The cultural definition of art

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Abstract

Most modern definitions of art fail to successfully address the issue of the ever-changing nature of art, and rarely even attempt to provide an account which would be valid in more than just the modern Western context. This article develops a new theory which preserves the advantages of its predecessors, solves or avoids their problems, and has a scope wide enough to account for art of different times and cultures. An object is art in a given context, it is argued, iff some person(s) culturally competent in this context afforded it the status of a candidate for appreciation for reasons considered good in this context. This weakly institutional view is supplemented by auxiliary definitions explaining the notions of cultural contexts, competence and good reasons for affording the status. The relativisation to contexts brings increased explanatory power and scope, and the ability to account for the diversity of art.

It is tempting to think that defining 'art' is quite impossible. Indeed, artists have been doing everything they can to reach beyond every definition for some time now, and successfully so. But there is nothing that can attract analytic philosophers to a concept more than saying that it cannot be defined, and saying that something is relative or 'in the eye of the beholder' is bound to give them a headache.

The modern classificatory quest was inspired by Morris Weitz's 'The Role of Theory in Aesthetics'. Although his claim that art cannot possibly be defined might be too bold, he was right to point out that: (1) 'art' has not yet been successfully defined, largely because (2) art keeps changing and pushing its boundaries, and thus (3) any definition which focuses on art's exhibited or intrinsic properties is doomed to soon be out of date. The classificatory attempts which followed tried to analyse 'being art' contextually, as a relation works have to the artworld and art institutions (Danto 1964; Dickie 1974, 1997), the historical relations with past art (Levinson 1979; Carney 1994; Carroll 1994), the specific function only art has (Beardsley 1982b; Iseminger 2004; Zangwill 2007), a set of disjunctive criteria (Gaut 2000; Dutton 2000), or a combination of the above (Kamber 1993; Stecker 2000). However, apart from facing numerous problems of their own, many of them still fail to do justice to the everchanging nature of art. They often implicitly consider art as if it was the same and was always treated the same as in the modern Western world, or as if none of the other arts and treatments mattered much, or at best constituted mere borderline cases (e.g. Levinson 1993).[1]

And although it is perfectly legitimate to restrict the domain to the modern Western understanding of 'art', I believe that (1) the fact that 'art' was and is understood differently in other contexts tells us something about the nature of the concept itself, also as it is understood in the modern Western world (see: Moravcsik 1993; Lopes 2007; Blocker 2014); and (2) it is simply a shame that such theories refrain from providing a more comprehensive account – it is good to have a limited view, but why not expand it if we can (see: Bourdieu 1987; Shusterman 1994; Ahlberg 1995)?

Naturally, existing theories capture some of the most important intuitions about art, and are at least partially successful. The definition I present is built to preserve their advantages and sidestep or deal with their problems. It absorbs elements of historicism and the cluster account, while retaining an institutional stem. In the end, it is only weakly institutional (the institutional element is necessary, but not sufficient), and although developed from Dickie's account, it is more than a mere modification of it. According to the cultural definition,

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[1] Notable exceptions include Shiner (2001) and Dutton (2000), as well as authors who discuss the status of artefacts created outside the Western context: Moravcsik (1993), S. Davies (2000), Monseré (2012), and others.

x is an art work in cultural contexts C_1-C_n *iff* some person S culturally competent in one of C_1-C_n afforded x the status of candidate for appreciation, for good reasons in all of C_1-C_n.

1 METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Several general points are worth mentioning before I move on. Firstly, a theory of art should have an explanatory power sufficient to explain why any given object is art, is not art, or is a borderline case. The more objects a theory can account for, and the more definite answers it can give, the better. Existing theories have serious limitations: institutionalists struggle in accounting for private art or providing justification for status conferral; historicists cannot account for alien art and objects not intended as art; some functionalists similarly depend on intentions, and cannot define what a 'correct' aesthetic experience is; etc. The theory I defend will remove these limitations.

Explanatory power is often seen not only as the power to account for factual, but also counterfactual cases. I follow a simple principle: being able to explain counterfactual or just plainly unlikely cases is a virtue of a theory, but a lesser virtue than being able to deal with actual and common cases. A theory which can explain why a lone alien child raised by wolves could produce art, yet struggles with establishing the status of Kafka's novels, does not have a great explanatory power at all.

Thirdly, simplicity and parsimony are often seen as virtues. I agree that a theory should be as simple and parsimonious as possible, but believe that sacrificing explanatory power or the ability to truly account for actual phenomena for the sake of simplification is a mistake. Weitz was right to say that the traditional theories are guilty of over-simplification, and it seems that some modern theories still value simple elegance over explanatory power. The cultural definition tries to capture the complex and messy phenomenon of art as accurately as possible, even if this means sacrificing some simplicity; it is as simple *as possible* – but no more.

Finally, it is important to note the fruitfulness and heuristic utility. Theories are not only supposed to be clever and elegant, they should actually help us understand the world better. If certain concessions are to be made to make the theory more fruitful, they are at least worth considering seriously.[2] Thus in defending my view I will not be ashamed to admit that some things cannot be determined through conceptual analysis, moreover – that they should not to be determined philosophically at all, but rather

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[2] I agree here with Shusterman and Ahlberg (op. cits.) that this is precisely what analytic aesthetics could learn from pragmatic aesthetics.

left to the social scientists. To those who frown at this approach, I answer: *amica philosophia analytica, sed magis amica veritas.*

2 DEVELOPING THE CULTURAL DEFINITION

I take as my starting point Dickie's first formulation of the institutional definition, which I will modify throughout this section:

> **ID:** x is an art work *iff* x 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) (Dickie 1974, 34).

2.1 STATUS AND CULTURAL COMPETENCE

The notion of status conferral has been widely criticised and later abandoned by Dickie. The term seems to presume a datable event and specific personnel doing the conferring in a formalised way, none of which need to actually exist. I would like to replace it with a less loaded term: 'afford'.

To be afforded a status is to be an object of actions which express the agreement that it should have this status. In some cases status can be afforded through a specific act of conferment (and so sometimes I will continue to speak of it), or, as per Dickie's later definition – presentation, but this is not necessary. Affording the status does not assume that any particular people need to perform any particular actions in any formal way. However, it does assume that some people have to do it in some way, and that there exist conventions which govern the process. In our culture, actions such as presenting to an artworld public or an art magazine writing about something, can afford an object the status of candidate for appreciation, while throwing it into a river or using as insulation can't. There is no metaphysical or historical necessity behind such conventions – they could have been different and are different in other cultures. Indeed, appropriate knowledge of such culture-specific conventions and the ability to employ them correctly, are needed in affording the status. I will refer to this as cultural competence.

> The institutional definition should be thus reformulated as follows:

> **ID1:** x is an art work *iff* x is (1) an artefact (2) a set of the aspects of which *has been afforded* the status of candidate for appreciation by some *culturally competent* person or persons acting on behalf of the artworld.

2.2 CULTURAL COMPETENCE, HISTORY AND CONTEXT

Stephen Davies argued that a valid institutional definition should account for historical changes in who can be an artist, what types of actions count towards affording the status, who is authorised to afford it, etc. (Davies 1991, 94). I agree that instead of talking about *the* artworld we should talk about artworld-at-t1 where, for example, a person with a great imagination but little skill in painting could not produce an artwork as she wasn't competent-at-t1 to produce art; and artworld-at-t2 where she could, because she is competent-at-t2. But it is unclear why the distinction between artworld-now and artworld-in-17th Century is any more justified than a distinction between artworld-in-Europe and artworld-in-India, or perhaps even male-dominated-artworld and feminist-artworld. Clearly different contemporary cultures can also have differing requirements regarding who can be an artist, or what conventional actions count towards affording the status. This is captured by the wider notion of cultural context.[3]

Such relativism is not particularly uncommon – it is widely accepted that aesthetic properties depend on the context of a work's creation (cf. Levinson 1990, 1996; Davies 2004; Walton 2008; etc.). I see no reason why contextualism could not be applied to defining art as well. If two identical objects produced in different cultural contexts can have different properties, it is surely possible that only one can count as an artwork. In fact, this observation is precisely what motivated Danto's Brillo Box argument. The initial anti-essentialist arguments suggested that 'art' should be understood as always relative to a cultural context – though while some took this to show that no general definition of 'art' is possible (Kennick 1958, 324), I agree with others who thought that such relativism can be made part of the definition (Tatarkiewicz 1971, 147). The cultural theory will allow one to determine the status of a work for any context, though one might naturally prefer to determine it for some specific contexts – one's own, one intended by the author, etc.

The definition can be reformulated as follows:

ID2: x is an art work *in cultural context C iff* (1) x is an artefact (2) a set of the aspects of which has been afforded the status of candidate for appreciation by some culturally competent *in C* person or persons acting on behalf of the artworld *in C.*

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[3] Given his later writings, I believe Davies would agree with me, (see: Davies 1997, 2000). Other authors who recommended relativising to cultures include Eaton (2000) and Brand (2000).

Introducing the indices requires clarification: how should one understand the history and culture relativity of art? There are several options.

Firstly, the concept 'art' can have different meanings at different times, and while in the Renaissance it meant 'beautiful representational artefacts', now it means e.g. 'artefacts capable of affording aesthetic experiences' – there is no 'art', but only 'art-as-understood-in-C.' Thus if Leonardo painted *Black Square*, his contemporaries would not think it was art, because it would not fall under their definition. But this approach paints a very discontinous picture of the concept's history, and fails to account for the relations between different meanings. Concepts don't change simply because some time has passed, they change under the influence of their own past, other cultures, as well as technology, religion, politics.

Secondly, the content of the concept can be historical. Here, the historical aspect is an element of the concept – what is art at t is directly determined by what was art prior to t. Here, Leonardo's *Black Square* would not be art because in the 15th Century there were no artworks it could (have been intended to) resemble, and no narrative would join it with prior artworks. But while this approach successfully captures temporal changes, it does little to account for cultural differences.

Finally, the cultural definition can both keep the structure of the concept the same at all times (thus making it continuous) and avoid direct references to history in its content. Similarly as the content-historical definitions, the concept contains indexed variables. In Levinson's theory 'correct ways of regard at t' referred to different things at different times, and a cultural theorist similarly indexes cultural competence and artworlds to contexts. But unlike in historicism, the content of the concept is not thereby relative to time, but to the state of the artworld in a given context – not to what was art prior to t, but to what were the conventions, beliefs and practices in any given C. Past beliefs and practices need not be directly mentioned in the definition, as only the indexed context matters. In practice, an cultural theorist can simply ask historians and anthropologists what a given C was like, and trust them to have arrived at the description of C in whatever are the appropriate anthropological means, including tracing its history.

For a cultural theorist the concept 'art' does not change over time. It seems to, because the artworld changes and in changing contexts people of different levels of competence afford status for different reasons. Thus if Leonardo painted *Black Square,* his contemporaries would not think it was art, because the conventions of artworld$_{\text{15th C Italy}}$ would not warrant affording it the status.

Of course, many other concepts have history or are context-sensitive. 'Fashion' seems to be quite like 'art' in many respects. Similar concepts might differ merely in what the variables in their definitions

refer to. But this does not mean that all concepts are culture-relative. 'Car' used to denote 'a four-wheeled vehicle', and now it is 'a four-wheeled engine-powered vehicle.' But it is merely historical in the first of the above understandings – its meaning changed and other words, such as 'cart' or 'carriage', are now used to denote its past extension. How about 'physics' then? Physics developed historically, so different things were meant by it at Newton's time and different at Bohr's. But, to use Putnam's distinction, 'physics' always meant 'the study of nature', and while our conception of nature has changed a lot through time, the concept itself did not (Putnam 1975).

This begins the answer to my second main question: how did we come about our present concept 'art'? The cultural contexts in which art was produced have been changing historically, and since what is art is relative to the cultural context, our present understanding of the concept is a result of the cultural changes happening in our society over time.

2.3 CULTURAL CONTEXT EXPLAINED

It is time to unpack the notion 'cultural context C'. Despite appearances, it is no harder to explain than a straightforward temporal index. Historical changes don't just happen because some time has passed – they follow shifts in peoples' beliefs and practices which happen in that time. Fortunately, different cultural contexts can be described in exactly the same way – as differing in commonly held beliefs and practices.

Anthropologists are divided as to how exactly 'culture' should be defined, but there seems to be a wide agreement regarding the basic components which any definition should include.[4] Culture is on the one hand about a system of ideas, concepts, values, and rules – in short, beliefs of various sort – and on the other, a system of behaviours, activities, resource exploitations – practices (Goodenough 1966). Relations exist between the beliefs and practices, for example, beliefs might include expectations about the behaviour of others, and behaviours might only qualify as valid expressions of a culture if they comply with those expectations. There is a fair bit of disagreement on how exactly the belief systems are related to the practices, but for the cultural theory it is enough that such relations exist and can be described in practice, regardless of the details of their nature. It is also irrelevant whether the beliefs exist in the

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[4] To provide a sample: '[Culture is] that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society' (Tylor 1871, 4); 'Patterns, explicit and implicit, of and for behaviour acquired and transmitted by symbols, constituting the distinctive achievement of human groups, including their embodiment in artifacts' (Kroeber and Kluckhohn 2001, 357); 'Historically created designs for living, explicit and implicit, rational, irrational, and nonrational, which exist at any given time as potential guides for the behavior of man' (Kluckhohn and Kelly 2007); etc.

minds of individual people, i.e. are psychological phenomena (Goodenough 1966), or are public and transcend individual minds (Geertz 1973, 12), as long as beliefs and practices can be commonly shared within a given social group, and differ between groups. Similar cultural models of art and artworlds have been used by art historians for some time now – Shiner, for example, says that art is 'a system of ideals, practices, and institutions', and further comments on their inter-relatedness: 'regulative concepts and ideals of art and social systems of art are reciprocal: concepts and ideals cannot exist without a system of practices and institutions' (Shiner 2001, 9,11).

What the cultural theory requires is rather minimal: (1) any given culture at least partially is a set of commonly shared implicit or explicit beliefs and related practices; (2) two cultures are different if their beliefs and practices are saliently different; (3) various subdivisions within cultures are possible on the same basis – artistic culture subsystem is distinguishable from legal, linguistic, religious, political and other subsystems; (4) there are relations between beliefs and practices within any cultural (sub)system, between subsystems and between cultures, such that at least some beliefs can change practices, practices change beliefs, practices of one system can change beliefs of another system, etc.

For example, $C_{modern\ China}$ is different from $C_{medieval\ Europe}$, because there are some significant differences in the beliefs and practices of people living in those contexts. Since the conventions regarding affording art status, or what types of objects are likely to be recognised as art by a competent public, are relative to particular beliefs and practices, what is art in $C_{modern\ China}$ may not be in $C_{medieval\ Europe}$. Importantly, cultural contexts do not have to follow geographic or historical divisions - it is perfectly intelligible to talk about the context of modern socialists around the world, or English conservatives of all times, and perhaps even differentiate high and popular culture.[5]

'Cultural competence in C' can then be analysed as follows: appropriate explicit or implicit knowledge and awareness of the various systems of beliefs and the ability to participate in the related practices present in C.

Filling the details requires data regarding the beliefs and practices of particular social groups, and is a job for a social scientist. Any definition of art which refers to cultural contexts is thus dependant on the sociological data, i.e. it is impossible to tell whether x is art in C without empirical data about C. However, this is not a limitation of the theory. The issue arises only when considering contexts different than the modern Western culture. To explain what art is *here and now* (which is all that most definitions aspire to do), all that is needed is a tacit assumption that we are culturally competent members of the

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[5] Potential problems related to determining the boundaries of contexts will be discussed below.

modern Western culture and judge objects within the framework of beliefs commonly held in this culture – i.e. we already have all the contextual data required. This seems to be a fairly common assumption and by sharing it my definition would be no worse off than most. Thus the cultural theory is not limited by the need of empirical data when compared with other definitions – instead it can use this data to explain much more than the competition could ever offer.

Meanwhile, invoking cultural contexts can fix a problem which plagued institutionalism: the vagueness related to the informality of the artworld. Once the artworld is described as a social practice and related system of beliefs, it makes little difference whether it is formalised or not. It would be easier for a social scientist to learn about it if it was, but studying the common beliefs and practices is perfectly possible either way.

The answer to how we arrived at our modern concept of art now gains another element: the historical changes which influenced its meaning can be traced and analysed in terms of changing practices and belief systems. Proper historical research could provide a really detailed account, though a rough sketch is not hard to think of. In Europe, under the influence of social movements of the early 19th Century and through emancipation of artists from the bounds of state and church commissions, art changed and could no longer be defined by beauty theories – the expression theory matched the Romantic artist much better. The belief which stressed originality encouraged a more rapid development of styles, the technological progress encouraged the use of newly developed materials and techniques, leading to embracing the idea of art as an experiment, producing the Avantgarde and the belief that art cannot be bound by a single concept (and following this, various disjunctive analyses). The progressive destruction of status quo in experiments spawned the belief that the only thing which distinguishes art from other things is in the way it is made or the function it has (leading to procedural and functional definitions).

2.4 REASONS

Probably the most serious challenge for the institutional theory has been presented by Richard Wollheim: either the members of the artworld have reasons to confer (or afford) the status, or not. If they do, a valid theory should mention those reasons – but then it seems that the reasons alone could constitute a definition without any need for institutions. If they do not, then we have no reason to take

their decisions seriously. Either way, any institutional theory must be useless, because it is either redundant or untrustworthy (Wollheim 1980, 157-166, 1987, 13-16).[6]

I agree that the members of the artworld should have reasons to afford the status. And, as I argued elsewhere (Fokt 2013), we can give them reasons, using another classificatory attempt: Berys Gaut's cluster account (Gaut 2000).

Gaut holds that the term 'art' is ascribed to objects which satisfy at least one sufficient subset of a set (cluster) of criteria – properties commonly ascribed to art, such as possessing positive aesthetic properties, being creative and original, or being intended as art. My idea is to rephrase this as follows: satisfying a sufficient subset of criteria for arthood constitutes a reason the members of the artworld take into account when affording the status. Following Gaut, none of the criteria are individually necessary, and subsets of criteria are jointly sufficient to form a reason. The possession of no single property from the cluster can always ensure that status will be afforded, but in general properties 'count towards' affording it. In practice, objects satisfying a subset of properties α are afforded the status, because artworld members hold the belief: 'satisfying α is a good reason to afford the status.' Once the status is afforded, the object is an artwork not only in the context in which the affording happened, but also in every context in which the subsets of properties it satisfies also constitute good reasons for affording it. Following this:

> ID3: x is an art work in cultural contexts C_1-C_n *iff* (1) x is an artefact (2) a set of the aspects of which has been afforded the status of candidate for appreciation by some culturally competent in one of C_1-C_n person or persons acting on behalf of the artworld in one of C_1-C_n, *(3) for reasons respected in all of C_1-C_n and determined by clusters of criteria for arthood.*

Finally, all things fall into place. The cluster is conventional. Just as any other beliefs, those regarding criteria included in the cluster and subsets of criteria considered sufficient, are relative to cultural contexts, and discoverable through empirical research.[7] This naturally requires relativisation to

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[6] 'If the theory takes one alternative, it forfeits its claim to be an Institutional theory of art: if it takes the other, it is hard to see how it is an Institutional theory of art' (Wollheim 1980, 164); see also his *Painting as Art* (1987), 13–16. There has been some controversy over the meaning of the second horn of the dilemma (see: Dickie 1998, 128). It is perhaps best stated a few paragraphs before Wollheim's catchphrase: 'if works of art derive their status from conferment, and the status may be conferred for no good reason, the importance of the status is placed in serious doubt' (Wollheim 1980, 163-164). Below, I will treat the second horn according to this formulation: the dilemma makes the institutions either obsolete or untrustworthy.

[7] In fact, some such research exists. Robert Thompson (1983), who looked into the art of the Nigerian Yoruba people, was able to distinguish nineteen criteria the members of that culture took into account when judging

context, however, it adds no further limitations to those already discussed. Instead, it gives justice to the original anti-essentialists arguments: there is no one reason or criterion for arthood, instead there are many and they can change over time or be different in various contexts (Kennick 1958, 321-333).

The fact that the artworld members now have reasons to afford the status does not mean that the institution is superfluous and the theory reducible to a list of reasons. Firstly, the cultural definition entails that having reasons is necessary for arthood – but only becomes sufficient together with the affording of status itself.[8] For Wollheim conferring was unnecessary once the reasons were salient, but one can resist this conclusion through preserving a part of the arbitrary nature of Dickie's view. Such arbitrariness does not, naturally, seem particularly attractive to many philosophers, because it offers brute facts about the (art)world in place of neat lists of necessary and sufficient conditions. However, sometimes brute facts are all there is, and if in the real world it so happens that certain distinctions are made arbitrarily, a theory should recognise that.

In many cases the practice of art is somewhat under-justified. Many folk artworks which fill galleries have been afforded the status by curators, critics, etc., while being identical to folk craft works which are used as utility objects (Shiner 2001, xv). A quilt hanging in a Folk Art Museum is art, while one made by my grandmother and used as a bed throw, although in all relevant respects identical, is not. Naturally, there is a reason why a quilt can be art – it satisfies at least one sufficient subset of criteria, so the curators were justified in affording it the status. But my grandmother's quilts satisfy the very same criteria! What follows is that while satisfying subsets of criteria respected as sufficient is important because it provides reasons why an object could be afforded the status, someone still has to do the affording. Conversely, a great number of human practices are in many respects similar to art and their products are often quite like artworks – yet are not artworks. A modern performance art piece and a dog show or a military parade can satisfy the very same subsets of criteria, and there seems to be little good explanation for why most classic cars, beautiful puppy performances, or computer games, were not afforded art status. To quote Dickie: 'it has turned out that way' (Dickie 2000, 100). However, if this is accepted, it seems inevitable to acknowledge that again, there not only have to be reasons why an object could be afforded the status, but also someone has to actually do the affording.

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wood carving. These included some which might sound familiar to us, e.g. ifarahon, clarity of articulation, but also some which are more distant, e.g. didon, shining smoothness of surface, and tutu, a cool aloofness. It is somewhat unclear whether the criteria Thompson uncovered focus on classification or evaluation, but the point remains: such research is possible.

[8] Thus my view may be treated as a case of weak institutionalism (see: Matravers 2000).

One could object by saying that bed throws and dog shows are actually artworks in some deeper sense, despite the fact that nobody knows about it. But since art is a cultural practice, there is no such metaphysical depth about it. This is illustrated well by Dickie in his 'knighting argument' (1998, 131): one can become a knight in virtue of being an honourable person and providing excellent service to one's country, but not every such person is a knight. Only those who were actually knighted are. It would be wrong to claim that the world is full of knights, most of whom have not yet been recognised – instead, it would make sense to say that the world is full of people who deserve to be knighted, or are knights in some honorific sense. Similarly, we are not oblivious to the existence of millions of artworks around us, including bed throws, dog shows and earrings – instead, we are surrounded by objects which can be called art in some honorific sense, and, if presented in an appropriate context, could become art in the classificatory sense.

Secondly, the institution cannot be eliminated, because although affording the status requires recognizing whether a given artefact satisfies a sufficient subset of criteria, to tell which subsets are sufficient one needs to refer back to the artworld (a similar thought has been expressed by Matravers, 2000, and I have argued for this in more detail in my 2014). The fact that satisfying subset α constitutes a good reason is merely one of the beliefs that make up an artworld. Gaut argued that the main method of finding out which subsets of criteria are sufficient for arthood, is to 'look and see', or find out by inspection (Gaut 2000, 28, 2005, 277). But such looking and seeing won't reveal a deep metaphysical list of human-independent criteria – instead one will find what people think those criteria are. Moreover, one would likely find that people from different cultures think about them differently.[9] In institutional terms, members of different artworlds can differ in what they believe to be sufficient subsets of criteria for arthood, and treat satisfying different subsets of those criteria as good reasons for affording the status. Following this, since the reasons for affording the status are determined by artworld members' beliefs, and what is art is (partially) determined by these reasons, what is art is (partially) determined by the artworld members' beliefs, i.e. the artworld. Thus ignoring the institution may allow one to reduce the definition to a list of criteria, but to justify why one should accept this list and not any other, one has to refer back to the institution.

Now comes the second horn of Wollheim's dilemma – would such arbitrariness not make the theory uninformative again? No, as the artworld's decisions are not arbitrary enough. Sometimes x may

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[9] I believe that Gaut agrees with this point, but only wants to defend the general disjunctive framework of the cluster rather than the particular criteria, and is only interested in applying the account to the modern Western concept.

not be an artwork even though it does satisfy a subset of criteria respected as sufficient, simply because it has not been afforded the status. But introducing reasons allows one to: (1) explain why certain objects are artworks and others are not (because only the former have been afforded the status for good reasons); (2) say that were one to attempt to confer status on an object with no good reason to do so, the object is not an artwork and one was mistaken in treating it as art; (3) predict which objects could become artworks if they were afforded the status (i.e. those which satisfy a subset respected as sufficient). This seems to be all that one would expect of a classificatory theory.

This also explains why the original institutional definition seemed so unattractive to some. Why should we need an artworld member to tell us that *Mona Lisa* is art? Surely we can just see for ourselves! This is because paradigmatic artworks often satisfy virtually all criteria. Following that, they satisfy multiple subsets of criteria respected as sufficient, giving us hundreds of good reasons to afford them the status. Unsurprisingly, it takes no art-scholar to notice that – even marginally competent artworld members find it blindingly obvious that *Mona Lisa* should be art. But this does not mean that affording the status is obsolete, merely that it is strikingly obvious that it should happen. The same is not true of less clear and borderline cases, and perhaps it is in here that the workings of the institution are more apparent.

The institutional theory also struggled with recognising private art (Levinson 1979, 233). On the cultural definition a person who has no connection with any artworld can create artworks recognised within an artworld, as long as the following holds: (1) this person is a competent member of a cultural context, even if this context is limited to her only; (2) she creates and affords the status to her work because it satisfies a subset of criteria α she respects as sufficient (i.e. she has a reason); (3) α is also respected as sufficient within some artworld. An identical solution is available to the problem of alien art faced by historicism (Currie 1993) – if objects created in an extra-terrestrial context were a product of a practice sufficiently similar to ours, they could count as art in our context.

Finally, how is it that we came about our concept of art? In fact, we never changed it. All art at all times could be defined in exactly the same way – by the cultural definition. The continuous changes in the extension of the concept, the changing shape of art, styles and genres, and the confusion in defining art, are explained by the culturally determined changes in the set of reasons. Simply put: in different contexts people thought different reasons were good, and acted accordingly. Thus there never was a development from naive aestheticism to expression theory to significant form to functionalism, etc. – instead first people considered the beauty criterion as so important that it was included in virtually all sufficient subsets of respected criteria, then, following a cultural change, its importance diminished in favour of expression of emotion, significant form, widely understood aesthetic function, etc. But through

all the changes in what reasons for affording the status people thought good at a given time, the structure of the cluster remained the same, and so did the concept 'art' as defined by the cultural theory.

2.5   TIDYING UP

Once all the elements of the definition are in place, some of them double in explaining the same.

The notion of 'artworld in C' is now obsolete. An artworld is a system of beliefs and related social practices concerning art, present in a given social group. To be a member of an artworld one has to have implicit or explicit knowledge of those beliefs and participate in the practices – but this is just a part of what it is to be culturally competent.

Similarly obsolete is singling out the art-relevant aspects of a work. Dickie needed to specify that appreciation should be directed at e.g. the front of the painting rather than the chemical structure of the canvas. On the cultural theory the status is afforded because x satisfies some reasons for arthood, and thus it is clear to any competent member of C that it should be appreciated for the aspects which correspond to those reasons. Thus the status is afforded by the parts of the work which, for example, have positive aesthetic properties, express emotion, and are traditionally seen as important in this particular medium – and since it is the front of the painting which satisfies those criteria, not its chemical structure, it is clear where the appreciation should be directed.

Finally, an object can become an artefact simply through being selected by an artist – i.e. being afforded the status. It is redundant to mention the artefactuality requirement in the definition which already requires affording the status. The actions which afford an object its status by the same afford it artefactuality, making it an object-used-as-an-artistic-medium. Thus artworks are artefacts, but since their artefactuality is ensured by affording the status (e.g. artistic selection), there is no need to separately mention it in the definition.

With all this, I am ready to present the final shape of the cultural definition:

CD: x is an art work in cultural contexts C_1-C_n *iff* some person S culturally competent in one of C_1-C_n afforded x the status of candidate for appreciation, for good reasons in all of C_1-C_n.

Auxiliary definitions:

A cultural context C is, at least partially, a set of beliefs and related practices commonly shared within a social group.

S is culturally competent in C if S has implicit or explicit knowledge of the beliefs, and skill to engage in the practices present in C.

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A good reason to afford the status in C is the fact that x satisfies a subset from the cluster
of criteria for arthood, respected as sufficient in C.

3 AVOIDING PROBLEMS

3.1 CIRCULARITY

The cultural theory defines art by referring to reasons for affording the status, some of which mention 'art.' Moreover, it is assumed that the cultural competence required to afford the status includes the knowledge and skills related to art.

Fortunately, the circularity is only apparent. Particular criteria of which the reasons are composed mention art, but this should not worry a cultural theorist any more than it worried Gaut. 'There is nothing amiss with circular accounts [. . .] provided they are informative' (Gaut 2000, 28), and the informativeness of the cluster account (and, by proxy, the cultural definition) is ensured by the limitations on circularity – 'being intended to be art' ceases to be problematic once one asks the author about her intention, or deduces it from contextual data.

Further, this criterion can be analysed as 'being intended to be similar in relevant respects, or be regarded similarly, to other objects in the extension of "art" in C' (cf. Levinson 1979, 240). The circularity then disappears, as the phrase 'art in C' is used differently in the definiendum (e.g. x falls under the *concept* 'art' in C) and in the definiens (if, inter alia, x is intended to be like objects in the *extension* of 'art' in C). Likewise, 'being set in one of the major art forms' does not mean being an artwork of a certain kind, but being an artefact about which competent participants in C hold beliefs and engage in practices, such that those beliefs and practices are characteristic of other artefacts which are considered to be in a certain art form. Again, the definiendum deals with the meaning of 'art' and the definiens with its extension.[10] Finally, cultural competence seems to, among other things, include knowledge and ability to participate in practices concerning art. But, as above, competence entails knowledge related to artworks known to the competent persons, i.e. the extension rather than the meaning of the term.

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[10] This is similar to Walton's treatment of artworks based on their standard, variable and contra-standard properties (Walton 1970, 338). What defines a category, or art form, is what properties are standard, etc., for objects in this category – which is itself determined by conventions and traditions, or beliefs and practices of the artworld members.

3.2 NO UNIVERSALISM

One could object that I did not define 'art', but merely 'art in C'. But we are not interested in what some people think art is, we want to know what art is.

If my analysis is correct, then this objection is unfounded. There is no such thing as 'art *simpliciter*', and asking about it makes about as much sense as asking: 'I know how all people *think* a rook can move in chess, but how can a rook *really* move?' The answer is: this is a silly question, there is no such thing as human-independent correctness criteria for chess moves. Likewise, there is no sense to talk about art outside of human practices. And since artistic practices are different in different contexts, asking 'what is art' is like asking 'what is fashionable' – it makes no sense unless one specifies the context to which the question applies. One shouldn't wistfully search for universality where there are only people creating objects.

3.3 INFINITE ARTWORLDS

The reader might think that through its partial relativism the cultural theory becomes vacuous and uninteresting. If x can be art in Western post-Avantgarde context, but not in communist China context, what is there to stop one from starting to break things down further and say that x is art in the context of all Scots who speak Gaelic, or 80's pop fans, or just my next door neighbour and his pals? My grandmother's cross stitches are art for her family and friends, but surely this is of little interest to anyone who wants to give an account of what 'art' means!

The simple answer is: the fact that one can consider an object's status in pretty much any context one wishes, does not mean that one should. Einsteinian physics allows one to calculate the motion of Alpha Centauri relative to my left hand, and all sorts of irrelevant paces , but this does not mean that one actually should do them, and even less complain that modern physics can tell us nothing about Alpha Centauri, because instead of one universal measurement of its motion it provides multiple relative ones. Instead, physicists choose those frames of reference which for some reason or another matter to us. The cultural theory is exactly the same, and cultural contexts are its frames of reference.

But how are we to choose the contexts which matter? Pretty much any context matters to someone, and if the choice is arbitrary then the whole theory is still uninformative.

Firstly, most philosophers of art are pretty arbitrary as it is, choosing to only speak about modern Western context.[11] There is no reason why one should not ask e.g. functionalists why they choose to focus on a fraction of what 'art' can mean. The likely answer would be – we focus on what 'art' means in the modern Western world because this context is important to us. Yet this is exactly as arbitrary as any choice a cultural theorist would need to make. However, while others choose once, a cultural theorist can do it again. Obtaining a good deal of new information for the price of falling into a problem one has already fallen into anyway, is not a bad deal.

Secondly, the same issue is not a problem elsewhere. It is commonly agreed that artworks can have different properties depending on which category of art they fall into (Walton 1970). However, a single artwork can legitimately fall into many categories – one can consider Raphael's *The School of Athens* in the category of frescos, or Renaissance frescos, Raphael's frescos, frescos located in the Apostolic Palace, frescos depicting Socrates, etc. Interpreted in any of those categories the work will have slightly different properties. Of course, Walton provides suggestions for choosing the correct category (ibid., 357-8). However, (1) a work can still be legitimately judged in more than one category ('frescos' and 'Raphael's works' seem perfectly appropriate); (2) a cultural theorist can apply similar restrictions: the arthood of x should be determined for the contexts of which (we have good reasons to believe) it was intended, which are recognised as important by the society in which it was produced, which satisfy some normative requirements (e.g. do not discriminate against female artists), etc.

Finally, the choice of a context can be motivated by evidence, basing on the characteristics of various social groups and cultural contexts determined by social scientists. Far from arbitrary, a context can be fairly specifically described, and its relevance decided based on this description. The most important distinguishing criteria include: race, nation, religion, mode of production, social status, or government type, while others may focus on education, access to and use of media, or dominating ideologies (Giddens 2006, 33-43, 295-300, 485-90, 534-6, 608-13, 704-14, 844-50, 939-40). Thus one can determine the characteristics of, for example, a predominantly white and moderately unprejudiced, multinational, mostly secular, post-industrial democratic society composed of mostly middle and upper class, reasonably well educated people with mostly liberal views and access to modern media – i.e., the modern Western art audience. It is not the case that cultural theorists can get lost in the myriads of possibilities. Instead, all they need to do is make use of the data provided by the social sciences.

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[11] This has been pointed out already by Weitz and Margolis, see: Margolis 1958, 90.

3.4 DISTANT CULTURES

Imagine a culture very different from ours. Its members create objects which are similar to Western art in some respects, but quite different in others. For example, the Kalabari people of southern Nigeria create representational sculptures which are not intended to be aesthetic and are not objects of appreciation. Instead, they are valued for their capacity to contain spirits, and 'some evidence suggests that as visual objects, [they] tend to evoke not merely apathy but actual repulsion' (Horton 1965, 12). These sculptures can be brought under a single concept and this concept might even be a cultural one – but is this concept 'art'? It seems that the cultural theory is at a loss here: by allowing that different cultures might have very different reasons to afford art status to objects, it loses the capacity to determine *why* practices of distant cultures should count as art.

Two questions are at stake here: 'are the Kalabari sculptures art *for us (in C_1)*?' and 'are they art *for the Kalabari people (in C_2)*?' Insofar as we are interested in what is art in our culture (whichever culture that is), we should encounter no problems: as long as there are good reasons in C_1 to afford the status and someone competent in C_1 (e.g. a gallery curator) does it, they are art for us. But this tells us nothing about how the Kalabari classify their works.

I believe that this can only be worrying if one accepts an implicit premise: that it is up to us to determine how concepts apply within other cultures. Instead, a cultural theorist should adopt the approach of multicultural or intercultural anthropology and hold either that only the members of the Kalabari culture are qualified in determining whether the practice they engage in is an art practice, or that this can only be determined in cross-cultural dialogue. Upon encountering a distant culture which engages in something that seems (to us) to be art-making, one should ask the members of that culture: 'this is our cultural concept of art – do you think that what you do is similar enough to what we do to fall under that concept?' Thus the answer to the question: 'why should one think that practices of a distant culture are art practices?' is: 'because competent members of that culture and users of the concept agree that they are.'

Note that in some situations it might not be possible to use this solution, as in the case of determining the status of the products of a culture with no living members. I believe that in these cases one should simply bite the bullet and remain agnostic as to whether or not the creative products of that culture were art in that culture. It is also possible that following a dialogue, C_2 practices which look quite familiar to us will not be considered art in C_2, or ones that look quite alien will. But this should worry us no more than the fact that within our culture things similar to art (such as jewellery or dog shows) are not art while some wild avant-garde works are. In any case, even if this dialogue should determine that

there is no such thing as art in C_2 (for the Kalabari), this need have no bearing at all on whether their sculptures are art in C_1 (for us).

3.5 CLAIMING TOO MUCH

Considering that a cultural theorists try to, wherever possible, rely on empirical evidence rather than intuitions or a priori reasoning, why would they just assume that in some more or less distant cultures the concept of art is also a cultural one? What if empirical research would reveal that in the Middle Ages 'art' had a purely functional meaning? Perhaps it would soon be found that the cultural definition is applicable to no more than what other definitions already cover, and thus has hardly any advantage over them.

While this may point at a possible limitation of the theory, it can hardly be an objection. In fact, it only proves that the theory is falsifiable. Of course contexts in which 'art' is not a cultural concept are possible – after all one can always come up with some counterfactual alien culture and just stipulate that in it art is defined functionally. But this is good, it shows that unlike in case of some theories (Tolstoy's and Collingwood's come to mind), conditions under which the cultural theory is false can obtain – it is not vacuous or tautologically true. Whether such conditions actually do obtain and the theory is falsified, is a completely different matter.

I could rest my case here: until my opponent finds evidence of a context where 'art' is definitely and without exceptions non-cultural, and provides a non-cultural definition which covers all and only the objects considered art in that culture, my theory is safe. But I can also provide reasons to think that such contexts would be at least very rare. Consider the history of Western art as a piece of evidence. The ways in which art was treated and defined have been changing continuously over time. Such changes were always related to broader cultural, religious and political transformations, and were never the result of someone standing up and saying: 'from today all art shall express emotion.' Instead, most theoretical changes followed changing practices – the need for the expression theory arose because the old 'beautiful representation' theory did not cover everything that was considered art. When the amount of art which did not fit the old definition became too obvious to ignore, a new one was made up. It seems that at any given time there were objects which were considered art even though they did not fit the theoretical framework. A cultural theorist accepts them because they satisfy some sufficient subsets of criteria, even though such subsets might be less popular or less often used than those approximated by whichever essentialist theory people held at the time. Considering that there seems to be no culture which does not develop historically in similar ways, the same should be true of any known context.

Nevertheless, cultural theorists are open to the possibility of there being contexts in which art is not defined culturally. If evidence for such contexts were found, they can simply tactically retreat to where they are safe, and claim that even if the scope of the theory has been hereby diminished so that it does not cover all, but rather covers only 90% of all cultural contexts, it is still a significant improvement on theories which merely covered one or two.

4   WHY BE A CULTURAL THEORIST?

The cultural definition has a great deal of very practical explanatory power. When asked: 'is x art?', a cultural theorist needs to do the following:

1. Establish the relevant cultural context C (e.g. establish that the question actually means 'is x art in modern Western context?').
2. Establish what properties are considered criteria and which subsets of criteria are considered sufficient in C, using methods available to social sciences (in one's own context one can assume that one has the relevant knowledge in virtue of being a competent member of C).
3. Check whether x has been afforded the status of a candidate for appreciation.
4. If so, check whether the person(s) who did so were culturally competent in C.
5. Establish whether among x's properties there are those considered criteria for arthood in C, and whether at least one subset of such properties is respected as sufficient for arthood in C (i.e. if there are good reasons to afford it the status in C).

If answers to points (3), (4) and (5) are positive, x is art in C, and any other context in which (5) holds. Additionally, the more subsets of properties respected as sufficient in C x satisfies, the more central and clear case of art it is.

If all those answers are positive, but x's properties are such that they satisfy a subset of criteria of which there is some controversy whether it is sufficient (i.e. it is accepted only by some competent participants in C, or it is considered an unclear case, or social scientists differ in their accounts of the beliefs held in C), x is a controversial case of art.[12]

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[12] To be distinguished from a borderline case. Since the logical structure of the definition rests on a biconditional, it cannot cover borderline cases by itself. However, it is simple to make a definition of borderline cases on its basis: x is a borderline case of art in C_1-C_n iff . . . for reasons considered borderline or barely sufficient in C_1-C_n.

If any of (3-5) is answered negatively, x is not an artwork in C, although it can be or become one in another context.

Most other theories of art focus only on what 'art' is now, losing sight of the fact that art is very diverse and yet largely continuous and unified at the same time. But what good is a theory that strives to encompass all contemporary art, including private and even alien works, yet stops short of searching for similar continuity between what 'art' means for us and what it meant in the past (see: Tatarkiewicz 1971, 139; Davies 1991, 179)? The cultural theory can account for the diversity of art, both synchronically and diachronically, and show that with all this diversity it is a continuous phenomenon. The diversity is a result of the differences in which properties are considered criteria and satisfying which subsets of criteria is considered good reasons to afford the status within particular contexts. The continuity holds on two levels: theoretical, as despite the differences all contexts can be researched using the same methods and all cases explained on the same model; and practical, as the differences and changes follow from relations between artistic practice(s) and belief system(s), and between artistic and other cultural practices and belief systems (e.g. ready-made art is continuous with Renaissance art, because although the reasons for affording the status are very different in their cases, the evolution of those reasons can be historically traced).

With this, the cultural theory actually meets the challenge raised by Weitz – it does allow 'art' to be an open concept, i.e. one that can expand (or even change) its extension over time (Weitz 1956, 31-32).

Importantly, the cultural theory can do all this without assuming an Enlightened Universalism stance by which the status of works from different cultures is judged exclusively by the standards of our culture. Instead, works of other cultures should be judged according to the criteria respected by the members of those cultures (which might have no concept of art and thus no criteria at all), and even if some of them might be appropriated by the Western artworld, their status as art within the Western context does not determine their status within their original context.

Further, the cultural theory takes seriously the feminist critique: it is not 'content to remain tied to the conception of a patriarchal artworld conceivably begun in ancient Greece that included only male artists' (Brand 200, 179) Instead, it breaks with the problematic linearity of 'art' and recognises the social contexts in which art is created. It acknowledges that the criteria and reasons characteristic of some artworlds might be products of patriarchal or colonial cultures and thus be biased, and allows for preferential focus on more inclusive contexts.

The theory can also provide a good framework for determining the status of objects which have never been seen or have been destroyed, or exist only in possible worlds. All those cases can be treated using the same explanatory process described above, but counterfactually. Since the cultural context is a system of beliefs and related practices, one can assume any counterfactual set of beliefs and practices (including those regarding criteria and reasons) and plug it into the theory. After establishing the context C_1 in which x could be art, one needs to counterfactually assume the properties of the object, assume that it has been afforded the status by someone competent in C_1, and ask: 'if x's properties were ϕ_1, would x be art in C_1?'

What about aliens? It would be unfair for a cultural theorist to simply assume that alien concept of art is a cultural one, since one can certainly conceive of aliens who define art in, say, a purely functional way. Still, some answers can be given. Were an alien artefact found which satisfied a subset of criteria sufficient in C_{humans}, and we had reasons to believe that this artefact was treated as art by the aliens (i.e. it has been afforded the status), or a human would present it as art, it would be art in C_{humans}. This would not, however, tell us whether it definitely was art in C_{aliens}, at least not until some empirical research would reveal that the alien concept of art is a cultural one and that the artefact satisfied a subset of criteria respected as sufficient in C_{aliens}.

All this amounts to perhaps one of the greatest strengths of the cultural theory: it has a much greater scope than any modern theory of art. It can talk not only about what art is now, but about what art was, is elsewhere, and what it might be.

On top of all this, a cultural theorist can account for a number of intuitions:

Art has to do with human practices, artistic and otherwise. One expects religious societies to be dominated by spiritual art, art in the time of revolutions to be bold and realist, art of the Enlightenment regular and structured. The cultural theory provides ways of tracing connections between art and other social practices.

What counts as art changes over time and what passes as art now would have never been accepted in the past. The cultural theory explains that by allowing for changing contexts.

A lot of what passes as art shouldn't really be art. It is not an uncommon to respond to modern art by rolling one's eyes over sighing 'I can't believe what gets into galleries these days...' In many cases such complaints are vacuous. In particular, one can express the judgement 'this should not be art' while actually meaning: 'this would not be art if judged by reasons respected in C_1'. Thus some say that Fountain is an artwork and actually mean it because it satisfies a set of properties respected as sufficient

for affording the status in $C_{post\text{-}Avantgarde}$, while others say that Fountain is not an artwork and actually mean that this is because it does not satisfy any subset respected as sufficient in $C_{pre\text{-}Avantgarde}$. Naturally, there is no contradiction between the two at all.[13]

People can be mistaken about what is art. There are several situations in which this can happen: one can try to afford the status in C while being culturally incompetent in C; one can mistakenly consider a work relative to C_1, while in fact the relevant context is C_2; or one can attempt to afford the status even though there are no good reasons to do so in C.

Painting, dance, literature – all arts are different, yet they are all art. Cultural theorists can explain this using the notion of family resemblance inherited from the cluster account. By stressing the historicity and relations to other practices, they can show how the arts developed together, were practised, funded and appreciated by the same people, etc.

Is art is a subjective or an objective matter? Common sense seems helpless. A cultural theorist can explain both intuitions: that x is an artwork seems intuitively objective to S, when x is objectively an artwork in the context S participates in (C_S), and most likely C_S is the only context S knows or cares about. X's arthood may seem intuitively subjective to S when x is objectively an artwork in C_Y, and S is aware of but does not identify with C_Y, or at least is aware of the possibility that in some C_Z x would not be an artwork. But whatever it seems, x's status is objective, but context-relative.[14]

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[13] This does not preclude the possibility of a meaningful discussion on whether Duchamp's piece should be an artwork – but such a discussion would first have to agree on the context in which it is to be judged. It is still perfectly possible to quarrel whether the work actually does satisfy a set of properties respected as sufficient in the modern times, or whether a certain subset should be sufficient.

[14] With thanks to Berys Gaut.

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