Definitions of Art

Author: Brock Rough
Category: Aesthetics and Philosophy of Art
Word Count: 1000

In 1964, Andy Warhol exhibited reproductions of Brillo Boxes, visually indistinguishable from commercially available ones. What made the ones in the gallery art but not the ones in the supermarket? This sent Arthur Danto on a famous exploration of the difference between art and non-art, if this difference cannot be drawn by visual means alone.¹

There are many works of art in the world. There are also many things in the world that are not works of art. How do we tell the difference? The project of defining art undertakes to answer this question. Many people have strong intuitions about this sort of thing, and the hard work of philosophy comes in at its usual place, articulating helpful distinctions that clarify the issue, with the hope of doing so to the degree that it settles the debate. Many people, though, who can identify paradigm cases of artworks and non-artworks, struggle to identify sharp boundaries for art.

If we are interested in defining art, there is a large set of things to be categorized. Painting, sculpture, drama, music, dance, and more have all been considered to be art throughout much of (Western) history. Many of these kinds of things don’t seem to bear much similarity, and certainly much of what they share in common is not formal, or intrinsic to their perceptual structures. Yet we call many of these things art. One of the goals of defining art is to find out just what it is that these things, despite all their many differences, share in common such that they are properly called works of art.

1. Which Art History?

The cave paintings of Lascaux are over seventeen thousand years old. Our present western Eurocentric concept of art was largely formed in the 18th Century. Should our definition of art include the Lascaux cave paintings, or, on the other extreme, even concern itself with what we casually call art from before the days of the French Academy?

This raises the issue of the cultural dependence of our notion of art. Plausibly, without humans (or persons sufficiently like us), there is no art, so there is no ahistorical, human-independent type that is art that exists separate from us and our practices and interests. Metaphysics aside, to define art is to offer conditions that capture all and only those things that are properly categorized as works of art.

For many, a definition of art should incorporate both historical periods, our contemporary non-visually distinguishable art, and pre-Renaissance art, perhaps extending back even to the Lascaux paintings.²

2. Classification vs. Evaluation

Another stumbling block can be cleared by recognizing two major and different uses of the term art. One sometimes hears, “That is a work of art,” said about something that one may intuitively reject as a work of art, say a clean-laid lawn, a well-made cake, or a fantastic fadeaway jump shot in basketball.³ What is often meant by such exclamations is that the thing referenced achieves some high quality, whether of aesthetic value, or some skill in execution.⁴ This evaluative use can be set aside as tangential to the question at hand. What we are concerned with is a classificatory sense, correctly labeling things as works of art and non-works of art.

3. Definition vs. Account

The art question is further muddled by yet another distinction, that between definitions of art and accounts of art. For some, the classificatory question is to be answered by a definition such that one can determine, for any X, whether X is a work of art or not. For others, to provide an answer to the question of what is art is to give an account of art as a complete practice, which includes making sense of why cultures make and appreciate art, what are the values of art, etc. The strict classificatory aim of a definition is only to give necessary and sufficient conditions for when some X is a work of art, leaving for further exploration the broader questions that an account of art considers.

4. Functionalism vs. Proceduralism

Not everyone is convinced that there is such a clean distinction between the aims of providing a definition and providing an account. Some have argued that a...
correct *classificatory* definition must incorporate the proper function of art, and that proper function itself might have evaluative content. *Functionalists* definitions are this sort, where the main function of art is to provide some positive kind or amount of aesthetic value or experience.  

This differs from *proceduralist* definitions, by which for something to be art is that it be deemed to be art in an appropriate way.  

Both *institutional* and *historical* definitions provide such accounts.  

*Institutional* definitions define an artwork as anything that has been recognized as a candidate for art status by a representative of the artworld.  

This definition has faced problems of over-conventionalizing art, and for being viciously circular.  

The other main *proceduralist* definitions are *historical* definitions. These definitions define art by reference to what has properly been regarded as art in the past. Perhaps the best known *historical* definition defines art as anything that has been intended to be regarded as artworks have properly been regarded in the past.  

This offloads a lot of contingent details onto art history, perhaps leaving unanswered the point of art, but suggesting a satisfying *classificatory* definition.  

5. The Possibility of Definitions  

Lastly, not everyone is convinced that a definition of art is forthcoming, or even necessary. Following right on the heels of Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*, Morris Weitz argued that art cannot be defined.  

Just as Wittgenstein argued that games cannot be defined, but are better understood as a group of things with a family resemblance, so should we understand art.  

Contemporary theorists have followed suit. One such attempt is the Cluster Account of art, whereby a cluster of properties is noted as giving evidence towards a thing being an artwork without offering a philosophically suspect definition. There has been disagreement over this kind of account, centering on the possibility that it is merely a disguised definition.  

In the end, the search continues for ever more extensionally accurate definitions of art.  

Notes  

1See Danto 1974.  

2This brief essay must, for space considerations, not provide an exhaustive account of definitions of art that have been influential in the past. These include Clive Bell’s theory of *Significant Form*, Leo Tolstoy’s *Transmission Theory*, and R. G. Collingwood’s *Expression Theory*, among others.  

3Though some have argued that these can all be instances of art. See, respectively Ross 1999, Quinet 1981, Elcombe 2012.  

4For an extended treatment of the importance of this distinction, see my essay *Aesthetics vs. Art*.  

5Stecker 1990  

6For a nice account of the difference between functionalists and proceduralism, see Davies 1990.  

7Dickie 1984  

8For a review see Matravers 2000.  

9Levinson 2011  

10Weitz 1956  

11Davies 2004  

References  


About the Author

Brock earned a PhD in philosophy at the University of Maryland, College Park. His research focuses on the art status and ontology of videogames, their role as a test case for theories of art, and the ontology and intersection of games and art. Before pursuing philosophy, Brock spent several years working as a portrait painter. http://www.brockrough.com

Follow 1000-Word Philosophy on Facebook, Twitter and subscribe to receive email notice of new essays at the bottom of 1000WordPhilosophy.com