *sort* of thing art is, and too much theorizing about art has either been inexact or entirely silent on the issue. The result has been a number of theories that have, by focusing on one significant feature of art, failed to provide a sufficiently informative account of it. Yes, art is institutional in nature and its products are intended to be part of a particular cultural history. Something about art has lent itself to representational, expressive, and aesthetic communication. But we should still wonder which practices distinguish the artworld from other institutions, what distinguishes the history of that institution and its practices from others, and what exactly about that history has encouraged focus within it on representation, expression and form.

What we need to do, then, is begin at a relatively high level of categorization and move downward. Each time we distinguish art from other members of a given class, we in effect characterize a new subclass to which art belongs. This process ends when art is in a class by itself. The obvious metaphor here is to the taxonomic ranks of biological classification. What it means to be a dog is to be a (familiaris) lupus among canines among canids among carnivores among mammals among chordates among animals (thanks, Wikipedia). I will use four of these ranks (again, metaphorically) to help us zero in on art. That is to say, we'll identify the "order" to which art belongs, and then by distinguishing it from other members of that class identify its "family," and then its "genus." When we know what distinguishes art as a "species" from other members of its genus, we'll know what art is.¹⁴⁸ The connection here to essential definition is obvious. Being a member of the each of these classes is necessary for art, being a member of the right species is sufficient.

¹⁴⁸ There is a similarity between this process and Plato's "method of division."

Order: Practice

Why should we think of art – at the highest level of categorization – as a practice?¹⁴⁹ It has been (as we've seen in the previous chapter) more often treated first as a set of objects. If we have two distinct senses here, why must either have priority over the other, and if one must, why should it be the practice sense? The reason one sense should have priority is that they are theoretically inseparable. A definition of “art” in the practice sense *yields* a definition of “art” in the object-class sense and vice-versa. If art is primarily the practice of x-ing, then art objects are those that are produced in (or by) x-ing. If art is instead primarily the set of objects that have y, then the practice of art is the one that deals appropriately with y-objects. So if art is *equally* the practice of x-ing and the set of objects that have y, then the set of objects that have y must also be the set of objects produced in (or by) x-ing and the practice of x-ing must also be the one that deals appropriately with y-objects. Arriving at this coincidence by defining each sense separately is not impossible, but it would have to be fortuitous. At any rate, if there is some property to unite the class of art-objects other than their role in the practice of art, we would do well to pick out the objects that fit into the practice and then see if there is such a property rather than work from both ends (so to speak) and hope for a coincidence.

But why should we do that instead of think of art first as a set of objects and then see what practice(s) grow up around it? There is nothing logically impossible about working out the dual-definitions this way, though it would be highly impractical. First of all, it seems awfully unlikely that we could imagine an appropriate set of art objects at a given time without also

¹⁴⁹ We could have started with much broader categories (“thing involving humans, product of culture” etc.). We’re starting, though, with what I take to be the first informative stage given the theory at hand.

having in mind a particular practice or set of practices to unite them. Any quick inventory of art objects will reveal great differences in form, style, material, materiality, and (to conjecture just a bit) any other manifest quality. But we don't have to rely only on the (mere) appearance of such differences. Danto's "problem of indiscernible counterparts" demonstrates that such manifest properties cannot possibly distinguish artworks from non-artworks. If two objects can to all outward appearance be exactly alike and yet one is an artwork and the other not, then that distinction cannot be maintained by properties given their appearance. Danto famously provides two sorts of examples of such pairs: artworks that so exactly resemble everyday objects, and naturally (i.e. unintentionally) created objects that – by some marvelous coincidence - so exactly resemble artworks. The latter sort of examples may run the risk of becoming fantastic and either producing conflicting intuitions or no intuitions at all. But given the real-world cases available, it is difficult to deny that artworks can look like anything without relying on a pre-theoretical conception of art that is, at this point, more antiquated than just conservative.

What makes an object an artwork is, to adapt a generously succinct line from Dickie, what we *do* with it.¹⁵⁰ We are back, then, to the primacy of the question of artistic practices.

Now, we should ask, why should we begin by thinking of art as *a* practice rather than many, perhaps very disparate practices? Composing and performing a symphony may seem very unlike painting and hanging a painting, yet these – if any – activities both fall under the practice of art. One important thing to notice here is that a practice may be thought of most basically as a set of related activities and activities as sets of appropriately related actions. But – as Anscombe pointed out in one of the more helpful moments of 20th century philosophy – we cannot talk

¹⁵⁰ Dickie (1969) P.256

about actions simpliciter, only actions under a description.¹⁵¹ The same, then, applies to the activities and practices they constitute. A practice, then, should be thought of instead as a class of related activities under appropriate descriptions.

Practices, then, collect activities under certain descriptions and activities collect actions under certain descriptions. What determines the proper relation between actions will be determined by the activities that collect them and the proper relation between activities by the practice that collects them. Take, for example, voting for a mayoral candidate. Filling out a ballot (the action) is – in the right context – part of voting for a mayor (the activity). Voting is in turn part of political life (the practice). There is in general nothing to relate the activities – voting, debating, inaugurating, speech-making, conspiring etc. – that constitute the practice of politics in a particular place and time other than the nature of the practice itself. The same is true of the actions that constitute any of those activities. Actions are collectively activities and activities collectively practices just in case there is some set of non-trivial descriptions to unite them.

Is there, then, anything to unite composing, performing, painting, hanging and everything else that goes on in the artworld, including seeming outliers like releasing inert gasses and sitting very still for hours on end? As we've seen, many philosophers of art think there is not. There being no demonstration that there could be such a thing quite like providing such a thing, I will again beg a little patience on this point.

Family: Communicative Activity

¹⁵¹ G.E.M. Anscombe, *Intention* Second Edition (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1963 – original publication 1957) Pp. 11-12

So then, if art is a practice and practices are classes of related activities, what *sort* of activity is art? On this point I'm entirely in agreement with Tolstoy who first (or at least first explicitly) pointed out that art is essentially communicative, that it is "one of the means of intercourse between man and man."¹⁵²

This is not to say, however, that art requires *successful* communication. I can paint a terrible painting that has no practical chance of communicating what I intended to anyone – even to myself later – and it can still be art just so long as I genuinely (if absurdly) hope that it will communicate something. But if I did not mean to communicate anything to anyone, then my painting is not, cannot be art – no matter how accomplished or beautiful it is. It may be training for some later artistic communication or just working on the craft by which I can later communicate. Here the difference between painting-as-training and painting-as-art is analogous to the difference between my sounding out Spanish words in order to work on my pronunciation and my actually using those words in speaking Spanish.

My painting may instead be therapeutic, the brushstrokes a kind of calming exercise. But what I thereby produce is not art unless I do something with it in order to say something to someone (which again could be me at some later time). Until I do, it is no more art than is a pillow flattened by punches or soaked with tears.

I could also paint my painting with the intention of bringing about some effect in an audience without the painting being art. One way this could happen is if my intention is not communicative. This is why – to take a couple examples – pornography and advertising are not (per se) art. The one is successful if it titillates, the other if it causes a desire to purchase, neither of which requires any uptake of communicative intention.

¹⁵² Tolstoy (1896/1996), P.49

To be clear, though, the communication that art requires need not look very much like everyday verbal communication, or even the kind of communicative activity you and I are engaged in now. For instance, my talents and tastes for visual art are such that I could imagine painting something that could produce a kind of aesthetic emotion in myself later, but I do not have the sort of even very minimal talent that would suggest I could provide such a feeling for anyone else at any time. So I could create some abstract work meant to be shown to no one else, and without any propositional content whatsoever. I am still, however, engaging in an artistic practice. What I'm doing is communicative, only it is communicating a feeling and that only with my later self.

Art, then, is communicative because it is one important way in which cultural values and norms, as well as shared feelings and significant ideas are shared among people and across generations. And it does so with a unique set of conventions and success conditions. To further refine our understanding of art, we should turn to those conventions and conditions.

Genus: Presentation

Where we should part ways with Tolstoy is in his identification of art with the communication of a particular sort of thing (for him, a feeling lived by the artist¹⁵³). Art can communicate many (I'll stop short of saying "all") kinds of things. Even if Tolstoy is right that a principal function of art is the feeling-transmission that he describes, even if this alone justifies the indignities and pains that we undergo for the sake of art, and even if this kind of infection is necessary for art to be good or worthwhile, it is simply not true that all art (sticking to a purely classificatory sense of "art") involves the communication of feeling or the attempt to do so. At

¹⁵³ *ibid.*, P.51

the very least, the conceptual turn of contemporary art has given us plenty of artworks that communicate – whatever feelings they may collaterally *produce* – nothing that is not purely propositional. And still only a grotesque contortion of interpretation would have anything non-affective communicated in (at least) a great deal of absolute music and early 20th century abstract expressionism. Artworks do not communicate the same thing or even the same *sort* of thing.

There could be some resistance to this last set of remarks, as it may not be quite so obvious that absolute music and the like *communicate* at all. I have taken it for granted thus far that Tolstoy is correct that feelings being passed from one person to another counts as genuine communication, that communication is not *necessarily* communication of propositional content. I don't want get bogged down in terminology here. It is enough to notice, I think, that there is an important distinction between mere expressions of feeling and attempts to pass on feelings via external signs. A guy on a crowded subway who holds the door open for a friend who isn't showing up will receive all kinds of expressions of anger, but we all just want him to let the door go so the train can move. There is not an attempt to make him feel our anger. If there were, then that feeling would be communicated instead of just expressed. If you don't think that is enough for genuine "communication," so be it. Let's just stipulate that I'm using "communication" here to cover propositional communication and the intentional passing on of feelings but (crucially) not the mere expression of feeling. And whether or not you think it is "communication," absolute music and abstract expressionist paintings are just the sorts of external signs that pass along feelings.¹⁵⁴

¹⁵⁴ Note that I am not including Tolstoy's provision that the feeling has to be one actually experienced by the artist, though I don't doubt this is typically the case. Nor am I insisting that the communicator be the artist in the first place.

But there are a number of other ways of organizing communicative activities other than by what they communicate. Another is by the structures and rules of the communicative systems that surround those activities. We can distinguish linguistic communication, for example, by reference to the kind of syntactic structures and semantic rules it employs. I've already¹⁵⁵ discussed some attempts – Nelson Goodman's, for instance – to characterize art in these terms. But as I argued then, artworks do not share a symbol system and (more importantly) the symbol systems that artworks are in are often irrelevant to their art status.

But that is not to say that there is nothing common to all artistic activity that can help us refine the account further. Crucially, all art but not all communication involves display. By “display” I have in mind the act of presenting an object to whoever can properly receive it. The operative sense of “display” is not the one we find in statements like “His actions display criminal intent” or “His limbs were displayed in a strange array” which do not involve communicative intent. I mean “display” the way we use it when we talk about the display of paintings and performances, but also flags, street signs, circuses and products in a store. All of these have two things in common. First, they communicate by means of showing or presenting. Second, there is something in the communicative act that determines its proper audience. The significance of this second feature will, I hope, become apparent shortly.

First, though, it is probably worth reminding the reader that at this point I am attempting to articulate a series of necessary conditions that pick out smaller and smaller subclasses – the last of which will, in conjunction with the others – provide a proper sufficient condition. So I am not claiming that only art is displayed, but only that all art is displayed.

¹⁵⁵ In Chapter Three

Still, there are two ways in which this claim could be unhelpful at this stage. First, there could be undisplayed art and the claim itself is just false. Second, all communication could (in the same sense) involve display, and the observation does not move the account any further along. Neither of these possibilities should be dismissed out of hand.

Alleged counterexamples to my claim that all art is displayed are likely to be of one of three kinds. First, it may seem that there are whole art forms that do not involve display. We do speak, for instance, about paintings, sculptures and performances as being displayed, but (generally) not novels or poems. If there are displays in libraries or bookstores, they are of books, not their contents. The artwork that concerns us is the novel, not the pages and binding that help us read it. Yet even if we don't often speak of it in these terms, the physical book *enables* a presentation of the novel just as it is presented by the shelf or case. Different art forms will involve different mechanisms of display, but each has at least one.¹⁵⁶

This is as good a time as any to clear up a subtle and maybe-pernicious problem. In addition to distinguishing the operative sense of “display” from those I mentioned above, we also want to distinguish *being displayed* from *being a display*. I have only claimed thus far that art (the practice) necessarily involves display. As will become clearer when we turn to the type of display art requires and especially to the determination of what it means to be an art object out of that conception, the artwork itself will be something that is displayed, not necessarily (but sometimes also) the thing doing the displaying.

Second, even if all art forms include a mechanism of display, it may be thought that we could have cases where individual works never make use of that mechanism. If all art is displayed, then (for instance) Fitzgerald did not live to see *The Last Tycoon* become a work of

¹⁵⁶ I take up this claim in detail in Chapter Six.

art. This is, however, just as we should want it. When Fitzgerald died, *The Last Tycoon* was a story, an unfinished novel, it was at turns biting, elegant, sarcastic and kind. But it was not a work of art until it was displayed to an audience.¹⁵⁷ This is, of course, not yet obvious. But if you want to deny it, I have to ask: when *did* it become a work of art? It would be absurd to think that it became a work of art as soon as Fitzgerald decided to write about Hollywood. I've decided to write a great many novels (that I never wrote) and none of them are works of art, so the mere deciding can't be enough. Nor would it be enough to more fully conceive the plot or develop a plan for the characters. Not even sitting down and working on the thing (a stage I've rarely got to myself) makes it an artwork. At some point Fitzgerald sat down and typed "Though I haven't ever been on the screen..." but that's only part of the work in relation to the rest. Nor is it the case that any additional word typed out turned what had come before into part of a work of art when it was not before. Even the last sentence he typed could not turn what was there already into an artwork. This is not (or not only) a sorites problem. A heap of sand is a heap of sand at some point (even if we can't say when) just by virtue of its size, but a novel is not completed when the last word is written. Something has to be done with it. I'm submitting that the "something" is a particular kind of act of display.

Perhaps *The Last Tycoon* is not the most difficult or pressing sort of case, because of course it did eventually become art. Consider an unnamed, unknown painting created by an established artist (though it could be anyone at all) that she destroys immediately upon

¹⁵⁷ Two small caveats: First, I have slipped into discussing an art object rather than a practice here. This is to some extent inevitable without employing some truly awkward phrasing. The question is easily (if somewhat oddly) re-framed as: at what point did *The Last Tycoon* take on its role in an artistic practice? Second, I have not said exactly when *The Last Tycoon* became a work of art. I know that it is now, but the moment it was first displayed as an artwork is lost to history. Edmund Wilson was maybe the first audience, maybe the first displayer. Its status does not become mysterious just because the precise moment it gained its status is unknown.

completion. The same sort of problem described in relation to *The Last Tycoon* arises for this work when we look for the moment of art creation in time between the blank canvas and the completed work. One last dab of oil cannot transform a mere arrangement of colors into an artwork. If she destroys the painting at any stage before it gets to do what art does – be the mechanism of communication through display – it never gets to be art.

Crucially, it is not enough that the painting *could* function as a mechanism of communication. First of all, almost anything could function as a mechanism of communication given the right background assumptions shared by the parties to the communication. Second, even quintessential cases of communicative tools are not communicative tools unless and until they are used as such. Consider: “You will change the tire.” I have here only a sequence of words. It could be used to declare, command, exclaim, question or perform, but until someone does so, it is none of these things.

Art, being communicative, is more like a sequence of words in this way than it is like, say, a hammer. A hammer destroyed in the factory before it ever drove a nail still got to be a hammer. But a hammer, unlike a work of art, is not (necessarily) involved in a communicative practice. Now a created work may look very much like art before it is displayed – indeed any object will look exactly the same before and after the first moment of display. But again, we should be comfortable with artworks looking exactly like non-artworks. First we have Danto’s indiscernible counterpart argument.¹⁵⁸ And even if intuitions run out vis a vis some of the more lavish hypothetical cases, it should be enough to notice that *any* communicative tool can look just like something that isn’t used that way.

¹⁵⁸ Please note the very limited use I’m making of Danto here. I am not claiming that he would be comfortable with anything I’ve said here other than that something that is not art can look exactly like something that is.

The third sort of alleged counterexample involves objects that were but are no longer on display. At the time of writing, Chagall's *Calvary* is in MoMA's permanent collection but not on display. It will likely still strike many as odd that *Calvary* is not a work of art right now because it is not being displayed right now. It is an object, a painting, and a Chagall, but down in MOMA's basement (or wherever) it is not now a work of art. When it is on view again it will be an artwork again. It is currently culturally important because of what it has been as a work of art and it is valuable because of what it can be again as a work of art (plus of course the Dutch-tulip-like inflation of painting prices).

There are a number of considerations that should mollify any discomfort with this condition.¹⁵⁹ Imagine that there is a fire at MOMA that destroys *Calvary* before it is cycled back into display. Surely we will want to say afterward that that particular object was a work of art but that it no longer is. But did it cease to be art at the moment it became cinder? When it is unrecognizable as *Calvary*? Or was it last art the last time it was treated as art – the last time it was displayed? Changes in the object are not the only ones that can rob it of art status.¹⁶⁰ Suppose there is no fire but MOMA just never gets around to displaying it before some other catastrophe ends our art institutions (along with the rest of our culture) but leaves *Calvary* intact. When some distant archaeologist discovers the painting and hangs it not in an art gallery (imagine his/her/its culture has no institution for such things) but in a natural history museum, do

¹⁵⁹ Though his concern is somewhat more ontological than definitional, there are some clear parallels here between the argument I provide and the ones Margolis offers for the “intermittent” existence of artworks. See especially: Joseph Margolis “The Mode of Existence of a Work of Art” *The Review of Metaphysics*, Vol.12, No.1 (1958, 26-34).

¹⁶⁰ To a large extent, of course, what changes in an object and/or its circumstances we think will cause changes in its art-status will ultimately depend on whatever theory of art we antecedently hold. Nelson Goodman, for instance, also thinks that objects can gain and lose art status, but for him this is a function of an object coming to have or losing a particular kind of symbolic function. See especially: Nelson Goodman, “When is Art” in *Ways of Worldmaking* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1981).

we want to say it is art then? If not, when did it cease to be art? More locally, though perhaps no more likely, suppose that today the art world turns entirely away from Chagall, and *Calvary* is given to the janitorial staff to clean the floors. The mistake would not be misusing art, but at most misusing an object that could or should be art.

That sort of error can work in the other direction, too. If MoMA places a menu from their café on the wall instead of *Calvary*, the mistake would not be to place some non-art on the wall, but rather to make into art something that should not be.

But I do not expect these suggestions to be compelling just yet. The imagined cases might be trending so strange as to rob us of clear intuitions. More importantly, *Calvary* seems to do so much of what art does even when it is in MoMA's basement. It has a non-negligible role in art history, it is thought about as art, considered in art history classes, appears in textbooks, catalogues and prints etc. etc.

Some further argument is required, and I think available. First, something need not be art right now to have a non-negligible role in art history any more than someone must be a soldier right now to have a role in military history. Generals do not lose their place in military history when they retire, and objects do not lose their place in art history if and when they lose their art status¹⁶¹.

Second, the objection seems to rest in part on a kind of equivocation on "*Calvary*." If *Calvary* appears in textbooks and is shown on projectors in art history classes, then the canvas on which Chagall initially painted *Calvary* being in MoMA's basement is no impediment to it currently being on display. Here we ought to bear in mind Wollheim's physical object/aesthetic

¹⁶¹ Just a quick note on this metaphor: of course retirement is clearer, more effective and more exact than losing art status. The relevant similarity is that that each involves a change in status that does not attend the destruction of the object, and in neither case does the loss of status mean a diminishment of the object in the history of things with that status.

object distinction. In his last (and favored) articulation of it¹⁶² the claim is that a physical object will decay, colors will fade, metals will rust, etc. but there is an aesthetic object that has the ideal (intended) condition that the object actually has at maybe only one time. If *Calvary* is the physical object, then not the painting itself but only images of it are on display in classes and textbooks and in living rooms as prints. In this case it is false that *Calvary* itself does what art does. Instead *images* of *Calvary* do what art does.

If *Calvary* is instead the aesthetic object, then it is on display in a great many places even though it is not on display at MoMA (except maybe in the gift shop). One way to think about *Calvary* as an aesthetic object is as a particular arrangement of colors which can be instantiated just about anywhere. *Calvary* itself is on display wherever it is instantiated, in art history books, online and on people's living room walls. On this account *Calvary* itself does what art does, but now it is false that it is not being displayed. It is being displayed in all sorts of places and in all sorts of forms, only not on the original Chagall canvas.

So depending on your ontological commitments, *Calvary* is either displayed lots of places and thereby performs the sorts of functions and has the sorts of roles artworks do and have *or* it is not displayed, but then it does and has none of those things. *Mutatis mutandis*, I believe the same sort of remarks can be made for each art form. In Chapter Six, I will return to these ontological difficulties and attempt to identify the operative displayed object in a number of different art forms.

For now, even if all art is displayed, how does this help us distinguish art from other forms of communication? Crucially, display is a form of public communication rather than private. The distinction here is between the intended parties to the communication rather than

¹⁶² Wollheim, (1968/1980) Pp.180-184

the context of it. So if my friend and I talk to one another at a crowded baseball game, we are having a private conversation in public. The announcements displayed on the scoreboard are public. They are addressed to whoever can see them. That is not to say, of course, that they are somehow addressed to *everyone*. There are plenty of ways in which the audience of public communication can be limited. The scoreboard, for instance, is addressed only to the people in the stadium and that group was limited to ticketholders and certain employees. Where this gets a little tricky is when we have much more limited publics. We do not want a theory of art that says that the audience for an artwork can't be a single person. We don't want to preclude my creating some art just for my friend. Nor, in fact, do we want to say that the absolute hermit who paints a painting for himself and hangs it on the wall of his remote cabin home doesn't have art out there. Similarly, a performance may be presented to no one other than the performers.

So what is the difference between private communication – say a conversation between me and my friend or a post-it reminder on the hermit's refrigerator – and public communication with just one audience-member (or even the kind of *talking to ourselves* that goes on when performers are also the audience)? The crucial difference is the role of the audience member in each form of communication. When we talk at the baseball game, my friend need not be the only person who can hear me to be the entire audience for what I say. That is to say, the people around us do not become part of my audience just by hearing and understanding my words. Notice that if they did, we would have no way of making proper sense of “eavesdropping.” But if I *display* something there in the stadium, the audience becomes anyone who can see and understand it. If I want to limit the audience to my friend, I have to take steps to limit others' access to the meaning of my display. By hiding or encoding the display, I can effectively create a public audience of one. All of this is to say: not all communication involves display because

some communication is *private*, its audience does not necessarily include everyone who can properly receive it.

Now of course a private communication might *happen* to include everyone who can properly receive it. But this is not necessary. Consider the following: Bob wants to communicate that today is Tuesday to Mary and holds up a sign that says “Today is Tuesday.” Now just as he does so, Susan enters the room and sees Bob holding up the sign. If Susan becomes part of Bob’s audience, if he is communicating with her just by virtue of the fact that she sees what he’s doing, then his communication is public and a form of “display” as I’m using the term. If instead Susan only happens to see what Bob is communicating only to Mary, his communication is private. When we display, then, not only is the object available to an unspecified audience – it is *made* available to an unspecified audience. By “unspecified” here I mean something like un-enumerated, as there is at least a descriptive specification (i.e. “the people who can see and understand...”) involved.

Another kind of worry may emerge at this stage: even if all art involves some form of display, does this particular conception of display capture the one always operative in art? An indicative comparison may suggest that it is. Let’s say I give my wife two pieces of paper in the same day. In the morning I write her a minimalist haiku as an ode to the simple joy of comfort in our domestic life: “Will be back anon. Have gone to the bodega. Need to pick up fruit.” Later that afternoon, having forgotten my forgettable poem, I write her a note to let her know where I am, it says: “Will be back anon. Have gone to the bodega. Need to pick up fruit.” Now let’s say she shows both of them to a friend. When she shows the friend the morning piece of paper, she expands the audience of my original communication. When she shows the afternoon version, she does not. The friend is audience to both, but only in the case of the poem is he part of *my*

audience. And he is so even though I did not have him in mind. In the case of the poem, because it is a work of art and therefore a *public* communication, my intended audience has to be everyone who can appropriately receive it. I may have thought that was only going to be my wife, but that is quite different from intending to communicate just with my wife, as I do in the case of the afternoon note. In that case, I am not thinking about her as the member of a unary class, but just her. True, these distinctions may not always make any practical difference. If my wife mixed up the two messages, nothing would change. But this doesn't show that there isn't an important difference between the two roles the messages play – the messages themselves would only have switched roles. It *would* be problematic, though, if she took them to be doing the same thing, to be engaged in the same sort of communication.

There may be a concern here that the plausibility of the last example rests in part on something specific about the poem or my lack of poetic talent. There may be a feeling that if my morning poem were of more value than the afternoon note would be poetry as well. But adding talent to the author (me, in this example) shouldn't change anything. We do not want to create artistic Midases. Dylan Thomas could communicate privately with a few lines of text and Rembrandt could communicate privately with a drawing without either becoming art just by virtue of their authorship. And the quality of the writing can't turn it into poetry either. There is a poetic quality to the Gettysburg Address and a cinematic quality to many commercials, but neither of these are artworks.

Species: An invitation to appreciation or contemplation of the invitation.

The final step is to say which presentations are art. What is common to the presentations of novels, paintings, symphonies and sometimes urinals and inert gasses but not to the

presentations of sales figures, exit signs and cereal boxes? Only in the former cases, I will argue, is the audience asked to appreciate or contemplate the object being presented.

The crucial purpose of presenting an artwork is to elicit the appreciation or contemplation of the artwork. If I write a poem that no one appreciates or contemplates, then I have failed in my purpose.¹⁶³ However, if I design a cereal box and no one ever actively evaluates or even considers the design, but its subconscious effect is that people buy more of the cereal, then I've done what I (most likely) set out to do. If I put up an exit sign that does nothing for anyone except inform them of where to leave the room, my primary ends are undoubtedly met. And if I present a diagram of sales figures to a company's board, I've done my job if the diagram helps them understand the data it represents no matter what they think about the diagram itself.

But my ends in writing a novel are not met when my audience merely understands the story I relate. My goals in reciting a poem are not fulfilled when that poem merely lets people know that they are at a poetry reading. And my painting has not performed its function when it causes someone to buy the canvas on which it is painted. In each case, among whatever other effects I hope to bring about, I must intend for my audience to contemplate or appreciate the thing being presented. I obviously need to say something to clarify "contemplation" and "appreciation." I'd like to defer this task for just a moment, however, until these concepts (among others) can be clarified in the context of the entire theory. For now, I hope that any intuitive and natural reading will suffice.

Once again, it is not difficult to generate cases that may appear troubling for this condition. For example, we do not usually distinguish the art status of Henri de Toulouse-

¹⁶³ That is, I have failed to make good on my communicative intention. I have not therefore failed to write a poem or to make art. Recall that the theory at hand does not make success a condition of art status.

Lautrec's advertisements from his other paintings. And yet the former were presented to (for instance) bring in people to an event. Two things to bear in mind here. First, I do not claim that eliciting contemplation of or appreciation for the presented object must be the only intention involved in displaying art. I suspect that it very rarely is. Probably, most art has also been intended to make money. If art can be used to make money in addition to its primary purpose *as art*, there's no reason it couldn't also get people to the Moulin Rouge (or buy cereal boxes, for that matter). But what if it was *no* part of Toulouse-Lautrec's intention that the posters be contemplated or appreciated? Again, this is no problem for the theory, as it at some point became a point of their display. If I hang a print of one of these posters in my living room, I'm surely not hoping someone attends the show it advertises. But if that really were the only intention behind its display, then it was never a work of art.

Similar remarks could be made for any of the other purposes art objects often have other than those that make them art. To consider another example, art objects may have liturgical, votive, or other ritual uses. Often, it is *through* their art-making properties that they are able to serve these other purposes. They are able to perform as devotional and even sacred objects because they get our attention in profound ways, inspiring contemplation or demanding appreciation. This is why art is so often important to religion, and why religious contexts are fertile ground for art.

In fact, nothing I've said (or will say) should suggest that an art object cannot have literally any number of other purposes. In addition to religious items, weaponry, furniture, household goods, clothes and many other objects can and have had art status even while serving their other purposes. But not every ceremonial object, shield, chair, plate, or shirt is a work of art. Similarly, a given activity may fall under any of these (or other) practices as well as artistic

practice. I have tried to say when we are engaging in art, and this holds (if it does) whether or not we are also doing something else at the same time.

We now have what I take to be individually necessary and jointly sufficient conditions for art. All and only art is the practice of communicative presentation for the purpose of contemplation or appreciation of the thing being presented. Much still needs to be said about just what this means and what its implications are, in addition to actual argument for the theory it expresses. I have in the preceding sections only given a hint of what I hope the theory can do – namely articulate what sort of thing art is and which of that sort it happens to be.

II. Articulating the Theory

I argued above that art should be first thought of as a practice and only secondarily as a set of objects, but also that a theory in one of those terms should imply a unique theory in the other. For our current purposes: defining the practice of art as x-ing will yield the theory that artworks are those objects that play the correct role in x-ing. There could in theory be some disagreement on the objectual definition despite antecedent agreement on the practical definition just in case there is disagreement over which objects involved in the practice are art objects. This seems, at least in the case of art, a very unlikely condition. For that reason, and because so many theories of art are articulated in terms of picking out a set of objects, let's move from what we have already to that kind of characterization. Doing so will, I hope, help both with recognizable clarification and easy comparison.

The objectual theory of art that is implied by what we've said above can be articulated this way:

x is a work of art iff: (a) x is presented to a public audience for the purpose of their appreciation or contemplation of x and (b) a proper understanding of x requires recognition of (a).

Let's call this the "displayed-object thesis." I will attempt to clarify and specify the key parts of this definition in the remainder of the present chapter, and then provide an argument for it in the next.¹⁶⁴

Before doing either of these, though, it may be worth reminding ourselves why any of this is important. Recall Tolstoy's claim (with which I'm very sympathetic) that the key standard by which we should judge explanations of art's significance is whether or not they help demystify (and perhaps rationalize) the great sacrifices we so often make for the sake of art. On the displayed-object thesis, we make such sacrifices because of the great benefits that accrue to us when we successfully make use of artistic public display. When an artist is able to not only bring about an audience's appreciation or contemplation, but to make its object the same as its cause, she has a uniquely powerful mechanism for communication. When the artist has my attention in this way, she has an opportunity to affect my feelings, beliefs, attitudes and worldview in a way that is just not given to her by the mere imparting of information. And the public nature of the communication means that there is potential for limitless instances of this opportunity. It's no wonder, then, that she is willing to make some significant sacrifices in the hope of having such an effect.¹⁶⁵

¹⁶⁴ You may notice that there is no explicit reference to "communication," despite everything I say above. As I will explain shortly, clause (b) of the definition provides for art's communicative nature.

¹⁶⁵ I am admittedly focusing here on only a part of Tolstoy's explanandum. He was also (and maybe even primarily) concerned with the larger social and interpersonal harm that our commitments to art can produce. Tolstoy (1896/1996) Pp.10-15

“Presentation to a public audience”

I could have said “x is *displayed*...” instead of “x is presented to a public audience...,” but as we just discussed, there are a number of senses of “display” that are not appropriate here. This phrase captures, I think, the one that is. Once again, there is nothing in “public” that should imply more than one member of the audience, or even that artist and audience can’t be the same person. The key difference between a private and public audience is in the way the presenter thinks about that audience. If it is a specific person or people, then the audience is private. If the audience is instead anyone who is able to appropriately receive it, then that audience is “public” in the sense I’m using. This way of thinking about a public audience allows, crucially, for an artist to intend an audience whose members she cannot even imagine. It is only through public communication that the artist can, for instance, write a poem for posterity.

Also note that the theory is entirely silent on who does the presenting or what form the presentation should take. Established and amateur artists, curators, publishers, decorators, dilettantes, hermits, you and I can all make something into art by doing what art does with it. I am not making the absurd claim that art-making is not the sole province of artists. It may even be analytically true that artists alone make art. What I am saying is that artists do not make something art. An art object is one made by an artist and made art by a displayer (who may also be the artist). That may be wrong - we’ll have to see - but it is no more absurd than thinking that consecrated sacramental wine is made by a winery and made consecrate by a priest.¹⁶⁶

¹⁶⁶ It has been suggested to me that a more appropriate analogue to the winery and the priest is the paint-maker and the artist. I think however you come down on this question will simply reflect whatever prior commitments you have to the determinant of art-status. Notice, though, that I’m not using this metaphor to argue for my position so much as to demonstrate that it is not – in general – absurd to think that the maker of something is not the one (or being the maker of something is not the office) to grant it some special status. This point is untouched by there

The theory should also not be taken to imply a single mode of display across the arts. Even if there were some description common to all the present forms of artistic display, it has become practically a definition of avant-garde art that it involves new forms. I suspect that it is this tendency that Weitz and so many others confuse for a deeper “openness.” In Chapter [?], where I discuss the application of the theory to various art forms, I will have to consider some of the ways that this sort of display (i.e. a display with the right sort of intention and conditions of understanding) actually happens in various artworlds. But the theory itself is entirely neutral on form.

“For the purpose of...”

There are at least two issues related to this part of the definition that could use some clarification. First, the proper intention need not be explicit or something conscious to the displayer, though it should at least be inferable from an actual explicit intention. It is highly unlikely, for instance, that we have an audience’s contemplation or appreciation immediately in mind when we hang a painting on the wall. Our only thought may be of the beauty of the painting or (what may amount to the same thing) our feeling when looking at it. But if so, then it is at least our own future appreciation of the painting that we mean to bring about, and that is enough to make it art.

A displayer’s intentions may be somewhat less, shall we say, aesthetic than that. We may think that hanging art on the wall has some other value to us – there may be social benefits, for instance. We do not want our theory to rule out an object being art because it was displayed as the result of someone wanting to hang art on the wall. But in this case we have to be a little

being *another* reasonable analogy. Also, my obvious affinity with Dickie on this point should not lead the reader to exaggerate the similarity between the conclusions we draw from it.

clearer about the displayer's intention. Let's say I hang a painting on my wall primarily because I want to impress my neighbors with what I hope they imagine to be my refined taste. If I mean to impress them via their appreciation or contemplation of the painting, then I have only used art for somewhat unsavory and wholly pathetic ends. I may in this case be in exalted if not quite good company, so much of the history of art having been determined by what glorified a relatively small number of patrons. That is to say, the fact that art requires certain intentions behind an object's display does not entail that those intentions have to be especially pure.

But if my little plan does not involve my neighbors' appreciation or contemplation of the painting, if I merely want them to think of me as being the kind of person who would have a painting on his wall, then in no sense do I do with the painting what we do with art. It is, strictly speaking, only a prop in my staged home. The painting itself serves no purpose beyond what would be served by my telling my neighbors that I have art in my house. The painting itself doesn't make that claim *true* any more than does the telling.

Second, whether the relevant intention is explicit or implicit, the definition as stated leaves the necessary relationship between that intention and the act of display somewhat underspecified. It would be too much to require that the proper intention be the only one that figures into the displayer's motivation. It is hardly ever (and maybe never) the case that it is the only intention we have in displaying artworks. As much as museum curators want to engage a public's appreciation and contemplation of art, they also want to keep their jobs. And I can imagine that my songs are capable of causing certain aesthetic experiences and play them in order for others to have them while also desiring attention and adulation.

At the same time, it is not enough that the proper intention merely be part of the motivation for display. Imagine a case in which someone directs a film meant to be pornography

while also hoping that it could someday be presented in an art museum. The latter wish may even mean that the director makes certain cinematographic choices that he wouldn't otherwise. But that alone is not enough to make the film art.¹⁶⁷ Or consider a biologist in charge of a display in a natural history museum. She may hope that some spectators will think seriously about the display itself rather than the species depicted in it. But again, no matter how much care she takes in crafting the formal aspects of the display, it will not be art in that context.

What is required, I think, is something in between these extremes. The proper intention – along with whatever means are required - must be sufficient for the display. That is to say, the display would have happened anyway had the other intentions not been present. It must be the case that the proper intention would have been enough motivation for the display. This requirement rules out the art-aspiring pornographer as well as the aesthetic-minded biologist. But it need not be the only intention involved in the overall motivation for which that is true. The motivation may be, in that sense, overdetermined. For example, vanity alone may be enough to get me up on stage, but so long as my desire to have an audience appreciate my music would be enough as well, then what I'm doing is art. This is not true in general of pornography or natural history displays.

“Appreciation or contemplation.”

“Appreciation” and “contemplation” should be understood fairly broadly, as they are meant to capture a wide range of ways in which displayers intend art to be received. It will be

¹⁶⁷ There could very well be a film that makes the jump from pornography to art, but it would take something more than what I describe here to effect such a change. I suspect there would at minimum need to be some substantial repurposing.

more profitable, then, to take a look at the genus to which each response belongs (to use the biological metaphor again) and articulate what forms of them these species pick out.

First, appreciation is a kind of pleasure caused by an object. We can also use “appreciation” to refer to an acknowledgement of and/or expression of gratitude for such pleasure, but the operative use is a reference to the pleasure itself. But of course not all pleasure caused by an object counts as - or even implies – appreciation. We can, for instance, feel pleasure because of the presence of a certain scent without being aware of pleasure’s cause. And we can also remark on the beauty of a sunset without actively being aware of the particular pleasing effect it has on us. Appreciation requires pleasure caused by a particular object along with awareness that the object caused the pleasure. And because we could be wrong about the way in which the object caused the pleasure in us¹⁶⁸ and therefore fail to genuinely appreciate it, we must also have at least a general sense of how it pleases us. Appreciation is much closer, then, to what we usually mean by “taking pleasure *in*” something than it is to merely “being pleased *by*” something.

Contemplation is best thought of as a species of consideration. I can consider an object in all sorts of ways that don’t rise to contemplation. The latter is marked by a certain depth and carefulness of thought. When I contemplate an object, I must ask and attempt to answer certain questions about it. I might wonder about its meaning, its historical significance, or if it is a genuine or good instance of its type. I do more, that is, than simply acknowledge its presence and form, or come to realize that I like it (or not). “Contemplating” an object also implicates a somewhat longer time thinking about the object than other forms of (mere) consideration. While we could consider something in passing, it can’t be quite right to say that we *contemplate*

¹⁶⁸ Imagine, for instance, thinking that a sunset is pleasing for the warmth it provides us, when we are standing near a fire and yet genuinely pleased by the visual spectacle of the sunset.

anything in passing. This is not to say, however, that contemplation cannot end in judgment or decision. Only if these results are easy or obvious, then contemplation is not required.

Two other features of this part of the definition are worth noticing at this stage. First, the requirement here is disjunctive. Not all art is presented for the purpose of contemplation. At least some trompe l'oeil art, for instance, realizes its purpose once an audience is fooled into mistaking it for a real object, realizes their mistake, and are duly pleased and impressed by the deception. Maybe there is an implicit invitation to wonder at the technique, but I don't think this is necessary for trompe l'oeil art status. And not all art invites appreciation. Many of our favorite 20th Century counterexamples to aesthetic theories of art – urinals, boxes, inert gasses, etc. – have fulfilled their purpose (probably well beyond their artists' wildest dreams) by virtue of their being so thoroughly contemplated.

Finally, I'd like to emphasize again that the "appreciation or contemplation" condition must be read along with the "purpose" discussed above. That is to say, it is not necessary of art objects that they successfully engender appreciation or contemplation. Plenty of artworks have been presented for the purpose of bringing about these responses without ever successfully doing so.

"of x"

We can display objects for the purpose of eliciting an audience's appreciation or contemplation without aiming at their appreciation or contemplation of those objects. We often display graphs and tables, for instance, in order to have an audience contemplate the data they represent rather than the graphs and tables themselves. And explanatory signs beside paintings and prefaces to novels are there in part to help us appreciate the paintings and novels, not to be

appreciated themselves. To be presented as an artwork, however, the intended object of appreciation or contemplation must be the presented object itself.

The second clause

It is really the second clause that captures the communicative nature of art. Borrowing freely from Grice's account of "non-natural" (i.e. communicative) meaning, it is not enough for successful communication that an audience come to have a certain belief as a result of the (allegedly) communicated object. Otherwise, evidence at murder scenes that indicate the killer's guilt and hypnosis would count as communication.¹⁶⁹ When my daughter says "I am hungry," I have not fully understood her utterance just by virtue of my coming to believe that she is hungry. I also have to recognize her intention to impart this belief in me by virtue of her utterance. This separates her *saying* she is hungry from her indicating her hunger through (say) a short temper. At least in regards to her hunger, I have properly understood her temper when I recognize it as a sign of her hunger and that she is in fact hungry. I have not properly (or fully) understood her utterance "I am hungry" if I merely recognize it as being caused by her hunger.

A similar picture emerges with art at two different points. First, like any communicative object, understanding an artwork requires understanding that a particular belief, attitude, or affective state was intended to be imparted on an audience via the object. This, we might say, is true of the communication that goes on between artist and audience. But notice that this kind of communication, which artworks share with any utterance, is not the kind of communication required for art status. After all, what is communicated by Swift's *A Modest Proposal* could

¹⁶⁹ H.P. Grice "Meaning" *Philosophical Review* Vol.66, No.3 (1957, 377-388) Pp.381-382

have been communicated by an essay on the treatment of and attitudes toward poor Irishmen that was, crucially, not at all art.

What makes *A Modest Proposal* art is that, first of all, it is presented in a way that invites our appreciation and contemplation of the writing itself and not just what it communicates.¹⁷⁰ But this alone would not be quite enough. We would not properly understand *A Modest Proposal* as an artwork even if we understood the point Swift was making in terms of certain beliefs about Irish and English society, recognized his intention to impart those beliefs on an audience *and* contemplated and appreciated the form this communication took. We must also understand that *A Modest Proposal* was presented to us (or to someone) with the intention that our contemplation and/or appreciation be so elicited.

Finally, a couple quick words specifically about “proper understanding” and “recognition” are likely in order. “Proper understanding” is meant to indicate something between *some* understanding, which could be anything true of an object and *complete* understanding, which may never happen for anything. Crucially, whatever else proper understanding requires, if a proper understanding of x requires believing y, then either believing not-y or failing to believe y entails a *misunderstanding* of x. It is my claim, then, that failing to recognize the relevant intention(s) of an artwork’s displayer imply a misunderstanding of it. Of course, that recognition may be tacit or implied by my interaction with a work rather than something I consciously consider or assert about it, and I’ve still understood the work. And for many artworks, this sort of recognition may never happen at all. All that is required is that the

¹⁷⁰ Swift may have wanted to trick some monstrous aristocrats into agreeing with his narrator’s attitude and therefore expose them, but this was at least not his only intention. And even if it were, it has not remained the intention of all those who have republished the essay.

recognition be necessary for proper understanding. It is quite possible and highly likely that some artworks are never properly understood.

Even if this chapter has made clearer what I mean to suggest by the displayed-object thesis and what motivates it in a general way, it is likely not yet clear how each part helps deliver necessary and sufficient conditions for art, informs our understanding of art and art history¹⁷¹, and does all the other things I suggested we want from a definitional theory. For that, I turn to some more substantive arguments in the next chapter.

¹⁷¹ A number of different historical questions may be of some especially pressing concern. Even if the definition captures our current artistic practices, how far back and how far forward will it continue to do so? I address both the historical nature of art and the capacity of the theory to cover older artistic practices in the next chapter. In Chapter Six I turn a (speculative) eye toward future artistic practices.

Chapter Five: The Case for the Theory

In Chapters Two and Three, I addressed three distinct challenges to the project of providing a new definitional theory of art: that such theories could not possibly work, that we have no way of knowing if a theory works without some topic-specific criteria for theory selection, and that we don't need another such theory because we have at least one successful one in the literature. I tried then to address those challenges in a way that was as specific-theory-neutral as possible. Having articulated my own preferred definition in the last chapter, I'm now in a position to re-address these issues in light of that theory. The result, I hope, will be three sets of reasons for preferring the displayed-object thesis. First, it successfully meets the challenges to definitional projects in general, while allowing us to take seriously the intuitions that underwrite those challenges in the first place. Second, it maintains the strongest advantages of the theories described in Chapter Three. Third – and perhaps most importantly – it avoids the problems of those theories that lead to their inability to satisfy the criteria for theory-selection I offered in Chapter Two.

I. Meeting Skeptical Challenges

It would be far too bold an assumption to think that my arguments against the skeptical challenges presented by Weitz, Ziff, Gallie and others are the end of their force, pull and significance. They each enjoy a certain initial plausibility that – as much as their authors' rhetorical and argumentative skill – deserves credit for their influence. So let's see if the displayed-object theory is capable of explaining the intuitions on which those challenges rely. If so, then even if they work as challenges to some essentialist theories of art, they may not work so

well as challenges to this one.

First, if Weitz's "open concept" argument is ultimately unsuccessful, it is not because it is *prima facie* absurd. Art does – especially over the last century or so – appear to have become untethered from the forms, projects, and ideals that grounded the practice for so long that they were (often) mistaken for necessary features of the practice. For better or for worse, it has become so common for artists to test and cross the boundaries of artistic conventions that doing so might be thought of as an art form in and of itself. Indeed, it is likely the dominant form of our time. We have, as Weitz seems to have seen,¹⁷² two good reasons to think about art in ways that accommodate this trend. First, it is the way of the artworld. For better or worse, diversity and possibility do not seem to be passing trends. Second, were we able to press a bygone theory of art hard enough to turn the artworld back in its direction, we still shouldn't want to. Though it may be the enabler of all sorts of nonsense, recent art history is also the liberator of an otherwise unimaginable outpouring of creativity and surprise.

These considerations, I think, are what make Weitz's "open concept" argument (as well as Danto's "end of art" thesis,¹⁷³ it should be noted) so appealing. It would be far better not to have an essential definition of art than to have one that unduly or arbitrarily constrains artistic creativity. But many theories of art available to us today are perfectly compatible with the artworld's freedom, the displayed-object thesis among them. I hope to demonstrate a little later that the displayed-object thesis manages to do so without Weitz's *other* legacy, the kind of residual pessimism and resulting lack of specificity that we so often find accompanying

¹⁷² Weitz (1956)

¹⁷³ The "End of Art" for Danto means that artists are "free to be what they want to be – are free to be anything or even to be everything." [Danto (1997) P.45]

subsequent theories.¹⁷⁴ For now, though, two questions: how does the displayed-object theory allow for artworld-freedom and is this enough of the sort of freedom we want?

The easiest way to answer these questions at once is negatively, to consider what constraints the theory places and then to see if these are at odds with either the actual practices of the artworld or the liberties we would want to defend on its behalf. Specifically, we want to know if the theory constrains artistic activity in such a way that it rules out the kind of open creativity that we both see and want. Among the liberties that the theory does preclude, I believe there are three that could possibly be thought problematic in this regard. First, no one can make an object into an artwork simply by creating it. Second, no one can make an object into an artwork simply by fiat or declaration. Third, no one can create an un-displayable artwork. The first two restrictions are, I think, obviously no hindrance to artists' creativity. The fact that something does not become art simply by virtue of its being created does not entail that there is anything that an artist can create that cannot become art. Neither does the fact that a declaration of art status is insufficient for art status. I cannot proclaim the chair in which I'm sitting art with any performative success, and neither could Tracy Emin, Marcel Duchamp, the head curator of the National Gallery, or anyone else. But that does not mean that the chair could not be art were I to do with it what someone must do to make something art.

Only the third constraint actually limits the class of things that can be art. But it does not do so in any way with which we should be uncomfortable. What sort of thing, after all, would we want to call a work of art but that cannot be displayed? Perhaps a candidate may be something like Robert Barry's "All the things I know but of which I am not at the moment thinking - , 1:36PM; June 15, 1969." But what exactly is the artwork here? If it is the piece of

¹⁷⁴ For a fuller treatment of this "residual pessimism" see my "Weitz's Legacy" in *ASAGE* Vol.7, No.1 (2015)

paper on which these words are written, then there's no problem – the paper is presented. If it is the words themselves, there is again no problem because the words are presented on the paper or spoken aloud. They are, then, like any poem. But perhaps neither of these are what Barry had in mind. Maybe meant for the artwork to be just the things he knew but of which he wasn't thinking at that moment. He did not present these things. If he meant to include not only propositional beliefs but – to use a somewhat antiquated distinction – things he knew by *acquaintance*, like the immediate objects of his phenomenal experience, then he may have been trying to make art out of things that *cannot* be displayed.¹⁷⁵ But it would be a mistake to think that these are actually the artwork in question. I don't know if this mistake is Barry's or certain of his interpreters', but it involves a confusion of reference and referent. Barry has at most *referred* to the things he knows. They are not the artwork itself any more than Napoleon is the artwork of Jacques-Louis David's *The Emperor Napoleon in His Study at the Tuileries*. What is strange and novel about Barry's work, then, is that its referent is not something to which the audience has (or could have) access. But the artwork itself, the thing doing the referring, is still very public and displayed.

The apparent plausibility of Ziff's and Gallie's skeptical challenges rests on a different sort of intuition. Namely, it is not clear how a single essential definition can handle serious disagreement at a given time and massive changes over time in the correct application of "art." One initially attractive answer may be that the kinds of disagreements Ziff and Gallie point to¹⁷⁶ are really disagreements over the correct *conception* of art while this theory (and probably others like it) are attempts to characterize the *concept* of art. In some cases, we can operate with the

¹⁷⁵ Ignoring for the sake of argument the fact that it isn't clear that such things could be *known* when he wasn't thinking about them.

¹⁷⁶ Ziff (1953); Gallie (1956). See Chapter Two for a discussion of each.

same concept of x (roughly, we do not mean different things by “x” and can agree on some basic if inexact conditions of it) without agreeing on an appropriate conception of x (roughly, the rules by which we pick out instances of x). But the concept/conception distinction is only really useful in explicitly normative and evaluative contexts.¹⁷⁷ It is probably for just this reason that Gallie himself focuses exclusively on an evaluative sense of “art.”¹⁷⁸

And yet not all disagreement about art can be explained away as disagreement over such evaluative senses. What classifies as “art” also seems to change, and there seems to be serious and reasonable disagreement over it. Whatever else it does, a theory of art in its classificatory sense ought to be able to explain such disagreement and change. If that theory purports to offer an essential definition (as mine does) it must do so in some way that – contra Ziff and Gallie – demonstrates some fundamental agreement among disputants. That is to say, the disagreement must be attributed to something other than the underlying concept. The way that the displayed object does so is relatively straightforward. Disagreements over (and by extension changes to) what counts as “art” are ultimately disagreements over what sorts of things are properly presented to a public audience for their appreciation or contemplation, and under what conditions understanding an object requires recognizing that intention.

That is to say, the theory does not presuppose an antecedent agreement on stable “appropriate” classes of art and non-art. Rather, whatever someone takes to be the appropriate class of art, that class will be picked out by the definition. Consider the following hypothetical: a small gallery has two exits only one of which has an exit sign above it. This sign is meant only to direct people to the exit and only negligence has prevented there being a sign above the other

¹⁷⁷ The most famous use of this distinction, in Rawls’ *Theory of Justice* is as good a case as any. John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* Revised Edition (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999 – original publication 1971) Pp.4-6.

¹⁷⁸ I made this case in Chapter Two.

door. Now an artist (i.e. anyone at all) places an identical exit sign above the other door with the intention that it be considered along with her other pieces in the gallery. The new sign is being presented to an audience for the purpose of their contemplation of it. Whether or not you ought to think the new sign is art will depend on whether or not you think it satisfies the definition's second clause. To say (for instance) that the object is nothing other than another exit sign is just to say that a proper understanding of it does not require recognition of the intention behind its display. Antecedent agreement on the definition only reaffirms divergent intuitions and explains – rather than explains away – serious disagreement over individual cases.

II. Preserving advantages of prior theories

In an attempt to justify the offer of a new theory, I attempted in Chapter Three to show that prior theories were all lacking or problematic in certain key respects. In the next section, I'll suggest some ways that the displayed-object thesis avoids those problems. Now, though, we should remember that I chose those theories either for their historical significance and/or their helpful contributions to the subject, neither of which would be possible if these theories didn't have some important advantages worth preserving. I'll try, then, to show that the displayed object thesis maintains the most significant of these advantages.

Mimetic Theories

Even though no one is likely to seriously hold a mimetic theory of art today, it is always worth reminding ourselves that this sort of theory of art seems to have been assumed for the majority of Western art history. Some of this, like the nearly-complete dominance of syllogistic/categorical logic and the focus on causation and categorization in the natural sciences,

can be explained by the long shadow of Aristotle over the “dark ages” of Western intellectual life.

But unlike in those other domains, the Aristotelian conception of art fit the data very well for a very long time. If nothing else, the mimetic theory of art explains how it is that representation and verisimilitude held sway over the Western artworld for so long. And it’s at least a little problematic for a particular theory if it does nothing to help us make sense of that history. If the correct theory of art is a purely aesthetic or formal theory, for instance, there remains a sort of mystery about art history. Namely: why, for so very long, weren’t artists and art critics focused on the essential qualities of art?

Notice that a similar mystery does not arise for the displayed object thesis. On that account, thinking about art turned toward representation and verisimilitude because those were an artistic aim and a critical ideal that made objects that had them worthy of our appreciation and contemplation, and artists knew those to be requirements of the artistic mode of communication.¹⁷⁹

Aesthetic Theories

The primary value of an aesthetic theory of art is that it makes central to the concept of art a feature of art that is at least central to – if not the entirety of – the value we place on art.¹⁸⁰ Now there are undoubtedly problems entering into any discussion of the aesthetic value of art. For one thing, we don’t always seem to be entirely clear about what “aesthetic” means.¹⁸¹ For

¹⁷⁹ It is not so strange that imitation has been (and still is) central to art. For instance, our “delight in imitation” that Aristotle describes in the *Poetics* is (if somewhat strangely explained there) undeniable. *Poetics* 1448b

¹⁸⁰ See Chapter Seven for an extended discussion of artistic value.

¹⁸¹ See Chapter Seven for more on this issue as well.

another, it is not clear that we can say anything *about* purely aesthetic qualities beyond the circular and perhaps even tautologous.¹⁸² But no matter how troubling these issues become, they are problems to be overcome rather than reasons for rejecting the importance of the aesthetic to art. Though we may (and I think should) deny that our sole interest in art is aesthetic, it would clearly be too much to deny that we have a particularly strong aesthetic interest in art. And though, as I say above, this interest may not always have been at the forefront of our theorizing art, it has always been a part of our evaluation and appreciation of nearly all forms of art. Whatever faults it may have, the theoretical tradition that runs through Baumgarten and Kant through Bell to more sophisticated accounts like those of Eaton, Beardsley and Iseminger¹⁸³ at least has the advantage of putting the close relationship between art evaluation and aesthetic qualities front and center.

This relationship is captured as well by the displayed object thesis, only not so explicitly, and in a way that does not ignore other important qualities of art. One way that an object can be art on the theory is that it is displayed for the purpose of an audience's appreciation.

“Appreciation” here can cover quite a bit more than *aesthetic* appreciation (roughly our self-and-cause-conscious pleasure at the aesthetic qualities of an object). We can appreciate the boldness, the ingenuity or the cleverness of an artwork rather than, say, its beauty or expressiveness. But it is enough (again, on the displayed-object thesis) for art-status that an object is presented for the purpose of our aesthetic appreciation and our understanding the work requires recognition of that intent.

¹⁸² Others have made this point in a number of different contexts. For a couple notable examples, see Kant (1781/2000) Pp. 229-241/§55-7; Wollheim (1968/1980) Pp. 230-231

¹⁸³ See Chapter Three and its discussion of these.

In addition to providing for this relationship between art and the aesthetic, the theory is also in a position to help explain why this relationship is so central to art evaluation. Even if aesthetic quality is not necessary for art (and it is not), the significance of aesthetic quality does not seem to be a mere accident of historical contingency and the institutional development of the artworld. It seems only natural that an interest in art should be accompanied by an aesthetic interest. This is because it is only natural that we have an aesthetic interest in the objects of public display. When I am asked to look at, hear, or read something and I know that anyone else similarly positioned is asked the same, I can't help but take on a kind of public stance. This does not divest me of my very particular interests and attitudes, but my awareness of my position as a member of a public audience does force me to additionally consider the object from that perspective. This is not an *objective* position, but rather something like *my* perspective from the office of public audience-member. Crucially, from that vantage I focus on the aspects of the presented object that would be accessible to anyone who shares in that office. As such I am forced to consider the aesthetic (i.e. the formal and therefore perceptible) qualities of the object in question. To conclude: because public display is necessary for art and aesthetic concerns are so natural to it, those aesthetic concerns are intimately – though once again not necessarily – tied to art.

Expressivist and Linguistic Theories

At this stage, (what at least I take to be) the primary virtue of expressivist and linguistic theories will be obvious: they capture the essentially communicative nature of art. They may all lead us to error by circumscribing the objects or modes of artistic communication, but they have at least the virtue of focusing our attention on the sort of thing that art is.

The displayed-object thesis does the same, though in a fundamentally different way. Any form of communication can count as art on the theory just so long as it is accompanied by the right sort of communicative intention on the part of a displayer and the right sort of requirement-for-uptake on the part of the audience. Art then is distinguished from other communicative acts much the same way that (for instance) imperatives are. Imperatives can appear in the grammatical form of interrogatives (“will you get me a glass of water?”) or declarative statements (“I’d like you to get me a glass of water”). What is crucial is that a speaker means to have an audience member do something rather than just understand what is being expressed, and a proper understanding of the utterance demands recognition of that intent.

Art too can take many (maybe any number of) forms and its crucial characteristic is the attachment of the right sort of implicature. Things as diverse as paintings, songs and texts can communicate things as diverse as feelings, beliefs and attitudes. In each case, though, if the communication is artistic, then it comes attached with the suggestion to its audience that the communicating object is presented to them for their appreciation or contemplation of it. I have not yet – but will shortly – try to demonstrate that the presence and absence of this implicature tracks the presence and absence of art status. For my present purposes, it is enough to notice that focusing on this feature of art properly focuses our attention on its communicative nature.

Institutional and Historical Theories

Like some¹⁸⁴ but not all communicative activities, art is also intimately bound to a particular institution and history. What counts as appropriate forms of artistic communication at a given time is determined in large part by the established practices within a particular set of practices

¹⁸⁴ Political and moral discourse, scholastic writing, and most performatives are some other examples.

that has a particular history. Institutional and historical theories of course do a good job of capturing this important feature of art.¹⁸⁵ Though – somewhat ironically given their traditional antithesis – like aesthetic theories, they run the risk of leading us to confuse an *important* feature for a *defining* feature of art.

Not only is the displayed-object thesis consistent with this virtue of institutional and historical theories, there is a sense in which it *is* both an institutional and historical theory. In this light the theory is simply specifying the kinds of activities that constitute the practice that defines the institution we call the “artworld” and making plain what it means to have the right kind of role in the set of narratives we call “art history.” The artworld turns out to be, then, the set of practices that determine the proper modes (at a given time) of display-for-appreciation-or-contemplation such that recognition of those intentions is required. And true art-historical narratives tell the story of the development of those practices. To intend an object to have a place in those narratives is just to have the kinds of intentions the theory requires.

Alternative-Structure Theories

The primary virtue of many alternative-structure theories is their ability to account for just the data that seems to motivate them: the great diversity in art forms and art objects. To take two of (what I take to be) the better examples of such theories, consider the ways in which Lopes’ buck-passing theory and Gaut’s/Longworth’s/Scarantino’s cluster theory do so. On Lopes’ account, there is not one art-making property, only poetry-making, film-making, sculpture-making (etc.) properties.¹⁸⁶ Whatever makes a poem a poem is what makes it art because poetry

¹⁸⁵ For my money, the best examples (as I suggested in Chapter Three) are Dickie, Carroll, Levinson and Margolis.

¹⁸⁶ Lopes (2007, 2008, 2014)

is one of the arts. So what makes a poem a work of art need not have anything in common with what makes a sculpture a work of art. Then on the cluster theory, because a good number of combinations of disjuncts will be sufficient for art status and none are necessary, the same properties need not (at least in theory) determine art status for two significantly different objects.¹⁸⁷

In both cases, this particular explanatory power is offered as a distinct advantage over traditional or essential definitions. But the displayed-object thesis allows for as much artworld-diversity as we should want. Specifically, and to repeat what I've already pointed out, the theory does not require that two art objects be displayed with anything like similar forms, materials, objects of communication, styles of communication or even contexts. In short, the absence of these kinds of constraints in the theory explain how it is that very different sorts of things can come to be art in seemingly very different ways. All that must be common to the practices that create art is that they be capable of being the mechanism for the kind of communication that the theory describes. While there may be some disastrous counterexample lurking out there, it is worth noticing that none of the examples alternative-structure theorists have (thus far) presented as evidence of art-form diversity lack this particular communicative capacity.

III. Satisfying the proper criteria

At the end of Chapter Two I laid out what I take to be a helpful set of criteria for selecting, specifically, a definitional theory of art. I tried then to do so in a way that was as theory-neutral as possible. I have to leave open the possibilities that there are other important criteria that I left out and that there are theories out there that satisfy these criteria at least as well as the displayed-

¹⁸⁷ Gaut (2000); Longworth and Scarantino (2010)

object thesis. I mean here, though, to argue first that the theory does satisfy these criteria well, and second that it does so in ways that some of the rival theories we've been discussing cannot. I've already hinted at – if not made outright - some of these arguments in this chapter and the last.

Extensional and Intensional Adequacy

When evaluating a new definitional theory, extensional adequacy is naturally and rightfully the first criterion we use. Ideally, a theory will perform like a function on the set of all practices or the set of all objects and return all and only those that are art. Of course our use of this criterion is hampered by both our necessarily incomplete knowledge of the artworld and by the fact that we cannot reasonably assume prior agreement on the extension of “art” in the first place. Still, we do not want a theory that is subject to obvious or what would be generally-agreed-upon counterexamples. You and I do not need to agree on the art-status of every single object in the world in order to agree that some of Piet Mondrian's and Jackson Pollack's paintings¹⁸⁸ indicate that a purely mimetic theory of art cannot provide sufficient conditions, or that street signs and advertising indicate that it cannot provide necessary conditions. The conceptual turn in contemporary art seems to preclude either purely aesthetic or purely expressivist theories providing sufficient conditions. And just the fact that written works can be art seems to indicate that theories that identify art with a single symbol system cannot provide necessary conditions. I made liberal use of counterexamplifying in my responses to some rival (or at least alternative) theories in Chapter Three.

¹⁸⁸ I'm sure there are those out there who still doubt that Pollacks and Mondrians are art, but let's not invite the Flat Earth Society to a cartography club.

In general, intensional adequacy is only more difficult to capture because imagination is often better than interpretation at finding the really difficult cases, the ones on which we are least likely to agree. But our topic is art, after all, and the difference between imagined and actual cases is often only a difference between what someone has taken the time to manufacture or perform and what hasn't (yet) been produced. What, after all, are *Fountain*, *Empire* and the *Inert Gas Series* but counterexamples made real?

How, then, can we determine – much less demonstrate – that the displayed-object thesis does not have some counterexample or even family of counterexamples lurking about out there in the corners of the artworld or potentially so in our imaginations? One thing in its favor, certainly, is that it avoids defining art via a single style or form and makes no prediction about the longevity of any particular artistic project. But this is hardly unique or definitive. The good news – for the sake of both brevity and decision – is that the preceding Chapter already contains an argument for necessity. Each step through the taxonomic classifications of art was in effect an argument for the necessity of a condition of the definition. I won't belabor all of those points here.

Sufficiency, however, presents a new challenge. I'll suggest some ways that the theory rules out some kinds of things that might be mistaken for art and then offer a kind of defeasible indirect proof.

Let's say there is an object O out there that satisfies the criteria laid out by the displayed-object thesis: O is presented to a public audience for the purpose of their appreciation or contemplation of O and we cannot adequately understand O without being aware of this intention. First, what sort of thing is O *not*? O is *presented* so it is not a product only of nature, someone has acted on (or with) it intentionally. It is something that the intending agent can hope

will elicit appreciation or contemplation, so it is not merely informative like a road sign or dinner order. O itself is an intended object of appreciation or contemplation, so it is not (only) a display of data in a graph or table or a display in a natural history museum, nor is it a work of mere pornography, propaganda or advertisement. In order to properly understand O I have to be aware of this intention, so it is not a sporting event or some elaborate prank.

So if O is not any of these things that might be mistaken for art, we are a little closer to seeing that the displayed-object thesis constitutes jointly sufficient conditions for art. To get closer still, let's now assume that O is *not* a work of art and see if this, plus some reasonable assumptions, leads us to contradiction. Now, to borrow unashamedly from Danto's key insight, since O is not a work of art, there will be a substantive – indeed ontological – difference between O and another object O(A), a work of art that happens to be indiscernible from O.

Let's imagine that O and O(A) are next to one another in a room.¹⁸⁹ What could possibly be the difference between them? After all, the differences between O and O(A) that can be articulated from the perspective of the natural sciences will not track the difference between them in art-status. Perhaps there is something like a spiritual difference between them, but if the reader genuinely holds the kind of superstitious animism that this would require, I can only beg forgiveness for my insensitivity to it.

So whatever the difference between O and O(A) is, it is a product of some relation to human culture. And given that there is a rather large and important difference between art and non-art, there must be some significant practical difference in the appropriate ways to respond to O and to O(A). There are a number of obvious candidates. Following Danto again, one key difference might be that it is always appropriate to ask what O(A) is about, but not necessarily O. But if I

¹⁸⁹ This is assuming, only for the sake of convenience, that O and O(A) are the sorts of things that can be *placed*. Mutatis mutandis, the same argument works if O(A) is a poem or a song.

must recognize that O was presented for the purpose of my contemplation or appreciation of it in order to understand it (as was stipulated), it seems that a proper understanding of O *requires* that I ask what it is about.

But of course much more than art is “representational” in this way. Maybe, then, there is some other relevant response appropriate to O(A) and not to O. In order to be *relevant* that response must be appropriate to O(A) by virtue of O(A)’s being a work of art. So you walk into the room and are told only that O(A) is a work of art and O is not, but that O was presented to you for the purpose of your appreciation or contemplation and you need to know that in order to understand O. In what way is it appropriate to respond to O(A) and not O? Another way of asking the same question: is there some way to view O(A) as a work of art *besides* appreciating it, contemplating it and considering the ways those effects were brought about? One candidate may be that it is appropriate to think of O(A) in an art-historical context but not O. Notice that then it would be appropriate to contemplate O, but that contemplation would have to stop short of considering it in reference to art objects. But this is an awfully arbitrary proscription. Non-art objects can be appropriately considered in their relation to art-historical developments and influences. It seems the only sort of contemplation appropriate to O(A) and not O is to actually think of O(A) *as a work of art*. But what that means is exactly what we’re trying to decide.

Perhaps instead there is some qualitative difference between the kinds of affective, especially *aesthetic* responses that are appropriate to O and the kinds appropriate to O(A), despite their sensory indiscernibility. Imagine, for instance, a trompe l’oeil painting of such skill and cunning that the visual illusion is not broken by knowledge of its manufacture. The painting may then remain indiscernible from its real-world counterpart, and our aesthetic response to it and only it should be influenced by that knowledge. But what *is* that knowledge except that the painting

was created in part for the purpose of our appreciation and that we should recognize that intention in order to understand the painting? And that, of course, is true of O as well.¹⁹⁰

We have not considered every possibility, but I think given the diversity and plausibility of the candidates we have considered, we can be confident that there will not be anything to distinguish a response appropriate to O(A) and not to O other than that which is already stipulated of O. And so we have reached a contradiction. Therefore, in the absence of some yet-unknown and successful candidate, we can conclude that if an object meets the criteria laid out in the displayed-object thesis, it is a work of art.

A quick summary of the major moves in the preceding argument:

1. An object O satisfies all of the conditions provided by the displayed-object thesis and is not a work of art
2. Another object O(A) is indiscernible from O but is a work of art.
3. If O is not a work of art and O(A) is, then there are important differences in the responses appropriate to O and to O(A) respectively.
4. It is appropriate to ask what O is about.
5. It is appropriate to consider O in reference to artworks and art history.
6. It is appropriate that our aesthetic response to O is informed by our knowledge of its creation and purpose.

Thus (*ceteris paribus*),

7. There are not important differences in the responses appropriate to O and to O(A) respectively.

¹⁹⁰ This feature of the theory distinguishes art from other appropriate objects of appreciation and contemplation. Consider the especially elegant mathematical theorem or proof. Understanding the mathematical object— and even its elegance, which may well be an *aesthetic* quality – does not require recognition of its being offered for that purpose.

Thus,

8. It is not the case that [O is not a work of art and O(A) is].

Thus,

9. It is not the case that [O satisfies all the conditions provided by the displayed-object thesis and is not a work of art].

Therefore,

10. If an object O satisfies all the conditions provided by the displayed-object thesis, then it is a work of art.¹⁹¹

As I stressed just now, 4-6 are not exhaustive of the possible differences in our responses to O and O(A), and so the subconclusion 7 (and therefore the entire argument) has something less than the force of validity. That said, I am confident that the three modes of interaction described above are collectively indicative of the *kinds* of responses appropriate to O(A) that might be offered as candidates to distinguish it from an indiscernible non-artwork. If I'm wrong, then there is another as-yet unconsidered response appropriate to O(A) by virtue of its being a work of art that is not also appropriate to O by virtue of its satisfying the conditions of the displayed-object thesis. If not, then we should be satisfied that the displayed-object thesis provides jointly sufficient conditions for art status.

¹⁹¹ Again, the argument has a *reductio-ad-absurdum* structure. (1) is the assumption to be tested – I'm attempting to demonstrate its negation by showing that it leads to contradiction when combined with reasonable assumptions. (2) is stipulated in order to help test (1). (3) is just a fact of our normal critical (and more broadly responsive) practices regarding art. (4)-(6) follow from the first condition of (1). (7) follows from (4)-(6) plus the art status ascribed to O(A) in (2). (8) follows from (3) and (7). (9) follows from (1), (2) and (8) – note that (8) delivers only that at least one of (1) or (2) are false, though I'm not sure how we'd deny (2) without insisting that indiscernibles are impossible, which would be a tough line to maintain. (10) just follows from (9).

Modal Adequacy

In Chapter Two, I suggested a number of simple principles for thinking counterfactually about art (in addition to the intensional adequacy requirement) for which a definitional theory ought to account, or at least not contradict. Two of those may be of some use here. First, a theory should not imply that there is anything that is necessarily art. On Clive Bell's account, for instance, anything is art that produces the right aesthetic emotion, which will be anything that possesses significant form.¹⁹² Setting aside all of the other problems with the theory (its circularity, vagueness, implausibility etc.) it has the undesirable effect of turning anything with significant form into art, regardless of its cultural, historical and institutional context.

At the risk of going to the same well too many times, Danto's examples of naturally-occurring objects indiscernible from art-object counterparts demonstrate that nothing is necessarily art. Danto presents a number of these sorts of examples. My personal favorites are the splatter of paint from the centrifuge indiscernible from Rembrandt's *The Polish Rider* and the rock-quarry explosion that leaves a mass indiscernible from the leaning tower at Pisa.¹⁹³ Because we can imagine a painting exactly like *Polish Rider* accidentally created by random (though admittedly immensely fortuitous) accident, we can make sense of the claim "It is possible that *Polish Rider* was created by accident and was thus never a work of art." The *Polish Rider* referred to in this sentence is Rembrandt's *Polish Rider*, which counterfactually might not have been created by Rembrandt at all. Going one step further, it is not necessary that Rembrandt's *Polish Rider* is art even if we keep constant the intentional history of its production.

¹⁹² Bell (1914/2009) P.13, 17

¹⁹³ Danto (1974) P. 140; Arthur Danto, "Art, Philosophy, and the Philosophy of Art" *Humanities*, Vol.4, No.1 (1983, 1-2) P.2

If Rembrandt worked in a culture that treated oil paintings as we treat very common placemats, *Polish Rider* would in that world be a placemat.

Second, there is nothing that cannot be art. Danto's other set of examples – the art objects indiscernible from real-world counterparts - demonstrate this principle quite well. To take another famous (and maybe notorious) example, Weitz argued that because we might say of a hunk of driftwood on a beach that it is a “real piece of art,” even artifactuality is not a necessary condition of art.¹⁹⁴ Dickie was right to argue that the expression “real piece of art” here is evaluative rather than classificatory, but he was also right to point out later that that same piece of driftwood could be art if it is taken and placed in the right institutional setting, say in a museum or (at least I would argue) someone's living room.¹⁹⁵ In short, any given non-art object could be art in some circumstance other than the one it has. Mimetic, formal, symbol-system and any other sort of theory that defines art in terms of some manifest property will have trouble accommodating this intuition.

The displayed-object thesis, on the other hand, is right at home with both of these principles. Nothing is art until and unless it is displayed for the right purposes, and there is nothing to say that any given object cannot be displayed for those purposes.

Categorical Accuracy

I realize, of course, that claiming some advantage over theories no one is likely to hold any more does not do a whole lot to prove my theory's worth. Still, the fact that the displayed-object thesis is able to (a) distinguish between art-as-practice and art-as-set-of-objects and (b) explain the close (perhaps even *logical*) connection between these two senses does at least speak well of

¹⁹⁴ Ref Weitz (1956) Pp.33-34

¹⁹⁵ Dickie (1969) P.253, 255

it. As I tried to make clear in the previous chapter, the present objectual definition of art is best thought of as a derivation of the proper conception of art as a kind of practice. In a sense, the failure to provide for (a) and (b) is the underlying problem with strictly mimetic and aesthetic theories of art. Such theories are open to obvious counterexample because they are looking for the grounds of art status in the wrong place. Theorizing about art objects without first thinking about what we do with them (essentially) is like trying to build a comprehensive theory of baseball equipment without thinking first about how the equipment is used in playing baseball.

So, that the displayed object thesis has this kind of categorical accuracy is another advantage it enjoys over theories of art that get the category wrong. But it is also an advantage over those skeptical accounts that deny there is any such category to be described. To take two indicative examples, Weitz's family resemblances and Lopes' buck-passing become useful when there is no stable, inclusive and identifiable category of art. And if there is not, then something must be done to diagnose the error so many of us seem to be in when we think, talk, argue about art. Now Lopes especially does an impressive job of diagnosing this error in a way that leads to his alternative account. But at least *ceteris paribus*, we ought to prefer the theory that explains rather than explains away our usual discourse.

Specificity

I argued above¹⁹⁶ that the skepticism that drives Weitz to his family resemblance view reemerges somewhat diminished as a kind of pessimism that runs through many of the better subsequent theories of art – notably institutional and intentional/historical theories. The pessimism emerges as a reluctance to specify exactly which practices constitute *artworld-*

¹⁹⁶ In Chapter Three

practices and which cultural histories count as *art* history. The feeling seems to be that if we leave out these kinds of specifications, we are sure to prevent (what really would be an unfortunate result) closing off artistic creativity and development. It is true that there is still a lot we can do with these theories and much that we can learn about the nature of art from them. But if a theory can account for the institutional nature of art while also specifying (without circularity) *which* institution is the artworld and account for the cultural-historical nature of art while also specifying *which* cultural history is the history of art, then that's the theory we ought to prefer. The displayed object thesis, as discussed above, does both. Specifically, on this account of all the cultural institutions out there, the *artworld* is the one that deals with and has grown up around the practice of presenting for the purpose of an audience's contemplation or appreciation of the presented object while requiring that the audience recognize that purpose. And the history of that practice is the history of art.

The specificity of the theory also provides it with an advantage over those (like Gaut's cluster theory) that do not specify the conditions that (for it, disjunctively) define art. Such theories are in the end no more than theories about the conceptual structure of art and not the concept of art. Specifically, we do not learn anything about art from such theories that can help us distinguish it from other concepts that have the same structure. Again, unless there is some reason it cannot be done, we ought to prefer a theory that provides a plausible account of both the conceptual structure of art and exactly which concept it is.

Cultural Invariance without Cultural Bias

Navigating the cultural boundaries of art has its own Scylla and Charybdis. We do not want a theory of art that identifies art with the art of our own culture, as a mimetic theory would have

done at least prior to the advent of abstract art in the West. Aesthetic and expressivist theories may have much the same sort of problem. On these views, what makes something art is culturally invariant, but the criteria run the risk of bias in favor of one particular culture. Imagine a culture with an exclusively abstract art history. A mimetic theory will return the improper result that there is art in our culture and none in that one.

One way to avoid this problem is to present an art-making property (or properties) that *cannot* be used to pick out art in another culture. So if, for instance, a theory that picks out art via reference to particular artworld-institutions or art histories, the application of the criteria for selection will be different across cultures. We would not, for instance, ask if object A of culture M has the right kind of role in a correct art-historical narrative of some other culture N, we should instead ask if object A has the right kind of role in a correct art-historical narrative of culture M. Now even if these methods are similar, because cultures M and N can have very different histories, we do not really have a culturally invariant method of art identification. But we do want, I think, to be able to discuss and compare art across cultures – even radically different ones.

The displayed-object thesis steers something of a middle course. Different cultures may have radically different histories of public display for the purpose of contemplation or appreciation. That is to say, in one culture there may be no history whatsoever of mimetic objects being displayed for these purposes. In another, there may be nothing but. Using the displayed-object thesis enables us to pick out art-practices and art-objects using the same criteria without privileging one cultural history over another.

Explanatory Power

The final criterion I presented in Chapter Two was explanatory power. I believe I've already covered the ways in which the displayed-object thesis explains most of the things I suggested that a theory of art ought to be able to explain: *historical change in an ahistorical concept, the institutional nature of art, the unity of art forms, and the difficulty of borderline cases*. First, the concern over "historical change in an ahistorical concept" is essentially only a temporal version of the concern about cultural invariance and cultural bias. What I say just above about the latter can be easily applied to the former. Second, I've discussed a number of times the ways in which the theory accounts for art's institutional and historical natures and won't belabor that point again here. Third, the virtues of being able to account for a conceptual unity among art forms - contra Lopes and others - as well as the ability of the present theory to provide for it has likely been over-stressed already. And finally, recall that properly explaining the difficulty of borderline cases is ultimately a matter of providing for the right kind of indeterminacy in applying a given theory's criteria. We do not want indeterminacy - as we find it in cluster theories, for instance - in the criteria itself but instead in some (we hope fairly rare) specific cases of the criteria's application. My example of the exit sign in the gallery indicates the way that the displayed object thesis allows for this second sort of indeterminacy. Barry's "All the things I know but of which I am not at the moment thinking - , 1:36PM; June 15, 1969" does as well. Again, the displayed object thesis does not determine for you whether or not you should think of such things art, but it does determine what is really at stake in disagreements over art status. Thus the theory also avoids the "dialectical stalemate" that Lopes thinks attends all serious disagreement over essential definitions.

Art's significance is the other explanandum I considered at the end of Chapter Two, and I think it is the most important. I've already suggested ways in which the displayed-object thesis

can explain the sacrifices we make for the sake of art.¹⁹⁷ There still may be some concern, however, that the definition makes art into something too small, too mundane and ordinary. But there is nothing ordinary about the kind of communication the theory describes. When we recognize that we're being asked to contemplate or appreciate not only the thing being communicated but the thing doing the communicated, we have to arrest our wandering attention and hold at bay the bombardment of mere information. Appreciation and contemplation are more focused, less fleeting forms of pleasure and consideration respectively. Art is uniquely capable of communicating ideas, values, norms and feelings because our focus on it has to be slower – we have to spend as much time and effort on the saying as on what is said. This, ultimately, is why art is powerful, why it is dangerous, wonderful and significant.

Nothing I've said here means that the displayed-object thesis inescapable or undeniable. These arguments do, I think, provide some reasons to find the theory both plausible and preferable to competing theories. In so doing, I've tried to make good on a number of promissory notes made throughout the dissertation thus far. I've attempted to show that the displayed-object thesis:

- (a) meets skeptical challenges to essentialist definitions of "art" while explaining the intuitions that provided those challenges with some initial plausibility,
- (b) preserves the chief advantages of some of the better theories of art already on the table, and
- (c) does a better job than those theories at satisfying some important and plausible criteria selecting a theory of art.

¹⁹⁷ In Chapter Four

One line in my ledger, though, is still prominently red. None of what I say above does anything for the applicability, usefulness or even plausibility of the theory if there is not some way of identifying an object in each of the major art forms that can satisfy the criteria I've suggested. Nor could the theory have much value if its application could do nothing to anticipate the avant-garde. I will use the next chapter, then, to identify the kinds of objects that can be and often are displayed in the way the theory requires – and in so doing suggest some ways that the theory can aid us in art research.

Chapter Six: The Displayed Object in...

If you've read this dissertation this far, you've probably had to turn back to the definitional theory at its center a few times. Let me help out:

The Displayed-Object Thesis:

x is a work of art iff: (a) x is presented to a public audience for the purpose of their appreciation or contemplation of x and (b) a proper understanding of x requires recognition of (a).

The definition itself provides an articulation what I take to be the kind of display that determines art status.

It would be an awful shame, then, if there were not an object in each of the major art forms that we can identify as being so displayed. My main objective in this chapter is to suggest some plausible candidates. Doing so will, I believe, demonstrate two strengths of the theory. First, it should provide some evidence of the breadth of the theory's applicability. Second, it should demonstrate the value of the theory for future art research. Specifically, the theory should help: (a) identify the practices and objects that ought to be included in an inquiry into art history, (b) individuate particular artworks for study, and (c) narrow our focus to the relevant features of artworks. I'll return to these latter issues later in the chapter.

Initially, though, a few quick words about the organization and structure of the chapter: first, because I mean to respond to a number of questions and objections about the applicability of the theory to various art forms, it is possible to skip those sections that cover forms about which you do not have questions or concerns. That said, I do think these sections together provide some additional explanation of the theory I mean to endorse throughout.

Second, I will not use this chapter to respond to particular cases or even particular families of cases in various art forms that might be problematic for the displayed object thesis. I tried to do that in Chapters Four and Five. Here I mean to begin by addressing a different, more general sort of objection – that the usual, conventional, or standard sort of object in a particular art form cannot satisfy the definition because it either lacks the requisite sort of displayed object or there are insurmountable difficulties in identifying that sort of displayed object.

Finally, I am not making the case for any *unique* advantage of the displayed object thesis. Successfully or not, that work was done in the preceding chapters. Again, my aim here is instead to settle some outstanding questions about the theory's applicability.

I. Plastic arts

Painting

Painting appears to be fairly safe ground for the displayed-object thesis. If anything is displayed, it is a painting. Still, some issues in identifying the displayed object may need to be decided. For instance, we've already discussed Wollheim's physical object/aesthetic object distinction and the consistency of both ways of thinking about paintings with the displayed object thesis.¹⁹⁸ Just to rehearse a bit: a painting is either identical with a particular physical object or an aesthetic object identical with the ideal condition the physical object may have had only once.

Rarely does deciding an issue in the philosophy of art have more pressing practical importance than this one. Recent controversies over art restoration require some answers.¹⁹⁹ If a

¹⁹⁸ In Chapter Four

¹⁹⁹ Memorable examples include the Sistine Chapel restorations of 1980s as well as the disastrous work on Elias Garcia Martinez's *Ecce Homo* and the sensation that followed. . . See

painting is identical to the object, then the condition of that object at a given time and state of decay is just the condition of the painting. Restoration, then, is necessarily aimed at changing the painting into something that it is not. Whatever murk time provided the Sistine Chapel frescoes prior to their restoration in the 1980s became part of the condition of the art objects. It is for (roughly) this reason that some opposed any restoration of it. If instead the art objects in question are identical to their ideal condition, then restoration is instead aimed at making the physical objects there on the ceiling closer in appearance to those works.

Interestingly, the aesthetic-object theory does some damage to Nelson Goodman's autographic/allographic distinction, or at least his principal applications of it. For Goodman, an autographic work is autographic "if and only if the most exact duplication of it does not thereby count as genuine,"²⁰⁰ otherwise it is allographic. Autographic works belong to autographic arts and allographic works to allographic arts. Painting is Goodman's prime example of an autographic art, music an allographic art. But if the painting is an aesthetic object, over time it is likely that prints and posters of it resemble it more than the object the painter actually painted.

Now it is worth noticing that "physical object theory" or "aesthetic object theory" refer to families of theories, each of which may contain a pretty significant variety of views. But however the "physical object" or "aesthetic object" is understood, there is no question but that there is a displayed object involved. If Kandinsky's *Composition 8* is the physical object in the Guggenheim, then my mother may have hung an image of it on the living room wall of an

also James Beck, *Art Restoration: The Culture, the Business, and the Scandal* (New York: Norton, 1993). The philosophical relevance is pointed out somewhat in passing by Amie Thomasson, "Ontological Innovations in Art" *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* Vol.68, No.2 (2010, 119-130) Pp.119-120.

²⁰⁰ Goodman (1968) P.113. We can, thankfully, avoid getting into the serious questions about authenticity and forgery that the distinction raises.

apartment where I grew up, but she did not hang *Composition 8*. If *Composition 8* is instead an abstract (pun intended, please forgive) type, then we had a token of it on the wall.²⁰¹

Recall that on the displayed-object thesis, what is important is the intention behind the display. First assume the physical object theory. When she hung the Kandinsky print, my mother had in mind that it would engender an audience's (usually hers and mine) appreciation. If she was asking for appreciation of the print itself, it is a work of art, even though it is not *Composition 8*. If she meant instead for it to call to mind *Composition 8* and cause appreciation of it, then perhaps it was instead a reminder of a work of art. If we instead assume the aesthetic object theory, then we simply had *Composition 8* on the wall, and it is a work of art because it was there and so many other places displayed for the purpose of an audience's appreciation. Of course the same exact analysis will not apply to all paintings or replications thereof. This is standard enough, though, to give an indication of how I would treat any similar case. Notice also that in the cases of paintings that cannot be replicated or that have no "original," it is even less in question what the relevant displayed object is.

Printmaking

Many if not all of the considerations above apply to prints as well. In fact, on certain versions of an aesthetic object theory of paintings, there may not be any substantive and relevant difference between painting and printmaking. But if paintings are autographic and identical to

²⁰¹ As I say above, there are many ways of understanding "aesthetic object" and believing that artworks are aesthetic objects does not commit us to thinking of them in terms of types and tokens. See Jay Bachrach, "Type and Token and the Identification of the Work of Art" *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* Vol.31, No.3 (1971, 415-420) for an example of an aesthetic-object theory that explicitly eschews the type/token conception. Also, see the discussion of music below for some further problems with thinking about artworks in type/token terms.

physical objects, we will need a slightly different account of prints. Goodman thought that printmaking was autographic at two stages.²⁰² The etched plate is autographic just as a painting is, but the prints from it are autographic, too, since they have an authenticity that a print from another very similar plate would not. I have to admit that I have some trouble imagining what difference it could make to me that a given print did not come from an original or authorized plate. Consider an example like Albrecht Durer's *The Opening of the Fifth and Sixth Seals* from his "Apocalypse" prints. This is an extremely detailed image with many fine lines that could easily be printed as solid color in error as well as places that are likely *meant* to be printed as solid color. It seems to me that I would have more interest, in fact count as more "authentic" an expert printing from a suitably close replica woodcut than a lesser printing from the original.²⁰³ We could instead count as instances of *The Opening of the Fifth and Sixth Seals* only those prints that Durer did or sanctioned himself. But this seems too heavy a burden, as there would be no causal difference whatsoever between authentic and inauthentic prints, only the artist's sanction. And authenticity, whatever it amounts to, is not something that can (typically, anyway) just be declared.

But again, happily, the displayed-object thesis requires neither a commitment to nor a rejection of Goodman's claims. It is enough that a given print is either displayed and thus a singular work of art or its display means that its type is displayed by virtue of one of its tokens being displayed. The only potential difficulty regarding prints and printmaking for the displayed-object thesis – and one that does not come up vis a vis painting – is that on the theory the plate itself is not a work of art, presuming of course that it is not displayed. But I'm not sure

²⁰² Goodman (1968) P.118.

²⁰³ I admit that I may be in the minority here. I can't help but think, though, that an interest in the lesser print from the original plate would have to be motivated by either an economic or purely historical interest.

this should be a problem. After all, not everything that an artist makes is a work of art. If an artist makes her own brushes or stamps without those transforming from the implements of art to the art objects themselves, why would it be any different with plates?

Sculpture

The situation is somewhat different with sculpture. I think we're far less likely to say that a casting of a famous sculpture is an instance of it than we are a print of a famous painting. But even so, this does not mean that the casting is somehow not a work of art. I may very well mean to produce appreciation or contemplation of a miniature of Rodin's *The Thinker* (perhaps thereby some contemplation of contemplation as well). But at the same time, we do not think a sculpture somehow inauthentic when it is physically manufactured by a fabricator rather than the sculptor. Many sculptures would be impossible otherwise due to their size alone.

But there is also no looming trouble in the history of producing a particular sculpture the way there might be with prints. The mold, which serves roughly the same purpose as a plate in printmaking, is clearly not identical to the sculpture (which is the artwork in question). Perhaps, in fact, this gives us by an analogical reason to think of and treat plates the same way. Regardless, it is clear that whatever we identify as a sculpture will be something displayed.

If this whole discussion of plastic arts has grown a bit repetitive, it is only because – despite some of the potential difficulties we've encountered – these are probably the cases of art forms where we most clearly have displayed objects. Let's move on then to some forms that may be somewhat more challenging.

II. Performing arts

Music

Music, at least in a sense, provides the first real set of challenges to the notion that we can always identify a work of art with a displayed object. And this should be no surprise, as music has become something of a central focus of debate in art ontology. Three features of music make coming to terms with it particularly difficult. First, a single musical work can be performed multiple times; second, musical works are created by composers; and third, music consists of sounds.

Certain problems emerge just from this last feature. For instance, just saying that music consists of sounds does not say anything about which sounds count as music. Well, John Cage and others have done a solid job of demonstrating that Danto's problem of indiscernible counterparts emerges in music. And so we should say that *any* arrangement of sound could be music. But perhaps these are deviant cases that shouldn't concern us here.

Unfortunately, we need not go looking beyond the most typical instances of music to find problems. Let's just say that a given piece of music is a sound structure that has certain characteristics – we need not say what those are. Are we including in “structure” just the notes presented in a particular meter and melody, or does the structure include the “coloring” provided by particular instrumentation? Could I, for instance, perform Chopin's *Nocturnes* on guitar? Or would a perfect rendering of the notes (which I couldn't pull off, but let's discount that) and their arrangement fail to be a performance of Chopin because it isn't on the piano?²⁰⁴ We don't have

²⁰⁴ For more on this particular issue, see Steven Davies, “Musical Works and Orchestral Colour” *British Journal of Aesthetics* Vol.48, No.4 (2008, 363-375) and Julian Dodd, “Confessions of an Unrepentant Timbral Sonicist” *British Journal of Aesthetics* Vol.50, No.1 (2010, 33-52).

to settle this issue just now, though. Whether it is Chopin that I perform or not, whatever that musical work is must be performed, i.e. presented to someone, to be a work at all.

A larger and somewhat more pressing problem emerges when we combine the thought that a musical work is a particular sound structure with the fact that a single work can be performed multiple times. If so, then the structure is not identical to a particular performance. And if music consists of sounds, then it is not the instructions (i.e. the score) for those performances. It seems that a musical work must be an abstract object. But if so, then it is not something that can be created by a composer. This problem and others closely related to it have generated a great deal of controversy and consternation.²⁰⁵ Most solutions to it do not present problems for the displayed-object thesis. We can insist that musical works consist not only of sound structures but also of the circumstances of their creation.²⁰⁶ Or we could deny that musical works essentially consist of sound, though we'd surely owe some other account. Or we could deny that two performances could genuinely be of the same work, though this would likely require too much reform of our everyday language and critical practices. Or we could instead maintain that musical works are only sound structures and these are abstract objects, but a special sort of abstract object that can be created by people.

The only truly problematic solution (again, for the displayed-object thesis) is one that claims that musical works, being abstract, are discovered rather than created by composers *and* that they are works of art prior to their discovery. This second part is important because it is

²⁰⁵ This difficulty is at the heart of Levinson's critique of Platonism in music in Jerrold Levinson, "What a Musical Work Is" *The Journal of Philosophy* Vol.77, No.1 (1980, 5-28). See also Ross Cameron, "There Are No Things That Are Musical Works" *British Journal of Aesthetics* Vol.48, No.3 (2008, 295-314) and Peter Alward, "The Spoken Work" *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* Vol.62, No.4 (2004, 331-337) for helpful statements of the problem. Finally, see Peter Kivy, "Platonism in Music: Another Kind of Defense" *American Philosophical Quarterly* Vol.24, No.3 (1987, 245-252) for a (remarkably reasonable) Platonist response to Levinson.

²⁰⁶ This is roughly Levinson's strategy.

possible to think that musical works have a kind of being²⁰⁷ prior to their discovery, but that their art status is dependent on their discovery. But if Mahler's *Ninth* was a work of art prior to his composing (read: discovering) it, then it was a work of art that was not (because it could not be) displayed. As tempted as we may be to dismiss such a view for the apparent implausibility of abstract musical works or the reduction of composition to discovery, we shouldn't be too hasty. First of all, both of these are consequences of thinking that music is only sound structures, a view that seems fairly plausible on its own. Second, there seems to be a real problem with the way we commonly think about – or at least talk about – music. This may not rise quite to the level of paradox, but it is odd enough that we shouldn't dismiss a solution to it just for being odd.²⁰⁸

But the second requirement, that these abstract structures are *artworks* prior to their discovery, is another matter entirely. Like abstract mathematical structures, the abstract sound structure can be individuated by its members and their relations. Notice, though, that there is no principled reason to think that musical sound structures are abstract objects with being prior to discovery and non-musical sound structures are not. The world of abstract objects does not discriminate between the two. So then we have to ask: what distinguishes the musical from the non-musical sound structure before either are discovered? The answer of course is that there is nothing. Perhaps – and I fear this may be going beyond the responsibilities of the Devil's advocate – someone could claim that the musical structure has a certain kind of form that is capable of producing aesthetic emotions that the non-musical form does not. But unrealized, undiscovered, and unconsidered abstract objects have *no* capacity for producing any kind of

²⁰⁷ Here I'm relying on what may be slightly antiquated assumptions, especially that abstract objects (if there are such things), lack creation, destruction, duration and extension, and thus have *being* without *existence*.

²⁰⁸ By way of comparison, think about the oddities we're willing to countenance in order to come to terms with the semantic paradoxes of self-reference: Hierarchies of language? Truth value gaps? Truth value gluts? Interpretable nonsense?

response in us, no matter what form they may have. So in the end there is no plausible solution to the central problem of music ontology that is really problematic for the displayed-object thesis. The one that might seem so is either implausible or consistent with the theory.

Theater

By and large, the same issues and considerations will apply to the theatrical arts, including dramas, musicals, ballets, operas etc. Certain complications may arise as these arts often combine in one way or another various other forms. For instance, when we go to see the production of *Much Ado About Nothing*, we are experiencing Shakespeare's play, which is a literary work as well as the particular production of it, which is a performing art. When we see *Don Giovanni*, we are experiencing a musical work as well. We've discussed music just now and I will return to literary art below. If the problems in each are surmountable, I do not think any new issues arrive via their combination, at least for the displayed-object thesis.

One interesting aside, though, before we leave the performing arts: consider what we often call "performance art": that special and often strange subset of the performing arts. One notable feature of performance art is that it can be (and in fact is often) autographic. While I can perform *Much Ado About Nothing* or (God help the audience) *Don Giovanni*, I cannot perform Marina Abramovic's *The Artist Is Present* or Chris Burden's *Shoot*. Of course I can stare speechless at people in galleries and have someone shoot me in the arm, but either would be at best an homage and at worst plagiarism.

III. Film and photography

If theater is something of a combination of art forms, then film – especially narrative film – is even more so. But film also introduces a few new wrinkles for the displayed-object thesis all on its own. The first is in identifying just what the displayed object is. I can see *The Shining* in a movie theater providing a projection. But the *The Shining* is not the series of *those* frames, since I can see the same movie in another theater. It cannot be dependent on physical frames at all since I can see *The Shining* using a DVD or just stream it from a website. But a film is not given to the kind of analysis we might provide for a musical work since it cannot be performed. I can't perform *The Shining*. Film is also not quite like theater. If you and I see two different productions, even two different shows of the same production of *Much Ado About Nothing*, we cannot say that we've seen the same thing, but if you see *The Shining* on a Wednesday at the theater and I see it on Thursday at home, we've both seen the very same artwork – provided some minimal requisite similarity in the prints.²⁰⁹

Whatever we think a film is, though, it seems at first that we must allow for it to be a displayed object. Films, after all, require screens and screens are mechanisms of display. But there are theories of film that would not allow this particular inference. The reason is that the film itself is not what we see on the screen and is not in fact what is displayed. In the spirit of the sort of the realism and anti-formalism of earlier film theorists like Andre Bazin²¹⁰, Kendall

²⁰⁹ Danto makes this point in "Moving Pictures." Arthur Danto, "Moving Pictures" *Quarterly Review of Film Studies* Vol.4, No.1 (1979, 1-24)

²¹⁰ Bazin was more concerned with (a) the culminating role of film and photography in the "obsession" with realism of the history of the plastic arts and (b) the idea that this role grounds the critical claim that cinema is at its best when its ambitions are realist rather than formalist. Andre Bazin, "The Ontology of the Photographic Image" in *What is Cinema?* Vol.1 Hugh Gray Ed. And Trans. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005 – Original publication 1967)

Walton famously argues for the “transparency” of film, film being a photographic medium.²¹¹

The claim here is that we see right through photographs and by extension films to the objects in them, that “we see,” as Walton says, “quite literally, our dead relatives themselves when we look at photographs of them.”²¹² Though the question of transparency is not (by a long mile) the only problem with coming to terms with the nature of film, it its truly *unique* problem. But it remains to be seen if this is a problem for us.

Let’s turn for a second to a useful distinction that Danto makes between viewing a given filmed object as either “model” or “motif.”²¹³ We view as model if we look at Jack Nicholson and see Jack Torrance, as motif if we look at Nicholson and see Nicholson. To see Nicholson acting and holding a prop through the final scenes is to view *The Shining* as documentary, to see Torrance holding an axe is to view *The Shining* as screenplay. The transparency theorist will say that to view *The Shining* as screenplay is to see Torrance as played by Nicholson exactly as we would if we were watching a stage play, and to see Nicholson acting is just like seeing the actors as actors in a stage play. To view the movie is to see through the images to the play performed before the camera. I’m know that reasonable people reasonably disagree about this and similar matters. I’m tempted to think that we may fundamentally view films differently, or at least that there is no way to satisfactorily adjudicate between competing intuitions on the matter.

However, this example does indicate something important - for our purposes anyway - about the transparency thesis: namely, that while it rules out a film *being* a displayed object, it also rules out film being an artwork. The artwork in question when we talk about *The Shining* is the play

²¹¹ Kendall Walton, “Transparent Pictures: On the Nature of Photographic Realism” *Critical Inquiry* Vol. 11, No 2 (1984, 246-277)

²¹² *ibid.*, P.252

²¹³ Danto (1979)

that the filming captures and allows us to see. Once again, being a displayed object is still necessary for being an artwork, even if “film” can’t *be* but only *capture* the actual work of art.

IV. Literary arts

The further we go in this chapter, the fewer unique potential problems and pitfalls we need to consider, and the more we can just say “see above.” This is true for literary art as well, especially as a literary artwork can involve so many of the issues of performance art. We are familiar with productions of plays and readings of poetry, but short stories and novels (usually excerpts) are read for audiences as well.

The unique issues involving literary works arise when we consider their other mode, as we read them in texts. This is another issue we’ve already addressed.²¹⁴ We cannot, of course, think of a physical book as the art object. First, we can read *Light In August* from two different copies, even two radically different printings. Nor is *Light In August* the set of all printings or all texts, since (if for no other reason) it is the same work that is read aloud to us as an audiobook or performed on a stage. The physical book and its pages are more a mechanism for displaying the displayed object. The book is like a screen in this way, which is fortuitous as we more and more read “books” on actual screens.

The two most sensible candidates for the object that constitutes a literary work are (a) a particular series of sentence-types or (b) a particular pair of a narrative and its telling.²¹⁵ Both enable us to speak about a given work across media and modes of presentation. We might prefer (a) to (b) given that what constitutes a narrative is open to interpretation in ways that the

²¹⁴ In Chapter Four

²¹⁵ Understand “narrative” and “telling” fairly broadly here, enough at least to cover poetry that might not immediately appear to be narrative in form. That is, allow for things like implicit or suggested narratives.

individuation of a literary work is not. So for instance, you and I can disagree about what Reverend Hightower believes about Joe Christmas's involvement in the murder and fire without having two different things called "*Light In August*" in mind. Or we might prefer (b) to (a) as a particular "telling" can cover a range of possibilities that "series of sentence-types" cannot. And we do not want a second printing of *Light In August* with fixed typographical errors or other light editing to be a different work from the first. Either way, though, we cannot have a literary work without a displayed object. Either tokens of the sentence-types (in the same series) are displayed on pages or in speech or the narrative and its telling are displayed in one of those forms.

V. Architecture, furniture and design

Architecture and design, being the arts most closely (and sometimes inextricably) tied to function, tend to present problems for a number of philosophical theories of art. It is to Goodman's credit that he recognized that because his theory of art rests on the way in which artworks *mean* and some (but not all) buildings are art, he had to say something about how buildings can mean. His answer is that buildings most often "mean" by exemplifying a particular style or movement.²¹⁶ I'm not sure Goodman is still operating with the kind of "meaning" typified by denotative or expressive content, but our task is not to adjudicate Goodman's theory again.²¹⁷ Rather, we need to provide if we can some reason to believe that a building's art status is tied to its display, that whenever a building is a work of art, it is a displayed rather than merely functional object.

One place to start might be with the feature or features of a building that are most central to its display. What I have in mind specifically is a building's façade. And what else is a façade

²¹⁶ Nelson Goodman, "How Buildings Mean" *Critical Inquiry* Vol.11, No.4 (1985, 642-653)

²¹⁷ See Chapter 2.

but the principle mechanism for the public display of a building's character? This is typically, though not necessarily the front of a building, and typically, though not necessarily the side of a building that contains its main entrance. What *makes* a façade a façade is its display function.

Next, notice that if we attribute art status to a façade, we are at least inclined to attribute art status to the entire building. But no other comparable architectural feature's art status is similarly sufficient for the status of the building as a whole. Were I to live in a house with extraordinary Doric columns, for example, I would not therefore live in a work of art. But if the façade of the building was art, so too would be my house. Because a façade's art status is uniquely sufficient for the building's art status²¹⁸ and the façade is distinguished from other comparable parts of buildings by virtue of their display function, we can conclude (defeasibly but reasonably) that the attribution of art status to buildings is tied to the recognition of a certain form of display. Whenever a building is a work of art, it is itself a displayed object. Otherwise, it is a mere warehouse for our things and ourselves.²¹⁹

A similar set of considerations apply to furniture and design. Rooms are primarily meant to be lived in, furniture to be sat or laid upon. But rooms and their contents can be artworks as well. We're familiar of course with the staged period rooms in large museums like the Met. But I see no principled reason why a particular room in my apartment could not be art if those are. What is crucial is that the room be not merely functional or even functional *and* aesthetically pleasing. It must also be set aside somehow as a displayed object. This could be achieved in a number of ways, from the obtrusive velvet rope to a more subtle break from the style and décor of the rest of the house.

²¹⁸ Note that I am not claiming here that a façade, artistic or otherwise, is necessary for art status.

²¹⁹ An expanded version of this argument can be found in in "Facades in the Display of Architectural Art" the proceedings of the 2007 Stony Brook Philosophy and Art Conference, Pp. 14-19.

VI. Anticipating the avant-garde

It is not necessarily a strike against theories of art that they fail to predict and account for the future condition of the artworld. But it is something of a supererogatory achievement when they do. We could praise Kant for having a theory that worked so well for impressionism and Tolstoy (or Collingwood, or Bell) for one that provided a kind of theoretical bridge between post-impressionism and abstract expressionism, and forgive both of them for leaving us theories that provide no way of making heads or tails of conceptual or (most) pop art.

I'd need a little more hubris than I have to claim that the theory of art I provided here will hold up in a hundred years. Some artworld trends, though, may be both predictable and predictive. So, if I may be forgiven a little speculation, I'll suggest three factors that may have an impact on the direction of art in the coming decades, and what they might mean for the applicability of the displayed-object thesis.

One important trend involves the role and artworld-position of curators. That position has grown in prominence and importance within the artworld, or at least its most recognizable and "mainstream" corners. This is very much a result of the kinds of works that that have come to dominate the contemporary scene. For example, as artist and critic Joe Frost wrote in 2013,

"relational art" is the ultimate expression of the curator's power. It relies on the say-so of the curator for validation. To a much greater degree than paintings or sculptures, which convey through their form the artist's awareness of history and sense of purpose, art with a poor material form, or no material form at all, needs sanctification. Curators are the individuals vested with that power.²²⁰

²²⁰ Joe Frost, "Immense Power to Make or Break Taste" *Australian Financial Review*, November 7, 2013.

Relational art requires – in a sense *is* – the participation of a community-audience in some collaborative social activity.²²¹ Frost’s point is that the curator, acting in her role as the arbitrator of what is displayed and what is not (whatever else a curator does is mere bureaucracy and fundraising), is all that decides which social activities should count as art. As art – especially avant-garde art – turns toward such new forms and ways of art-making, the essential role of display in the right context and with the right purpose will only become more apparent.

Also, the curator’s position has become increasingly untethered to particular galleries, museums and the like. The traditional image of the curator as the person who decides what is displayed at a certain place is being supplanted by the international, quasi-freelance curator, deciding what is on display in two or three exhibitions a year.²²² Transforming the position of the curator from one that is attached to the person-institution to a free-standing role in the larger practice-institution of the artworld signifies a growing awareness of the importance of display in that larger institution²²³, which of course I’m claiming has been essential all along.²²⁴

The second trend I’ll consider here is likely obvious to any consumer of contemporary culture. Technological advances in the means of both artistic production and distribution have meant a democratization of creative accessibility and a diffusion of audiences. What once required the backing of enormous movie studios now can be done with a few digital cameras and

²²¹ The term was coined (I believe) by Nicolas Bourriaud. See Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* Simon Pleasance and Fronza Woods Trans. (Paris: Les Presses du reel, 2002)

²²² Randy Kennedy, “The Fine Art of Being a Curator” *New York Times*, July 19, 2012; Alice Pfeiffer, “Who Wants to Be a Curator?” *New York Times*, October 11, 2012

²²³ Of course it also signifies – because it results in part from – certain economic realities. I don’t want to discount that.

²²⁴ Other significant roles have recently been claimed for the curator, including art theorist [Carol Vogel, “The New Guard Steps Up” *New York Times*, March 18, 2010] and artist [Rossen Ventsislavov, “Idle Arts: Reconsidering the Curator” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol.72, No.1 (2014, 83-93)]. While a given curator can of course (and perhaps it is best if she is) an art theorist and an artist, these roles are not central to what she does qua curator.

remarkably user-friendly editing software. Similar advances in audio equipment and software has turned apartments into studios and laptops into mixing boards. And as the production and distribution of media becomes predominantly digital, the writer less and less needs a publisher, the songwriter a record label or the filmmaker a studio.

The artist's audience is also no longer limited by the money needed to expand the geographic reach of publicity and distribution. I can write a song this afternoon and find an audience for it across the world by this evening. And while this trend may work in some ways counter to the first – that is, it may diminish the significance of the professional curator – it is no less indicative of the essential nature of display for art. Each object written, composed, filmed, or whatever it is we'll be doing next, must be displayed. I can record all kinds of sounds, type all kinds of words, film all sorts of moving images, etc., but I must always press “send,” and send them in some way that indicates that I mean for them to be contemplated or appreciated. The more we do away with the economic and person-institutional scaffolding of artistic production and distribution, the more clear the nature of the communicative relationship between displayer and audience will become.

Let's turn finally to the content of recent contemporary art. There has been a noticeable shift in recent years away from the kinds of conversations that dominated the artworld in the mid and late 20th Centuries. The most prevalent theme then was an obsession with art itself, especially its essential nature. This has produced some remarkable and some remarkably dull work. Danto is right that we should be grateful that such philosophically critical questions emerged in the artworld.²²⁵ But Jean Baudrillard is also right that this conversation went on a

²²⁵ Danto (1983)

little too long.²²⁶ It is interesting when a work of art challenges the boundaries of and our intuitions about art status. But it was more interesting when Duchamp did it almost 100 years ago. Too many contemporary artists have been content to make the same point again and again, often in only superficially new ways.

We can be thankful, then, that a new conversation seems to be emerging in the artworld, one that focuses on questions of agency, personal and social identity. There is a sense in which the artist is supplanting the artwork as the chief subject of art. It is difficult to discuss large-scale trends like these without being too bold or too vague, and the preceding claim is probably both. I admit I can only offer some highly anecdotal evidence to move it beyond the recording of a highly personal “sense.” This summer (of 2015), the major New York City institutions with a hand in contemporary art all have at least one major exhibition on themes of personal and political experience.²²⁷ Not all of these are exhibitions of new pieces, and it is not my claim that these are new conversations, only that this is becoming more and more a kind of work that is being displayed.²²⁸

²²⁶ Jean Baudrillard “Contemporary Art: Art Contemporary With Itself” in *The Intelligence of Evil or the Lucidity Pact* Chris Turner Trans. (New York: Berg, 2005, 105-116). The claim I’m attributing to Baudrillard here is probably the mildest of all of his criticisms of contemporary art. I’m not endorsing all of his, shall we say, crankier moments in this piece.

²²⁷ Just a few examples: “One-Way Ticket: Jacob Lawrence’s Migration Series and Other Visions of the Great Movement North” and “Yoko Ono: One Woman Show, 1960-1971” at MoMA, “Surround Audience” and “Leonor Antunes: I Stand Like a Mirror Before You” at the New Museum, a retrospective of Doris Salcedo’s sculptures at the Guggenheim, “In Reverie of Form” at the Agora gallery, Andres Galeano’s “Unknown Photographers” at the RH gallery, “IM Heung-soon: Reincarnation” and “Halil Altindere: Wonderland” at PS1, and “Kehinde Wiley: A New Republic” and “FAILE: Savage/Sacred Young Minds” at Brooklyn Museum.

²²⁸ It is more difficult to identify (or try to identify) artworld trends than it once was. Like so much of public life, the artworld is more diverse and changes faster than in eras of even the recent past. I do not, however, think that it is (yet) impossible to identify movements, trends and commonalities. There will just be a wider and more available collection of exceptions.

This trend, along with the “relational art” discussed above, will very likely bring to the fore a number of questions about the nature of the person or community as artwork. We will likely have new kinds of objects that are displayed for the purpose of contemplation or appreciation. And there will likely be some discomfort with being asked to contemplate each other and ourselves in these ways. But that is just to say that we will have a new kind of object displayed as art is displayed, not a new form of display.

VII. The Value of displayed objects to art research

I have tried in the preceding discussion to suggest ways of thinking about various art forms in terms of displayed objects, to identify the objects in each form that can serve in that role, and along the way address some potential difficulties with the approach as a whole. But that we *can* identify artworks with certain displayed objects does not mean that we should. So why should we? I’ve given one version of that answer already²²⁹ when I argued for the displayed object thesis on (mostly) theoretical grounds. But I think we can also identify certain practical benefits to the theory, and we’re in a better position to do so now that we have at least a glimpse of how the theory might actually be applied,²³⁰ but for now I’d like to consider just a few ways that the displayed-object thesis can be useful to art research.²³¹ I am not claiming here that these benefits necessitate or accrue solely to my theory.

²²⁹ In Chapters Four and (especially) Five

²³⁰ In Chapter 8

²³¹ This is a claim that Dominic Lopes makes (of course in a different manner) in favor of his “buck-passing” theory in *Beyond Art*. I confess I’m not sure it would have occurred to me to make this sort of move had he not. I gratefully acknowledge the inspiration and influence. This should be a criterion for all theories of art and a burden of demonstration for all art theorists. Lopes himself, however, does not think that there are any genuine empirical studies of art in the way that I’ve described – only empirical studies of the individual arts. See especially Lopes (2014) P. 82.

It is for just this reason that I include a discussion of them here in a chapter meant to respond to objections rather than argue for unique advantages. But an advantage of the theory shared with others is an advantage nonetheless.

Let's begin at the highest level of generality. Thinking about artworks as displayed objects provides a useful organizing principle for studying art history. To see how, we should begin by noticing that we really have two art histories, or rather two distinct ways of picking out the same central events of art history. The first is a history of artists and their work, let's call this the "personal" history of art. The second is a history of artistic styles, their change and development. Call this the "style" history of art.²³² So we can talk on the one hand about Cezanne and then Picasso and then Kandinsky, and even about the influence of Cezanne on Picasso and Kandinsky or on the other we can speak broadly about the ways in which cubism and abstract expressionism emerge out of post-impressionism.

Given that they pick out the same events, it will be natural to ask which of these histories is fundamental. And it may seem at first to be the personal history. After all, in order to be in a style, a work has to first be created. Styles are created by certain properties of artworks and artworks by artists. But though the personal history may zero in on the primary act of artistic creation, it is not fundamental to our actual accounts of art history.

First of all, inclusion of an event in our personal-histories of art is dependent on its role in the style-history. As art historians we do not, typically, try to theorize about every artistic activity in a given culture. That feels more like anthropology. We instead begin with (admittedly) unstable, evolving, and controversial narratives about development and change in

²³² A number of the claims and arguments in this section also appear in "Back in Style: A New Interpretation of Danto's Style Matrix" forthcoming in *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*.
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art – that is, the history of style change, and include the personal histories of artistic creation only when and insofar as they fit into those narratives.²³³

Second, artworld actors other than artists help determine the style history of art. A given style does not become art-historically significant just by virtue of creation, instantiation and merit. It must be noticed, funded, presented, criticized, theorized, experienced, and eventually supplanted. The particular ways that these things happen constitute the life-cycle of an artistic style. And that cycle depends on the workings of so many people's whose names are lost to the personal history of art that there is a certain injustice in thinking the personal history sufficiently fundamental to the style history.

Finally, the personal history alone often does not allow the development of art to be tied to larger world-historical events without making highly speculative claims about individual artists' psychological and epistemic conditions. Sometimes, of course, such claims are not so speculative. The particular development of perspective in Renaissance art, for instance, depended on work in geometry (and optics) and the actual applications of the latter to the former are well known. But it is no less true that late modernist literature was shaped by the horrors of the Holocaust and two World Wars, and we do not need to look to the experiences of any particular writer or writers to justify the claim. More to the point, it is not necessary that every late-modernist writer was deeply affected by world events for it to be true that world-events shaped all of late-modernism. Of course, it is not unlikely that literature that was less directly shaped by world events was influenced by works that were. But we do not have to have all of

²³³ This point, or ones very similar to it, have been made before. See for instance: Paul Frank "Historical or Stylistic Periods?" *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* Vol.13, No.4 (1955, 451-457) and James Ackerman "A Theory of Style" *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* Vol.20, No.3 (1962, 227-237). There is also an obvious debt here to Carroll's "narrativistic" theory of art [Carroll (1988, 1983)].

these connections in mind to claim that the style as a whole was to a large extent the result of those events.

I am not claiming here that the style history of art is somehow foundational to the personal history, only that the reverse is not the case. And if not, then we need to ask what exactly we should be looking for when we approach (that is, organize and narrativize) this history. The displayed-object thesis would have us look first to the sorts of objects that are typically or predominantly displayed in artworld contexts at given places and times.²³⁴ And we can find the “artworld contexts” at any given place and time by finding those settings where objects are displayed for the purpose of contemplation or appreciation. This strategy allows us to focus on just what is important in the style history, i.e. changes in the major artistic styles. By looking at *all* of those conditions, we can zero-in on the antecedent conditions of style change beyond the production of particular artists and major person-institutions. A number of prominent late 20th Century art styles emerge from anonymous graffiti, for instance, more than they do from Basquiat and Haring. And of course it matters to the development of impressionism that you could find a growing divergence from realism on the walls of the Louvre, but it is also significant that you found it on the walls of Parisian apartments.

The next benefit of the displayed-object in this vein is somewhat more local. It can help us individuate artworks as objects for study. Two examples will help. First, Faulkner published two different stories under the title “The Wild Palms.”²³⁵ The two stories, *The Wild Palms* and *Old Man* are presented as alternating chapters in the text. When we come to consider the combined *Wild Palms*, why should we think about it as one artwork and not two? The two

²³⁴ The reason we start with a history of artistic display rather than a history of display in general simply because all art involves display, but it is hardly the case that all display is art. Also, I do not think that display in general has anything exactly like an “atmosphere” or institution.

²³⁵ Apparently his publishers chose this title, but the structure of the work is Faulkner’s.

narratives never converge. They were written separately. And while there are thematic similarities, the same themes appear in a number of Faulkner's works. But they both are part of one artwork because they were presented as that. We cannot fully understand the work itself or either story in it without being aware that they were presented together. Somehow or other, Faulkner meant for us to contemplate or (likely *and*) appreciate one object consisting of two stories. This observation has implications for us beyond just our critical, interpretive and evaluative practices. Placing *The Wild Palms* in relation to the rest of Faulkner's oeuvre, in the context of the literary world of its day, in the history of literature and the history of art requires a determination and individuation of an artwork. And because it was displayed as a single work, the *Wild Palms* is one work with two narratives; and because they were not displayed as a single work, *The Bear* and *Spotted Horses* are two different works.

Sometimes, though, artworks should be viewed singly *and* as a unit. Consider the relationship between songs and albums in popular music. Understanding the seminal role of The Ramones in the history of (actually quite a few) genres and styles requires an account of "Rockaway Beach" and "Teenage Lobotomy," but these were not (only) released as singles. They were presented as parts of *Rocket To Russia*. To focus on the aesthetic value and even the historical significance of the songs to the exclusion of the album is to miss something significant about both.

The third and final benefit I'll claim here for the displayed-object thesis is that it can help narrow our focus to relevant features of artworks. The sort of thing I have in mind is avoiding errors like mistaking the back of the canvas for being part of the painting itself. Unless some very special circumstance demands otherwise, our Rembrandt-research ought to end there at the front of canvases. But of course no one is likely to make this mistake. We might make such a

mistake, though, when researching the art of a culture with another set of practices more distant to ours. Consider two (hypothetical) ancient civilizations, both with the practice of painting vases with depictions of scenes from their religions and daily lives. Both are practices that should be considered in doing art-historical research into these cultures. Let's say next that in the one culture, the common practice was for vases to be constructed specifically for each painting, their forms determined by the aesthetic and narrative needs of painters. In the other, paintings were made on vases of exactly the same form. Some vases were painted, others were not and there was nothing to distinguish the two prior to the act of painting. Though I suppose I can imagine intuitions running the other way, it seems pretty clear to me that research into the artistic practices of the first culture should include the crafting of the vases and this is not true of the second. This is because the vase is part of the displayed art object in the first culture and not in the second. Notice that on a purely aesthetic theory, for instance, we would have to treat the vases from the two cultures the same way.²³⁶ While we may have more broadly anthropological or historical interests in the entire vase of the second culture, it does not seem that we should have an *art*-historical interest in it.

Now we do not necessarily need a theory of art to come to this conclusion. The only advantages I claim here for the displayed-object thesis (and it has this above some, but not all other theories) is that it is (a) consistent with and (b) supportive of our best critical and art-historical concerns regarding particular features of artworks. I must admit, however, that I shouldn't assume anything like agreement on our "best" practice. Take a painter who includes something in or on her canvas that cannot be perceived by the audience to whom the painting is displayed – say some material only visible under ultraviolet light or something imbedded in the

²³⁶ I have to confess here to (yet) another use of Danto's argument from indiscernible counterparts.

canvas that cannot be seen without x-rays, and the required technology is not provided to the audience. In order for these things to be *unambiguously* un-displayed, we must also stipulate that the audience is not told about these hidden features. Given a case as strange as this, I'm not at all confident anticipating or predicting intuitions. I can only admit that on the displayed-object thesis, we would not be encouraged (or, I suppose, even entitled) to consider the unknown and unknowable as a feature of the artwork relevant to criticism or interpretation. I am content with this result, however, if for no other reason than that such features – being unknowable – cannot as a matter of practice be subject to criticism or interpretation in the first place.

I'll conclude with a quick word, a reminder really, of the modesty of the gains I've made here, even if the chapter is entirely successful. Once again, I do not think that any of the observations or arguments above uniquely determine the displayed-object thesis. Nor have I attempted here to continue my case for the theory as a whole. By and large, for instance, I have bypassed here the question of the necessity of the theory's other conditions, especially contemplation or appreciation as the purposes of display. The case for necessity of these conditions²³⁷ will be the same across media and art forms. Only the nature of the displayed object changes in each form, and so required some special, more particular attention.

I *have* meant to head off one important objection to and one important question about the theory. The objection is that there are art forms that do not essentially involve displayed objects. I've tried to respond to that objection by considering candidates for the crucial displayed object in a number of art forms, including some that are unlikely to produce this sort of objection. I've included the latter because it helps answer the pressing question: what can we *do* with this theory? I've tried to show that the theory can be useful to our understanding of these various art

²³⁷ Provided in Chapters Four and Five

forms as well as to some typical modes of art research. I will return to these and other practical benefits of the theory in the last chapter.

First, though, I'd like to consider another potential benefit of the theory to another kind of theoretical question, specifically those about aesthetic value. Let's turn, then, to those issue in the next Chapter.

Chapter Seven: Art, Display, and Evaluation

The displayed-object thesis is not a theory of artistic value, nor does it imply one. But the theory of art it provides does touch on the evaluation of art in at least two significant places. First, it helps identify the proper object of evaluation. To identify the features of an object that are displayed in the relevant way – a subject of the last chapter – is to identify the features that bear artistic value and are subject to evaluation-as-art. So the evaluation of a painting should not include the texture of the back of its canvas because (let's assume) that was never part of the painting's display, but we should not suppose that we are ever evaluating the painting outside of the particular context of its display. Another related way the theory may be of some practical use to our best critical practices is its ability to help focus our attention on either the *aesthetic* value of art or on certain *non-aesthetic* values of art, as appropriate.

The second way in which the displayed-object thesis is relevant to artistic value and evaluation is somewhat less definitive, but it is potentially more significant. I will argue later in this chapter that the theory allows for a helpful answer to what we might think of as the first problem concerning aesthetic value: where exactly does it reside, or – to ask essentially the same thing – what ultimately justifies our first-order aesthetic judgments?

Two caveats about the current project at this introductory stage: First - and to emphasize something I've already suggested - I am not claiming that any of the substantive theories of value, regarding its identification or artistic evaluation, follow from the displayed-object thesis as I've laid it out. That is to say, there would be nothing unreasonable about agreeing with everything I've said to this point and rejecting every claim about value that I make in this chapter. The claim is only that understanding art as the displayed-object thesis prescribes can

help resolve some of the latter issues. Second, I want to point out that the two main projects of this chapter are entirely separate – or at least separable. The first one concerns the identification of what sort of thing has artistic value and the second the justification of aesthetic evaluations.

I. Wollheim’s “Art and Evaluation”

The two stages of this project may sound familiar. They echo the two questions Richard Wollheim considers regarding aesthetic value in his “Art and Evaluation,” an appendix to later editions of *Art and Its Objects*.²³⁸ Rather than a complete treatise or thoroughgoing account, Wollheim provides us there with a helpful, opinionated overview of just the issues I will consider here. I mean to use it now as a kind of backdrop on which to develop the present claims.

Wollheim’s first concern in “Art and Evaluation” is with what he calls the “incidence of aesthetic value,” roughly the determination of what sorts of things bear aesthetic value. For him, the primary locus of aesthetic value is certain characteristics of arts and artworks which in turn provide aesthetic value to those arts and artworks.²³⁹ So if I happen to find Hubert Robert’s paintings beautiful it is because I find the interplay of colors in them beautiful. If I find ballet (at least when done well) beautiful it is because I find the sorts of movements typical of ballet beautiful. I will argue below that the account is in one respect lacking and in one respect wrong. It is lacking because if our concern is aesthetic quality *in art* we should ask just which aesthetic characteristics of would-be artworks are capable of transferring their aesthetic quality to the work itself. Much of what Wollheim says in the main body of *Art and Its Objects* is at least suggestive of an answer,²⁴⁰ though I will use some of the conceptual tools made available by the

²³⁸ Wollheim (1968/1980) Pp. 227-240

²³⁹ *ibid.* Pp. 230-231

²⁴⁰ Though Wollheim does not avail himself of it.

displayed-object thesis to come to a somewhat different solution. I will also try to show, then, that Wollheim's account here is not just incomplete but also somewhat wrong. Specifically, I will argue that he is wrong to treat the individual arts as loci of aesthetic value. All of that, though, in due time.

Wollheim's second concern is with the "status" of aesthetic judgments – or, perhaps more clearly, with the ultimate justification of such judgments and the nature of the facts to which they (allegedly) correspond. He presents four candidate theories – or more accurately four families of theories: realism, objectivism, relativism, and subjectivism.²⁴¹ Wollheim is fairly even-handed with most of these theories, presenting a plausible case for each while winking at some of their faults. Relativism alone seems to engage Wollheim's partisanship, and he presents what he takes to be a thoroughly damning argument against it. I will use the latter part of this chapter to suggest ways that realism, objectivism and subjectivism are less plausible than Wollheim thought (or at least expressed in this short piece), and I will sketch a version of relativism that escapes his objections. I will show that this version of relativism is made possible and, if I'm successful, plausible by the displayed-object thesis.²⁴²

II. Aesthetic and artistic value

The correlation between Wollheim's two concerns and the two stages of my current project are obvious, though there is an important (though maybe only apparent) disanalogy that deserves some special attention. Wollheim is concerned entirely with *aesthetic* value, and I started with a discussion of what I've called "*artistic*" value. We need to take a moment to

²⁴¹ *ibid.* 231-240

²⁴² The displayed-object thesis is not the only theory of art that enables or suggests this sort of relativism, and I'm not claiming otherwise.

consider whether or not these are the same thing and if not, what their relationship might be. Once again, I think the displayed-object thesis, while it does not yield one and only one answer, can be helpful in dealing with the question.

Let's begin, though, with a preliminary (and all-too-often overlooked) difficulty that attends any discussion of the aesthetic. Namely, it is not always clear what exactly "aesthetic" means. First of all, there is the difficulty of pinning down the *study* of "aesthetics" as the term shifts from Baumgarten's concern with Beauty to our present concern with art. As with so many things, the temptation is likely to blame Hegel, who promotes art from a special case to the central case of beauty to be studied.²⁴³ However, I don't know that we can simply mark the term off into its pre- and post-Hegel uses. I myself slip too easily between them in teaching and discussion.

But we should set this issue aside, as our present concern is with the value of aesthetic *qualities* rather than *aesthetics* as a discipline.²⁴⁴ Unfortunately, a somewhat thornier problem waits for us here: how exactly do we characterize the aesthetic in a way that allows us to adequately distinguish aesthetic from non-aesthetic qualities of artworks? Traditionally and generally, there have been two distinct approaches. The first identifies the aesthetic via certain kinds of affective reactions of an art audience, the second with certain formal qualities of a work.

Now these are not usually understood as competing theories of what constitutes or determines aesthetic quality. More often, substantive disagreement surrounds the relationship between the two approaches. Let's consider three indicative cases. First, Kant provides two characterizations of beauty that each fit one of these patterns. Beauty in nature as well as art is

²⁴³ Hegel (1886/2004), Pp. 3-5

²⁴⁴ See chapter 2 for some discussion of the latter question.

first of all the object of our disinterested satisfaction,²⁴⁵ but it is also that which has the form of purposiveness without (definite or actual) purpose.²⁴⁶ But these two – the first which treats beauty as that which produces a particular feeling, the second which treats beauty as a particular form – are for Kant more re-statements than distinct approaches. We should remind ourselves that this is one of Kant’s moves. In the *Groundwork* we’re treated to four “formulas” for what he takes to be a single categorical imperative.²⁴⁷ It is far from clear in either case, however, exactly how we have separate articulations rather than separate concepts.

Second, Bell makes use of both sorts of notions of the aesthetic in his definition of art. Recall that an artwork for Bell is that which produces aesthetic emotion, and aesthetic emotion is the one that is produced by significant form.²⁴⁸ Unfortunately, significant form is constituted by those features that are necessary for appreciating artworks, so we have a bit of vicious circularity.²⁴⁹ I suspect that we will end up in some similar circularity any time we attempt, as Bell does, to involve these two characterizations of the aesthetic in an account that depends on our keeping them distinct. Our better options seem to be to either identify them with one another (as Kant does) or to treat them as alternative, perhaps even inconsistent characterizations.

We get a hint of this third option, I think, in Carroll’s response to skepticism about the relevance of moral considerations to aesthetic judgments. Carroll argues in this context that the aesthetic is to be understood *either* as a function of an artwork’s form or as the object of

²⁴⁵ Kant (1781/2000) Pp. 46-8/§1

²⁴⁶ *ibid.*, P.180/§42

²⁴⁷ Immanuel Kant *Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysic of Morals* T.K Abbott Trans. (Amherst, NY: Prometheus (1988 – original publication 1785) P. 27, 49, 58, 60, 62, 67-8

²⁴⁸ Bell (1914/2009) P 17,57

²⁴⁹ See chapter 3 for a more thorough discussion of this issue.

experiences valued for their own sake – and moral judgments of a work are relevant either way.²⁵⁰

This is where I should provide a theory of exactly how “the aesthetic” should be understood, either as encompassing the formal and affective (a la Kant), as relating them (a la Bell), or as at most one of the two (a la Carroll). I just don’t have such a theory. I’ll confess, in fact, to using the term “aesthetic” sometimes with the one thing in mind, sometimes with the other, and at other times without either definitely in mind. What I can offer, though, is that nothing I have or will say here depends on only one of these understandings. We should be able to get by, then, with the kind of uncertainty that attends so much of our talk about “aesthetic” qualities. We can know, for instance, that when we discuss an aesthetic quality, are *not* talking about either an artwork’s representational content or qualities that invite strictly cognitive approaches to them.

So with that unpleasantness behind us, let’s circle back to the question of value. One (at least initially) plausible use for the displayed-object thesis on this score is that it helps explain and distinguish our interests in both the aesthetic and non-aesthetic artistic value of artworks. That is, we might think of the two purposes that the theory treats as disjunctively necessary for art-status – an audience’s appreciation or contemplation²⁵¹ – as determining the conditions under which we ought to focus on aesthetic or (otherwise) artistic evaluation. And we have some anecdotal evidence that such a strategy could work. Pollock painted primarily for the purpose of our appreciation, and that purpose directs us to attend to the aesthetic qualities of his works. Warhol on the other hand created most of his works for the purpose of our contemplation, and

²⁵⁰ Noël Carroll, “Art and the Moral Realm” in *Art In Three Dimensions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010) especially P.193-4

²⁵¹ This is of course an inclusive disjunction. Much (perhaps even most) art is meant to elicit contemplation *of* our appreciation.

we should thus attend first to his works' non-aesthetic (but still, by virtue of their being values of art qua art) artistic value.

There are, however, two immediate problems with this approach. First of all, it is at least controversial that there is any useful distinction between aesthetic and artistic value. Dominic Lopes, for instance, argues that there are no artistic values other than the aesthetic.²⁵² Andrew Huddleston then makes what I take to be a pretty compelling case that artists often make art seeking a kind of *artistic achievement* that cannot be reduced to the aesthetic and that such achievements constitute a distinct artistic value.²⁵³ But this rescue of non-aesthetic artistic value does not help rescue the usefulness of the displayed-object thesis on this score, as we find (for obvious reasons) no reference there to the attempt to *achieve* artistically.

Second, even if there is non-aesthetic artistic value, we will not find anything like a reliable correlation between either the invitation to appreciation and the propriety of aesthetic evaluation or the invitation to contemplation and the propriety of non-aesthetic evaluation. As a member of its audience, I expect I'm being asked to appreciate the significance of the representational content of Wyeth's *Christina's World* at least as much as I am its formal content or my "aesthetic" emotional response to it. And the invitation to contemplate George Bellow's *Stag at Sharkeys* (so I interpret it) involves my reflection on my *aesthetic* reaction to the aesthetic qualities of the painting in light of the violence depicted. This is not to say that displays of *Christina's World* do not call for my appreciation of aesthetic qualities or that displays of *Stag at Sharkeys* do not call for contemplation of non-aesthetic qualities. But these cases do show that display for the purpose of appreciation does not uniquely *determine* the

²⁵² Dominic McIver Lopes "The Myth Of (Non-Aesthetic) Artistic Value" *The Philosophical Quarterly* Vol.61, No. 244 (2011, 518-536)

²⁵³ Andrew Huddleston "In Defense Of Artistic Value" *The Philosophical Quarterly* Vol.62, No. 249 (2012, 705-714)

propriety of aesthetic evaluation and display for the purpose of contemplation does not uniquely determine the propriety of non-aesthetic evaluation. So we should not expect either correlation in general.

So if the initial claim was too ambitious, what can we say about the usefulness of the displayed-object thesis in the present context? An admittedly more modest benefit can be found, I think, in this observation: focusing our attention on the purpose of display does help fix the features of a given artwork subject to evaluation. When I recognize that a work of art is presented to me as a work of art *and* that that entails that it is presented to me for the purpose of my appreciation or contemplation, I am then encouraged, maybe even required (in some sense) to evaluate its success in arousing my appreciation or contemplation. This, coupled with an interpretive theory about the aesthetic or non-aesthetic features of the painting that are meant to produce either (or both) of these effects, should lead me to the appropriate objects of evaluation in the painting. We can, furthermore, be somewhat agnostic about whether or not those features are necessarily aesthetic or not.

Perhaps a quick example will help clarify the sort of thing I have in mind. Take a given production of Tchaikovsky's *Nutcracker* with Vainonen's choreography. I see the dancing, hear the music and I recognize, perhaps from its context alone, but likely from its appearance as well, that it is a work of art and that I am a member of its audience. Rather automatically I so too recognize that it is presented to me for the purpose of at least one of my appreciation or contemplation. I then – and again probably automatically - look for those features of the object in front of me that are plausibly meant to arouse my appreciation and contemplation. The dancing is clearly meant to be beautiful, the music clearly meant to be expressive. If these ambitions are realized, I should recognize my appreciation and value the work for its aesthetic

quality. As I've said, other sorts of qualities may evoke my appreciation, but my first thought is naturally with my appreciation of the aesthetic. I may also contemplate the meaning of having moments when the characters - as in the Christmas-eve party scene - are dancing as an extraordinary activity (i.e. because they are at a party and they can hear music) as well as moments when characters – as in just about all of Clara's dream - dance because they are somehow incapable of moving otherwise. I could also contemplate the form of the dance, but my first thought is naturally with the content of the artwork.

I may have attended to all of these features without first considering the purpose of the ballet's display. We do, of course, appreciate the beauty and contemplate the form of unintentional, purely natural objects. A particularly graceful person's walking down the sidewalk may elicit both, just as the ballet does. But in the case of the ballet, recognizing the purpose of its display focuses my attention on those features of it that are appropriate for evaluation. There may not be anything particularly *inappropriate* about my evaluating the movements of the person on the street, but I have not failed to appropriately respond to them when I do not. This, we might say, is one key difference between being an audience member and a merely being a witness to something. And art is made for audiences, not witnesses.

IV. Identifying the proper object of aesthetic evaluation

So the displayed-object thesis provides some modest aid to our thinking about aesthetic and artistic value. In the remainder of this chapter, I'll narrow our focus just to aesthetic value and specifically the significance the theory has to Wollheim's two questions. First we'll consider the question of the *incidence* of aesthetic value. As I suggested above, there is one way I find Wollheim's answer wrong, and another way I find it incomplete. Only the latter

discussion really involves the displayed-object thesis, but let's begin with the former, as I think it will help clarify the scope of the larger conversation.

Wollheim is right, I think, that the primary locus of aesthetic value is in the characteristics of artworks and only secondarily in artworks themselves. So the painting is beautiful only if it contains (for instance) some arrangement of colors or structure of lines that is beautiful, the sonata is not beautiful without there being beauty in (again for instance) its melodies or arrangements. The significance of this observation will become apparent in a moment. He was wrong, however, to ascribe aesthetic value to art in general, any of the individual arts, or the characteristics thereof. First of all, it is not clear to me that there are *aesthetic* characteristics of the arts that are not just the characteristics of works in those arts. Having a history that spans many thousands of years is a characteristic of painting and not any individual painting, but this is not an aesthetic characteristic. But having such-and-such an array of colors, being of a certain height, having a certain texture, and I think any other aesthetic property will apply to individual paintings, not painting.

I also just find the idea of evaluating art or the arts on aesthetic grounds exceedingly odd. I suppose you do hear people say things like “ballet is beautiful” or “death metal is hideous.” I think we have to assume, though, that they either mean that ballet is beautiful (and perhaps uniquely so) *when done well* and that death metal is hideous *when done poorly*, or that they just don't have a whole lot of experience (what Hume called “practice”²⁵⁴) with ballet or death metal. It does not take a whole lot of error or ineptitude to rob a ballet of its beauty, and death metal is capable of exquisite beauty, or at least the kind of sublimity that would preclude its “hideousness.”

²⁵⁴ David Hume “Of The Standard of Taste” in *Four Dissertations*. (London: Thoemmes Press, 1997 – original publication 1757)

It would be even more odd to evaluate art itself on aesthetic grounds. We may reasonably say something like “art is subject to aesthetic evaluation,” but only if we mean to point to a feature that artworks have in common. It is plainly false if we mean that the entire class is somehow subject to aesthetic evaluation under anything like normal conditions. First, there is no *particular* aesthetic quality that all artworks have in common. Second, assuming that an aesthetic judgment requires some kind of reaction to an object, we never make an aesthetic judgment about all of art because we never react to all of art at once. It is possible, I suppose, that we could *imagine* being presented with and therefore reacting to all of art at once and imagining that this experience would have an aesthetic – probably cacophonous - quality to it. But this exceedingly strange possibility is not what Wollheim has in mind, and not what we normally have in mind when we say that art is subject to aesthetic evaluation.

Now, then, to the gap in Wollheim’s account and the assistance the displayed-object thesis can provide in filling it. It is not quite enough to know that aesthetic value is foremost a property of characteristics of artworks. We should also want to know *which* characteristics are the ones that have such value. This would be no trouble at all if we could simply say that the *aesthetic* characteristics of an artwork are the ones that can have aesthetic value. But this leaves two matters unsettled. First, if the claim is to be more than trivial, we need some background understanding of which characteristics (of anything) should count as aesthetic. We’ve already considered the difficulties on this score. For instance, will all and only the formal characteristics of a painting be capable of producing a proper aesthetic emotion? I’m just not sure how such a

question could be properly settled, even with extensive use of point-of-gaze tracking and fMRI technology.²⁵⁵

Let's just assume, for our present purposes, that some relatively intuitive concept of the aesthetic is stable enough to fix the relevant *kinds* of characteristics – at least in most cases – and that these characteristics satisfy both the affect-producing and form-having concepts of “aesthetic,” if they do either. There remains still this second issue: whatever kinds of characteristics are capable of aesthetic value are almost never experienced just in an artwork when we are experiencing that artwork. Sometimes we are able to segregate the aesthetic value of an artwork from the aesthetic value of other features of its display. I seem to be able, for instance, to concentrate my attention on a beautiful painting despite its hideous frame. Or I may take some genuine disinterested satisfaction in the perfect rectangularity of a canvas while feeling nothing for the painting on it. But more often the aesthetic quality of a display is inseparable from the aesthetic quality of the artwork being displayed. The finest performance of Mahler's Fifth will sound dull in a hall that dampens certain horns. Poor lighting can wash out all but the very center of Rembrandt's *The Night Watch*.

There may be an initial temptation to think that these features are extraneous to the artworks themselves and whatever aesthetic value they increase or diminish does not belong to artworks so much as their display. The first problem with this move, however, is that it can maintain for artworks themselves “aesthetic” characteristics only if we limit the conception of “aesthetic” to the formal sense. Our aesthetic emotions, after all, are in response to an entire experience (really an array of experiences) inextricably tied to the overall display. To take just

²⁵⁵ My own emphasis on the concept of display will not settle this issue either. While it is true that to display an artwork is to present certain characteristics of a work, this does not necessarily distinguish the *aesthetic* characteristics of a work, as more than just aesthetic characteristics can be presented.

one example, the dark greys in the background of *The Night Watch* may be formal characteristics of the painting itself, but in poor lighting they can do nothing to affect our aesthetic experience of it. Now as I say above, there is nothing – at least as far as I can tell – necessarily wrong with divorcing these two conceptions of “aesthetic.”

However, even if we concern ourselves only with the purely formal notion, we end up with some confusion when we try to distinguish the aesthetic characteristics of the artwork from those of the artwork-as-displayed. It is awfully strange, for instance, to think that *The Night Watch* has all of these formal characteristics that are relevant to aesthetic evaluation when we are unable to experience them. There are, after all, all sorts of microscopic properties as well as macroscopic relations of the painting that we cannot experience under normal (or perhaps *any*) circumstances. Some of these may be “formal” under any reasonable conception of form, and yet they are not subject to aesthetic evaluation if they are not subject to aesthetic (or any other sort of) experience.

What beauty we ascribe to *The Night Watch*, then, is inseparable from certain extrinsic (to the painting itself) facts of its display. And when we think of an artwork first and foremost as a displayed object rather than a (merely) created object – setting aside for the moment whatever additional conditions must be satisfied by such a display – the object that is relevant to aesthetic evaluation *of the artwork* will of necessity include features of the work’s display. Thus the displayed-object thesis provides the means to a more plausible account of the incidence of aesthetic value.

One concern about this approach – and one that may have occurred to the reader well before now – deserves our attention for a moment here. If the aesthetic evaluation of an artwork depends in part on features of the artwork’s display extrinsic to the art object itself like lighting

or acoustic environment, why doesn't it also depend on more distant features of the cultural atmosphere in which the work is presented (such as playbills, advertising, reviews, even philosophical and critical theories)? In fact, if the art status of an object depends on the nature of its display, why doesn't it also depend on the object's place in the entire artworld? That is to say, why doesn't the displayed object thesis slide into a more traditional (and perhaps traditionally vague) institutional theory of art? One answer, I think, suffices for both of these questions.²⁵⁶

The *kinds* of things that are plausibly - or in some cases even *possibly* - to count as artworks and the features of those works and their display that are to be relevant to aesthetic judgments are in (quite large) part determined by the artworld environments in which they are displayed. But the actual status of a particular object and the features that are subject to aesthetic evaluation are immediately determined by the nature of their display, particularly how it is that the display is used as a mechanism of communication. There are all sorts of communication in an artworld. Playbills, reviews, and philosophical treatises all have their roles to play. They are just not the sorts of communication that immediately determine either art status or aesthetic relevance. That is not to say, however, that such things could not be part of a given artwork display. A piece may be accompanied by an artist's statement on the content of the work that is indispensable to the display of the work itself. We should not expect a general rule to distinguish these cases from more ancillary uses of artists' statements. We'll just need to look at individual cases to decide what is part of a work's display and what is not.

²⁵⁶ For clarity: I am at the moment responding to what I take to be a reasonable objection here by trying to clarify the theory, not claiming a unique advantage of it. That is to say, I am only trying to put some distance between the displayed-object thesis and more plainly institutional theories (like Dickie's), not provide an argument that the former is better.

V. The justification of aesthetic judgments: four options

Let's turn, then, to the second of Wollheim's questions about value, another place where the displayed-object thesis may be helpful. That is the question of the locus of aesthetic value. We might call this the "meta-aesthetic" question, as both its central concerns and available answers have obvious counterparts in the field we call "metaethics." So while metaethics is concerned with the nature of moral facts and the meaning of moral terms, our concern here is with the nature of aesthetic facts and the meaning of aesthetic terms. When we say that "x is beautiful, expressive, profound..." what do we mean and what sort of fact are we (allegedly) pointing to?

I'll begin by quickly rehearsing Wollheim's categories of meta-aesthetic theories. These are categories and not theories themselves because each could contain a great variety of different versions. It is also worth noting that these categories are not exhaustive. There is no error-theory here, for instance, and this is surely an available position. But I think they do provide a wide and useful menu of options.

Option 1: *Realism*.

According to the realist, aesthetic value is determined entirely by non-relational properties of the objects that hold such value.²⁵⁷ Aesthetic value is a primary quality of these objects. I happen to think that Daniel Ridgway Knight's *The Shepherdess of Rolleboise* is a beautiful painting.²⁵⁸ Realism would demand that my judgment is about *The Shepherdess* itself, or at least some significant set of properties of it. If the judgment is true, the fact to which it

²⁵⁷ Wollheim (1968/1980) 231-232

²⁵⁸ It may be that the realistic style of the painting coupled with the natural beauty of the subject means that I'm responding more to the latter than the former. This is also no masterwork, and I make no claims here to its ingenuity, innovativeness, or any virtue other than its beauty.

corresponds would be there regardless of anyone's viewing, noticing or appreciating it. In some (let's hope) distant future in which the Earth contains no conscious creatures, if *The Shepherdess* survives whatever catastrophe causes this condition, so too does its beauty.

Option 2: *Objectivism*.

If aesthetic value is a primary quality on a realist account, it is a secondary quality on the objectivist's. In theory there could be as many different kinds of objectivist accounts of aesthetic value as there are different theories of perception. But again following Wollheim, we can think of objectivism generally as any theory that treats aesthetic value as being dependent on certain facts about the valued object as well as the psychology of "humanity at large."²⁵⁹ This doesn't mean, of course, that everyone always has the right kind of experience when confronted with a given work of art. First, in order to have the requisite accompanying experience, we must have an adequate understanding of the artwork, and not all people will. Some other people may lack the requisite psychological properties (awareness, sensitivity, etc.). What is necessary is that there be certain generalizable psychological/perceptual laws linking the objects with appropriate experiences. *The Shepherdess* is beautiful, then, not because beauty is intrinsic to it, but because it has certain properties that produce the sensation of beauty under the right conditions and in the right kind of perceiver. The obvious analogue here is color. The beauty of the painting is what results from our perceiving certain of its primary qualities like the sensation of red is what results from our perceiving certain primary qualities of apples. Without a perceiver, the painting has no beauty, only the qualities that would produce a sensation of beauty were there such perceivers.

²⁵⁹ *ibid.* P.232

Option 3: *Relativism*.

I will have a good deal more to say about relativism in what follows, as it is both the one position that seems to draw most of Wollheim's disapproval and the one I mean to defend. But to introduce it here very quickly: Aesthetic value according to the relativist is dependent on the psychology of specific people or groups of people. Different versions of relativism relate aesthetic value to different spectators, and this could mean whole societies, sub-cultures or individuals. Wollheim helpfully points out a potential ambiguity in claims of the form "Aesthetic value is relative to x." It is not clear whether x is to be substituted for by persons who *provide* value or persons for whom value *holds*.²⁶⁰ We'll call these "type-1" and "type-2" relativism, respectively. According to type-1 relativism, *The Shepherdess* is beautiful just in case *and because* certain people – presumably aesthetic experts – say so. Under type-2 relativism, it may be beautiful for some people or groups and not for others, the truth-value of "*The Shepherdess* is beautiful" is (so to speak) local to these individuals or groups.

Option 4: *Subjectivism*.

Among these four options, subjectivism is the only non-cognitivist account of aesthetic value. Specifically, aesthetic value is an expressive quality.²⁶¹ It is determined by a projection on the part of the spectator. Aesthetic value does not arise from the valued object (as in realism) or from an interaction of the object and the psychology of spectators (as in objectivism), but entirely in that psychology as it projects value (entirely of its own creation) onto the object.²⁶² To say that *The Shepherdess* is beautiful is just to express our approval of or pleasure in it. The

²⁶⁰ *ibid.* Pp.235-236

²⁶¹ There could in theory be other forms of subjectivism.

²⁶² *ibid.* Pp.239-240

claim has no more truth value than does “Yay aesthetic qualities of *The Shepherdess!*” which is more or less equivalent to what the subjectivist thinks “*The Shepherdess* is beautiful” amounts to.²⁶³

VI. Objections

As I’ve mentioned above, Wollheim presents realism, objectivism and subjectivism in a neutral – bordering on sympathetic – light. He reserves his objections for relativism. I tend to think, however, that some version of relativism is after all the most promising account of aesthetic judgment, and that the displayed-object thesis can help move us toward – though not uniquely determine – a particularly promising version of it. As such, I’ll try to show both that this version of relativism escapes Wollheim’s objections and that the other families of aesthetic theories are susceptible to some objections that Wollheim did not consider. In this section, I’ll present Wollheim’s objections to relativism along with my concerns about realism, objectivism and subjectivism, and then in the next section turn to the alternative version of relativism that I favor.

Let’s begin with objections to type-1 relativism. According to type-1 relativism, if an artwork is beautiful it is because some particular person or group says so. Wollheim thinks this idea runs afoul of two intuitive principles. First, it violates what we might call the “no-authority principle.” How *could* there be an authority or authorities for aesthetic value judgments? It seems awfully implausible to think that I could view an artwork, think it is beautiful, then *learn*

²⁶³ A.J. Ayer provides just this sort of account of aesthetic judgments by claiming that they admit of the same analysis as ethical judgments under his theory of the latter. Ayer’s emotivism regarding aesthetic judgments, then, as a version of expressivism, is a version of just the sort of subjectivism that Wollheim has in mind. See A.J. Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic* 2nd Edition (New York: Dover Publications, 1952 – original publication 1946) especially Pp.113-114

from some expert that I was wrong and therefore no longer think it beautiful.²⁶⁴ Compare this to a judgment of a given artwork's style. I might learn from an expert that St. Peter's Square exemplifies baroque architecture when I thought it was high renaissance. Not being an expert in the relevant distinctions, I'm happy to take the right person's word for it. But I just can't imagine thinking St. Peter's Square beautiful and then not just because someone "corrected" me, no matter how much respect I might have for that person's taste or knowledge. This is not to say that aesthetic beliefs can't change as the result of such learning, only that reliance on expert testimony by itself is not one of the ways that such beliefs can be changed. Increased exposure to art and to art history – both of which may be influenced by the reports of experts – may in turn influence change to the aesthetic judgments we held in our youth or relative inexperience. However, those judgments cannot be changed simply by virtue of an expert telling us that they were wrong.

Type-1 relativism also violates what Wollheim calls the "acquaintance principle," in effect that aesthetic knowledge must be achieved through first-hand experience.²⁶⁵ Before I visit Rome, see a Papal address on television, etc. I can learn from someone else that St. Peter's Square is in a baroque style, that it has such-and-such a history, and that that person, many people or even everyone else finds it beautiful. But in order to believe that it is beautiful, it seems that I have to see it for myself.

The problem, of course, is that if an artwork is beautiful *because* some person says so, then I can (a) learn that I'm wrong in my own judgment by learning of this other person's judgment or (b) learn that the artwork is beautiful just by learning of this other person's judgment without ever experiencing the work myself. Wollheim considers two amendments

²⁶⁴ *ibid.* P.236

²⁶⁵ *ibid.*

available to the type-1 relativist that would allow an escape from these difficulties. First, we might think that everyone is an authority. If so, then I have no reason to supplant another's judgment for my own, as I'm just as entitled to it and I can't learn what my judgment *should* be until I form it myself and thus apply my own expertise and authority. But, as Wollheim points out, this leads immediately to massive contradiction.²⁶⁶ If I think St. Peter's Square is not beautiful, you think it is, we are both authorities and authorities' judgments are determinative of aesthetic value, then St. Peter's Square is both beautiful and not. This is untenable.

The other move available to the type-1 relativist avoids such contradiction by understanding aesthetic value as a relation of the form "x is valued by y." So when you say "St. Peter's Square is beautiful" and I say "St. Peter's Square is not beautiful," what is meant is really just that St. Peter's Square is beautiful to you and St. Peter's Square is not beautiful to me. On a somewhat larger scale, we might say that "St. Peter's Square is beautiful" means that it is beautiful to one culture or another. But, again as Wollheim insists, this is to turn aesthetic judgments into sociological claims or psychological self-reports.²⁶⁷ This does not do justice to the fact that when I claim that an artwork has a particular aesthetic quality I do not have anything about myself in mind. I am claiming something about the aesthetic value of the work, not making some second-order claim about my (or anyone else's) judgment of that quality.

Wollheim finds the problem with type-2 relativism more obvious. The type-2 relativist is guilty of producing just the kind of contradiction that the type-1 relativist slides into when he makes everyone an aesthetic authority.²⁶⁸ If the truth-value of aesthetic judgments are local to individuals, then my claim that *The Shepherdess* is beautiful can be true while your claim that

²⁶⁶ *ibid.* Pp.236-237

²⁶⁷ *ibid.* P.237

²⁶⁸ *ibid.* Pp.237-238

The Shepherdess is not beautiful is true as well. *The Shepherdess* is right now and in the same sense beautiful and not beautiful. And notice that it is not open to the type-2 relativist to deny that either of us is actually making a truth-functional claim, as this would slide the view into subjectivism.

Wollheim seems to think these objections together are telling against relativism. Perhaps this was his main ambition, and that's why he didn't feel the need to cast such a critical eye on the other families of positions. Let's do that for him, then. First let's consider realism, and two forms of it. In the first, objects have aesthetic value by virtue of participation in a quality that has some sort of being independent of its instances. Let's call this "Platonic realism."²⁶⁹ The first sort of objections to Platonic realism centers on the implausibility of these beings (like beauty is alleged to be) that lack existence, as they do not begin, end or take up space. And even if we were to allow these into our ontology, there is no way to establish the kind of correlation between observable and unobservable phenomena that we need to posit the participating-in relation between aesthetic abstract entities and their individual physical instances. Surely more could be said in favor of abstract objects generally, but this last point shows, I think, that we have good reason to be skeptical about platonic realism regarding aesthetic objects even in the absence of a thoroughgoing nominalism.

But realism does not require Platonism. A non-platonic realism might treat aesthetic properties as intrinsic to the objects that have them without there being any relation to an order of separate abstract objects – or, for that matter, anything else. This is certainly more plausible, and is likely the sort of realism Wollheim has in mind, though at least one result of this view

²⁶⁹ I suspect this is at once broader than many uses of the adjective "platonic" which are references to Plato's specific theory of the Forms and narrower than others that make "platonism" synonymous with "realism." I don't imagine there are many completely uncontroversial uses of eponymous adjectives.

counts heavily against it. Namely, a world without conscious observers still contains beauty and its opposite(s). Whatever physical features this world has all contain beauty or not, as each case may be. Now this may not be obviously problematic or even seem all that odd. When we imagine such a world, we almost can't help but picture images of natural objects that are either beautiful or not in our imagination. But this is cheating a bit, because our imagining has created a conscious observer of the imaginary world. To really imagine such a world must be without a picture of it. Is it still possible that this world contains beauty? Maybe so. I wouldn't expect the realist to think otherwise yet. But if it does contain beauty, we should expect some sort of account of the beauty in this world to be possible without our picturing it. We could describe in detail the physics and perhaps even the chemistry of such a world in this way. And if the beauty of its objects are really properties of those objects full-stop, why not the beauty as well? But a complete physical description of this world absent a mental image of it will not include beauty or its opposite(s). It is worth mentioning here that I've slipped a bit from discussing aesthetic qualities of artworks to aesthetic qualities of natural objects. But notice that the fact that such a world could also not contain any artworks is a complication for our imagination, but not the objection. Just stipulate that the world contains an artwork using whatever science-fiction scenario suits you – a leftover from a long-lost civilization, perhaps. And again, if all of this imagining has exhausted our intuitive resources, and I think maybe it has, then realism is still in a bit of trouble, since on the realist account it should be *obvious* that beauty is possible in any physical condition, and we at least have a situation in which it is not at all clear.

But perhaps the realist could say that there is some question-begging going on here. The objection is that a world without observers cannot contain beauty because we should be able to provide an account of the beauty absent any real or, crucially, imagined observers. But the

realist's position is exactly that the beauty of this world is a metaphysical fact of it that can be utterly divorced from the epistemic fact of our (or anyone's) awareness of it. What difference does it make that no one could describe the aesthetic facts of this world? This is (according to the realist) just to point out an obvious difference between physical and aesthetic facts, not to show anything profound about the latter. But this puts *too* much distance between the aesthetic and physical natures of things. If the aesthetic quality of something is (a) independent of any observation of it and (b) not at all discoverable the way physical facts are, then it is something utterly mysterious. And if the realist position is taken to be an explanation of our aesthetic responses, we have only explained one mystery by appeal to a much larger one.

Finally, it may be alleged that beauty is not the right sort of example. After all, more purely formal aesthetic qualities – like balance, symmetry, purposiveness (in Kant's sense) etc. – do not admit of the same objections. But this sort of response points to what I take to be the fundamental problem with realism: it allows for aesthetic quality in a strictly formal sense, but not at all in the audience-affective sense. And while it may be possible to separate the two accounts, a theory that allows for the explanation of one and not at all the other is at best able to explain half of what we want from an aesthetic theory. And “beauty” has so often (and I think not by accident or mere convenience) been taken to be the quintessential aesthetic property, that an inability to explain it is *particularly* problematic for an aesthetic theory of this sort.

Objectivism, then, may seem to be an improvement on realism on at least this score: by making both the formal features of objects and the psychological features of observers necessary for aesthetic quality, it is equipped to handle both of the primary senses of “aesthetic.” Two different problems, however, attend objectivism. First, as I mentioned above, on an objectivist account aesthetic quality is a secondary quality like color, brightness or reflectiveness. But there

are some glaring and significant differences between aesthetic qualities and these others.

Let's again use beauty and color as our respective examples. For one thing, there is nothing deviant about a failure to receive beauty. If I cannot see the red in a particular painting, something is clearly wrong with my vision. Or when – as actually happens to me pretty often – others insist that there is some subtle difference in shade that I just cannot see, I have no problem assuming they're correct and that my vision (or some other feature of my perceptual apparatus) is inadequate. But when others report finding something beautiful that I do not – as also happens pretty often – I am not similarly inclined to assume some psychological problem in myself that disables my ability to receive the beauty. Even in those cases where others see beauty in a form or genre and I do not, I do not (and have never heard anyone else in similar situations) attribute the difference to a defect in beauty-perception. At most, we are sometimes inclined to say that we lack “practice” (again in Hume's sense) in those domains.

I suppose it is open to the objectivist to insist that there is something wrong with me if a properly attuned and situated observer would perceive beauty and I do not. There may indeed be cases where certain psychological issues create something like beauty-blindness. But then we have to confront another, more problematic difference between the red in the painting and its beauty. Those who have a better grasp of optics and vision than I do can provide a relatively complete physical account of how and why it is that I have less precision in my perception of colors. No such account is available to explain varying degrees of delicacy in perceiving beauty. My eyes are required to perceive as the sensation of red those properties of red objects that reflect light in such-and-such a way. Which physical properties of objects produce my sensation of beauty as experienced in a painting and a symphony? Which organ(s) are involved in receiving beauty in both of these cases?

I am not claiming in either of these objections that objectivism cannot handle disagreement over aesthetic judgment, only that it is a mistake to think that those disagreements can be reliably explained by differences in perceptual abilities between observers – as can disagreements over, say, shades of color. The point is maybe more stark at the level of disagreement between cultures and periods. If the objectivist is correct, there should be some regular and predictable corresponding difference in perceptual capacity across cultures and periods. I can't say definitively that there isn't some such difference waiting to be discovered, but until there is or until we have some reason to think there is, I think it's safe to assume this idea is as strange as it sounds.

But perhaps all of the above ascribes too strong a connection between aesthetic and secondary qualities to objectivism. Maybe aesthetic qualities need only be relevantly *analogous* to secondary qualities. But what the objectivist must insist upon *at minimum* is that perceptual/psychological features of humanity at large are consistent enough to produce either agreement in or a standard of correctness for aesthetic judgments. What cannot be the case is that the truth of aesthetic judgments are grounded in the judgments of a majority or even what judgments everyone happens to make at a given place and time. Either would turn some people into de facto aesthetic authorities. And then it is not clear how *objective* objectivism would be. All of the problems above arise for objectivism given just this minimal requirement.

This leaves us then with subjectivism. As the one non-cognitivist account, subjectivism is really a kind of skepticism about aesthetic value judgments. By diagnosing such judgments as being at most expression of our attitudes, subjectivism claims that our judgments are neither what they appear to be in their surface grammatical structure nor what we typically take them to be when we make them. As such a departure from our expectations and common usage,

subjectivism is awfully difficult to undermine in its own terms, without begging certain fundamental questions. For instance, I'm tempted to claim that subjectivism is untrue to the nature of aesthetic discourse, as it makes genuine disagreement over aesthetic judgments impossible. But of course this is just what a subjectivist should want. If my saying "x is beautiful" is really just the expression of my pro-attitude toward certain qualities of x, then it *is* absurd to think that we are doing anything meaningful when we argue over the beauty of x. Such discussions *should* consist of nothing more than me informing you of my pro-attitude and you informing me of your con-attitude. What else is there to say? I may have doubts about the value of what we're buying with such widespread reform of our everyday practices, but if this is really the right account of aesthetic judgments, why should I want to hold onto such pervasive error?

Even so, one feature of subjectivism remains puzzling. The attitude toward the aesthetic qualities of the object that determines – indeed constitutes – our aesthetic judgments of it: is it intentional? That is to say, do we *choose* to adopt a pro-attitude toward the aesthetic qualities of some artworks and not others? The answer seems like it has to be "no." First, I've never decided to find something beautiful and have never heard of anyone doing so. I suppose I've *tried* to see the beauty in something and I confess I've *pretended* to find something beautiful. But I don't think I could decide to have a pro-attitude toward the aesthetic features of a painting any more than I could decide to have a pro-attitude toward the taste of a food. And I don't imagine the subjectivist would think otherwise. But then my attitude must be an involuntary response to something in the artwork. And then to what am I responding? Whatever that turns out to be would seem to ground an alternative theory. That is to say, we have reason to look to features of the artwork rather than the observer alone to explain our aesthetic judgments. And

that is what subjectivism denies.

VII. Another type of aesthetic relativism

Where, then, does all of this leave us? If Wollheim is right about relativism and I am right about realism, objectivism and subjectivism, (big “ifs” I know) then the correct account of aesthetic judgments must be found somewhere else. And while these four options certainly don’t exhaust the universe of possibilities, they are broad enough to capture most plausible available theories.

Now we’ve come again, finally, to a place where the displayed-object thesis may be of some assistance. Specifically, I believe it provides a theory of art that provides for (though again does not necessitate) a version of relativism that escapes Wollheim’s objections. On this version, truth of aesthetic judgments of art is relative to exposure to a given art history and what that means (on the theory I’ve been endorsing) is a history of the right (i.e. the operative) sort of display. A particular history of display produces aesthetic expectations that help determine the truth or falsity of aesthetic judgments. So for example, for me to say that *The Shepherdess* is beautiful is to say that I expect that people sufficiently exposed to the same history of display would typically share my relevant aesthetic experience of it. And to say that some other work is beautiful in (culture, era, condition) x is to say that I expect those properly exposed to the history of display in x will typically have an aesthetic experience like I have with (at least potentially) a different set of objects.²⁷⁰ It is worth noting that this expectation differs from others we may have in that we can maintain it even beyond the disconfirmation of its object. This is just why we are so surprised when our aesthetic judgments are not in line with others’, especially when

²⁷⁰ Note that this is neither a definition of “beauty” nor an articulation of all of the conditions for its application.

we share the relevant background with those others. Notice the two tiers here: beauty is assumed to be a feeling invariant across cultures and judgments. What produces the sensation of beauty is – potentially - highly variant, relative to exposure to particular histories. To return again to the two primary senses of “beauty”: our affective response to art is covered at the first tier, forms that produce that response are covered at the second.

The theory is a kind of relativism by virtue of the way it treats that second question of aesthetic qualities, the kinds of objects that produce aesthetic emotions. But just what sort of relativism is this? Well it isn't Wollheim's type-1 relativism. The truth of an aesthetic judgment is not determined by anyone or any group of people holding it. It is possible – though highly unlikely – for everyone exposed to a particular history to be wrong in their judgments. That is to say, it is possible for everyone to be wrong in their expectations of other's reactions. And it isn't exactly type-2 relativism either. It is not true for me (or us) and false for you that something is beautiful, it just may be true that it is reasonable to expect something to produce a sensation of beauty for me (or us) and not you. Thus this version avoids the inconsistency of type-2 relativism.

The key difference, though, between this sort of relativism and those that Wollheim considers is in the type of claim that it takes an aesthetic judgment to be. On the sort of relativism I'm suggesting here, an aesthetic judgment is a normative claim, though its normativity is comparatively weak as it capable of producing expectation but not praise or blame.²⁷¹ So for instance, Wollheim in discussing type-1 relativism, rightly points out that we do

²⁷¹ This highlights an important difference between aesthetic and moral relativism. Our discomfort with moral relativism follows our desire to blame past peoples and other cultures as we do our own. But we do not blame anyone – even here and now – for their aesthetic judgments. Similarly, we do want to say that if we went back to some prior time that we might know, when everyone else does not, that something they're all doing is wrong - and that we may

not want to turn aesthetic judgments into merely sociological claims. But this third sort of relativism does not treat “x is beautiful” as meaning that “x is beautiful to y,” which could be determined without coming to any judgment about the aesthetic properties of x. Instead, it treats it as “x should be beautiful to y” or “we should expect x to be beautiful in y.” The weakly-normative nature of the claim derives from our own experience *plus* knowledge of a particular history of display. Thus there is no reason to expect that these judgments can be made on the basis of testimony, authority, or otherwise without first-hand experience of x, so the theory confounds neither of the “acquaintance” or “no-authority” principles.

Moreover, the theory does not require that we have in mind any facts about the particular history of artistic display to which we’ve been exposed when we say that something is beautiful. Those facts rather determine the scope of our judgment. When I say that something is beautiful, it would be inappropriate to point out that a very different culture (or alien species or something like that) wouldn’t find it beautiful. This is because my judgment is limited to the expectations I can reasonably have about people who share my history of artistic display. So the theory is neither of Wollheim’s relativisms, nor does it slide into subjectivism. Because those expectations can either be reasonable or not, the judgments I make from them are not mere expressions of my own attitude. Neither does it does not rely on anything like a hidden objectivism. There is no claim here about the psychology of humanity at large. Without a specific history of display, there is no expectation of agreement or criterion for assessing judgments.

It is not enough, of course, to merely avoid the problems with relativisms that Wollheim notices. But this isn’t the place for a full defense of this version. That would likely require

be similarly wrong about certain things now. But there should be no correlate thought about aesthetic judgments.

another dissertation entirely. Rather, I've meant only to show another use for the displayed-object thesis: that it can help point us to a plausible theory of aesthetic value. It may be that any version of relativism that replaces the agent (as the thing to which value is relative) with a particular cultural history will similarly miss Wollheim's objections. The point here (once again) is that the displayed-object thesis gives specificity to that history. As such, I have not indicated another *special* or *unique* advantage for the theory (as I tried to do in Chapters Four and Five), so much as another significant use for it.

Conclusion: Where We Are, Why I Brought Us Here

I. A very fast look behind

We've been through a lot together. Maybe we've had an enthusiastic conversation, uncovering the implications of a view on which we fundamentally agree while working through the subtle differences in our approaches to it. Or maybe we've been arguing vehemently as I try and justify a position you find untenable with evidence you find unsatisfactory. Or worse, you may have spent this time hoping I find a way to make that position clearer and being disappointed that I have not. Likely there's been some of each.

All three of these call for some further conversation, and I hope there will be. But for now, I have nothing substantially new to offer. I've tried to work stepwise through: justifying the asking of what appears to some to be a stale question (Chapter Two), demonstrating that we do not yet have a satisfactory answer to that question (Chapter Three), offering and explaining the displayed-object thesis as an answer to that question (Chapter Four), providing some evidence for the displayed-object thesis (Chapter Five), and finally suggesting a potential practical benefit of the theory (Chapter Six) as well as a further theoretical use for it (Chapter Seven).

With what I have left of your attention, I'd like to attempt to articulate my own motivation for offering and trying to justify the theory. This should not be taken as an argument for the theory so much as an explanation of why I am attracted to it in the first place. To the extent that we've agreed or come to agree, let this last section be a further suggestion of what we can do with that basis of agreement. To the extent that we do not agree, let this dissertation end the way it began, with a confession.

II. A very fast personal history: art

I grew up assuming that when adults asked “What do you do?” of one another, the expected answer was about the art that they made rather than what made them money, whether or not the answer was the same. My mother was a poet, our closest family friends were painters, composers and ballet dancers. It was assumed of me that I would become a fiction writer (I’m not sure how this assumption formed, though I am sure about how it dissipated slowly into a great chasm of missing talent).

Despite all this, I don’t remember being terribly energized by or even interested in art until I was maybe twelve, when a friend and I listened to a mix tape that his older brother had sent him. The first song was The Misfits’ “Where Eagles Dare,” and I was in. I copied the song six times over and would listen to it six times straight through, rewind, straight through again, over and over for a month. More than anything, I remember being amazed that anything sounded like that. Every time the chorus kicked in the sound hovered for a moment in front of my head, and I had to lean into it a little to keep it in my headphones. Since then, a few other works, maybe five to ten new ones a year, have provided a similar feeling, like the experience of the work is just beyond me and it would be impossible not to move myself into it. Berlioz’s *Symphonie Fantastique*, Dylan Thomas’s *Fern Hill*, and Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck’s *The Lives of Others* are some indicative examples of very different kinds.

When other people talk about “aesthetic emotion” this is the sort of thing – or perhaps an extreme version of the sort of thing – I imagine they have in mind. But truth be told, I have no idea if others have anything like a similar experience of art. And frankly I’ve done such a poor job of explaining the feeling that I don’t think I can ask. I suspect our collective inability to

articulate these things is how we end up in viciously circular accounts of aesthetic emotion. But it remains clear to me nonetheless that any decent theory of art ought to at least begin to help us understand aesthetic emotion, as I've been convinced and re-convinced that there is something unique about the way art is able to affect us. And just as importantly, I'm convinced that this is a reason – perhaps most often the main reason – art is offered to us.

But I know as well that this is not all I can do. I don't think I had any grand aesthetic experience of Steinbeck's *East of Eden*, but the story and its telling seemed to reveal something true about the nature of family, history and psychological inheritance – something that I would be hard-pressed to express myself. I had a slightly different notion of intimacy, privacy and gaze before Tracy Emin's *My Bed* than I did after. And I should probably be embarrassed by how much of my understandings of virtue, responsibility and redemption have been shaped by the *Star Wars* trilogy. All of this is to say that I've been convinced that art is not only capable of transferring ideas and attitudes, but it is extremely – maybe even uniquely – good at it.

I'm also sure that art is united not only by the *quality* of its communicative capacity, but also by the *way in which* it communicates. There is something common to the mechanism that enabled The Misfits' and Steinbeck's very different sorts of success in my particular case. In one very broad sense, the displayed-object thesis is my best attempt (thus far, anyway) at articulating what that mechanism is.

III. A very fast personal history: the philosophy of art

Our experiences with art should inform our philosophies of art, just as our perceptual experience should inform our philosophies of perception. In my case, my aesthetic experiences have drawn me to theories like Kant's, but also Beardsley's and Iseminger's. And the fact that I

take art to be an essentially communicative practice has encouraged a keen and lasting interest in Tolstoy.

But I have also learned something about art from philosophical theories of it. And while I might have rejected these claims were they inconsistent with my own experience, it took actual arguments to persuade me of them. As such, exposure to these arguments felt nearly as revelatory as my experiences of great art. As you can glean by now from the nearly incessant references throughout this dissertation, nowhere is this truer for me than with Danto's "The Artworld." Everything in that piece has since been done better. Dickie does a better job of illuminating and characterizing the necessity of an institutional context for art. Carroll does a better job of doing the same for the historical nature of art. But "The Artworld" is something of a primary document for a whole way of thinking about art that I've found enormously helpful.

I have tried here to provide a theory of art (and a justification for it) that is sensitive to the institutional nature and historicity of art without discounting the significance of aesthetic emotion and the communicative nature of art. The risk in a project like this is that you end up with a camel of a theory, an unwieldy amalgam as informative and strong as the least common denominator among competing theories. I hope instead that I've taken on the obvious strengths of these other accounts without loss in transfer, and provided something more plausible and informative in the process. At this point, and to avoid undo repetition, the results will have to speak for themselves.

IV. A very fast look ahead

I do not mean to suggest by the last sentence that there is nothing else to be said in favor of the displayed-object thesis or that there is no more work to be done in the way of explanation.

I'm sure that there is. I seriously doubt as well that the theory will not need to be reformed at least a couple times over the next few years. It has been adjusted quite a bit over the last few years, and that just seems to be the way these things go. I do think, however, that the core of the theory is sound and useful. If nothing else, I'm happy to call that a good start.

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