Fake Views—
or why concepts are bad guides to art's ontology

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Abstract: It is often thought that the boundaries and properties of art-kinds are determined by the things we say and think about them. More recently, this tendency has manifested itself as concept-descriptivism, the view that the reference of art-kind terms is fixed by the ontological properties explicitly or implicitly ascribed to art and art-kinds by competent users of those terms. Competent users are therefore immune from radical error in their ascriptions; the result is that the ontology of art must begin and end with conceptual analysis. Against this tendency towards concept-driven ontology, I offer a trio of objections derived from: (1) the cultural and temporal variability of concepts of art, (2) the systematic tendency, on the part of would-be ontological assessors, to err on the side of familiar categories or, conversely, to exaggerate minor differences between familiar and unfamiliar practices, and (3) the influence artworld precedents exert over expert and folk concepts alike. These considerations, I argue, mandate an epistemic humility that is simply unavailable to the concept-descriptivist.

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I – Introduction

It is often thought that the boundaries and properties of art-kinds are determined by the things we say and think about them. This is because art-kinds are thought to be paradigmatic instances of social kinds, which means that their ontology is not grounded in homeostatic property clusters, an underlying real essence expressible by microstructural properties, or causal powers capable of entering into powerful empirical generalizations. Unlike natural kinds like bismuth or potassium, no particular arrangement of particles can explain what makes dance or sculpture *art*-kinds, nor will it explain where printmaking ends and photography begins. And if the ontology of art and art-kinds depends on what we say and think, then it seems to follow that we cannot be substantially wrong about the ontological properties we ascribe to them (so long as 'we' is suitably specified). 'Painting' is thus taken to refer to the more-or-less two-dimensional application of pigment to a surface, usually canvas, paper, wet lime plaster, or wood, while 'sculpture' refers to the more-or-less three-dimensional manipulations of matter, usually in ceramic, metal, stone, or wood, and so on for the other artistic media. The result is that paintings and sculptures are concrete objects with relatively strict identity and persistence conditions, while dances, novels, and musical works are abstracta of one stripe or another and can survive much more radical changes.

At its extreme, this tendency to privilege concepts manifests itself as what I call *conscriptivism*, a portmanteau of 'concept-descriptivism':

> *Conscriptivism*
> The reference of art-kind terms is fixed by the ontological properties that competent users
> of the terms explicitly or implicitly ascribe to them.[1]

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[1] Thomasson (2005: 223, 2006, and 2007: 189-90).

According to the conscriptivist, the reference of any art-kind term is grounded in a concept of the ontological kind involved as it is manifested in, for example, discourse about the art-kind among competent users. The ontology of art is thus relegated to an exercise in bare conceptual analysis with no meaningful chance of failure, provided the right experts are consulted. Although conscriptivists remain few and far between, philosophers of art are nevertheless quite fond of claiming that cultures (including our own) can only be said to have art if they first possess a concept of art, as evidenced (perhaps) by the presence of such a word in the language, or by the existence of a class of objects that functions culturally just as art does in our culture (or in some other culture).[2] While this commitment to concept-dependence[3] is distinct from the commitment to a conscriptivist ontology both share a root commitment to concept-first ontology, the idea being that art-ontological puzzles are best resolved by conceptual analysis.

It is this move that we ought to avoid, because our concepts of social kinds make for untrustworthy guides. So are our concepts of natural kinds, of course; the difference is that, where natural kinds are concerned, the physical world acts as a readymade system of checks and balances on our theorizing. When it comes to social kinds, the sources of reality checks are less immediately obvious. In what follows, I will argue that appealing to our concepts is bound to seriously misrepresent the ontology of art and art-kinds. This is because a growing body of anthropological, art-historical, and psychological evidence indicates that our concepts of art and art-kinds reflect entirely arbitrary historical interests with a limited range of application. Nor is the problem limited to 'folk' theories or concepts[4]—I will argue that the sources of error are pervasive, and depend on basic features of human culture and psychology. The result is that even artworld 'experts' are liable

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[2] A small sampling includes Carroll (1993), Clowney (2011), Dean (2003), Dutton (1995, 2000), Novitz (1998), and Wollheim (1980 [1968]). On the art-historical side, see Kristeller (1951, 1952), Shiner (2001), and Vogel (1997). S. Davies (2000) has made, but does not endorse, similar claims.

[3] The term comes from Lopes (2007: 3). An act of Φ-ing is concept-dependent iff Φ-ing requires a concept of Φ.

[4] c.f. Dodd (2013).

to deploy flawed concepts and intuitions, and are no more likely to deploy those concepts in a manner that accurately reflects their ontology, whatever it may be. The concepts of competent users thus have minimal evidentiary value.

I will begin, in §II, by introducing the problem of 'art's' *conceptual instability*, which gives us reason to doubt that 'art's' content is stable across the uses to which it was put in the history of our own culture, let alone other cultures. If concepts are a guide to ontology, then 'art's' history offers us an embarrassment of riches. Against the response that what we are interested in is the concept that competent users of the terms in our *present* culture deploy, §III will present the problem of *conceptual imperialism*. 'Conceptual imperialism' names a tendency on the part even of competent users of 'art' and art-kind terms to assimilate unfamiliar practices under the banner of familiar concepts without regard for the actual features of those practices. The problem, then, is that even competent users of a term seem susceptible to substantial errors when analyzing the practices of other cultures, resulting in mistakes about the concept's extension. Finally, §IV introduces the problem of *conceptual inclination*, which concerns the influence of artworld precedents on our theories of art, giving us further reason to doubt that our intuitions about art and art-kinds actually reflect the concepts' ontological content rather than conventionally salient features of our thinking.

II – The problem of conceptual instability

The first problem for conscriptivism concerns its ability to secure the source of its privileged concepts. This is what I call *the problem of conceptual instability*. The idea is that the diachronic consideration of our concepts of art and art-kinds yields a proliferation of different, often contradictory data points. The anthropological and historical evidence indicates that the concepts underpinning the various practices we regroup under the banner of 'art' are not stable across time, let alone across human cultures. Our artistic practices have changed a great deal over time, not just

in terms of techniques but also with respect to their functions and the place they occupy in our societies, and this has led to changes in our artworld concepts. Consequently, there are bound to be at least as many concepts as there are cultures and times, if not as many as there are users of the relevant kind-terms. The result is that the conscriptivist cannot secure the uniqueness of the reference of her terms except by arbitrarily restricting herself to particular expressions of the relevant concepts that share all or most of their content.

The case for 'art's' instability begins with two hugely influential essays by Paul Oskar Kristeller (1951 and 1952), who argued that the modern "system of the arts" emerged in the mid-eighteenth century through the work of Charles Batteux. According to Kristeller's story, the ancients had concepts of *techné* and *ars*, but these did not specifically denote the "fine arts" and instead included all manner of craft or scientific activities. The mediaevals likewise had no concept of the fine arts and persisted in applying 'art' to crafts such as shoemaking, juggling, and arithmetic. This conflation persisted through the Renaissance, until the modern writers began to group some artifact-making activities (especially painting, sculpture, and architecture) together and distinguishing them from crafts. Still, it was Batteux who first "correctly" grouped together the arts that define our system of the arts today: poetry (including literature), painting, sculpture, music, and dance. These he grouped together on the grounds that their primary goal is pleasure, and from them he distinguished the "mechanical" arts, which serve practical needs such as food and shelter, and a third category combining the two.[5]

Although Kristeller's view still holds considerable sway, there is good reason to suspect that it is just another "Just So" story. For one thing, as James I. Porter has pointed out, alternative

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[5] Kristeller's references are to Batteux's *Les Beaux arts réduits à un même principe*, nouvelle edition (Leiden: Elie Luzac, 1753), 12.

analyses of the eighteenth century are available.[6] More importantly, much of the historical "evidence" that Kristeller adduces in support of his claim that, prior to Batteux, there was no concept of 'fine art' or any systematic distinction between fine art and craft, is simply false. So, for example, Kristeller accuses Plato (in *Cratylus* 423c) of numbering the imitation of animal noises among the arts.[7] But, as James Young has pointed out, the discussion of animal noises in the *Cratylus* has nothing at all to do with *art*, let alone fine art: Plato is simply arguing that one does not *name animals* by imitating their noises! Young's careful work reveals that Kristeller routinely mistakes discussions of imitation and imitative practices for discussions of artistic practices. Worse still, Young observes that both Aristotle and Plato *did* identify music, dance, poetry, painting, and sculpture as arts and distinguish them from other art-forms, and that Batteux himself explicitly credits Aristotle with this grouping.[8] Kristeller's contention that pre-modern peoples did not share our concept of art is thus grounded in a systematic conflation of pre-modern talk of "the arts" with the fine arts.[9] To this list of errors we might also add that Batteux did not actually isolate the fine arts from considerations of morality and utility.[10] The result is that there is no sound historical reason to believe that our ancestors had a wildly different concept of the fine arts; what they may have had, instead, is a broader notion of the arts in general—certainly one that is broader than our notion of fine art. So much the better for the conscriptivist.

Kristeller was not wrong on every count, however. For one thing, we should be suspicious of the idea that the concepts of individual art-kinds are stable over time, so that, e.g., Greek music or theatre operated just as ours do today, or even as they did in mediaeval Europe.[11] I will deal with this subject in more detail in the next section; for the time being, let us assume this view is substantially

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[6] Clement Greenberg, for example, thought the artworlds of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were dominated by literature (see Porter, 2009: 4).
[7] Kristeller (1951: 504).
[8] Young (2015 : 4-6).
[9] Young (2015: 10).
[10] See Porter (2009: 13) and Young (2015: 3).
[11] I will deal with this subject in more detail in §III.

correct. Even if individual art-kinds exhibit diachronic stability, it should be clear to all that the class of the *fine* arts is not especially stable.[12] Art-kinds pass in and out of it, depending on prevailing cultural attitudes. Contemporary culture, for instance, has added photography and film, while gardening exists only at the periphery of fine art today (in the West, at least).

More importantly, Kristeller was right to focus his attention on eighteenth-century Europe because the practice of art-making and the cultural attitudes surrounding art underwent rapid changes at the time. As Peter Kivy has put it, "the eighteenth century witnessed a veritable explosion of separate, self-contained works on the subjects of the fine arts, beauty, sublimity, taste, criticism, the standard of taste, and much more—works unprecedented in Western intellectual history."[13] It is no coincidence that it is in the eighteenth century that aesthetics was elevated to the status of a canonical philosophical discipline, that works of visual art acquired titles and were exhibited *en masse*, and that aesthetics and the philosophy of art were first distinguished from one another. Kristeller's cardinal sin was to identify the eighteenth century with the first moment in history when a consensus over 'art's' conceptual content was possible; what actually happened in eighteenth century Europe is that philosophers first started doing the philosophy of art in the full knowledge that that was what they were doing.[14] They began to deploy theories of art in order to reflect upon the value of art and artistic practices. More recent historical evidence and philosophical argument suggests that Kristeller misidentified the conceptual change that dominated the eighteenth century. What was new was not which kinds of things people classified as 'art', but rather *the cultural role* those things started to play for them. The eighteenth century saw the crystallization of the concept of an art*work* as a special kind of entity.

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[12] Kristeller contends that it stabilizes after the eighteenth century, which is not quite right, but he may be right that it acquired *more* stability after that point.

[13] Kivy (2012: 70).

[14] See Porter (2009: 14) and Kivy (2012: 64, 73).

An example will serve to make this clear. According to Lydia Goehr (1992), the eighteenth century saw a sea change in musical practice. By the close of the century, the development of the concepts of accurate notations, composers, perfect compliance, performance-of-a-work, and scores, among others, resulted in a new concept of musical 'works.'[15] Prior to the eighteenth century, composers had very little creative freedom[16] and a composer's identity mattered less than the occasions for which or persons for whom works were commissioned. Music was not typically the focus of attention—it was treated instead as a background accompaniment to other activities, and false starts were common. Passages were frequently reused to suit similar occasions, and there was a great deal of "creative" overlap between composers and pieces. The absence of complete and institutionalized systems of notation also meant that performers were given a great deal of leeway to complete or interpret passages, and that music was not typically made or expected to outlast its performances. It was only towards the end of the eighteenth century that people began thinking of individual compositions as self-sufficient entities, as 'works' to be published and enjoyed on demand (as it were).[17] This is not to say that there were no functioning concepts of composition, performance, or notation prior to the eighteenth century; rather, it was their significance that changed. For Goehr, these changes reflect the establishment of a concept of musical *works* as distinct entities subject to individual attention, appreciation, and repetition.

These conceptual changes are significant where conscriptivist ontology is concerned because they serve to ground new kinds of claims about the first-order properties of musical works. Once musical works became systematically scored, the dominant conception shifted from thinking about them as occasion-specific performances to thinking of them as repeatable and multiply-instantiable

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[15] Goehr (1992: 103).

[16] Goehr (1992: 176). Note that Goehr's claim is actually that *musicians* only gained creative freedom at the end of the eighteenth century. Given her subsequent remarks about the freedom performers enjoyed and the underdeveloped nature of scores, however, it seems clear that she actually has *composers* in mind.

[17] Goehr's defense of each of these properties can be found in (1992: 179-202).

entities with much stricter identity and persistence conditions (governed by compliance to the score). If the conscriptivist thesis is to be believed, then this change in the uses to which competent speakers put musical terms reflects a change in the ontological properties which they explicitly and implicitly ascribed to them. This means that when we enter the musical ontology room, we have at least two sets of properties to consider: those encoded by competent users of musical terms prior to the development and adoption of a complete system of notation, and those encoded afterwards. The conscriptivist faces a dilemma: either one set of speakers is incompetent, or pre- and post-notation practices belonged to different art-kinds entirely. If the former, then how should we choose between them? If the latter, then she faces the additional problem that most speakers do not typically draw the distinction in their music-talk—that is to say, most ordinary users of music-terms are incompetent because they are not aware of the difference that notation makes.

These problems are not limited to our concept of musical works. Tiffany Stern (2000) has likewise observed, of theatrical productions, that their practice prior to the late eighteenth century departs radically from what we have come to expect. Consider Shakespeare's plays, for which there was, contrary to our current practice, no ensemble revision. Actors practised individual rehearsal ("study"), but received no direction on how to behave when not speaking (there were no producers or directors in the modern sense). Nor were actors given much indication of the play's content: there was no complete typescript to which they could refer—they were only given their cues and lines. Finally, the play's opening night would have been the actors' first opportunity to get a sense of the endeavour as a whole, but it was also a trial run of the play's plot and writing, which were subsequently subject to major rewrites.[18] The result is that, contrary to our ordinary intuitions, Elizabethan theatre was not a text-based art-kind, and neither, perhaps, were *any* theatrical

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[18] These observations come primarily from Stern (2000: 5-8, Ch. 3, and Ch. 6).

productions prior to the crystallization of a work-concept in the nineteenth century.[19] That is not to say that there existed no playscripts prior to the nineteenth century; rather, the point is just that the script did not yet exert the kind of regulative force we routinely assign to it today. And as with the musical case above, it is a simple matter to see how the conceptual shift between the Elizabethan era and our own could result in competent users of theatrical terms encoding different sets of identity and persistence conditions—and maybe even classifying them as different sorts of entities altogether (e.g. action types vs. events).

Generalizing from these two sets of cases to the artworld more broadly, the lesson here is that the differences between an old and a new artistic practice are not always readily apparent because artworld conventions develop incrementally over time and are historically contingent. As Michael Baxandall has observed, the inferences we draw about works are based on our understanding of the work's historical context and the interests driving artists at the time, and these are in turn based upon our understanding of our own historical situation and interests. The trick is to discover when and where the analogies to our own time break down, and to revise our reconstructions in light of those facts.[20] In other words, there is no fully independent standard to which we can appeal.

III – The problem of conceptual imperialism

So far, I have argued that the conceptual content of 'art' and individual 'art-kinds' is unstable across time, and that this fact should caution us against top-down approaches to art's ontology which begin by taking some concept in hand and then squint at its entrails in the hope of divining something about art's nature. For such a strategy to have any hope of working, we would have to repeat it for

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[19] See, e.g., David Osipovich (2006) and James Hamilton (2007).

[20] Baxandall (1985: esp. 109). For more on the pragmatic value of Baxandall's heuristic principles and his 'inferential' approach to criticism, see D. Davies (2016).

as many of the historically-situated concepts of art as we can discern, and the result will be far too many distinct 'concepts' to secure the reference of art and art-kind terms. But it remains open to the conscriptivist to argue that what she is actually concerned to describe are concepts with a much more limited range of application: *our* concepts, properly indexed. In fact, this is exactly how Amie Thomasson has conceived of her own project. To put the point in her terms, the descriptivist (my conscriptivist) can respond that what we are interested in are the application and co-application conditions of 'art' explicit or implicit in the categorial intentions of the competent users of the term who ground its reference in English (or in our artworld or culture).

Even so, I will argue that the project stumbles on what I call *the problem of conceptual imperialism*, which describes two related but contrary tendencies: (1) the tendency to assume that objects and practices with which we are unfamiliar fit into the conceptual categories that are most familiar to us, and (2) the tendency to exaggerate the differences between practices which are quite similar, but at least one of which is unfamiliar to us. It is, in effect, a way of begging the question in favour of the categories and judgements that are most familiar to us. The result is a synchronic problem to add to the conscriptivist's diachronic problem: *our* concepts are routinely applied far beyond *our* practices, and *our* concepts of art and art-kinds have spread to cultures all over the globe. This means that otherwise competent users of 'art' and art-kind terms frequently apply them improperly, so that any ontological properties which they might encode will be subject to substantial error.

Conceptual imperialism is at its most obvious in the way we talk about the artistic practices of other cultures. Consider Bill Holm's seminal *Northwest Coast Indian Art: An Analysis of Form* (1970 [1965]). In this landmark monograph (often called the bible of northwest coast art), Holm presents an analysis of the formal characteristics of more than four hundred objects created by the Kwakiutl

people of the Pacific northwest and tries to derive the aesthetic and artistic principles underpinning their creation. And yet, his preface contains this startling admission:

> Ideally, a study of this sort should lean heavily on information from Indian artists trained in the tradition that fostered the art. Unfortunately, I was unable to locate a qualified informant from the area covered, i.e., the coastal region from Bella Coola to Yakutat Bay. That there may be some still living is not questioned, *but contemporary work seen from the area reveals a lack of understanding by Indian craftsmen of the principles that are the subject of this study*.[21]

This peerless scholar of indigenous art began his investigation with a set "aesthetic principles" in hand and, finding them disconfirmed by the testimony and work of contemporary practitioners, naturally concluded that these practitioners were not "suitably informed."

Holm's preface to the 50th anniversary edition goes some way towards explaining this failing. The book has its origins in a research paper written for his MFA on the characteristics of the form-line system in Pacific northwest coast two-dimensional art. When Holm decided to publish it several years later, he realized that *he had no documentation*; to remedy this deficiency, his former advisor suggested that he record the characteristics of some 392 artifacts on Keysort cards.[22] Holm also expresses regret for developing a misleading vocabulary that erroneously tied stylistic choices to representational intentions on the artist's part—so that, for example, his *salmon-trout's head* is better thought of as an *elaborated inner ovoid*, since it does not actually represent a fish's head. Indeed, Holm confesses that the term comes from Tlingit weavers who, of course, are not members of the Kwakwaka'wakw Nation, let alone the Kwakiutl clan.[23]

That said, I do not mean to fault Holm's intentions, which I think were beyond reproach; nor do I mean to take issue with the aesthetic patterns he discerns in Kwakiutl artifacts, which are there to be seen (or not). My point is just that even experts are susceptible to conceptual imperialism; guarding against it requires us to pay careful attention to our methods and to the tests

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[21] Holm (1970 [1965]: vii). Emphasis mine.
[22] Holm (2014: xxii).
[23] Holm (2014: xxi). It is also worth noting that Holm's focus is exclusively on the art of the Kwakiutl clan, not (as might be inferred from the title) all of the Nations making up the rest of the Pacific northwest coast, nor even the other sixteen clans making up the Kwakwaka'wakw Nation.

we devise for our hypotheses. Part of the problem here seems to be Holm's insistence on the cultural "purity" of the practices he aims to study, rather than pinpointing the conventions governing current Kwakiutl artistic practices and situating them relative to those which appear to have governed their past practices, and those of their neighbours. The fact that Holm's search for "informed" practitioners came up short should come as no surprise, since he seems to have been looking for his subject in No True Scotland (or, perhaps, in the Tlingit Nation).

Holm is hardly unique in this respect. Larry Shiner (1994) tells a similar story, according to which an Alaskan State Arts Council representative finds himself in the position of "constantly explain[ing] to Alaskan [First Nations] that ivory carving and beadwork can be supported 'as art,' but kayak or harpoon making cannot."[24] If Alaskan First Nations are to be believed, then the close relationship they perceive between their carving and kayak-making ought to prompt the Alaskan State Arts Council to re-evaluate either their ideas about art's proper extension, or their designation of carving and beadwork as 'art'.

Even works from the history of our own culture are susceptible to this kind of misrepresentation. As Susan Feagin has observed, "Altar-pieces don't transform spaces the same way when they are hung on walls in museums. Neither do paintings originally produced for chapels in churches and cathedrals when they are also hung in museums."[25] Many of the works from our history, Feagin argues, are site-specific; this means that when our engagement with these works is mediated by gallery, museum, or textbook, we experience them as caricatures deprived of their cultural significance and their historical place. This poses a fairly straightforward epistemic problem for appreciation and interpretation; but it can also pose an ontological problem, because it invites us to apply art-kind terms without regard for factors that might well influence their identity and persistence conditions, or their kind-classifications. Just consider Tracey Emin's groundbreaking

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[24] Shiner (1994: 225-6).
[25] Feagin (1995: 265).

Everyone I Have Ever Slept With 1963-1995 (1995), a tent with the appliquéd names of 102 people with whom the artist shared a bed (literally understood) in the designated period. Without access to the salient contextual details, it would be all too easy to mistake *Everyone*'s vehicular medium for a relatively uninspired work of sculpture, rather than an important piece of conceptual art.

But we can also err too far on the side of caution and exaggerate the differences between cultural practices. This is the moral of Denis Dutton's critique of Lynn M. Hart's infamous analysis of the *jyonti* paintings of Uttar Pradesh. Hart argued that the "aesthetic principles" of *jyonti* painting are different in kind from those of the Western world because the images and patterns are based on religion, ritual, and myth, and the paintings are produced primarily for use in religious contexts.[26] As Dutton observes, however, Hart errs in two respects: first, she ignores the fact that all of the same observations are applicable to much of the Western artistic tradition; second, she assumes that because these works are painted their proper Western analogues are paintings. When we actually compare the *practices* at issue, however, it becomes clear that the appropriate comparison classes are the domestic and dowry arts.[27]

According to Sidney Kasfir, this kind of misplaced concern actually betrays a simple double standard: we insist on interpreting the works of other cultures primarily in terms of their political, religious, and social functions, all the while conveniently ignoring the fact that our own artistic practices share parallel histories of political significance, religious patronage, and social utility.[28] Western artists influenced by "foreign" notions can expect to enjoy acclaim, while non-Western (especially First Nations) artists influenced by Western styles can expect to be criticized for "inauthenticity" (as we saw with the Kwakiutl above), or for betraying their cultural heritage and

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[26] Hart (1995).

[27] Dutton (2000: 218-20).

[28] See Kasfir (1992) and Shiner (1994: 231). Similarly, S. Davies's (2007) illustrates the interdependence of Balinese artistic practices and Bali's tourist industry.

bowing to commercial interests.[29] Non-Western artistic heritage is expected to be static, self-contained, and unresponsive to outside influences. At its extreme, Shiner observes that this imperialistic tendency can have the absurd result that "carvings *intended* to be Art in our sense, i.e., made to be appreciated solely for their appearance, are called 'fakes' and are reduced to the status of mere commercial craft."[30] Similarly, Kasfir notes that "when a contemporary [African] carver from another ethnic group (or 'tribal style area') intentionally takes up this same style, the resulting object is said to be a fake because, it is claimed, there is conscious intent to deceive."[31] White (and male) artists like Gauguin and Picasso are free to explore whatever media, subjects, and techniques catch their fancy but Aleut, Baoulé, and Haida artists—and women, too—must stick to their "traditional" iconography and kinds—namely, figural and totemistic carvings, masks, and pictures of animals, as though their artistic practices were static and timeless.

The moral of the story is just this: it no longer makes much sense to speak of "our" artworld as though the pronoun could do more than limit the range of its temporal application. Today's artworld is a pan-cultural syncretic amalgam of far too many different conventions, practices, and works; the conscriptivist cannot rely on the categorial intentions of competent users of the relevant terms who ground its reference in "our" artworld because "our" artworld is the *world's* artworld.

IV – The problem of conceptual inclination

At this point, the conscriptivist may well object that the failings I have described are not so much problems with deferring to our concepts as they are failures to defer to *accurate* concepts or real expertise. According to this line of argument, the flawed uses to which art-kind terms are put by

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[29] Kasfir (1992, esp. 41-3, 45) and Shiner (1994: 230).
[30] Shiner (1994: 226-7).
[31] Kasfir (1992: 45).

speakers in the throes of conceptual imperialism should disqualify them as competent speakers in the first place.

But to insist on regimenting 'competence' in this way runs risk of disqualifying us *all* as competent users of 'art' and art-kind terms. My point is simply this: *we are all susceptible to these basic errors and prejudices*, many of which derive from the availability heuristic.[32] If competence requires immunity from error and prejudice, then *nobody* is a competent user of art-kind terms. The ubiquity of our testimonial incompetence is captured by what I call *the problem of conceptual inclination*. The idea here is just that our concepts of art and art-kinds encode and reflect content that is *conventionally salient*, but not necessarily ontologically complete or even correct.

To see how this might be the case, we can begin by looking at women's role in art history. Since the example set by Linda Nochlin's groundbreaking essay *Why have there been no great women artists?* (1988 [1971]), feminist scholarship has argued that art history and art theory are fundamentally flawed. This is because they purport to be neutral and universal, but are in fact based on biased and narrowly applicable criteria.[33] The result is a narrow conception of artistic value— embodied in the art-historical canon—which in turn circumscribes our conception of art's ontology.

From the outset, women's access to the artworld was constrained by the traditional system of transmitting professions from father to son.[34] In order for a woman to receive even basic artistic training, her father would have had to take an exceptional interest in his daughter's education. Even so, marriage might easily disrupt a fortunate woman's career path; this is because until recently women were expected to abandon the amateurish pursuits of youth to concentrate on child-bearing, -rearing, and household maintenance, or to help their husbands in their business endeavours. While this social attitude is especially well-documented for the nineteenth century, when modest

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[32] See Tversky and Kahneman (1973). Conceptual imperialism and conceptual inclination, in particular, reflect the influence of the availability heuristic.

[33] See, e.g., Brand (2000: 184).

[34] Nochlin (1988 [1971]: 156).

proficiency in several art-forms was considered a sign of a well-educated woman, it is one based on long historical precedent.[35] Aspiring female artists effectively faced a choice between career and matrimony.

Any woman who successfully negotiated these obstacles faced additional stumbling blocks. Her work might, for instance, be widely attributed to her father, mentor, or other male contemporaries, thereby erasing her from art history (as was the case with, e.g., Artemisia Gentileschi and Marie-Denise Villers). Similarly, female artists were often restricted in the subject matter it was culturally acceptable for them to depict (viz. still lifes and scenes of animals); unfortunately, these subjects were considered the purview of amateurs, not of masters. When the academies began to take over artistic education in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, female students were barred from attending life drawing classes lest they should chance to see any nudity. Later, when women *were* allowed to attend such classes, the models had to be partially draped.[36] Prevented from developing their skills in the most prized kinds of depiction, all of which involved the human form, women had to seek their subjects elsewhere in the lesser fields of genre painting, portraiture, and still life.

I have focused my attention on the case of women in order to illustrate the kinds of structural factors that have erased them from art's history, resulting in the cultural transmission of a skewed canon of art. This erasure is not necessarily total, since women and other extra-canonical agents could still exert some influence over the precedents underpinning the conventional attitudes and practices of which the canon is composed.[37] Nevertheless, these lacunae continue to exert considerable force over our artworld concepts today. Allow me to explain.

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[35] Nochlin (1988 [1971]: 164-6).
[36] Nochlin (1988 [1971]: 158-9).
[37] So, for example, they might exert some influence indirectly by means of women's amateur productions, expressions of judgements of taste, occasional patronage, and the initiation and reinforcement of their children's artworld participation.

Considered by itself, the erasure of some groups' contributions to the artworld does not yet pose an ontological problem. After all, the fact that paintings by Renaissance women were under-appreciated until recently does not mean that they were perceived as non-artworks. The trouble where ontology and testimony are concerned is that the weight of precedent disposes the artworld to preserve and to reproduce existing conventions. Conventions are by their nature conservative, and the art-historical canon gives us a necessarily incomplete picture of artworld practices. This means that the judgement of whether a new practice belongs to an art-kind depends, to a large extent, on whether other practices like it have been so judged in the past. Consider, for instance, the early efforts to justify photography's inclusion among the arts, which tended to make the case on the grounds that photography shares its goals and methods with the other pictorial arts and that, contrary to appearances, it requires the skilled manipulation of its vehicular medium.[38] These efforts ultimately succeeded in extending the cardinality of art-kinds by one, but the work required to perform this extension also served to legitimate and to reinforce existing criteria for art-kind membership.

The result is that perfectly good candidate art-kinds (e.g. calligraphy, gardening, needlework, textile arts, etc.) are left out of the canon entirely, and this absence affects the space of possibilities we are willing to entertain. As Peggy Brand has put it, what we have inherited is "an artworld whose conventions have been established and perpetuated by a relatively elite group. [...] What has come down to us is an art of exclusion."[39] The relative absence of women and of certain kinds of practices from the canon's ranks poses a problem for the conscriptivist because it affects the space of possibilities and the set of relevant alternatives which competent users of 'art' and art-kind terms are willing to entertain. Their absence from the canon directly influences their plausibility as art in the

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[38] See, e.g., Emerson (1974 [1889], esp. 328) and Stieglitz (1899).
[39] Brand (2000: 177). Anneliese Monseré makes much the same point in response to Gaut's cluster theory of art (2012, 159).

eyes of members of the dominant culture and that, in turn, affects the set of first-order ontological properties we are willing to ascribe to individual art-kinds.

The art-historical canon occupies an important social role at the heart of the artworld: it is not just a compendium of greatest hits, it also supplies the primary text for the artistic education of a culture (experts and folk alike). We need only crack open any art history textbook to see the extent of the canon's influence; it gives the academic discipline of art history the bulk of its subject matter, kindling student interest in particular artists, styles, traditions, and works, and plays a central role in disseminating the history of art to the broader public (especially through the intercession of critics, galleries, and museums). It furnishes criticism with a reference point for the evaluation of new works, and helps to define the parameters of genre and style. In a word, the art-historical canon selects from among the field of artworks those which are deemed worthy of special attention, and serves the function of turning critical, economic, historical, and even popular interest upon those works, and others like them.[40]

Consequently, the more central a place canonical value judgements occupy in one's artistic education, the more salient the ontological properties they enshrine become for identifying new artistic practices. In fact, this is borne out by evidence from social psychology. I have already mentioned Tversky and Kahneman's work documenting the pervasive influence of what they call the availability heuristic.[41] To this extensive body of evidence we can also add Robert Zajonc's (1968), which found that mere exposure to a stimulus is sufficient to enhance a subject's attitude towards that stimulus.[42] A subsequent meta-analysis of 208 studies showed that Zajonc's exposure effect is both robust and reliable.[43] In a more recent follow-up study, James Cutting likewise found

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[40] Locher (2012: 33-4).
[41] Tversky and Kahneman (1973).
[42] Zajonc (1968), cited in Lopes (2016).
[43] Bornstein (1989: 268). A recent study by Aaron Meskin, Mark Phelan, Margaret Moore, and Matthew Kieran (2013), however, suggests that mere exposure did not increase liking for *bad* art.

that subjects' preferences for certain artworks is a function of their familiarity with the work in question: aesthetic preference is a function of frequency of appearance, not canonicity, prototypicality, or the subject's expertise (except insofar as these contribute to the frequency of the subject's exposure to the work in question).[44] So, to say, as Griselda Pollock did, that art history creates its own objects (viz. art and artists)[45] is really just to observe this tendency in action. The canon's influence populates the realm of ontological possibilities; it gives us the list of entities whose ontology we are supposed to investigate in the first place. The fact that the canon does not paint a complete picture of the variety of artistic practices thus poses a significant problem, for what guarantees do we have that some of the practices and works that it excludes will not prompt us to revise the first-order properties we assign to art and art-kinds?

V – Conclusion

There is no doubt that our art-historical canons presuppose some general understanding of what makes an artifactual practice an art-kind. Likewise, there is no doubt that our use of 'art' and art-kind terms presupposes a general understanding of what makes something art in the first place. My point, in posing this trio of problems for conscriptivism, has not been to deny these facts, nor to suggest that our commitment to descriptive adequacy is hopeless or misguided. My goal has simply been to show that we should not mistake our use of 'art' and art-kind terms for a reliable guide to ontology; we cannot simply read an art-kind's first-order ontological properties from the uses to which we put its associated terms. Our language reflects historically-situated and conventionally-reinforced preferences, not bare ontology. Human beings share a cognitive apparatus that makes extensive use of common heuristic devices, and these routinely encode systemic biases into the concepts we

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[44] Cutting (2003), cited in Lopes (2016).
[45] Pollock (1999: 27). For Pollock, the point of feminist interventions in art history is not just to highlight women's contributions to established art forms, but to expand the sphere of what counts as 'art' in the first place (so that it includes, e.g., the textile arts).

deploy. Once our conceptual ghosts have been properly exorcised, we can instead lavish our attention on the practices that gave rise to those concepts and intuitions in the first place. Doing so will not guarantee the accuracy of our theorizing—nothing short of discovering a common microstructure by virtue of which art-kind terms can enter into powerful empirical generalizations will do that—but it does hold out the promise of minimizing errors due to conceptual instability, imperialism, and inclination. Because art-kinds are social kinds, philosophers are right to begin their investigations by considering our concepts, intuitions, and practices—but using them as a starting point requires us to adopt a healthy dose of epistemic humility, and to approach them with a measure of skepticism. To defer to our concepts, as the conscriptivist would have us do, is to stake everything on fake views.

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