Defining Art Culturally

Modern Theories of Art — A Synthesis

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Abstract

Numerous theories have attempted to overcome the anti-essentialist scepticism about the possibility of defining art. While significant advances have been made in this field, it seems that most modern definitions fail to successfully address the issue of the ever-changing nature of art raised by Morris Weitz, and rarely even attempt to provide an account which would be valid in more than just the modern Western context. This thesis looks at the most successful definitions currently defended, determines their strengths and weaknesses, and offers a new, cultural definition which can preserve the good elements of other theories, solve or avoid their problems, and have a scope wide enough to account for art of different times and cultures. The resulting theory is a synthetic one in that it preserves the essential institutionalism of Dickie’s institutional views, is inspired by the historical and functional determination of artistic phenomena present in Levinson’s historicism and Beardsley’s functionalism, and presents the reasons for something becoming art in a disjunctive form of Gaut’s cluster account. Its strengths lie in the ability to account for the changing art-status of objects in various cultures and at various times, providing an explanation of not only what is or was art, but also how and why the concept ‘art’ changes historically and differs between cultures, and successfully balancing between the over-generalisations of ahistorical and universalist views, and the un informativeness of relativism. More broadly, the cultural theory stresses the importance of treating art as a historical phenomenon embedded in particular social and cultural settings, and encourages cooperation with other disciplines such as anthropology and history of art.
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Introduction

It is tempting to think that in modern times defining ‘art’ is quite impossible. Indeed, artists have been doing everything they can to reach beyond every single 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 paper which inspired the majority of the modern classificatory definitions, must be Morris Weitz’s ‘The Role of Theory in Aesthetics’ (1956). The claim presented by Weitz was very strong – not only did he criticise existing theories of art, but argued that ‘art’ cannot be defined, due to its ever-expansive and adventurous nature. Although such anti-essentialism seems quite paradoxical (is it essential to art that it has no essence?), it was soon seconded by other authors (e.g. Kennic 1958). Weitz was criticised on numerous fronts, but while little might be left from his bold anti-essentialist claims, he managed to point out three hugely influential issues: (1) ‘art’ has not yet been successfully defined, largely because (2) art keeps changing all the time and pushes its own boundaries, and thus (3) any definition which focuses on art’s exhibited or intrinsic properties is doomed to soon be out of date.

Some philosophers agreed with Weitz to a certain extent and argued that regardless of whether defining ‘art’ is actually possible or not, it is in fact unnecessary and quite useless, and that it is more than enough if we simply have some heuristic means of recognising artworks (Bartel 1979 49; and more recently Carroll 1994). Some went as far as stating
that anti-essentialism is in fact a distinctive feature of analytic aesthetics (Shusterman 1989: 6; cf. Shusterman 1994: 390). However, many authors opposed such approach and argued that a definition is not only possible, but also much needed (e.g. Tatarkiewicz 1971: 147; Dickie 1974: 21ff. Walton 1977: 99).

The classificatory attempts which followed considered the lesson of anti-essentialism and tried to analyse ‘being art’ as a contextual property, or a relation works have to their context, history, function, etc. However, as I will try to show in this thesis, they did not improve enough and remain unsatisfactory. Specifically, neither of them did full justice to Weitz’s claim about the ever-changing nature of art. To a large extent they keep pretending that both art and the concept ‘art’ do not change that much over time and between different cultural contexts, and they operate within a kind of Enlightenment universalism bubble in which they either talk about all art as if it were the same and was always treated the same as it is in the modern Western world, or at least as if all the other arts and treatments of art did not matter particularly much. And as much as I understand the legitimacy of restricting the concept to be defined 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; 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 sometimes, but why not expand it if it is possible (see: Bourdieu 1987; Shusterman 1994; Ahlberg 1995)? The cultural theory I will propose follows from those considerations: I try to define ‘art’ in a way which will take into account the fact that the content of the concept can and does change relative to various historical and cultural contexts.

One could ask bluntly: do we really need another definition of art? What does the cultural theory offer to make it worth our attention?
There are several reasons why I think a new theory — and specifically the cultural theory I offer — is needed and is likely to be more successful than other views.

1. A new definition is needed simply because all others fail. They not only fall into conceptual problems, but also simply fail to include everything that is actually considered art and/or exclude everything that is not. Assuming, pace Weitz, that a definition is possible, this is enough of a reason to continue the search. And as I will show, the cultural theory does the job better than any of its competitors.

2. None of the most developed definitions enquire into the origins of our concept of art, they simply take it for granted, as if it sprung up from nowhere just before the Great Avantgarde. In the course of my argument I will show that tracing a concept’s history can be most instructive in determining its meaning.

3. None of the definitions are capable of accounting for both modern Western art and understanding of the concept, as well as the 17th Century European and 10th Century Chinese one. While they are not exactly required to have such a broad scope, it seems that a theory which would successfully cover all that ground would be worth some attention.

4. There are no theories which successfully balance between the over-generalisations of ahistorical universalism and the uninformativeness of complete relativism. The cultural theory does exactly that — while holding that the meaning of ‘art’ is context-relative, it succeeds in determining the characteristics of the relata in enough detail to remain informative.

With all this, I hope that the cultural theory will be able to much better account for the actual practice of art. Many definitions present something akin to what Carroll called
a ‘philosophical dream such that, ideally, all the relevant answers … should fit into a tidy theoretical package’ (Carroll 1994: 7). They keep pushing a square peg into a round hole, because for some reason they care for the elegance of the hole more than for its adequacy to the content. Other aestheticians have voiced concerns over this issue (e.g. S. Davies 1991: 21; Carroll 2009: 3; Kamber 1993: 313) and with them I hold what should be quite obvious – that one should treat a theory’s compliance with the evidence and actual practice as the main criterion of its success. Thus accounting for actual artistic practice will be the main goal of the cultural theory.

There is a related issue worth mentioning here, which provides another reason why ‘fitting the world’ is so important. Some theories do not take the actual artistic practice for granted, denying arthood to, e.g., readymades or conceptual art. They are quick to say that if people think that such works are art, they are simply wrong, or have been misguided, and treat their discriminative approach as an asset, as ‘normative bite’. My general worry here concerns the vagueness and difficulty of determining a clear borderline between treating some works as non-art mistakenly taken for art, or as art that is wrongly counted by the theory as non-art, i.e. a counterexample to the theory. If this line is blurred, it seems that a theory can become unfalsifiable – at which point does one say that the theorists are no longer allowed to shrug off counterexamples by saying ‘sure x might seem like a counterexample, but that is because people are mistaken about x’s arthood’? Tolstoy’s and Collingwood’s theories can perhaps serve as examples here. In consequence, such ‘discriminative’ theories might find themselves providing a very good normative account for ‘art’, but certainly not a descriptive one. And while I agree that a definition should have a normative bite to it (and the cultural theory does provide that), it cannot change into a definition not of ‘art’, but of ‘what—the-author-thinks-art-should-be-like’.
In the following pages I will first focus on discussing the currently most influential and successful definitions of art - the institutional theory (section 1.1), historicism (1.2), functionalism (1.3) and the cluster account (1.4). I will explain them in turn and try to bring out their main advantages, yet ultimately I will argue that none of them are successful in covering all and only the things which are as a matter of fact considered art in our world, and that each of them suffers from rather serious conceptual difficulties. Learning from their mistakes, I will then offer my own theory which centres around what I call the cultural definition of art. To do this, I will first explain my methodological assumptions (2.1), and then develop the definition step by step, explaining it on the way (2.2 and 2.3). I hope that by then end of this exposition it will become apparent why the cultural theory can be so theoretically and practically attractive (2.4). In the following chapters I will show that the cultural definition is not only intuitively appealing, but has multiple important advantages which make it more successful than its competitors. First, I focus on showing how it can resolve practically every single problem which plagued the other theories, while at the same time retaining most of their advantages (3.1–3.4), after which I present an additional set of advantages characteristic of the cultural definition only (3.5). In Chapter 4 I turn to addressing some possible problems a cultural theorist may face and argue that they are not as difficult as it might seem, and in the Conclusion (5.1–5.3) I explore some of the wider implications and consequences of my arguments for other fields in aesthetics.
Chapter 1

Reconstruction of selected modern theories of classification of art

Four diverse approaches shape modern thinking about art: (1) procedural or institutional theories; (2) historical definitions; (3) functional theories; and (4) disjunctive, or cluster theories. While many other types of definitions are defended, these four seem to be the frontrunners in the present discussion. This chapter introduces the most developed and popular versions of those definitions and identifies their strengths and weaknesses. In pointing out the problems they face, I will focus on those issues that have proven most problematic and have not yet been satisfactorily answered, which will help me in establishing my own view later.

1.1 The Institutional Theory

The first of the series of controversial articles on philosophy of art published by Arthur Danto, ‘The Artworld’, began the discussion about the possibility of contextual definitions of art, and specifically about the relation between art and the institution he called the
Reconstruction of selected modern theories of classification of art

(a) Andy Warhol, *Brillo Box*, 1964, Silkscreen ink on painted wood, The Andy Warhol Museum, Pittsburgh

(b) A real box of brillo soap pads, produced by Brillo Manufacturing Company since 1913

Figure 1.1: Brillo Boxes, art and ‘mere thing’

‘artworld’. The main thesis is that it is not any specific physical or contextual properties which make certain objects art, but the fact that they are presented in the context of the artworld.

Danto is led to this conclusion by his argument from indistinguishable objects (Danto [1964] cf. Dickie [1974: 29]). He discusses Andy Warhol’s *Brillo Box* — an artwork composed of what looks exactly like a mass-produced Brillo soap pad box (Fig. 1.1). Although considered an artwork, a piece of sculpture even, it looks exactly the same as any other Brillo box, lying in a warehouse — it has all the same perceptual properties. Moreover, the box which is art is in no way more interesting, beautiful, thrilling or emotionally involving than the boxes in the warehouse. The only thing that distinguishes *Brillo Box* from other Brillo boxes is the fact that the former has been selected and displayed in a

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1 From the philosophical point of view, the choice of this example is rather puzzling — Warhol’s boxes were made from different material than the factory boxes, and thus are in fact perfectly perceptually distinguishable after closer examination. Neither do they share the same history of production or contextual properties with the factory boxes, and in fact they seem to be simply sculptures representing brillo boxes. However, since the example is established in the literature, I will follow it here.
gallery as an artwork by Andy Warhol, an artist. Danto concludes that the only feature which distinguishes art from non-art is being presented by an artist in an artistic context. This context, together with all the works presented in it, Danto christened the ‘artworld’.

Several institutional classificatory definitions of art have been formed on the basis of Danto’s argument (eg. Difley 1969; Bourdieu 1987; Becker 2008 etc.). Danto himself never formulated a complete theory, and soon began to advocate a different approach (Danto 1973, 1974, 1998). The most fully developed and certainly the most influential view has been presented by George Dickie.

Before I proceed to its reconstruction, it is important to note that Dickie significantly limits the understanding of the term ‘art’ he is going to define. He explicitly says that his theory is mainly to be applicable to the concept of art as we (‘present-day Americans, … present day Westerners, … Westerners since the organization of the system of the arts in or about the 18th century – I am not sure of the exact limits of the "we"’) understand it (Dickie 1969: 254). This is not, however, to say that his definition cannot account for works created before the 17th Century – it merely means that it is not concerned with what the people of the 17th Century considered art and why, focusing only on what we consider art.

Dickie’s early theory

While the institutional definition has been already presented in only slightly different form in (Dickie 1969, 1971), the most complete formulation of the theory is found in Art and the Aesthetic (Dickie 1974).

A work of art in the classificatory sense is (1) an artifact (2) a set of the aspects of which has had conferred upon it the status of candidate for appreciation by some person or persons acting on behalf of a certain social institution (the artworld) (ibid. 34).
Firstly, Dickie argues that an artwork has to be an *artifact* rather than a natural object, or perhaps a universal. This requirement is intended to exclude from the domain of artworks things such as Robert Barry’s conceptual piece *All the things I know but of which I am not at the moment thinking - 1:36 PM; June 15, 1969*, or natural objects which have not been displayed in an artwork context.\(^2\) While most people would not question the artifactuality requirement, at this point it is unclear why art could not evolve into something that would challenge it. Dickie adds further intuitive support for believing that artworks must be artifacts: ‘artifactuality is a necessary condition of creativity’ (Dickie 1974: 49), i.e. that artistic creativity can only be displayed through working in a medium, resulting in an artifact. While all this is intuitively true, there seems to be no reason to believe that this requirement must hold in every possible situation and that even if a great majority of artworks are artifacts, there cannot be some artworks which are not. Nevertheless, both here and in his later discussion Dickie takes the artifactuality of art for granted, and most other authors tend to agree with this claim (Yanal 1998: 2).

Secondly, it is only some *aspects* of the artifact in virtue of which it can acquire the status of a candidate for appreciation. Dickie explains that he is ‘using the expression "aesthetic aspects of a work of art" to mean "aspects of a work of art which belong to the aesthetic object of the work" which in turn is equivalent in meaning to "the aspects of a work of art which belong to the object of criticism and/or appreciation"’ (Dickie 1974: 156).\(^3\) Examples of such aspects are: the shade of blue used by an artist in depicting the sky, the meaning of a poetic line, or the concealed (invisible) wires used to ‘fly’ Peter Pan above the theatrical stage. Examples of aspects of a work of art which do not belong to the aesthetic object of this work are: the colour of the back of the painting, the type of font

\(^2\)It partially follows from Dickie’s discussion of the classificatory and evaluative meanings of ‘artwork’. While the term can be used in a evaluative or derivative sense to describe natural objects just as well as artifacts, the primary sense of the term, which is the sense defined by the IT, can only be sensibly applied to man-made objects, i.e. artifacts (Dickie 1974: 25-6).

\(^3\)It is somewhat unclear to me why Dickie talks about aesthetic aspects, since his theory specifically stresses that art need not be aesthetic. I mention this here to provide a full account of Dickie’s views.
used to print a poetic line, or the actions of the property man in traditional Chinese theatre. Examples show that the perceptibility of those aspects is irrelevant to them belonging to the object of appreciation. Knowledgeable members of the artworld realise which of the aspects are to be object of their appreciation or criticism, however, there are no explicit rules governing discriminating relevant and irrelevant aspects. Deciding which aspects are to be appreciated is instead a matter of convention.

(Omitting this point is perhaps the reason why the indistinguishable objects argument seemed suspicious to Wieand (1994), who argued that it is in fact impossible to make sense of what it means to be indistinguishable, which in turn calls the whole argument into question. While it might indeed be difficult to establish the indistinguishability of two soup cans one of which is selected by an artist, it is less difficult if those cans are to be indistinguishable only with respect to all those aspects which are relevant to appreciation. Moreover, Wieand does not take into account Dickie’s reflections on artifactuality of found art – it is not the soup can that has been chosen by an artist that is to be distinguished from other soup cans, or the gesture of presenting it – what matters is the complex artefact soup-can-as-used-by-an-artist, which is perceptually indistinguishable with respects to all its relevant aspects from a mere soup can. Thus while it might be the case that one cannot make sense of the argument if ‘indistinguishable’ is understood in terms of Leibniz’s Law, or what Wieand calls strong or weak undistinguishability, the institutionalist may simply say that this is not what is required.)

Thirdly, artifacts become artworks because a certain status is conferred onto them. Dickie argues that the conferral of status in art is similar to that of other social institutions – just as the king’s conferring of knighthood on a man, or a priest’s conferring the status of a married couple onto two persons, it does not involve any physical or perceptible changes being inflicted on the object(s) (ibid.: 34). Importantly, the conferring of the status of art need not involve any formal ceremonies or official societies – instead it can be done informally, being similar to e.g. acquiring a status of a wise man or a village idiot (ibid.)
Although there are customary, formalised and perceptible ways of conferring the art-status, if even just giving a title to one’s creation, they are not strictly required (Dickie 1974: 39). Further, the status can be conferred on natural objects, thus changing them into artifacts (ibid: 45) (in fact the act of conferring the status is the minimum the artist has to do to make an object his artwork, according to Dickie), and lastly, the status can be conferred wrongly – while one cannot make a mistake in conferring it, one can err by conferring it, e.g. were the object to find no appreciation in a wider public (i.e. be found unworthy), the person conferring the status would lose face. (ibid.: 50)

Fourthly, the status conferred is that of being a candidate for appreciation. This probably is the most important element of Dickie’s definition – what makes an object an artwork is not any specific qualities of this object, or even its history or function, but purely the fact that some people found it to be an adequate object of appreciation. The notion is surprisingly nonrestrictive – practically anything can become an object of appreciation and, importantly, no special kind of aesthetic appreciation needs to be involved. In fact, the notion of appreciation is used according to a most commonplace meaning – it is just the same as finding something worthy or valuable (ibid.: 40-1), or perhaps fully understanding it (Dickie 1974: 108; cf. Bartel 1979: 48-50). While some other theories assume the existence of a special aesthetic appreciation, Dickie explicitly states that it is ‘the institutional structure in which the art object is embedded, not different kinds of appreciation, [that] makes the difference between the appreciation of art and the appreciation of nonart’ (Dickie 1974: 41). Further, as can be inferred from the above discussion of status conferral, possessing the status can often be independent from any visible characteristics – while one

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4 Some authors disagree with Dickie on this point and think that some things, even commonly thought to be artworks, cannot in fact be appreciated (see: T. Cohen 1973: 78; Dickie 1974: 42) – I agree with Dickie that most such criticisms follow from a misunderstanding of his views and will not discuss them (Dickie 1997: 80ff).

5 An argument which indirectly establishes this claim is found in (Dickie 1964) – although it is aesthetic attitude which is discussed there, it leads to a conclusion that approaching artworks does not need any special kind of attitude, attention, and thus also appreciation.
usually knows that the object which hangs on a gallery wall is presented as a candidate for appreciation, not all artworks need to be hanged on gallery walls.\footnote{In fact, Dickie writes that for that reason one can sometimes not know whether an object one is presented with is an artwork or not (Dickie\citeyear{1974} 37).}

Finally, the people who confer the status of a candidate for appreciation, as well as those who do the appreciating, are acting on behalf of a social institution, the *artworld*. Dickie’s understanding of the artworld differs somewhat from Danto’s. Most importantly, the artworld is not composed of the people who do art, or those who present it, or artworks, or galleries, or any physical objects, etc. Instead it is a certain *established social practice*, a way in which these people act by assuming the roles and taking part in art-making, art-presenting, etc. (ibid.: 31). Moreover, it is an *informal* practice and it has an only loosely organised ‘core personnel’, called the ‘presentation group’, of people who assume the roles without which the artworld could not exist – the roles of artists who create artifacts-to-be-appreciated, presenters who make them available for appreciation, and ‘goers’ who do the appreciating (note that many roles can easily be performed by the same person). While there are many other members of the artworld, like critics, historians, philosophers, etc., their roles are merely derivative and unessential to the artworld’s existence. (ibid.: 35-6)

All the people who participate in the artworld are self-appointed, i.e. if they wish to be a part of the artistic practice, they thereby become a part of it – which means that anyone can do and evaluate art (Dickie\citeyear{1997} 14).

Although Dickie does not stress it as explicitly in *Art and the Aesthetic* as he does in his later theory, already here he speaks of the artworld as divided into several *artworld systems*, such as painting, theatre, literature, music, etc., as well as new subsystems which can be added within a system, and then develop into full-blown systems (Dickie\citeyear{1974} 33). This division is introduced to account for the fact that the social practices the artworld members are involved in are very different in cases of different arts – e.g. there are different conventions related to creating and appreciating theatre and paintings. However, they are
still similar in one main respect – the 'central feature all of the [artwork] systems have in
common is that each is a framework for the presenting of particular works of art.’ (Dickie
1974: 31)

Two other elements of Dickie’s early theory are worth mentioning here. One is the
explicitly admitted historicity of the artworld – the institution has its origins in ancient
religion and other institutions, and continued to exist (perhaps with some breaks) since
then (ibid.: 30). This allows for avoiding the problem of where did art (and the artworld)
come from, or what was there when there was still no artworld, as it is acceptable that
the artworld evolved from other social institutions and as such is not required to have a
clearly marked beginning. Additionally, it provides us with reasons to account for why in
certain periods of time some objects were treated as art while in others they were not –
because the artworld changes historically, so does art. However, as Stephen Davies pointed
out (1991: 94), the treatment of art history in IT is surprisingly limited – these issues will
be discussed in the next chapter, and while it is not obvious that Dickie himself would like
to follow my view, his early theory is at least compatible with the part of it which involves
the artworld’s historicity.

The second element worth mentioning here is Dickie’s requirement for the artist (or
whoever presents an artifact to the artworld) to intend to create an artwork (or an object
of appreciation).\footnote{This is best spelt out in The Art Circle: A Theory of Art: ‘It may be wise at this juncture to point out
the obvious fact that creating art is an intentional activity: accidents, fruitful or not, may occur within
the creative process, but the overall activity is not accidental’ (Dickie 1997: 71).} This qualification is supposed to exclude the possibility of creating an
artwork ‘by accident’, or unintentionally. I find this requirement rather odd, considering
that artist’s intentions are completely irrelevant to her creation’s status, according to the
definition. A more extended discussion will follow in section 2.2.2.
Dickie’s later theory

Criticism of the early theory, especially by Danto (1974) and Beardsley (1982), invited some substantial changes in the Institutional Theory. Most of the changes, however, are made to the partially misleading way in which the old IT was formulated, thus making it immune to some obvious objections without changing its essence.

Danto pointed out that even though Dickie explicitly denies that his definition requires any specifically aesthetic appreciation, he implicitly assumes some sort of special kind of appreciation in his explanation of the theory and examples, by talking about appreciating ‘the qualities of the thing’. Thus the later version of IT avoids calling for appreciation at all, speaking instead only about presentation, in this way removing the seemingly aesthetic approach.

The objection presented by Beardsley exposed the fact that while on one hand Dickie holds that the artwork is a very loosely and informally arranged institution, on the other he speaks about practices which seem very formal – conferring status and acting on behalf of. Additionally, other authors charged the same notions with being too vague to be informative (Bartel 1979: 49). To avoid these problems, the new IT abandons the quasi-formal notions, instead calling upon less legal-sounding ‘creating an artifact of a kind to be presented’, etc.

The new Institutional Theory provides us with the following five-step definition:

I) An artist is a person who participates with understanding in the making of a work of art.

II) A work of art is an artifact of a kind created to be presented to an artworld public.

III) A public is a set of persons the members of which are prepared in some degree to understand an object which is presented to them.

IV) The artworld is the totality of all artworld systems.
V) An artworld system is a framework for the presentation of a work of art by an artist to an artworld public. (Dickie 1997: 80-2)

Let me briefly review elements of this definition. Firstly, artworks are *made by artists*. While this already may seem tautological, Dickie claims that in the context of the artworld anyone can be an artist – and thus it is not the artist who defines what is art, but the fact that one created something considered art makes one an artist (ibid.: 14). There are certain limitations to this democratic category. The artist has to participate in the creation of an artwork with understanding – this clause seems to successfully replace the assumed intentionality of the early definition. Rather than talking about the artist’s intentions, Dickie excludes the possibility of creating artworks ‘by accident’ or outside the context of the artworld by noting that the creator of the work has to realise what he is doing. While it may be equally difficult to tell whether one realises what one is doing as it is to determine one’s intentions, in this situation the problem is at least limited, because we can simply say that artworks created ‘with understanding’ are those created by a person who has an appropriate cultural competence (I will expand on this in sections 2.2.1 and 2.2.5). Thus it is easy to exclude such ‘creators’ as chimpanzees (who can paint, but since they cannot understand the concept of painting, they do not create art) or the producers of paint and canvass, cleaners in the theatre, etc. (who participate in the creation of an artwork, but do it from the outside of the artworld).

Secondly, artworks are artifacts. While in the early theory Dickie claimed that artifactuality is *conferred* on objects, the late theory drops this notion, speaking instead of artifacts as things which need to be *made* in some way (ibid.: 44-46). While the case is obvious with traditional art, the difficulty arises with the examples of ready-mades and found art. Here the making is limited to *using as an artistic medium*, e.g. a driftwood can become an artwork if it is ‘picked up by someone who is familiar with the world of art and taken home and hung on a wall, unaltered, with the intention to display its characteristics as the characteristics of a painting are displayed’ (ibid.: 45). In this way the found object
becomes a more complex object – the-driftwood-used-as-an-artistic-medium – and as such is no longer a natural object, but an artifact. (Quite similarly a child can pick up a stick and use it to hit other children, thereby without altering the stick making it into a weapon.) This is, however, a minimal requirement without which an object cannot become an artifact, and thereby cannot be art. Still, other than quoting the tradition of art involving artisanship and working in a medium, and the general consensus on this point, Dickie gives no knockdown argument to support the artifactuality requirement (ibid.: 60-62).

Thirdly, artworks are artifacts of the kind to be presented to an artworld public. It is hardly a very defined kind, yet what is marked here is the important character of artworks which are normally created to be displayed, shown or presented, and not just to anybody, but to an artworld public. It is not at the same time necessary that a particular object actually is presented, it is enough that it is of the same kind as other objects which normally are. There is an important shift made here in comparison with the earlier definition – it is no longer important that an artwork is a candidate for appreciation, and it is not the conferral of status that places the object in the institutional context, but its presentation.

Fourthly, the public is a set of persons who possess certain cultural or artistic competence needed to understand a work presented to them. What follows is that being an object of the kind to be presented to the public means being an object of the kind which a set of persons possessing a given cultural or artistic competence can understand.

Finally, the definitions of the artworld and artworld systems are similar to those used by the early theory. Artworld systems are further characterised as ‘frameworks’ for presentation – it seems that this makes them refer less to particular disciplines of art (music, sculpture, performance etc.) and more to specific cultural practices or perhaps elements of the cultural competence concerning those practices (e.g. the practice of painting and common convictions about what painting is or should be like, what is typical in painting, what is desirable, or even that paintings are normally displayed on walls not ceilings). It is hard, however, to say whether the understanding of this term indeed changed – it simply
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seems that only in the late theory has it been defined in enough detail; yet the early theory might have implicitly accepted its late version as well.

1.1.1 Advantages of the institutional theory

I believe that the main advantage of the institutional theory (IT) is so simple that it is often overlooked by the commentators. Even Dickie never really spends enough time stressing just how important this element is, often only mentioning it in discussion with other definitions. In one place he says: ‘What the traditional theories of art and their definitions tell us about art qua art is false. What the institutional theory tells us about art qua art is something that we already know and have known from an early age, although actually formulating this knowledge is not easy’. (Dickie 2000: 103) Similar remarks can be found in other places, e.g. in the discussion of the Weitz and Ziff conception: ‘why should we think that the new conception of art has given an accurate account of our conception of art?’ (Dickie 1997: 35, my emphasis); other authors share the intuition that whoever asks ‘what is art?’ actually already implicitly knows what it is (e.g. Kennic 1958: 320; Diey 1973: 109). The two presuppositions of the late theory also point to it, though not entirely directly: ‘...a philosopher of art ought to take account of developments in the artworld’ and ‘the traditional theorists of art were right in the way they conceived of the domain of objects which they theorised about [...i.e.] right in thinking that paintings, poems, plays, and the like are the things with which they should be concerned.’ (Dickie 1997: 13)

The institutional theory has the immense advantage of explaining how we actually commonly do recognise objects as artworks, it strives to build a definition from an actual artistic practice by making explicit what is implicitly obvious for all members of the modern artworld, in this way respecting David Davies’ pragmatic constraint (D. Davies 2004). It

\footnote{It seems that actually caring about what happens in the world is finally becoming more popular among philosophers, see e.g. (Carroll 2009: 3), and the recent development of experimental aesthetics seems to confirm this trend.}
formulates the common pre-scientific convictions in theoretical language. In a way, IT is just a complex explication of the famous quotes from Andy Warhol and Kurt Schwitters – ‘Art is anything you can get away with’ and ‘everything the artist spits out is art’, and indeed the universal: ‘art is whatever the artist says it is’. In fact, it expands the last claim by pointing out that art often is what curators or art gallery owners say. While one can mourn over the fact that after dadaism ‘anything goes’ in art, it is a fact that it does. Thus IT perfectly fulfills what is required of a good theory of social phenomena: it reconstructs actual practices and formulates in scientific language what is pre-scientifically commonly known (in philosophy the idea can be traced at least to Carnap, who said that the point of science is formulating in theoretical language what is known in object-language; or more recently, Putnam who saw himself ‘as describing, and, to a certain extent, reconstructing, the [linguistic] practices’, (Putnam 1992: 349)). Given that Dickie explicitly states that he did not attempt a ‘real definition’, seeking rather for ‘relational characteristics of art that situate it within human culture’ (Dickie 2000: 103), I believe it is justified to relate his theory to those found in social sciences and judge it by the same criteria.

Another similarly important advantage of IT lies in the fact that it realises and can account for the impressive arbitrariness of the artistic practice. It defines the ‘artworld’ as ‘the totality of all artworld systems’, a collection which ‘has been drawn together over time in a somewhat arbitrary way’ (ibid.: 100). Dickie asks why are such systems as literature, painting and music included in the artworld, while e.g. dog shows are not? While it might be that a particular dog show has all properties required of an artwork according to other (traditional) theories, it is not art, and there is no better explanation of this fact than: because our history and culture are such and not different; basically because ‘it has turned out that way’ (ibid.: 100). It is just natural that cultural constructions and social practices are somewhat arbitrary, and because people who are subject to these are part of the IT

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Dickie himself writes: ‘The institutional theory of art may sound like saying, "A work of art is an object of which someone has said, ‘I christen this object a work of art." And it is rather like that, although this does not mean that the conferring of the status of art is a simple matter’ (Dickie 1974: 49).
definition of art, what is art is defined in a somewhat arbitrary way. Again, while one might regret such relativism, it is just a fact that many social practices which exhibit all the virtues and characteristics of art (e.g. jewelry making, furniture crafting, computer game design) are often not treated as art.

On the other hand, it happens sometimes that members of the artworld do confer status on objects in a similarly arbitrary way – while most artworks have been placed in the galleries because they have some art-relevant properties, it is perfectly possible that an object may gain the status of art in a rather accidental way. As Dickie wrote, the status may be conferred wrongly, i.e. for reasons or with a result which will find no acceptance with a wider public, but while the person conferring the status may in such a case lose face, the object does become an artwork nevertheless (Dickie 1974: 50). For example, the immediate reason why sketches of a famous painter gain the status of art (rather than just an exercise) may not be their artistic value, but the fact that the artist’s widow ran out of money and decided to earn some by presenting them to the artworld. A piece may gain art-status because its author’s uncle is a renowned critic who, as a favour, wrote a positive review; one may receive a role in a movie (and thereby become an artist and co-author an artwork) because one bribes the director; a random object may be placed in a gallery by someone who merely wants to mock the permissiveness of modern art, and yet be treated as an artwork (Duchamp’s Fountain could actually be one), etc. In short, there is a myriad of ways in which something can become an artwork which can be seen as completely arbitrary and unjustified, yet they still do in fact work.\textsuperscript{10}

\textsuperscript{10} I will review the importance of arbitrary decisions for a theory in section 2.3.
1.1.2 Objections to the institutional theory

There are no institutions

One misguided yet recurring argument against IT is that the institutions it assumes are nowhere to be seen. Wollheim in his *Painting as art* (1987: 15) ridicules Dickie’s theory, asking where are the representatives of the artworld nominated, what records are kept of their conferrals of the status of candidate for appreciation, etc. It seems thus that IT can be easily falsified – the things it assumes just do not exist.

In reply, Dickie simply states that this is a misinterpretation of his view, which never assumed the existence of any *formal* institutions. Such a ‘robust view’ is obviously false (Dickie [1993, 2000: 95]). Instead, IT requires only *informal* institutions to exist – there are no art-officers needed to confirm that a certain artifact is an artwork, as similarly there are no fashion-officers needed to settle whether someone is well-dressed. The only people who need to be included in an informal institution are the creators of the artifacts presented to the public, and the public (this fact is better elucidated by the later formulation of IT). Dickie describes his idea of the artworld not as ‘a formally organised body, perhaps of a kind which has meetings and requires a quorum to do business . . . [but as] the broad, informal cultural practice’ (Dickie [1997: 9; cf. Dickie [1969: 254]). In fact, not only does the artworld not have to be organised – it does not even have to be particularly unified when it comes to deciding what is art and what is not. It is not the ‘artworld acting as a whole which makes art . . . [but] individual persons who typically make works of art or . . . groups of persons who make art’ (Dickie [1997: 9].

A follow-up objection might be that the informality of the artworld introduces an unbearable vagueness to the definition – it is simply very hard to tell whether any given person is entitled to present artifacts to the artworld public (cf. S. Davies [1991: 84-90]). While Dickie seems happy to admit that anybody who consciously thinks he is an artworld member indeed is one and thereby has the power to present his works in any institutionally
accepted way (Dickie 1974: 36), this issue does call for more discussion, which will follow
in section 2.3. For now, however, let me note that there are a number of institutions
which have no formal structure whatsoever, and yet do not seem to invite similar critique
– determining what is fashionable, for instance.

History and the artworld

Some authors have claimed that with all its reliance on social institutions which unavoid-
ably change over time, IT is surprisingly ahistorical. Dickie never discusses the time-
relativity of the artworld – and it seems more than likely that who can be an artist, what
types of actions count as conferring status, who is authorised to confer the status, etc., can
vary depending on temporal context (S. Davies 1991: 94). Specifically, the issue of who is
authorised to confer the status of a candidate for appreciation (or present the work) can
and does change over time – e.g. it was once impossible for a person who had not yet
established their name as an artist by creating conservative works to confer the status on
a very innovative one, while now it might well be.\footnote{This is largely related to the
problem of authority and democracy vs. elitism discussed by Davies – I will not follow it
here, as I essentially agree with the possible solution he mentions which is based on
Danto’s end-of-art claims; while it is a contingent fact that anyone has the authority to con-
er art status, it is true of our times. I will expand on this issue in sections 2.2.4 and 4.7.}

It is again slightly unfair to charge Dickie with this objection, as he specifically stated
that his theory is applicable to modern Western understanding of art only (Dickie 1969:
254) – thus his view on the artworld is actually time-relative, but only to our times. Still,
I agree with Davies that in this way IT is actually more narrow a theory than it could
be and that with little effort an appropriate temporal indexing could make it capable of
defining art at other times and perhaps in other contexts as well. In the context of my
own synthesis based on IT this seems like a worthy aim and I will expand on it in section
2.2.3.
Private art

A more complex objection, brought forward by Jerrold Levinson, is that IT does not allow for the existence of so called 'private art' – artworks created by people who have no relation to any institution of the artworld. He imagines a person who lives in a remote place, living ‘in perfect mutual oblivion’ with the artworld. However, even though the artworld is not present, it seems possible that this person could create an artwork. Levinson claims that IT could not account for such a case, and further that ‘the institutional theory comes close to conflating art and self-conscious art, art and socially situated art, art and declared art’ (Levinson 1979: 233).

There are two important elements of this criticism. First, it could be held that IT does not allow for an artifact to become an artwork if it is known only to the creator, i.e. without the acceptance of the artworld (a larger amount of people). Dickie claims that this objection is just completely misguided. Indeed, it is hard not to agree with his complaints about his texts not being read carefully enough (see his 2000: 93ff), for even the earlier forms of his first definition already mentioned and accepted such a possibility – because ‘artist’, ‘presenter’ and ‘public’ are merely social roles, it is perfectly possible that all those roles are assumed by the same person, i.e. it is enough that one person, the author, acting on behalf of the artworld, declares his creation an artwork, for it to have this status:

A number of persons are required to make up the social institution of the artworld, but only one person is required to act on behalf of or as agent of the artworld and confer the status of candidate for appreciation. Many works of art are never seen by anyone but the persons who create them, but they are still works of art (Dickie 1971: 103).

12 A very similar objection has been raised by Beardsley (Beardsley 1982a).
13 Dickie mentioned this already in ‘Defining art’: ‘many works of art never reach museum walls and some are never seen by anyone but the artist himself’ (Dickie 1969: 254), and confirmed this point later: ‘many works of art are seen only by one person – the one who creates them – but they are still art. The status in question may be acquired by a single person’s acting on behalf of the artworld and treating an artifact as a candidate for appreciation’ (Dickie 1974: 38); another mention is found in the above-mentioned
It would seem thus that Levinson’s objection simply misinterprets the theory. However, there is a second element to it which may be more successful – what the example shows is not only that artworks can be made without the acceptance of a wider public of the artworld, but also that the artist himself does not need to be aware of the very existence of the artworld, or other people who are its members. If this is so, then it seems quite implausible that he can act on its behalf or as its agent (however informally those notions are understood), and thus that he could create anything of the type to be presented to the artworld public, or confer the status of a candidate for appreciation. Levinson notes that the only solution from this impasse is to admit that one person can constitute the institution, or that the creator can constitute a whole artworld – which would make the definition of ‘the artworld’ ‘trivial and otiose’ (Levinson 1979: 233).

It is worth enquiring if this would really be so. The simplest softening-up answer available to Dickie would be: *tu quoque* (see: Oppy 1992: 155 for a similar argument). It indeed seems odd to accept that one person only can constitute an artworld and as a representative of himself present his own creation to himself – and through this make it art. However, is it not equally odd to accept with Levinson’s historical definition that an object can acquire the status because one person intends that he himself would regard it in the same way as he or others regard previous works of art (see p. 47)? It is true that the case of private art makes it seem trivial, because just about anybody can constitute an artworld and make just about anything art – but on Levinson’s account just about anybody can make just about anything into art by intending it to be perceived in the relevant art-historical context. It could be argued on behalf of Levinson that a lone artist,

discussion with Wollheim, cf. (Dickie 2000: 95); later in the same article Dickie explicitly writes that his new definition also ‘leaves open the possibility that artworks can be created that are never presented to anyone, for the definition requires only that an artwork be a kind of thing to be presented. I have phrased the definition in this way to allow for the untold artworks that have been created but which for one reason or another have not reached any artworld public’ (ibid. 99).

14Note that even though it seems that being regarded implies acceptance of more than one person, Levinson himself is at pains to show that it is enough for an item to be intended for a certain regard, even if it is not actually so regarded.
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even though his work will never be seen by anyone, can nevertheless intend it to be treated as former artworks by everybody, thus assuming a kind of potential audience. However, the same can be said in defense of IT: the lone artist can firmly believe that even though at the moment he is the only member of his artworld, were he to meet other people and present his work to them, they would definitely bestow their appreciation upon it – i.e. there is potential appreciation by potential other members of his artworld, even if none are actually there to appreciate it. The later theory can account for this possibility even better – it does not require the artist to actually present anything to the artworld public, just to create something of a kind to be presented (Dickie 1997: 65).

However, it still seems that Dickie’s problem is of a different kind from Levinson’s. The artworld is a certain social construct which requires the artist to know social views on what the kinds of things to be presented actually are. But on Levinson’s view an artist can be perfectly oblivious to the social context in which other art is done; he can create art purely by (accidentally) intending his work to be regarded in a way in which (unknown to him) other people regarded previous art. Thus it seems that on Dickie’s view the lone artist can be detached from society, but not completely – he can withdraw from contact with the institution, but he needs to ‘carry [the institution] with him as Robinson Crusoe carried his Englishness’ (ibid.: 50).

While the objection stands, it needs to be accurately evaluated. Is it at all important or even appropriate to allow for such completely detached private art? In places Dickie quite explicitly states that he is completely happy admitting that without at least a minimal social context there cannot be art, i.e. that the artist must have at least some basic grasp of what are the kinds of things to be presented (or what people regard as art, or what they appreciate, etc.) (ibid.: 54-55). Moreover, he plainly states that there are basically no completely detached artists, i.e. that his view is simply empirically correct. I tend to agree

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15Dickie points towards this solution directly, see: (Dickie 1974: 43). It is naturally worth asking now on what basis can the author think that, which would lead us to Wollheim’s objection discussed below. I will expand on this issue in section 2.2.6.
with this opinion and will discuss it in more detail in chapter 2. For now I shall merely mention that Levinson’s insistence on his theory being able to account for such detached art actually invited some rather serious criticism (Currie 1993), and might in fact cause more trouble than it avoids.\footnote{It is indeed worth asking whether the whole venture does not steer the classification too close to the traditional ontological or metaphysical solutions. ‘I know no one will ever see it and it has no connection to anything else, but is it actually art?’ for some is just an embarrassingly silly question (Cf. Csikszentmihalyi 1999: 321). I tend to agree with such views and will continue to deal with real issues, not imagined problems of modern scholasticism.}

To sum up, the problem of private art shows Dickie’s theory to entail that objects created in complete detachment from the artworld cannot be artworks. Whether this is really a drawback is, however, questionable – every theory excludes some objects from being art, and it is not obvious that private art should not be excluded. This issue will be examined in greater detail in section 3.1.

**Ignoring the artist**

Another problem brought up by Levinson concerns the fact that on Dickie’s view it is not important what the maker of the artwork-to-be intended, that is, whether she wanted it to be art or not – it is only the institution that decides on its status (Levinson 1979: 233). Perhaps because of such criticisms, in the later definition Dickie specifically states that what makes an artwork is primarily the artist’s act of presenting it to the artworld, presumably with the very intention that it be treated as an artwork (or a candidate for appreciation). However, because my own theory will follow Levinson’s interpretation (be it misguided about what Dickie really meant or not), I will discuss it from a slightly different angle.

The simplest and yet most successful thing an institutional theorist can do is to bite the bullet. It is simply true, one could say, that in some cases the artworld does not take artists’ will or intentions into account when deciding whether the artifacts they produced are art or not. I wish to turn this objection into an advantage of IT, very much in relation to the fact
that it can account for the arbitrariness of the artistic social practice. It just is the case that sometimes the artwork misinterprets or takes leave to liberally interpret the intentions of authors – an example might be the treatment of anti-art, which was intended to challenge the institution, but was eventually made part of it. Similarly, sketches and notebooks of various artists, neither intended for presentation nor presented by their authors, have started appearing in galleries since the artworld members decided they should. Moreover, in other cases the institution ignores what the artist explicitly desired – most famously Kafka wanted all his works to be burned unpublished and never wished to present them to anyone (see section 1.2.2). The history of art is full of authors who did not want certain of their works, especially early ones, to be released or treated as art, or who, as with Tolstoy, at some point changed their mind and insisted that most of their œuvre is not art at all. Despite this, such works are in fact treated as artworks, regardless of their creators’ will or intentions. Some even explicitly protest against the artworld’s disregard for what the artists want; Milan Kundera, for instance, devoted his Testaments Betrayed to this issue. Ultimately, I think that there is simply an overwhelming amount of evidence in the history of art to show that stressing the decisions of the artworld above the artist’s intentions is not a problem for the theory, but an accurate description of actual social practices.

Circularity and inclusiveness

Another recurring objection concerns IT’s circularity. Especially the later formulation makes it obvious that the terms used in the definition are inter-defined, i.e. the fifth step of the five-step definition refers back to notions defined in the preceding steps. Similar circularities are virtually always taken as a logical fault in a theory and constitute a good reason to discard it as uninformative.

However, Dickie claims that the circularity of his definition is not vicious, because the circle is wide enough to ensure informativeness. To defend this position he gives examples of other ‘inflected concepts’, as he calls them, which do not raise objections and prove
that some circular definitions not only can be informative, but actually are widely and successfully used – as in the cases of the terms *law*, *legislative*, *executive* and *judiciary* (Dickie [1997] 84). Indeed, all dictionaries are closed systems of interdefined terms. The main point of defence, however, lies in explaining how the art-relevant terms are acquired. We never actually, Dickie claims, learn about art from theories or definitions – instead we learn about it implicitly in childhood. We understand art similarly to how we understand how to address our superiors, how to behave in a church, how to tell a word from a random sound, etc. That is, we acquire a certain cultural competence in the area of artistic practice, similarly to how we acquire competence in religious or linguistic practice, or simple courtesy. Now, because we ‘grow up in art’ (the general idea seems akin to social-interactionist theories of language acquisition) we learn the (pre-theoretical) meanings of all the terms of the definition simultaneously, ‘and this is no accident for the various artwork elements do not exist independently of one another’ (ibid.: 83).

While I am inclined to agree with Dickie that circularity in the case of his definition is not fatal, I believe that it invites certain other problems. In particular, it seems that the lack of external references can lead to the definition being too inclusive, i.e. unable to tell art from clear cases of non-art. Consider this example: an artist invites guests to his gallery, and after the exposition he offers them a dinner he prepared himself, mentioning how good it is and then asking how they liked it or what they thought of it?[^17] While IT copes perfectly in establishing that the artist’s paintings are thereby artworks, it seems unable to explain why the dinner is not. It is also made by an artist, it is certainly a thing to be presented, it is presented to an artworld public in an artworld context, and indeed presented as a candidate for appreciation. Defining some of the terms in a way that would break the circle could solve the problem (e.g. some of the artist’s activities could not lead to art-making, or certain ways of presentation could not be the right ways, or the

[^17]: A similar objection has been raised by Scholz (1994: 314).
appreciation could be of a wrong kind, etc.), but this would require introducing additional elements to the definition.

Dickie briefly discusses this issue, implying that it does not pose a serious threat to his theory, but even so his solution seems inadequate. He argues that such dinners (or in his example, playbills) are not art because they are ‘parasitic or secondary to works of art’ (ibid.: 81) – they are dependent on artworks. The solution is simple – ‘the word "artifact" in the definition should be understood to be referring to artifacts of the primary kind’ (Dickie 1997: 81; Cf. Dickie 2000: 99). However, such a stipulation seems simply too crude, and while it solves the problem of over-inclusiveness it takes the theory to the opposite pole, making it too exclusive. Would such a stipulation not mean that Picasso’s *Ménines d’après Velasquez* is not an artwork? Clearly it is parasitic on Velasquez’s *les Ménines* – it is a cubist ‘remake’ that could not exist (at least not with all its contextual properties) if the original did not exist (Fig. 1.2). Dickie’s stipulation, then, would require some qualification determining what kind of secondary artifacts are to count as art, and this once again seems to require breaking the circle of ‘inflected concepts’.

An easier solution to this problem is available to Dickie, and using it would make the notions of primary and secondary kinds of artifacts obsolete. It can be simply stipulated that while painting and theatre are artwork systems, dinners and playbills are not, and thus should not be taken into account when discussing art. Note that no one has to actually stipulate this – it simply, to paraphrase Dickie, historically ‘turned out’ that in our culture dinners and playbills are not artwork systems, while painting is. There is no further explanation needed here – it is just a crude and arbitrary fact, and because the artworld is just a cultural construction such things simply ‘come about as a result of people’s behaviour over time’ (Dickie 2000: 100; though some authors are, naturally, quite unhappy with such arbitrary solutions, e.g. Walton 1977: 98). Thus the correct answer to ‘why dinners (or, using Dickie’s example, dog shows) are not art even though they involve
(a) Diego Rodríguez de Silva y Velázquez, *Las Meninas*, 1656, Oil on canvas, Museo del Prado, Madrid
(b) Pablo Picasso, *Las Meninas*, 1957, Oil on canvas, Museu Picasso, Barcelona

Figure 1.2: *Las Meninas* - Velázquez and Picasso

artifacts, presentation, public, etc.’ is ‘because our culture does not treat dinners and dog shows as artworld systems’.

There are some obvious objections to this solution. Firstly, it seems that the cases of dinners or dog shows are still different from the playbills – while dining and dog shows are separate social practices, the bills are given to the same public at the same time as theatre performances and thus are not really a separate (non-artworld) system. However, even though playbills tend to be a part of theatre-going practice, they are not an essential element of it, separate in a way in that paintings which are ‘remakes’ of other paintings are not. Bills are not normally presented to the audience for appreciation, and even if in some cases they are, they are presented and are supposed to be appreciated in a different way (e.g. an artistic Art Nouveau bill can be appreciated, but not in the same way as the play itself – possibly they can belong to the same artworld system as prints or posters, but definitely
not theatrical plays). Remakes of paintings, on the other hand, are to be appreciated in exactly the same way as any other paintings. Moreover, it seems that there can be theatre with no bills and bills with no theatre, while there cannot be remakes of paintings without the paintings which they remake. Whereas the theatre-bill connection is a contingent one, the original-remake is necessary, and this seems to be a good enough reason to treat the latter and not the former as elements of the same social practice. To make this point even more convincing, let me pose the following dilemma: either we treat the plays and the playbills as separate systems, or we agree that we cannot distinguish between painting and sculpture just because both kinds of artifacts tend to stand in the same galleries, or that we cannot tell a work of architecture from music just because sometimes we listen to music while looking at architecture.

It is the second objection which will require me to abandon defending IT and move towards transforming it. In modern art it seems that such divisions are quite artificial – an artist can easily perform the same action of inviting the public to a dinner, and claim that the dinner indeed is an artwork, in which case it would not be true that dining is not an artworld system. It seems that Dickie’s definition cannot capture the difference between a simple dinner and the same dinner presented to the same people as a work of art. In solving this problem it is tempting to simply refer to the notion of intentionality – what seems to make the dinner an artwork in one case and not the other is the fact that only in one case does the artist intend for it to be an artwork. However, note that in both cases the artist can present the dinner as a candidate for appreciation (he even asks how the guests liked it!), and by the definition this alone should make them both art. I believe that this objection might well be unsolvable within Dickie’s theory, and in the view that I develop in the next chapter I shall attempt to answer it by modifying the definition (the issue will be further discussed in section 4.2).
Wollheim’s dilemma

Finally, there are two main objections to IT which prompted me to develop the synthetic view I present below. The first is an objection raised by Richard Wollheim in his *Painting as art* and *Art and its Objects*. Wollheim poses a dilemma for the institutional theory: either the representatives of the artworld have reasons for deciding whether a certain artifact is an artwork, or they do not (1980: 157-166; 1987: 13-16). If they do, a correct theory of art should include them and explain arthood in terms of those reasons. But were the reasons which justify arthood conferral made salient, they by themselves would constitute a definition of art, and no institutional backing would be required to establish the status of particular artefacts. On the other hand, if the decisions of the artworld representatives are not guided by reasons, we would be justified in doubting their judgement and their authority to tell people what is art – and so, in denying that the artefacts they pick are actually art. ‘Roughly,’ Wollheim says, ‘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).

There has been some controversy over the meaning of the second horn of the dilemma, and Dickie may be right in saying that it is rather unclear (Dickie 1998: 128). It is perhaps better stated not in Wollheim’s catchphrase, but some paragraphs before: ‘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 of the dilemma according to this other formulation, thus making the alternatives presented to Dickie those of making the institutional theory either obsolete or untrustworthy.

Dickie claimed later that this and multiple other problems had been resolved with his second institutional definition, which states that ‘a work of art is an artefact of a kind created to be presented to an artworld public’ (Dickie 1997: 80, 2000: 94-6). However,
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although it is hard not to agree that his earlier views have been substantially misinterpreted, it is not at all obvious that the definition from The Art Circle: A Theory of Art really resolves Wollheim’s dilemma. Although it does away with the notion of status conferral and specifies that it is the artist(s) who make(s) artworks, it seems that the dilemma could be re-run as follows: either the artists have reasons to present their work to the artworld public, or they do not. On the first horn the institutional theory is still redundant, because were the reasons properly recognised, the work would be art in virtue of satisfying those reasons regardless of whether it as presented or not. On the second horn, while the legitimacy of artists as persons authorised to make art may be more justified than in the case of mere artworld members, it is still unclear why one should trust them in choosing e.g. their novels rather than their shopping lists for presentation.

Although Dickie seemed unperturbed by this objection, most treat it as fatal. The line of argument I adopt in answering it will involve some substantial changes to the Institutional Theory, discussed in detail in section 2.2.6. I agree that the members of the institution do indeed base their decisions on the features and context of the objects they judge, and I further agree that these features should be mentioned by the theory. However, I do not agree that this means mentioning or determining what those features are can render the institutional theory redundant. To sketch the argument to come, I think that although the artworld members have conventional or culturally determined reasons to confer the status, and so that those reasons may explain their decisions, the fact that it is those and not other reasons which are considered when conferring the status is itself dependant on the artworld, because the particular sets of reasons used in particular contexts develop within, and are informed by, artworks. Additionally, I believe that Wollheim was too quick in removing the requirement for the actual act of conferral – I will argue that dropping it means stepping back into the problem raised by artworks indistinguishable from mere things, which stimulated the development of institutional theories in the first place.
Ultimately, this problem is the main reason for developing the cultural definition presented in the next chapter, and a solution to Wollheim’s dilemma, presented in section 2.2.6, is one of the main proposals of this thesis.

Carroll’s objection

The other pressing objection was presented by Noël Carroll (1994: 12), who claims that the institutional theory fails to meet the open concept challenge – instead of telling us what a work of art is it merely says that, whatever a work of art is, it fits into a social context. Thereby, Carroll claims, IT is not a definition at all.

I follow other authors in claiming that it is simply not true that characterising art in terms of its context is insufficient to define it (Cf. Yanal 1998: 4). What is interesting about this objection, however, is that it tries to again turn the discussion back to metaphysics – it assumes that a definition of art should be given in metaphysical rather than contextual terms. I believe that this is a fundamentally misguided approach. Asking: ‘I know that we all think it’s art and treat it as art, but is it really art?’ seems to make about as much sense as asking: ‘I know that we all think that in chess the rook can only move in straight lines, and we play the game as if it does, but how can a rook really move?’ It seems obvious that there is no such thing as the correct rook move outside the social setting in which chess developed, and yet we have no problems defining ‘rook’ – why should it be a problem for ‘art’? Thus my answer to Carroll is: of course, IT (as well as my view) does not provide an answer to the metaphysical question of what art really is, independently of social context, because that would be a silly question to ask.
1.2 Historicism

Jerrold Levinson, who formulated the most widely discussed historical theory of art, speaks of defining art as follows:

\[ \text{Artworkhood is not an intrinsic exhibited property of a thing, but rather a matter of being related in the right way to human activity and thought. \ldots I propose to construe this relation solely in terms of the intention of an independent individual (or individuals) [\ldots which] makes reference (either transparently or opaquely) to the history of art (what art has been)} \]

(Levinson 1979: 232).

The terms italicised by Levinson are crucial to his view – it is the intention of the author of the work, to somehow link it with the work’s history of art is already familiar with, which makes his creation an artwork. This intention is for the work to be regarded-as-a-work-of-art. The definition of art Levinson arrives at is the following:

\[ (I_t) \ x \text{ is an art work at } t \iff x \text{ is an object of which it is true at } t \text{ that some person or persons, having the appropriate proprietary right over } x, \text{ non-passingly [or: seriously] intend(s) (or intended) } x \text{ for regard-as-a-work-of-art, i.e. regard in any way (or ways) in which objects in the extension of ‘art work’ prior to } t \text{ are or were correctly (or standardly) regarded (ibid.: 240).} \]

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18 Cf. for a prospective object to count as art must be for it to be related in some way to those objects that have already been decided or determined. For a thing to be art it must be linked by its creator to the repository of art existing at the time, as opposed to being aligned by him with some abstracted template of required characteristics’ (Levinson 1979: 234).

19 Levinson’s is by no means the only historical account on art - other theories have been offered e.g. by James Carney (1991, 1994) and Noël Carroll (1988, 1994). However, Carroll’s historical narrative view is not a real definition, but merely a way of identifying art which at best provides necessary but not sufficient conditions. Carney’s external historicism, on the other hand, seems to be plagued with multiple problems some of which have been pointed out by Levinson (1989, 1993). The defences against charges of circularity and regress offered by Carney seem rather unconvincing, and might in fact lead his account to losing the status of a real definition.

20 In (Levinson 1989 fn 8) the term ‘seriously’ is used in place of ‘non-passingly’, and I will follow this modification below.
Levinson sums up the characteristic features of his view as: intentionalism, historicism, indexicality and non-institutionality (Levinson 1989: 21-22). Let me follow him in a brief explanation of his definition. Firstly, the core of this approach, which gives it the essential historicity (Levinson 1979: 232), is the claim that an artwork is an object which is intended for regard-as-a-work-of-art. The use of this term in the definition already explains that to regard-x-as-a-work-of-art is to regard or treat x in the same way(s) in which objects previously agreed to be artworks were regarded or treated. Importantly, the definition does not specify a single manner of regard, but admits that the way art is regarded changes over time. The apparent circularity of this definition is avoided by emphasising the historical or temporal element of it – an artwork at t is not defined by the treatment of other artworks of the same time, but by how objects regarded as artworks were treated prior to t, and thus even though the term ‘artwork’ appears both in the explanans and the explanandum, its meaning is different (ibid.: 240). Since justifying the status of artworks by their ancestors cannot go back forever, a historicist stipulates the existence of at least one ur-art, or the first art, from which all art developed (ibid. fn 11 and 13).

Levinson distinguishes several ways in which an artwork can be intended for regard-as-a-work-of-art, to exclude the possibility that the author’s ignorance of the history of art disables him from producing artworks (ibid. 237-8). Thus the first and most common way (already mentioned above) in which intending for regard-as-a-work-of-art can be understood is that the author of the work intends it to be regarded and treated in the same way in which the past artworks of which he is aware were regarded and treated. However, even if the author turned out to be ignorant of the whole of history of art, it is possible that he intends that the object he has created is regarded in a certain way φ such that (unknown to him) φ is actually the way in which artworks created prior to his work were regarded.

The second most important point of the definition is that it is the author’s intention which makes an object an artwork. This is the main element of Levinson’s definition which differentiates it from the institutional theory – it is not the artworld, but the artist himself
who decides whether a given object should be regarded as an artwork or not. By this Levinson claims to have captured the common intuitions about so called private art (ibid.: 233) – it seems possible that someone could create an artwork without having shown it to anybody, or even knowing about the very existence of artists, artworks and artworlds anywhere in the world. While an institutionalist would have to claim that the object created is not an artwork (as it has no connection to the artworld), a historicist can easily allow for such cases, as all that is needed to make an artwork is the author’s intention that the work should be regarded in a way $\phi$.

While the notion of the author’s intentions seems quite vague, Levinson says that there are plausible analyses of it and that the fact that he needs intending-as-a-work-of-art does not ‘make arthood an occult thing’ (Levinson 1989: 23). I strongly disagree with this claim, and will discuss it in section 1.2.2.

The other terms in the definition simply qualify it to exclude certain implausible cases. Thus thirdly, the author is required to be serious in his intent, i.e. he needs to really and decisively mean his creation to be regarded as an artwork. This requirement is designed to exclude the possibility that something might be an artwork just in virtue of some transient or momentary whims the author might have, or mistaken judgements he later corrects (e.g. intending something to be regarded-as-a-work-of-art while creating it, but finding out that it is not good enough after it is finished and resolving otherwise).

Fourthly, Levinson qualifies his definition by speaking about standard or correct ways of regarding-as-a-work-of-art. It might be the case that artworks are held in high esteem for reasons not commonly regarded as related to their ‘arthood’ – to use his example, paintings might become highly valued for the thermal insulation they can provide. Were this the case, the only thing which prevents one from having to, subsequently, admit that a

21 'The idea I want to insist on is not sobriety of character, but rather firmness, stability of intent – i.e., actually meaning it. It is no part of my proposal to exclude joking, whimsical, sardonic, or irreverent works of art – or acts of artmaking' (Levinson 1989 fn 8).
sheet of fiberglass is an artwork (as it will also be valued for what artworks will have been historically valued for) is the fact that the paintings were valued as insulation incorrectly.

Additionally, the ways of regarding should be ‘relatively complete or total’ (Levinson 1989: 24). It is not enough that a given object is intended to be regarded in the same way past artworks have been regarded in just one minute detail (as e.g. traffic lights are intended to be treated ‘with attention to colour’, similarly to impressionist art) - the similarity in manner of regard should be greater.

Fifthly, the intention for regarding-as-a-work-of-art is only legitimate if expressed by a person having appropriate proprietary right over the object which is to be so regarded. As Levinson writes, ‘you cannot ‘artify’ what you do not own . . ., because the other person’s intention, that of the owner, has priority over yours’ (Levinson 1979: 237). This proviso sharply distinguishes Levinson’s view from the institutional theory on which people other than the author or owner of the object do decide whether it should be regarded-as-a-work-of-art or not. This is claimed to be confirmed by our artistic practice – Levinson constructs a hypothetical case in which an ancient Mexican item of unknown purpose is displayed for regard-as-a-work-of-art in a museum, yet when a ‘well-documented descendant of the tribe, armed with full knowledge of its customs and practices’ (and thus presumably holding more appropriate proprietary right over the object than anybody else) appears and claims that the object is not in fact intended for regard-as-a-work-of-art, it is removed from public view (ibid. 237). In this case the object never actually was an artwork, because the institution in which it was displayed had no proprietary right over it and thus no right to intend it for regard-as-a-work-of-art.

If any of those conditions is not met, a given work cannot be classified as an artwork. More importantly, what is really needed is the reference to past artworks present in the author’s creation and intentions: ‘if [the artist] does not do this – if his activity involves no reference whatsoever to the body of art works preceding him – then I think we fail to understand in what sense he is consciously or knowingly producing art’ (ibid. 235).
1.2 Historicism

1.2.1 Advantages of historicism

I take the main advantage of the historical view to be, again, slightly underestimated. While Levinson points it out numerous times, it needs to be emphasised with greater force that historicism uncovers what people actually do find important in art, what is virtually universally accepted by all artists and the public – the fact that art has a history.\footnote{This is emphasised even more in Carroll’s historical narrative theory (1994).} Artists study past art and often make references to it in their works, the public interprets art in the context of past works, and almost all philosophers of art agree that the context in which a given work was produced (which includes all artworks produced up to that point, or at least those known to the artist) is essential in determining the work’s properties and thus interpreting it, evaluating it, classifying it according to a genre, etc. Thus historicism basically captures that, as a matter of fact, art is a historical phenomenon. While I will argue later that the link to history is not as essential as Levinson would like it to be, I still agree that it is of utmost importance and should play a prominent role in any valid theory of art classification.

Another significant and related advantage lies in the fact that historicism implicitly allows for change – present art does not have to be the same as past art, and the criteria for what counts as art change over time, together with what are thought to be the correct ways of regarding art. Once again, this perfectly captures what is actually going on in the world, as artmaking has been changing over the centuries. While virtually all theories which take Weitz’s criticism into account share this virtue, historicism is especially explicit about it.

Historicism also allows for the works of lone artists be classified as art. Levinson takes this to be an advantage over the institutional view, and stresses that it is quite essential for a valid theory of art to allow for such private art to exist.

Finally, in what seems to be an important motive for some, historicism is a form of procedural definition which is not institutional (this is mentioned in Levinson 1989: 22;
and Levinson (1993: 411). While it is clear that traditional definitions cannot cope with modern art, those who do not agree that art essentially has a certain function or do not want to embrace a disjunctive definition are likely to turn to procedural definitions. At the same time, many are repulsed by the idea of embracing an institutional analysis, because it is thought to be either very weak, or uninformative, or simply not philosophical enough. Historicism offers a good alternative – it explains art in a procedural way without referring to the institution, and thus may be preferred for negative reasons.

1.2.2 Objections to historicism

Correct regard problem

Beardsley criticises Levinson’s theory for the vague notion of ‘correct regard’ – an object is an artwork only if it is intended to be regarded in a way that past artworks have been correctly regarded. He claims that the only plausible readings of this notion are quite unacceptable for a proceduralist. ‘I am inclined to fear a dilemma here’ he writes. ‘Either we give a general account of "correctly" in terms of some version of taking an aesthetic interest in \( x \) or else we make an open-ended list of specific "ways of regarding" that have been permitted in the past and that will among them probably permit just about anything in the future’ (Beardsley 1982b: 302). If the first is true, a historical analysis is unnecessary and should be substituted with a functional account which explains how objects become art in virtue of being aesthetically interesting to us. If the second is true, the theory drifts suspiciously close to a cluster-theory type view, in which case it faces problems related to its disjunctivism – it is difficult to tell why a certain way of regarding should be correct and not the other, or whether indeed there is any way which can be shown to be incorrect (ibid.: 301). Either way, Beardsley argues, little is left of the purely historical account Levinson defends.
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Levinson offers a solution (Levinson 1989: 24-27) by suggesting that the correct regard is a relatively complete or total one, i.e. encompassing structured complexes of ways of regarding. Additionally, contrary to Beardsley, such ways of regarding do not have to remain the same over time - they also change historically. Levinson points out that his account does not require us to know what exactly are the correct ways of regarding at a given time, but only that there actually are such ways. Present art is intentionally and relatively completely related to those ways of regard, and this is all we need to know to classify it as art. Thus historicists can accept the second horn of Beardsley’s dilemma, but ignore its consequences – the need to define the correct manner of regard and the over-inclusiveness when appreciating future art.

There are, however, problems with this reply. As Graham Oppy pointed out, it is simply hard to tell what ‘relatively complete’ actually means – how many similar ways of regarding is enough (Oppy 1992: 157)? It is also hard to tell which complete way is complete in a sense of capturing the important, rather than many unimportant ways of regard – if there are any important ones in treating modern art. Moreover, it is hard to defend the thesis that such relatively complete ways should be structured, because what most modern art does is precisely to challenge our structured ways of regarding past art.

What is more, lack of any independent criteria for correctness in this context may easily force a historical theorist to accept a form of institutional theory. Since Levinson denies that the ‘correct’ regard is the one which offers most rewarding or enjoyable experiences, and cannot (at pains of rather tight circularity) claim that it is the one which allows for best understanding of a given object qua artwork, it seems that he would need to agree that the standards of correctness are socially determined (S. Davies 1991: 173). Levinson briefly considers this issue, claiming that he is happy to accept that ‘what have been accepted as artworks and as correct ways of engaging with them [is explained in part by] a history of social determinations’, but this ‘doesn’t mean there are social rules for making art’ (Levinson 1993: 417). I think that he underestimates the weight of the objection. Firstly,
given Davies’ analysis of conventions in art and their relations to artists’ intentions, it seems more than appropriate to say: if what is essential to making art is intentions, and intentions run according to conventions, and conventions are socially determined, then making art is socially determined. Secondly, it seems that if the correct ways of regarding are socially determined, so is the content of the artist’s intention (i.e. ‘x should be regarded in a way which is socially determined’), and if intentions are so determined, then social determination starts bearing a great deal of explanatory weight. Ultimately, I agree with Davies that accepting this introduces a vital institutional element to the theory. It seems that historicists need to admit that some things about art are in fact determined by the institution, and I will show that this ultimately leads to a reduction of the historical into an institutional theory (see section 2.2.3).

Alien art

Gregory Currie in his ‘Aliens, Too’ (1993) presents a thought experiment in which he challenges historicism by exposing problems in the idea of ur-art and the relations later art bears to it. Were relics of a lost alien civilisation found which closely resembled our modern art and which were regarded by the aliens in the same way that we regard our modern art, it seems that they should be regarded as art (Currie 1993: 116). Oppy suggests that we need no aliens for the argument to work, because Levinson himself provides perfect examples. If a lone artist producing private art similar to our modern art lived before the era of modern art, or perhaps before the time of ur-art time, the same situation would obtain (Oppy 1992: 155).

However, on what Currie calls ‘pure’ historical theory (ur-art is defined by ‘identifying a set of historically given instances’ present in our civilisation), such artefacts would not count as art as they bear no historical relation to ur-art. Moreover, alien art would not bear any relation to our ur-art even though it was intended to be regarded in the same way in which our modern art is regarded, because it could have been created long before
modern, or even *ur*-art on Earth – and it is implausible to assume that the application of the concept ‘art’ to artifacts made by alien races should depend on contingent facts about human development, and perhaps the aliens’ knowledge of them. ‘Impure’ historical theories (*ur*-art is defined non-historically, but because of certain qualities it possesses) could defend themselves by claiming that alien art may not be related to our, but to the alien *ur*-art, which as it happens has similar qualities as our *ur*-art. However, this is just an optimistic assumption – modern alien and human arts, although similar, could have developed from completely different *ur*-arts, and yet we would still call the alien artefacts art. Yet a historicist would need to exclude them on the basis of lacking a connection to anything that has qualities characteristic of *ur*-art.

Ultimately, Currie concludes, standing in a historical relation to past art is not an essential feature of art, because, as the example shows, there can be art which does not stand in such a relation – i.e. the historical definition is too exclusive. As of now no good response to this objection has been given, and I believe that until one is found, historicism remains seriously flawed.

**Intentions are cheap**

The main problem with Levinson’s definition lies in his reliance on the intentions of the artist, as numerous authors have remarked (see: Stecker [1990]: 267-9; S. Davies [1991]: 172). Let me now abstract from the problems related to what an object is supposed to be intended for in order to count as an artwork, and focus on the sole fact that art making requires intentions. Graham Oppy in his ‘on Defining Art Historically’ stresses the fact that intending something to be a work of art cannot possibly be *sufficient* to actually make an artwork, because it would just make art implausibly easy to produce (Oppy [1992]: 154). ‘Intentions are too cheap’, Oppy says, giving an example of him intending his broken crockery to be art, ‘surely it can’t be this easy to make a work of art!’ Thus it seems the historical definition entails that pretty much anyone can make pretty much anything into
art merely by forming an intention for it to be art. Unsurprisingly, many people would like to disagree with such a conclusion, and certainly Levinson should be considered one, since he ridicules the triviality of art-making in ‘private artworks’ (see section 1.1.2).

Levinson could try to save his definition by pointing out that a person is required to intend an object for the appropriate regard seriously or nonpassively. However (especially given the current state of art), it does not sound particularly implausible that one could very seriously intend the broken crockery or pretty much any object, to be regarded in a way in which past art has been regarded. If Levinson would like to simply claim that such intentions cannot possibly be serious, it seems fair to ask him how exactly he determines seriousness, for I and undoubtedly many other people do not share his certainty in professing such judgements. Without a valid means of determining ‘legitimate seriousness’ the whole thing becomes rather vague, and were Oppy to start breaking his crockery while really seriously intending it to be art, one would have no way to challenge the seriousness of his intention, and following this, to deny arthood to crockery. But to return to the initial point, surely it can’t be that easy to make art!

23 And do so in a rational (not insane or pointless) way, as well as deeply believe that ‘an experience of some value [would] be thereby obtained’, to allow for Levinson’s later provisos (Levinson 1989: 29, cf. Levinson 1993: 414).

24 A counterexample to historicism presented by Crispin Sartwell can be thought as a special case of this objection (Sartwell 1990). Imagine that someone creates a forgery of a Rembrandt self-portrait and succeeds in replacing it for the original in the Metropolitan Museum. It seems that in this case the very success of the forger’s action requires him to rather seriously intend that the fake is treated in exactly the same way as the original has been treated – a successful forgery is one that is not recognised as such, or at least not easily recognised. But this implies that the author of the fake intends his work for regard-as-a-work-of-art, which, by Levinson’s definition, together with the fact that the author is aware of the relevant historical context, has proprietary rights over his own creation and is serious in his intent, is enough to make the forgery an artwork. However, it seems that what distinguishes a fake from an original artwork is precisely the fact that the former is not an artwork. Sartwell further claims that the problem lies in the fact that too much importance is given to the intentions of the creator. ‘Levinson’s definition’ he writes ‘may rely too heavily on the notion of “intention for regard.” Something can be “intended for regard” as a work of art and fail to be a work of art’ (ibid.: 158). A similar argument can be made with regards to kitsch – is that art just because the creator wanted it to be and it resembles past artworks in some respects?

However, it seems that this objection can easily be challenged. For why should we not accept that forgeries are art too? It may be derivative art, yet still art (Oppy 1992: 159-160). It seems that Levinson could easily accept such a solution.
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Intentions are even cheaper

However, there are more important reasons to reject intentions – they are not only insufficient to make something an artwork, they are also in many cases not even necessary (this issue is pointed out in: Oppy 1992: 155; Stecker 1990: 267-8; Carroll 1994: 33-5). In this sense they can be even cheaper, in fact utterly worthless, for it turns out that quite often the artist’s intentions are just completely disregarded when deciding whether his creation is an artwork or not.

It seems simply historically true that there are many cases in which an artist either never gave any reason to think that he did, or even explicitly stated that he did not intend some of the objects he created to be regarded in the same way past artworks have been regarded, and yet they are quite universally treated as art – Beethoven’s early works, Leonardo’s sketchbooks, possibly even the published private correspondence of artists. Besides, there are many examples of objects created for religious use clearly not intended to be artworks, and yet treated as such – ancient votive figurines, fetishes, quite plausibly a large amount of early Christian art. Not only are they treated as artworks even though we are aware that they were probably not made with a relevant intent, it also sounds implausible to suggest that we would give up this treatment were the lack of such intent to become explicit.\(^{25}\) Thus the main problem of relying on intentions is not only in the fact that not all objects that are intended to be artworks are artworks (as in Oppy’s crockery example), but that there are actually quite a few objects which are artworks even though they were, specifically or otherwise, not intended as such.

One case in particular seems very obvious – Franz Kafka gave explicit written instructions to his friend Max Brod to, upon Kafka’s death, destroy all his works without publishing. Quite clearly this expresses an intention to treat his works in a way which past

\(^{25}\) I believe that Levinson’s example of a descendant of a Mexican tribe coming to the museum and successfully claiming back an object displayed as tribal art but in fact intended for religious purposes (Levinson 1979: 237) is just hopelessly naïve – the Australian Aborigines have claimed objects from the British Museum for years and never saw them removed from the display.
artworks have not been normally (and definitely not correctly) treated, and as such should, according to the historical definition, disqualify them from being art. However, Brod did not obey his friend’s wishes and published the novels, which are now regarded as some of the best artworks of the 20th century.\footnote{Note that Kafka did not pass his ownership rights to Brod, in which case Brod’s intention for the works to be regarded in the same way as past art was regarded would be legitimate and thus sufficient – he merely instructed him to execute his will.} Thus the historical theory seems to be falsified by nothing else but history.

Levinson addresses this problem and tries to resolve it in several ways. (Levinson\textsuperscript{1989} 29-30). I believe, however, that his attempts not only fail to deal with the issue satisfactorily, they actually expose vital weaknesses in intentionalism.

Firstly, Levinson argues that Kafka must in fact have had the relevant intention at another time, and this is sufficient for justifying his novels being artworks, or he did have the relevant intention all the time, but being internally conflicted he never expressed it properly.\footnote{For another treatment of an analogous case see: (Oppy\textsuperscript{1992} 159).} To show the absurdity of this solution let me refer to the ‘seriously’ of the historical definition (cf. Levinson\textsuperscript{1979} 236). Clearly he could only have passingly or non-seriously intended his creation as a work of art (in which case it is not actually a work of art). It seems that even if at some point Kafka did, as Levinson presumes, intend his work to be regarded-as-an-artwork, ultimately he resolved (rather seriously, if he asked for it to be burned) that it should not. Of the two options possible, only the latter has been explicitly expressed by the author (we only have evidence for the latter), and expressed in writing, which usually is a sign of, as per Levinson’s formulation, ‘actually meaning it’ – and moreover, in the months between giving such instructions and his death Kafka did not change his will (or at least did not express it in a similarly ‘serious’ way). So why should we not take his (assumed) intention to treat his works as artworks as the passing and non-serious one? With all this, Levinson’s argument that Kafka ‘undoubtedly had an art-intent at many points prior to, during, and perhaps even after the period of composition’
1.2 Historicism

(Levinson 1989: 29) which could ‘override’ the intent to destroy the manuscripts, seems purely ad hoc. While providing very poor support for his thesis, this actually exhibits its most important flaw – the fact that intentions can be interpreted in many ways and various (seemingly similarly justified) interpretations can lead to contradictory outcomes.

Levinson’s other solutions are even worse. ‘Thirdly’, he writes ‘we might choose to view the case as one of those anomalous ones where, owing to the exceptional potential literary value at stake, we recognise that the community of readers and critics can in effect justifiably appropriate certain texts and project them for literary regard, thus overruling, unusually, a creator’s considered intent’ (ibid.: 30). Apart of the fact that history teaches us it is not such an unusual and anomalous case, this solution is just begging the question against Wollheim’s objection, which Levinson considered on the previous page of the same article (if there are some properties of the object which make people decide that it should be regarded as art, than the definition of art should mention those properties), as well as dangerously slipping towards institutionalism. As I will later argue, the second of these troubles is inevitable for historicism.

The last solution is equally problematic. Here Levinson admits that Kafka’s example shows ‘experiencers, spectators, audiences are a sine qua non for art’. But this is just the same as to admit that there cannot be private art – one of the main reasons why historicism was to be superior to IT! Moreover, this once again comes dangerously close to admitting that those audiences do in fact have more to say than the artist’s intentions, which again is to assert IT.

There is one possible way in which Levinson’s account could be saved here. He could claim that Kafka was indeed unhappy with his novels, but that this does not mean that he thought they were not artworks – he just thought they were bad ones. If so, his treatment of them was very appropriate (to give a historical example, Brahms was meticulous in destroying all compositions he was unhappy with, to make sure his name was not associated with things he found unsatisfactory), and he might have just been wrong about the value
of his creation – however this point would be beyond the scope of a classificatory theory of art.

I see three problems with this reply. Firstly, it seems that while this might be true in Kafka’s case, there are other examples to be given. Leonardo created hundreds of sketches which are displayed in galleries today, although they were almost certainly not intended as art – instead they were mere exercises or anatomic and botanical studies, and Leonardo treated them more as science than art (Chastel 1974). They were not bad art, similarly as architectural blueprints are not bad buildings, or treatises on painting bad paintings. If they are treated as art today, it is not in virtue of what the artist intended.

Secondly, it seems that even if such an answer would be possible, it would not be available to a historicist. What matters for a historicist is not whether something was intended to be art, but whether it was intended for a certain kind of regard. It is irrelevant if Kafka thought his novels were art, good or bad, since all that matters is that he intended them to be burnt, and burning was not a standard way of regarding artworks at the time.

Finally, it seems that the decision as to whether Kafka had this or that intention is simply quite arbitrary; it is very hard to find compelling reasons to hold either side of the argument. This point applies equally to the whole of the above discussion – I believe that the main problem exposed here is the fact that artist’s intentions are a hopelessly vague matter, and any theory which would rely on them must inherit the difficulties arising from that fact. Because human intentions are simply externally inaccessible, and because it is virtually impossible to tell whether a given intention is a stable and serious one or merely a whim, employing them to do explanatory work in a theory is sadly an example of very poor metaphysics of the type criticised already by Kant – attempting to answer questions about the nature of an object the nature of which cannot be known. (It is possible to interpret the notion of intentions in a way which would make them more reliable, however I believe that such a solution is unavailable to a historicist – this issue will be discussed in section 2.2.5.)
Some may treat this as a mere epistemological trouble and insist that intentions do fix the status of an object even if we will never know them – a theory can be true even though in many cases it is completely impractical. But just how seriously should we treat a theory which claims to define art, and yet for half the possible x’s its reply to ‘is x art?’ will be: ‘it is either art or not, depending on the author’s intention, which we will probably never know?’ While this might be a valid answer, I think that we should work towards a definition which can be effective both in theory and in practice, and it seems that preserving the dependance on artistic intentions can only make things harder.

1.3 Functionalism

Unlike the proceduralist definitions discussed above, functionalists believe that objects do not become art thanks to certain procedures which are followed in their creation (or later treatment), but due to the distinctive function they fulfil in the society. If this is so, the definition of ‘art’ should be akin to the definitions of ‘weapon’ or ‘poison’ – a thing can be classified as a poison regardless of any physical, historical or contextual properties it might have, as long as it can perform the function of poisoning somebody. In this section I will discuss some of the most prominent functionalist definitions of art, focusing mainly on the original version offered by Monroe Beardsley, and briefly reviewing offers by Gary Iseminger and Nick Zangwill. These definitions share the general idea described above, however they differ significantly in details.

In what follows I will consider functional definitions in their classificatory sense only, even though they derive this sense from evaluative treatment of artifacts (i.e. something is classified as art if it performs the aesthetic function well enough, or attains a threshold of merit (S. Davies [1991: 42])).

To begin with the first of those definitions, Beardsley claims that
(…) an artwork is either an arrangement of conditions intended to be capable of affording an experience with marked aesthetic character or (incidentally) an arrangement belonging to a class or type of arrangements that is typically intended to have this capacity (Beardsley 1982b: 299)

Once again I shall briefly focus on the elements of the definition. Firstly, an artwork is an arrangement of conditions – Beardsley writes that what he means by this term is somewhat similar to what Dickie understands by ‘an artifact’, but uses a different term to emphasise that some artworks are not physical objects (ibid.: 311-312). The difference seems to be purely terminological, however, and the terms are in fact coextensive, so in the discussion to come I shall use them interchangeably, or simply use the term ‘artifact’ to avoid confusion.

Secondly, an artwork is an arrangement intended to be capable of affording an experience with marked aesthetic character. This is the crux of the theory, and the main difference between functionalism and other views – Dickie plainly denied that there is any special kind of aesthetic experience, or that anything aesthetic is relevant to classifying art (Dickie 1965, 1964), and Levinson seems to agree that giving rise to aesthetic experience might be an important and even frequent feature of artworks, but it is by no means essential to them. Similarly Gaut (see 1.4) believes that it is merely one of the features which can afford an artifact the name ‘artwork’.

There are two things worth noting here. Firstly, the requirement placed on the artworks is not that they actually do afford one aesthetic experiences, but merely that they are intended to do so. I shall discuss the intentionalism of Beardsley’s view below, but for now it is only worth noting that such a clause ensures that the fact some people may not be moved by a given object does not mean that the object cannot be an artwork – the author’s intention is what counts. Secondly, even if this intentionalist element were dropped, the same result can be had from the ‘capable of’ clause – this move ensures that, say, Beethoven’s 9th is still an artwork even if ignorant pop-music fans derive no aesthetic
pleasure from listening to it, or indeed even if there is no one left to appreciate it. As long as the object is capable of providing aesthetic experiences, then, it does not matter that there are no people capable of receiving them.

Thirdly, an artwork is an arrangement that is intended to perform a certain aesthetic function. The artist can have a number of intentions related to his works, but ‘what makes them art, on this definition, is that the aesthetic intention ... is present and operative’ (Beardsley 1982b: 299). Unsurprisingly, unlike in Levinson, the intention is not for an object to be treated a certain way, but for it to ‘provide a possible source of aesthetically qualified experience’ (S. Davies 1991: 52). However, Beardsley realises that sometimes it is impossible to tell what the author’s intentions were, and in these cases he claims the alternative version of his definition should be used (Beardsley 1982b: 305-6).

Thus fourthly, an artwork can be an arrangement which belongs to a class or type of arrangements which are typically intended to have a capacity to elicit aesthetic experiences. If an archeologist finds an ancient sculpture, he does not need to wonder what were the intentions of its creator, because clearly being a sculpture places the artifact in a class of objects (sculptures) which were typically intended to provide aesthetic experiences, and thus it is an artwork. Beardsley proceeds to discuss what exactly makes an art kind, or class or type, but it seems that his views on this are similar to what Dickie defined as an ‘artworld system’, and I shall assume that these terms can be again be used interchangeably.

**Iseminger’s definition**

Iseminger improves on the above definition by making links to the artworld and the practice of art more important, as well as removing the talk about necessary and sufficient conditions. He claims that:

The function of the artworld and practice of art is to promote aesthetic communication (Iseminger 2004: 23).
And supplements it by a valuational thesis which is remarkably similar to Beardsley’s own:

A work of art is a good work of art to the extent that it has the capacity to afford appreciation (Iseminger 2004: 23).

Iseminger assumes a slightly more naturalistic definition of a ‘function’, and ties his definition together with the idea of the artworld, however he claims that it is still the function some objects have in our society, rather than the society itself, that makes them artworks. His understanding of the artworld is similar to Dickie’s, or possibly even more permissive – a person can become a member of the artworld simply because he wants to, but also because others generally view him as one. However, while artistic communication does presuppose the existence of the artworld, aesthetic communication can do without it. Because the definition is given in terms of aesthetic communication, it is not essentially institutional.

Aesthetic communication, the most important element of the definition, typically occurs when a person creates something while intending it to be aesthetically appreciated by someone else and is met with success. However, art is not required for aesthetic communication to occur, as one can appreciate non-art artifacts for their aesthetic properties.

I will generally argue in favour of many points in Iseminger’s definition, however, I do not agree with his ultimate conclusion – I will try to show that while it is true that the function of art as it is described by Iseminger is indeed very important, possibly even one of the most important reasons for certain objects to possess the status of art, the decisive role in them acquiring this status is played by the artworld. It seems that in his more recent research Iseminger has also started to see the institutional element of the definition as more important, and he prefers now to talk about ‘institutionalism aestheticised’.28

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28 A symposium organised by Iseminger at the 2012 American Society for Aesthetics Eastern Division Meeting, had exactly this title.
Because, as Iseminger claims, his theory shares all the advantages of Beardsley’s view while escaping its problems, I will review them jointly, pointing out where the refined theory should be treated differently from the original view.

Zangwill’s definition

The most recent (and by far the most puzzling) of the functional definitions is Zangwill’s. He first presents the following formulation:

(1) Being a work of art is having an aesthetic function; and (2) each work of art has some specific aesthetic function that is essential to its being the particular work of art it is (Zangwill 2007: 99).

Following a discussion concerning aesthetic function being dependant on the aesthetic properties of an object, this definition is transformed into a normative one:

(1) Being a work of art is being such that there are some aesthetic properties that it should have; and (2) it is essential to being each particular work that there are some specific aesthetic properties that it should have (ibid.: 104).

The definition is somewhat puzzling because it is remarkably similar to Beardsley’s, and seems to fall into exactly the same problems as the twenty-five years older original. Moreover, Zangwill presents a normative account suspiciously close to traditional definitions of art, which were criticised precisely for the fact that through trying to define what art should be they fail to provide an account of what art actually is.

In the following discussion I will not distinguish Zangwill’s definition from Beardsley’s as, save for some minor details, both can be criticised in the same way.\(^\text{29}\)

\(^{29}\)Interestingly, while Iseminger tried to specifically address issues which were problematic for the original functionalism and offer a definition which would not fall in the same traps, Zangwill does not even mention Beardsley’s name, in fact ‘Redefining Art’ is not even included in his bibliography.

\(^{30}\)When discussing artistic failure, Zangwill writes: ‘Fortunately, there is usually considerable convergence between the artist’s intentions and the work itself, so that the work has many of the aesthetic
1.3.1 Advantages of functionalism

There are several meta-aesthetic aims which functionalism tries to achieve. Firstly, Beardsley claims that a valid definition of art 'should mark a distinction that is theoretically significant' (Beardsley 1982b: 299). Following the charges against IT he claims that his view has the advantage of clearly stating what is art and what is not, and how people can err by calling an object an artwork – virtues which the IT can be said to lack, as it provides at most very vague answers. Beardsley admits that it is perfectly possible to 'get along' without any proper definition of art, and indeed that there are some extra-artistic interests in ascribing objects the status of art, but argues that such ordinary use of the term 'art' should not be a matter of philosophical enquiry. Thus while the proceduralists are happy to admit that there is no difference between what is called 'art' and what is art, functionalism is said to be able to capture the difference and show how these two sorts of things can fail to coincide.

I completely agree with Beardsley that our ordinary use of the term 'art' in its classificatory sense is of less interest to philosophy than is generally thought, but the conclusion I draw from this is not that a theory of art should be created which uses the term in a more defined way, but that philosophers should keep working on the concept as it is actually used and accept that what is art is largely determined by culture and society, not philosophical reflection. While we can continue to produce definitions which have all the virtues of a good philosophical theory, but little reference to reality, it might be a better idea to focus on what actually exists in the world and admit that art is a context-relative and rather messy phenomenon.

Secondly, Beardsley wants his definition to 'capture reasonably well a use [of the term 'art'] that has been prominent for some centuries and still persists quite widely today' properties it was intended to have. In practice, we do not have to worry too much about cases of artistic failure' (Zangwill 2007: 106). Indeed, this passage describes his own view quite accurately – it may seem plausible thanks to some 'fortunate convergences' of some facts about some artworks, and if one does not 'worry too much' about the details.
I believe that such a judgemental approach, as opposed to the more promiscuous proceduralist views, is most appropriate, and worth developing. However, as my discussion of functionalism's over-exclusiveness below shows, it has to be taken cautiously. I hope that the cultural definition I develop in chapter 2 succeeds in accounting for both the fact that in modern art anything goes and the fact that most people might have good reasons, within certain contexts, to think that some works are not in fact art, without falling into the trap of being overly exclusive.

Thirdly, functionalism is said to provide a definition which is useful to other disciplines besides aesthetics, notably art history and anthropology. It is at the same time claimed that it does not capture the phenomenon in all its variety, because if there is no artworld in some culture there should be no art either. I agree that providing good theoretical background for other disciplines is an important role of philosophy, however I doubt whether functionalism does actually achieve that better than IT. I will discuss this issue in the next chapter.

Finally, Beardsley lists some features of his theory which he believes to be virtues, which nonetheless I would describe as inaccuracies or flaws. Functionalism is said to expose and depend on the link that art has with the aesthetic, as well as providing an account which
would explain why things cannot become art in ‘midlife’. Below I will show that these are in fact very problematic claims, which the functionalist should defend rather than boast of.

1.3.2 Objections to functionalism

There is no special aesthetic experience

The simplest way to challenge functionalism is to deny that art actually has the function it is ascribed. Some people want to deny that there is any special kind of aesthetic experience, or a specifically aesthetic way of attending to or appreciating things (S. Davies 1991: 62; Dickie 1964, 1965, 1997: 85). If this were the case, the experiencing of artworks would not be qualitatively different from the experiencing of other things, and thus no distinctions could be made on the basis of it. I will not discuss this issue in much detail here, as although I am inclined to agree with Davies and Dickie, it seems to me that there are easier ways of showing functionalism to be false and so it is safer to disprove it on other grounds.

Correctness

It is interesting that Beardsley, who criticised the vague notion of ‘correct’ regard in Levinson’s theory, is susceptible to an objection regarding the same term. Although here it is the correct experience that is questioned, the basis of the objection remains the same – how is Beardsley able to account for whether the person experiencing something aesthetically does that correctly, or completely? We should certainly rule out aesthetic experiences under the influence of drugs, but how can we tell the borderline at which we decide whether a person experiences objects correctly? To quote Davies, how many gins is a theatre-goer allowed in the interval (S. Davies 1991: 63)?
One solution might be to claim that the borderline is at the point at which the receiver is able to correctly recognise the work’s non-aesthetic properties. It seems quite intuitive to say that a person who is not able to recognise the colours on a given painting will not be able to correctly experience it, or judge whether it is aesthetically pleasing or not.

But is this really so? Famously, Claude Monet suffered from cataracts in his later life, and the paintings he created in that time were affected by his incorrect experience of the world, his inability to distinguish more vivid colours. Since his paintings from this period have a noticeable reddish tone, present in the vision of people suffering from cataracts, it seems more than probable that they have been affected by his deteriorated sight, and the fact that Monet destroyed most of his works from that time after his cataracts were removed in 1923 suggests that even the author realised they were a result of impaired perception. Thus if Monet himself was unable to correctly recognise the non-aesthetic properties of his Japanese Bridges (Fig. 1.3), how could he experience them aesthetically, or intend them to be experienced aesthetically by others? He was unaware that he was seeing the world differently from other people, so he must have intended his works to be seen as he saw them. Should a functionalist deny a famous painter the ability to aesthetically experience his own works? Or should he suggest that either we all see these paintings incorrectly, or we should all develop cataracts before we can truly aesthetically experience them?

However, even if this puzzle can be answered, a more difficult one needs to be faced. It seems quite commonly accepted that an aesthetic experience of a given object is not based on its physical or even contextual properties, but (mainly) on its aesthetic properties. But while it is easy to check whether a given person is correctly ascribing non-aesthetic properties to the work, it is a quite different thing to give criteria of correctness for the ascription of aesthetic properties. And even omitting the discussion of whether aesthetic properties can be properly ascribed to objects, it needs to be pointed out that one huge,
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(a) 1899, oil on canvas, National Gallery, London; painted before any symptoms of the cataracts developed.

(b) 1918-24, oil on canvas, The Minneapolis Institute of Arts; painted about the time of most severe disability.

(c) 1918-24, oil on canvas, Musée Marmottan, Paris; painted after the cataracts were removed.

Figure 1.3: Claude Monet, The Japanese Bridge at Giverny

implicit and completely unjustified leap is made here – it is assumed that correct recognition of non-aesthetic properties of works is similar to the correct recognition of their aesthetic properties. This issue is far from being resolved (the discussion about it being present in analytic philosophy at least since Frank Sibley’s famous ‘Aesthetic Concepts’, 1959) and if there is any consensus among philosophers, it is rather leaning towards admitting the lack of any necessary or universal connections between non-aesthetic and aesthetic properties. It is perhaps more obvious as one realises that, while it might be clear that a person unable to tell the colours of a painting could not correctly judge and experience its aesthetic value, it is a different thing to say that a person who can tell colours can thereby give correct aesthetic judgements or have the correct experience – deriving the latter from the former would be to make a basic mistake in *modus ponens*. Ultimately it seems that to follow the proposed path of defence would mean basing the solution to the problem of correctness on very shaky ground.

In fact, it seems that a borderline between correct and incorrect experience would have to be drawn arbitrarily, and I agree with Davies that functionalism does not provide a convincing account of how such an arbitrary decision should be informed by ‘attending to aspects of the individual’s experience and attentiveness’ (S. Davies 1991: 63). On the other
hand, such phenomena as the mere exposure effect, provide some evidence that the rules of correctness might be determined socially – it is the artistic practice of the members of the artworld which conventionally determines what individual actions and approaches are correct or complete.

**There is no necessary or sufficient connection between the aesthetic function and arthood**

As functionalism tries to define art in a standard way, i.e. by the use of necessary and sufficient conditions, it seems worth testing whether the conditions it offers are in fact as important as it claims, or simply whether it stands against Weitz’s objections to the classical definitions. The conditions in question are: being (intended to be) capable of affording aesthetic experiences; or, for Iseminger, promoting aesthetic communication; or, for Zangwill, being such that there are some aesthetic properties that it should have.

Before I begin, one thing has to be noted. While Beardsley is happy to admit that his definition may not capture the common usage of the term ‘art,’ and indeed to claim that we are often wrong when we call something art (and some authors support him here, e.g. (Pettersson 2001: 83)), this claim has force mainly when applied to truly controversial pieces of modern art. It is much less persuasive if it can be shown that the theory would exclude some of the most revered and established artworks, or include some wildly problematic objects. As I will argue below, this is sadly the case.

Fulfilling the functionalists’ conditions is not in fact necessary for an object to count as art – it seems fair to say that a decent amount of conceptual art or politically involved art does not have the capability to afford us any aesthetic experiences at all, has no aesthetic properties, and promotes aesthetic communication no more than a political speech would.

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32 This point has been raised though not fully discussed in (Kamber 1998).
33 The ‘expansive, adventurous character of art’ has been pointed out by Weitz (Weitz 1956: 32), and the fact that artists are free to completely disregard whatever we claim the essential property of art should be has been also commented on by other authors (cf. M. Cohen 1962: 486)
Moreover, it is quite clear that in many cases the artists do not in fact intend their works to be in any way related to the aesthetic – they are only interested in expressing a message, e.g. On Kawara in his works points to links between Hiroshima and Vietnam, consciously avoiding aestheticising them (Fig. 1.4). One can assume that at least Beardsley would simply argue that this is reason enough to deny them the status of art, however it is not entirely clear that we should do so. I shall discuss functionalism’s exclusiveness below, for now let me merely state that were we to admit these artifacts are artworks after all, it would turn out that performing an aesthetic function is not necessary for something to be art, and that functionalism would be very close to what Weitz called an ‘honorific’ definition (Weitz 1956: 30).

It is also unclear whether this problem is indeed solved in Iseminger’s modification of the functional definition. While Iseminger claims that his theory is free of the issues related to necessary and sufficient conditions because it is not an essentialist definition (Iseminger 2004: 24), it does seem that it saliently requires artworks to perform some sort of function (be it aesthetic, artistic, or otherwise) which would amount to promoting aesthetic communication. However, it seems that a fair amount of artworks, notably conceptual and political art as mentioned above, may not actually present anything that would promote
specifically aesthetic communication. Once again, the comments made by Weitz about the ever-changing nature of art are relevant – it might be historically correct, as Iseminger claims, that Diderot and Batteux did indeed set up the artwork as an aesthetic institution (ibid.: 106ff.), but that does not mean that the artwork is not free to change its function, or acquire more than one function.

The more interesting argument considers sufficiency. Assuming that art does serve the function of affording us an aesthetic experience, it seems that it is not the only source of such experiences. Clearly we can have aesthetic experiences by looking at landscapes, flowers, etc. To avoid this problem, Beardsley limits the sort of objects which should be taken into account to man-made objects, artifacts. However, even with this qualification it seems that there is a whole host of non-artwork artifacts which serve the function of giving us aesthetic experiences, and moreover that are created with the very intention of giving us such experiences. Classical furniture, jewellery, lingerie, interfaces of computer programs, horses’ gait in military parades – some claim that even certain chess moves or mathematical proofs can be elegant or beautiful. We are aesthetically impressed by all these things, and yet there seems to be no temptation to include them in the domain of art. Not only can these things be created with the explicit intention of making them aesthetically pleasing, they also often belong to a kind which is typically intended to have this exact function (e.g. most jewellery is there primarily to be aesthetically pleasing). Needless to say, they do have and should have aesthetic properties to serve their function well. If that is so, it seems that the definition once again is unable to capture the difference between art and non-art.

A similar objection can be raised against Iseminger’s modification of the theory. He claims that his definition does not mention sufficient conditions, however if this is the case

\[^{34}\]A similar thought has been expressed by Robert Stecker in his review of *The Aesthetic Function of Art*, (Stecker 2007: 116-117), and explored in detail in Stecker’s own historical-functional definition of art, which cannot be discussed here in detail; (Stecker 1996).

\[^{35}\]A similar argument has been presented by Stephen Davies, who points out that there are better means to the effects Beardsley says art has on us (S. Davies 1991: 57).
then the charge of indeterminacy against his view is even stronger. If his ‘aesthetic communication’ is to be understood purely in terms of creating something with the intention of its being appreciated by others, i.e. if ‘aesthetic communication’ stands for ‘communication via aesthetic means’, then the above criticism still applies to his theory. An alternative would be to allow the communication to go beyond creating and aesthetically appreciating, and to accept a more common understanding of the term, i.e. ‘aesthetic communication’ could stand for ‘communication about aesthetic facts’ via any means. Then the above problem might be solved, as the members of the artworld do not typically discuss cavalry parades and lingerie. But instead it now seems very difficult to tell the difference between objects which are artworks and other objects which amount to aesthetic communication and yet are not artworks, e.g. critical articles on art, photographic reproductions of paintings, or indeed even Iseminger’s own book. The issue is further complicated by the fact that there can be artworks which are commentaries on other artworks – thus the escape route through distinguishing the object of aesthetic communication from the tools of communication is inadequate, as some objects can be both. It is very easy to refer to the artworld here and say that aesthetic communication within the artworld is such that it simply distinguishes objects worth appreciating and discussing about. This, however, would make the definition lean towards the proceduralist side.

A possible solution to this problem is naturally to agree that all the above-mentioned practices are in fact art, and so that bracelets and computer programs should be grouped together with paintings and theatrical performances. Indeed, there are some very good reasons to believe that the artists of the Art Nouveau movement did actually create jewellery and furniture specifically intending it to be art, as did the artists of the Bauhaus movement — Xenakis, too, composed music which represented mathematical equations,

[36] While Iseminger never explicitly states that the communication must happen between artworld members, he writes that it is a ‘function of the artworld’ and ‘consists in someone designing and making an artifact with the aim and effect that it be appreciated by someone else,’ suggesting that the people communicating are artists and public, who definitely are artworld members (Iseminger 2004 23, 25-6).
and there could be plenty of modern art found which tries to express aesthetic qualities through the medium of computer presentations, performances similar to military parades, or indeed dog shows and the like. Thus maybe the solution is to accept those practices and their products as art after all?

However, there are numerous problems with such a move. First of all, there is the issue of counterintuitive over-inclusiveness – while we might agree that Mackintosh’s chairs are art, it is very unintuitive to thereby extend the term art to encompass just about any chair. It might be argued that Mackintosh’s chairs are different because, unlike our everyday chairs, apart from providing a sitting surface they attempt to bring about an aesthetic experience, and this is why they should be considered art. Iseminger’s theory would sort this problem out easily – clearly normal chairs do not promote aesthetic communication (assuming that the chair can communicate aesthetic ideas, or that its aesthetic qualities can be an object of communication). However, the problem is not removed here, but merely relegated – we may be able to distinguish between Mackintosh’s chair and another chair, but not between Mackintosh’s chair and its photo, a book that discusses it, etc. (In what follows I will focus on criticising Beardsley’s definition, while bearing in mind that the same criticism can with little modification be applied to Iseminger and Zangwill.)

And yet as a matter of fact there are other chairs which are usually regarded as artworks – e.g. chairs produced after Bauhaus designs – which do not attempt to be particularly aesthetically pleasing, but merely functional. Arguably they are far less aesthetically pleasing than many Victorian chairs which were made by mere artisans and which, although appreciated, are not treated as artworks (Fig. 1.5). While it seems possible that Beardsley might simply say that Bauhaus chairs are treated as art unjustifiably, the example shows an important problem – there is a continuum of how much aesthetic experience certain objects can give us, and it is very hard to pinpoint the place in which objects of a certain kind which were not always regarded as art stop being art. Secondly, such pinpointing would be actually very easy were one to accept Dickie’s view – then the reason why some
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chairs are art and others are not is simply because ‘it just turned out that way’; chair-making began to count as an artistic genre (or an artworld system) after the Art Nouveau movement. Such a simple solution is, however, unavailable to the functionalist.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, such an inclusive treatment is in deep disagreement with Beardsley’s most basic aims. His theory was thought of specifically as being able to exclude some objects from the domain of art, and Beardsley was notably quite keen on excluding a fair amount of objects produced by modern artists. Yet the above all-encompassing solution not only allows the inclusion of all of modern art into the domain, it actually extends it even further, into regions which even Dickie would hesitate to
accept as art, such as lingerie-making and military parades. It seems quite unlikely that Beardsley himself would wish to follow that path.

However, if he does not, it seems that the only solution capable of saving his definition from vagueness would be to again qualify it by adding that the second of its disjuncts should include some reference to art history, i.e. to say that the class or type of arrangements typically intended to have a capacity to cause aesthetic experience should already be somehow historically established as art. The connection with history or context may be made very relevant, and the explanation very fine grained, however, in the end such a solution would betray the essence of functionalism and lean heavily towards proceduralism. What would be thereby shown is that performing the aesthetic function is not sufficient for something to be art.

Exclusions

One important feature of the functionalist definition is that it is much more discriminatory than the proceduralist approaches. Beardsley admits that following his theory leads to denying the status of art to some things which have been popularly acclaimed as art (especially readymades), but claims that this is a virtue rather than a fault of his view (S. Davies 1991: 56, 71-3). While a Weitzian might simply say that one should never try to close the concept ‘art’ in any manner (Weitz 1956: 32), one could argue that perhaps it can be closed in at least some respects. Nevertheless, while it is hard to disagree that a good theory should also provide us with a means of saying that some things are classified as art wrongly, I believe that the functionalist’s line is drawn in the wrong place, or for wrong reasons.

Before I proceed, one worry has to be expressed. It seems that the functionalist definitions are heading close to becoming normative, rather than descriptive in nature, i.e. they attempt to say not what art is, but what art should be – Zangwill’s version particularly is prone to this difficulty, accepting as it does its normative aspect quite unashamedly.
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The defenders of the view would certainly claim that there are functional definitions of other things, e.g. weapons, which are clearly not normative, and so is the definition of art. However, there seems to be a vital difference here: determining the function of art is more arbitrary than in the case of weapons. The definition of ‘a weapon’ requires that objects called ‘weapons’ are efficient in harming and destroying persons and things, similarly to how ‘artworks’ are those objects which efficiently bring about aesthetic experiences. But while the definition of a weapon does include all the objects which are commonly referred to as weapons, the functional definition of art does not encompass all things that we call artworks, notably readymades, conceptual art, etc. It simply seems that the definition wrongly recognises the actual function of art, or instead of recognising it tries to impose one which does not necessarily fit actual artistic practice as well as the definition of weapons fits combative practice. There is a fine line between being very discriminatory and simply being wrong – theories defining art in terms of beauty or expression clearly crossed that line, and I fear that the functionalists may be following them quite closely.

Let me now focus on the details. The sort of works which functionalism excludes from the domain of art are those which have been created with no intention of making them aesthetic (or with the explicit intention of making them anti-aesthetic), or, were intentionalism dropped, those which have no capacity to afford the audience any aesthetic experiences (or do not promote aesthetic communication, or are not such that they should have aesthetic properties). This has several implications: (1) it excludes anti-art which explicitly tries not to be aesthetic; (2) it excludes readymades, because they were not initially created as artworks, and an object cannot acquire the status of art ‘midlife’ it either is art from beginning to end, or it is not art at all; (3) it excludes a lot of conceptual and politically or socially involved art for which the main aim is to shock or pass on a message, in which case the aesthetic function may be nonexistent. (Note that only the last of these points applies to Iseminger’s version of the theory. Still, even though it deals
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with some problems Beardsley faces, it is questionable whether it can indeed remove all of them.)

It might easily be argued that this is in fact the right move to make, as many people would agree that the status of objects of the above kinds is somewhat dubious. However, it seems that, if this policy is applied, a fair amount of objects which we usually do not doubt to deserve the status of art would consequently lose it. Holding (3) leads us to denying that a large amount of religious, political, or tribal art is art, because it was created to serve a religious, etc., rather than an aesthetic function, and its ability to promote aesthetic communication or possession of aesthetic properties is rather contingent or incidental, in this way quite akin to plastic cutlery or political speeches. The obvious answer here is that, although secondary or subordinate, the aesthetic function was still present, unlike in some modern art. However, this rejoinder is misguided and easily falsified with historical examples, and likely rests on an unjustified premise which attributes modern aesthetic attitudes to the people of the past. Up until the 18th Century (and certainly in Antiquity and the Middle Ages) art not only served primarily religious, political, social and economic functions, but also what could be called the ‘aesthetic’ experience the contemporaries had of it was quite unlike the aesthetic experience a functionalist requires (Shiner 2001 4, 24-7, 34, etc.). Sculptures, paintings and poems were treated with appreciation, but exactly the same sort of appreciation that was given to political speeches, athletic competitions and virtuous persons. There is a great body of evidence showing that the experience of art prevalent up until the 18th Century was nothing like the modern aesthetic attitude, and that even if art’s function was tied with what we would call its aesthetic properties, this function was not to elicit the sort of aesthetic response or experience we typically have. Similarly, a great deal of primitive art completely disregards the aesthetic function – the sculptures of the Kalabari of southern Nigeria 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). For another African people, the Lega,
carvings are apparently used simply as vehicles for communication and not valued for their intrinsic form.’ Moreover, ‘if a carving is broken or lost, or taken by an outsider, most initiates are not unduly worried, replacing it with "something that is functional and … is the semantic equivalent"’ (Layton [1991] 10; after Biebuyck [1973] 164) (Fig. 1.6). It is simply somewhat anachronistic, and smells of Enlightenment universalism, to just assume that art was always experienced and made to be experienced the way we experience it.

This applies not only to some selected primitive sculptures. Most of the inscriptions, icons, etc. created within the worlds’ greatest religious systems were clearly not intended as much to please the eye as to pass on some sort of message, or to lead the soul to God(s). The writers of icons were not concerned about whether their works looked good,
1.3 Functionalism

i.e. that they were aesthetically pleasing to humans or God - instead the colours, shapes, composition, virtually every aspect of the work, was determined by the religious message it was to convey. This is why the creation of icons was referred to as ‘writing’ rather than ‘painting’. In fact, similarly to many early Christian artworks, they were judged ugly by the people of the Renaissance precisely because they did not attempt to aesthetically please, but to express a symbolic meaning, or to focus presumed magical or religious powers. It is very revealing to read Vasari expressing his disappointment at late Roman works such as Constantine’s Arch, which ‘entirely lost all [the] perfection of design’ of ancient art, and his disgust for the ‘Goths and other barbarous and foreign nations who combined to destroy all the superior arts’ (Vasari 1963 vol. 1, pp. 6-7) (Fig. 1.7). It was not until the early 20th Century when similar views were challenged by such art historians as Alois Riegl, with their idea that one can aesthetically appreciate art different from one’s contemporary works.37

Similarly, the religious function of sacred music in the Middle Ages completely trumped its aesthetic function. To be sure, the Fathers of the Church whose theory determined the shape of art at the time were fully aware that music could be aesthetically pleasing – they actually explicitly did what they could to make sure that sacred music is not, because it was meant to convey meanings and direct the soul to God, not to worldly pleasures. Knowing full well that music can change one’s mood, please and impress (after all, they read Plato), they specifically forbade what is merely aesthetically pleasant – thus sacred music could use no instruments (which can produce beautiful sounds, but are unable to word a message), could not be composed in the locrian modus (because its root note together with the root note of its plagal modus did not form a perfect fourth or fifth, but a tritone, or diabulus in musica), had to be set in a form defined to suit the type of text expressed, etc. (Harman 1988 2-21). Boethius in his De institutione musica did not even

37Riegl complains at length about the disregard towards late Roman and early Mediaeval art, which used to be unstudied and treated with disregard, because ‘it is simply unclassical’, i.e. not aesthetic in the classical sense (Rieg 1985 8).
consider what he called *musica instrumentalis* (the sounds music makes) as a thing worth enquiring into, almost entirely focusing on the theological and mathematical theory behind it – he did not care what music sounded like, just what meanings it embodied (McKinnon 1990: 85). Such an approach is very akin to (1) – modern anti-art, or at least (3) – political or social art. Especially the latter seems to aim at exactly what St. Basil recommended: ‘God blended the delight of melody with doctrines in order that through the pleasantness and softness of the sound we might unawares receive what was useful in words’ (Harman 1988: 2). He clearly conceived of music as simply a form of propaganda, in which the aesthetic attractiveness is merely a convenient aid to passing on a religious message. All this was followed by such great composers as Guido of Arezzo, shaping Mediaeval and influencing Renaissance music - all of which functionalists would certainly include in their canon. Yet while we might praise medieval Christian artworks for their aesthetic value,
they were created with no more thought directed towards it than religious sermons which
could just as well employ aesthetic means to convey their messages.

What are the consequences for a functionalist, given that past attitudes toward paint-
ings, sculptures, music, etc., were not meant, and had no ability, to elicit aesthetic experi-
ences in the modern sense of the word, no more than political speeches, magic rituals and
a person’s virtue did? To remain consistent, a functionalist would need to either accept
that all things which elicited aesthetic experiences in the old sense are art, and thereby
become vastly over-inclusive, or if they wish to stick with the modern sense, admit that
old and primitive paintings, sculptures and poems became art mid-life, mostly around the
18th Century.

While functionalism might be right in wanting to exclude some objects popularly
thought of as artworks from the domain of art, the theory itself does not provide tools
good enough to draw the line in the right place. Exclusion of such masterpieces as music
by Guido of Arezzo and much of Romanesque sculpture is simply unacceptable. Once again,
employing historical qualifications might be helpful, however it would result in modifying
the definition in a proceduralist fashion.

Intentions again

Similarly to historicism, Beardsley’s functionalism heavily depends on the intentions of the
author, and thus it seems that the same sort of criticism is appropriate. Iseminger’s view
also seems to face these problems, as it requires the intentional creation of something to
be appreciated. However, while Kafka’s case seems fatal for historicism, Beardsley leaves
an escape route – simply by employing the second part of his definition he can say that,
even though we cannot tell if The Trial was intended as an artwork, or possibly even if

While the fact that Iseminger requires not only the intent for the object to be appreciated, but also
that it actually is appreciated might remove some problems related to the cheapness of intentions, it might
at the same time make the definition susceptible to the issues related to private art, objects becoming art
‘mid-life’, and primarily – there being no one left to recognise the value of the work.
it was intended not to be one, it is a work of a certain kind (a novel) which, especially considering all its aesthetic qualities, certainly qualifies as a (reasonably) typical member of a class of things which are normally intended to produce an aesthetic experience.

This solution, however, leaves us in a quite uncomfortable situation, in two ways. We may be forced to similarly ascribe art-status to artifacts we feel less comfortable with than Kafka’s novels. Say a poem was found which is absolutely horribly written and in fact was a fake love letter with which Abelard wanted to secretly pass on a message to Heloise – i.e. it was not intended to impress her aesthetically (and indeed is of such a poor quality that it does not impress us either), but to inform her of his whereabouts. It seems that because we cannot be sure of the author’s intentions, just in virtue of the fact that it is a poem, regardless of how badly it is written, we must accept it as a work of art. Even if we agree that it is a poor work of art, we are still not at liberty to say that it is not a work of art at all, unless we somehow discover what Abelard’s real intentions were (then we would classify his writing under the kind ‘secret message’ rather than ‘poem’, and not treat it as a pretender to the status of art).

If this is so, not only does it seem that Beardsley’s solution is not adequate – in this case he himself criticises it, because as in the case of IT he discusses, here an object only becomes an artwork once it is acclaimed by the public (cf. Beardsley 1982a: 132). In general it seems that while the first part of his definition leaves us with the same problem of vagueness that intentionalism is doomed to face, the second part only pretends to solve it, while in fact it does little explanatory work. Quite probably it could do more explanatory work were it to elaborate on what determines that a work is of a certain kind, or which kinds are typically intended to produce aesthetic experiences, but the likelihood is that such an explanation would require a reference to either the history of art and other artworks, or to the society in which those artworks are made and judged, and in this case once again it would start to lean considerably towards proceduralism.
Davies’ objection

Stephen Davies presented an interesting objection designed to show that, while art definitely has an artistic function, it often happens that it is not thanks to this artistic function that a thing is considered art, but conversely that its artistic function is due to the fact that it has been classified as art (S. Davies [1991] 66ff). The argument is based on Danto’s claim that artworks such as the *Brillo Boxes* have aesthetic properties which identical boxes that have not been displayed in an artworld context lack. These properties are acquired by objects purely in virtue of them being called art, with no change made to the object itself. If this is the case, Davies continues, it seems that through being called art (i.e. a procedure) an object can attain aesthetic properties, and then in virtue of having those properties it can serve the function of art. Thus the dependence is inverted in a way which suggests that it is the procedural approaches which take precedence before anything can be decided on the basis of the work’s function. While a functionalist might try to resist this conclusion, Davies argues, it seems that he could only do so by assuming functionalism and facing charges of circularity. Note also that this criticism can be applied to all forms of functionalism alike.

1.4 The Cluster Account

The theory advanced by Berys Gaut in his “Art” as a Cluster Concept’, unlike the previously discussed views, does not explicitly try to provide a definition of art – instead it is concerned with its adequate ‘characterisation’, or providing an ‘account’ of what art is, not set in terms of a conjunction of necessary and sufficient conditions.\(^3^9\) Gaut tries

\(^3^9\) Gaut’s is not the first attempt to provide a disjunctive definition, but arguably the most developed and successful one. The idea of a family-resemblance analysis was discussed since Weitz’s and Kennick’s anti-essentialist papers (1956 and 1958), and even some fully formed definitions have already been offered, (see: Tatarkiewicz [1971], Kamber [1993], Dutton [2000]), and some others have been inspired by Gaut (Longworth and Scarantino [2010]).
to provide a disjunctive analysis of the term ‘art’, and disjunctive analyses are not what is usually meant under the term ‘definition’ – and thus he claims to preserve the anti-essentialism of Weitz’s account (Gaut 2000: 40; cf. Gaut 2005: 284f.), and in fact expand on Weitz’s suggestion that what matters in aesthetics are various criteria used to identify art (Weitz 1956: 33). While some critics argue that the cluster account is a definition after all, I would like to skip over what I think is largely a terminological dispute, because I take the distinction to be of little importance. After all, the institutional theory is not a ‘proper definition’ either, and ultimately in my theory the cluster account will not carry the definitional burden, so I take this issue to be irrelevant for my purposes.

I reconstruct the account as follows:

The concept ‘artwork’ is properly applied to an object iff this object is an artifact which has a certain non-arbitrary subset of a set (cluster) of properties commonly ascribed to art, thus bearing a family resemblance to other artworks.

The theory is based on Wittgensteinian views about family resemblance – one concept can apply to a number of diverse objects not because they all share a given property, but because they stand in the relation of resemblance. The basic claim Gaut makes is that family resemblance does not have to be understood in terms of the resemblance-to paradigm, but rather that of cluster concepts. On the first understanding two objects which share no relevant properties are both art because they both share their properties with a paradigmatic instance of art – such a view faces the simple problems of having to arbitrarily point at paradigmatic instances and dealing with the vagueness of the resemblance relation. The latter understanding, however, can bypass these issues by presenting a set of properties independent of any paradigmatic examples, a cluster of properties which are criteria for the application of a concept. Thus two objects can share no relevant properties and yet

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40 Elements of the discussion can be found in (Adajian 2003; S. Davies 2004; Gaut 2005; Meskin 2007; Stecker 2000); in practice Gaut is concerned with answering the question ‘what is art’ which is what definitions are concerned with, and thus regardless of its structure it serves the same purpose.
1.4 The Cluster Account

fall under the same concept, because the relevant properties they have are included in the cluster.

Let me now focus on particular elements of this account. Firstly, the concept is properly applied if an object has a *subset of the set* of properties commonly ascribed to art. This is the central point of the theory, and Gaut characterises it in three stages: (1) fewer than all properties belonging to the cluster and instantiated in an object can be sufficient to apply the concept ‘art’ to that object; (2) none of the properties is individually necessary for the concept to apply; (3) some of the properties are disjunctively necessary for the concept to apply (Gaut 2000: 27). Thus two objects can both fall under a concept even if the subsets of criterial properties they have are disjoint, because (1) they need not have all the properties, (2) there is no one such property that they need to have, and (3) they can both have a minimum necessary amount or combination of properties included in the cluster.

Secondly, there is one property which is in fact necessary for an object to qualify as art – *artifactuality*. Gaut is happy to accept that transforming an object into an artifact is something relatively easy – selecting is enough in the cases of found art or readymades – but he insists that it is ‘artworks that are involved here’, i.e. an action is required to make something art (ibid.: 29). As in the case of IT this requirement seems to be accepted with little argument, as obvious (I will devote some more space to this issue in section 2.2.7). While it is treated as a necessary condition, it does not challenge the disjunctiveness of the cluster theory, because artifactuality is in no way distinctive of art. Importantly, Gaut denies that artifact-making must be a part of a cultural practice of any kind – if it were, objects created outside the society (earlier referred to as ‘private art’) could not be art. The issue of private art was discussed in section 1.1.2 and I will return to it in section 3.1.

Thirdly, what is included in the cluster are *properties commonly ascribed to art* or the *criteria* of arthood. There is no great theory behind selecting the particular properties –

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41I use this term in the meaning offered in Gaut’s paper.
they are chosen *prima facie* as those ‘properties the presence of which ordinary judgement
counts toward something’s being a work of art, and the absence of which counts against
its being art’. The ten criteria Gaut lists as likely candidates are (Gaut 2000: 28):

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

Notably, some of those properties include the words ‘art’, ‘artwork’ or ‘artist’, thereby
making the analysis circular. However, Gaut claims, similarly to Dickie, that circularity
does not have to be fatal for theories (or definitions) ‘provided they are informative’ (ibid.: 28).
The informativeness of the account is thought to be achieved differently than in IT
(which referred to the ‘width’ of the circle) – the cluster account is informative ‘because
of the presence of noncircularly specified properties [and] because there are substantive
constraints on the application of the circular criteria — we can know whether someone intends to make a work of art by consulting him.\footnote{Although I wish best luck to those who want to consult some of the long deceased artists about their intentions, I will not discuss the failures of intentionalism here — it was partially discussed already and will be discussed later. I would only like to note that while I am suspicious about the non-circularity of at least parts of the cluster account, I am happy to accept that its circularity is not fatal in the sense offered by Dickie.}

Fourthly, the above set of properties is defeasible. There is no reason why new properties should not be added to the cluster, or even some of the above properties removed, or replaced by other, more adequate ones. The theory defended by Gaut holds that ‘artwork’ is a cluster concept, not that exactly what is included in the cluster is absolutely correct, and changing the number or composition of the properties included does not challenge the structure of the theory.

Finally, the subsets of properties in virtue of which an object can fall under the concept ‘art’ are not completely arbitrary. In other words, not just any subset of properties from the cluster will be sufficient for the concept to apply — otherwise objects such as philosophy papers (which can be formally complicated, original and intellectually challenging) would be art. Thus only certain subsets of properties are sufficient for the object having them to fall under the concept.

On top of this, an error theory is used to explain why we are driven towards conjunctive and simpler definitions — aesthetic, formalist and other definitions commit the fallacy of unjustifiably inflating one of the criteria included in the cluster to the status of a necessary and sufficient condition for arthood. The cluster account thus not only can explain what is art, but also why the previous definitions of art have failed.

### 1.4.1 Advantages of the cluster account

I take one of the main advantages of the cluster analysis to be somewhat similar to what I find important in the institutional theory — it explicitly tries to account for how art is
actually regarded in our society, both in its content and structure. Gaut follows Wittgenstein’s advice: ‘don’t think, but look’, and selects his proposed criteria after reflecting on ‘how the concept in question is used in the language’ (Gaut 2000: 28; cf. Gaut 2005: 277), which, as I stressed while discussing Dickie’s view (see p. 22), is what forms the basis for reflection on art as a social phenomenon. This might be a somewhat unfair treatment of Gaut, who agrees that the concept of art can have only developed in a society, human or alien, but does not think that it has a socially determined extension. However, I do not think that pointing out this advantage is completely contrary to the spirit of the cluster theory. This is because firstly, it remains to be proven that some of the criteria quoted are indeed culture-dependent – if they were universal then even though including them in the cluster follows from reflection on cultural practices, they are not counterfactually dependant on those practices, i.e. they can exist in alien worlds. And secondly, the cluster is expandable and allows for additions or even modifications of the criteria, and thus by being derived from our artistic practice does not exclude the possibility of adding criteria characteristic of other, even alien practices.

On the structural side, the cluster theory also seems more apt for providing an account of art as a social phenomenon – its basic motivation lies in the observation that art as it evolved through the centuries is not a unified phenomenon, and as such is very hard or perhaps impossible to describe in a simple and neat definition. Following Weitz, it recognises that as a human (or alien) dependant phenomenon it is simply somewhat messy and in places completely arbitrary, and instead of trying to sweep this fact under the carpet and provide a conjunctive theory which accounts for most of art, it settles for a disjunctive one which can encompass all of it.\footnote{Gaut advances similarly disjunctive theories in other domains as well, including his patchwork theory of interpretation of art (cf. Gaut 1993).} By the same token, even though it might be independent of the contingencies of our history of art, it explains them – the reason
why it is messy and uneven is because criteria for arthood were not grouped according to some definition, but on the basis of family resemblance (Gaut 2000: 34).

Another related advantage lies in stressing heuristic utility. Gaut is quite happy to accept that his account may turn out wrong after all, but he recognises what I believe is one of the most important features of scientific enquiry at least since Popper and Kuhn – as long as a view is an improvement on other views and is heuristically more fruitful, it is to be preferred for methodological reasons (Gaut 2005: 276-7). If fruitfulness is to be obtained at the cost of losing the status of a definition, so be it, because in scientific theories accuracy is more important than simplicity or elegance. In fact, I believe that in this case it would be more than appropriate to extend the error theory used in the argument to a meta-level and explain not the content of different definitions of art, but the very drive to characterise art in terms of a definition. It could be argued that similarly to how we are biased towards simplicity and thus unjustifiably prefer simple definitions to complex disjunctive ones (ibid.: 282), we are, as analytic philosophers, biased towards explaining concepts in terms of proper definitions – perhaps because aesthetics is thought to be required to use the same tools as metaphysics or epistemology, or perhaps because of unjustified protectionism against continental philosophy and the social sciences (see Wolterstorff 1989 for an interesting historical account for that phenomenon). The cluster account, however, remains indifferent to this sort of bias and tries to search for truth where it actually is, not where we want it to be.

Apart from the above, there is a number of what can be described as ‘better off than’ advantages over other discussed theories. These are important from a methodological point of view – they ensure that the theory is broader, has greater explanatory power, and is susceptible to a smaller amount of objections than its rivals, and thus should be preferable (Gaut 2000: 35-6). In general, by providing multiple criteria for arthood Gaut does not
have to rely on anything as strong as others do – even if it can be shown that a given object was created with no relevant intentions (which would disqualify it in Levinson’s view), or that it has no aesthetic function (as Beardsley would require), it can still count as art in virtue of having other properties included in the cluster.

Firstly, the cluster account can explain private art. As mentioned in the discussion of IT and historicism, the issue of lone artists who are completely disconnected from the artworld or perhaps any society whatsoever does require some sort of explanation, and unlike IT, the cluster account can allow for it. While *prima facie* this seems to be an advantage of the theory, as I have argued above (see p. 27) it may not ultimately be of such great importance. The issue will be again discussed in section 3.1.

Secondly, it can also deal with ‘alien’ art which is completely independent from the history of our art. As discussed on page 40, this could be a serious problem for historicism. The cluster theory, on the other hand, does refer to some historical relations – ‘established genres’ are naturally to be explained historically – but does not make them essential.

Thirdly, by stressing the plurality of art’s functions, the cluster account avoids the problems of functionalism – difficulties in determining what exactly is the function of art and denying arthood to objects which do not perform the function, even though they are commonly recognised as art (e.g. readymades).

Finally, the cluster view does not face perhaps the strongest problem to IT – Wollheim’s dilemma. Instead, Gaut actually provides us with a list of criteria on the basis of which we commonly take something to be art, thus following the first horn of the dilemma and providing an account which, as Wollheim predicted, does not need to depend on the artworld. This, perhaps the most inspirational part for my cultural theory, will be discussed at length in section 2.2.6.
1.4.2 Objections to the cluster account

Error theory for everyone

The cluster account claims not only to have explained what is art, but also why there are discussions about the definition at all. By employing an error theory Gaut explains away the intuitions of those who follow other theories of art as mistakenly assuming that one of the criteria for arethood included in the cluster is in fact a necessary condition (Gaut 2000: 36-7). Thomas Adajian challenges this claim as slightly overrated – it is not clear why Gaut can use the error theory to favour his account and other theories cannot. There is no reason why those who offer other definitions couldn’t say that Gaut is in error in treating what is in fact a necessary condition as a mere criterion (Adajian 2003: 383-4).

However, a story can be told of why the cluster account is in a better position to use error theory after all (Gaut 2005: 282-3). For one, it can explain a wider range of definitions. It might be true that a functionalist can claim that the cluster theorist is in error by reducing the necessary condition of having an aesthetic function to a mere criterion, but it cannot similarly explain why an expressionist or a formalist are also in error. The cluster theorist, on the other hand, is welcome to run the same argument against all of them. The main point, however, is that error theory is based on exposing biases which cause misjudgements, and it seems that the bias a cluster theorist can appeal to in order to explain any other definition is more persuasive. It is a common cognitive bias to simplify complicated things (e.g. by reducing the number of criteria), while it is quite an uncommon bias to complicate simple things. Thus a cluster theorist appeals to something far more likely (and well recognised by other disciplines) than what is available to those who want to use error theory against him. Ultimately I agree with Gaut that this criticism merely points out that a certain move is available to both sides of the argument, while completely ignoring the fact that only one side is actually correct in making it.
Irrelevant criteria

An interesting objection has been raised by Aaron Meskin in his ‘The Cluster Account of Art Reconsidered’. He argues that on Gaut’s understanding of how fulfilling various criteria ‘counts towards’ an object being art, any arbitrary property which can be co-instantiated with the ten criteria offered (e.g. ‘having been made on a Thursday’), will count as a criterion as well. This is because such an 11th criterion would be, similarly to the other ten, not necessary for the application of the concept, added to any sufficient subset it would be a member of a sufficient subset, and added to any disjunctively necessary subset it would also be a member of a disjunctively necessary subset. This is, however, highly dubious – why should ‘having been made on a Thursday’ count towards something being an artwork?

Meskin offers some possible solutions to this problem, arguing that neither of them is really satisfactory. While it has been discussed by other authors, it seems that the objection largely misfires. While Meskin mentions that we could recognise which properties are irrelevant for arthood by Wittgensteinian ‘looking and seeing’ how the concept is used, he writes that this merely excludes some wildly irrelevant properties while preserving others, e.g. it is still likely that ‘hanging on gallery walls’ or ‘having high monetary value’ would be taken by many as criterial, because of how the concept ‘art’ is used. However, this assumes that what Gaut needs to inspect to find out which properties are criterial is particular objects (in which case the objects are taken with all their other irrelevant properties), whereas in fact what is required is inspection of particular subsets of criterial properties to find out which of them are sufficient (in which case irrelevant properties remain irrelevant, because the sufficient subsets are established regardless of particular objects and all their non-criterial properties).

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45 See: (Longworth and Scarantino 2010) for a possible account for how one of Meskin’s proposed replies could be followed to resolve the objection.
The cultural theory I am about to propose can expand on this issue. I not only agree that the criterial properties should be inspected by ‘looking and seeing’, I think that they should be inspected using the methods of the social sciences. What needs to be done, in fact, is not to look for some universal properties through the contingent characteristics of people’s beliefs about them, but checking precisely for the beliefs people hold about art and about what makes art, and assigning them the cultural contexts within which they are held.

Utility and Institutions - a historical dilemma

In the following I will develop an objection which culminates in facing a cluster theorist with a dilemma: either the cluster account is so complex that it ceases to be useful, or it contains an essential institutional element.

Let me start by reevaluating an objection raised by Adajian. Gaut claims that his theory provides us with good tools for accounting for objects which border on being art, but are not – the reason why we wonder whether they should be treated as artworks or not is because they have a large amount of properties included in the cluster (Gaut 2000: 36). However, it seems that this feature actually causes more problems than it is worth, for how exactly are we to distinguish objects narrowly on either side of the borderline of what is and is not art? It seems that while jewellery or dinners may be similar to art in virtue of possessing a number of properties included in the cluster, they may not in fact have any less cluster properties than some artworks – especially readymades and found art which often lack quite a few. To follow Adajian, ‘this means, though, that the cluster view has no resources for saying, of any given thing with some but not all of the criterial properties, whether that thing is an artwork, not an artwork, or a borderline case’ (Adajian 2003: 382). (Perhaps this point can even be strengthened: because Gaut holds that the cluster is defeasible, it means that we cannot determine the arthood of objects which have all of the properties currently included in the cluster, because other properties can be added.)
If this is the case, the objection follows, the cluster account lacks explanatory power – and especially for a theory which boasts methodological superiority over its competitors such a flaw seems fatal.

I think that the answer provided to this objection not only fails to resolve it, but actually points to the next objection I shall raise. In ‘The Cluster Account of Art Defended’ Gaut first notes that it is impossible to determine that e.g. any object which satisfies the minimum of eight criteria is thereby art. It is also impossible to reliably weight the criteria and say that an object has to satisfy whatever number of criteria provided their joint weight is sufficient. Instead, we should employ ‘the familiar method of inspection: that is, consider the particular subset, and consider whether something satisfying it is a borderline case or not’ (Gaut 2005: 280). If it is found that two objects, of which one is commonly considered art and the other one is not, both satisfy the same criteria, then one should reconsider the classification of either of them and ascribe them the same status.

But let me stop here and innocently ask a softening-up question: just how much of this Wittgensteinian ‘looking and seeing’ does one have to do before one can actually use the cluster account? One would assume that a theory which boasts great heuristic utility should be useful, and easy to use. Yet upon closer inspection, it seems that the amount of work needed to make it actually work is near infinite. What Gaut requires one to do is to inspect the properties which can be criteria for art and decide whether they actually are or not. However, since no regular method for such an inspection is offered, the enterprise becomes extremely tiresome. One would need to inspect every possible property any object might have and decide whether this property is a criterion – this includes inspection both for ‘is beautiful’ and ‘has been made on a Thursday’, or indeed ‘is located more than 231 metres away from Jupiter’. While this might sound quite ridiculous, it would be necessary as no indication as to where we should inspect, no proviso which would limit the domain of

[46] The same applies to Longsworth’s and Scarantino’s disjunctive theory which may have solved Meskin’s problem, but seems to preserve all issues related to undefined borderlines and vagueness of Gaut’s original theory.
properties to inspect, is given. It could be argued that such a reductio is unjust – clearly one has some idea where to look for criteria, after all it is much more intuitive to look for them among a thing’s aesthetic rather than astronomical properties. I do agree that common intuitions can in this case be a certain guide, however I am sceptical as to whether or not they are enough. Even if one decides that intuitions are trustworthy (which I think is far from obvious), they do not seem to be a sufficiently stringent limitation – they might suggest that one should look for criteria in one place, but it seems implausible that they could entirely rule out the need to look elsewhere. In other words, were one to follow one’s intuition and construct a set of criteria from only the intuitive candidate properties, one could only say that the result is an approximate set of criteria, which could be complete, but one cannot be entirely certain of that before one inspects the infinity of less intuitive properties.

At this stage this issue seems no more problematic for a cluster theorist than for anyone else – after all, if the epistemologists know anything, it is that they never even knew that their definition of ‘knowledge’ was missing something until Gettier pointed it out. Surely similar scepticism could be applied to any definition, and the cluster account is no worse off because of it. Yet one thing seems to complicate things – while other definitions claim to provide necessary and sufficient conditions for falling under a concept, the cluster account does no such thing, and openly invites modifications to the set of criteria it proposes. Finding a new condition falsifies other definitions (undermining the sufficiency claim of their sets of conditions), whereas finding a new cluster element merely adds to the complexity of the account. This might seem like a very weak softening-up objection right now, but it will become more significant once combined with other issues which make the account extremely complicated.

Still, one could think such a solution satisfactory enough. However, this is only the first step of the problem. Given that a set of all criteria has been established, the method of inspection now has to be used to determine all sufficient subsets of the set. Assuming
that Gaut’s set is complete, i.e. that there are only 10 criteria, this requires one to inspect exactly $2^{10}$ possible combinations of those properties – exactly 1024 possibilities, each of which should be inspected threefold, as a clearly sufficient, clearly insufficient or a borderline subset. Every new criterion doubles the number. While it is certainly possible to do all this, and the cluster theorist may be unperturbed by such minor ‘computational difficulties’, it seems simply awkward that a theory which claims great heuristic utility requires so much work. Still, this objection can only be treated as a softening-up objection, one which exposes the limitations of the theory, rather than seriously challenges it.

To overcome these limitations, Gaut could also hold that the ‘inspection’ could be understood not as the typical philosophical enquiry into our intuitions, but actual empirical research, e.g. finding out which properties people actually do treat as criteria and which subsets of the found set of criteria are sufficient. Such treatment would indeed be very helpful – there would be no need to inspect infinite amounts of properties or every combination from the set, one could just collect the ones which are commonly thought of as criteria or their sufficient subsets. I sympathise with this solution, but I think that it merely points to a much more serious problem – it seems more than likely that such research would show that people’s judgements in this matter are history-dependant and, following that, so is the cluster. (As will become clear later, this constitutes a step towards my own theory, as while Gaut would probably hold that inspection allows one to discover the only set and sufficient subsets of criteria that there is, I will claim that there are many such sets and sufficient subsets, and they are relative to the societies inspected.)

Additionally, I think that Gaut’s claim about the impossibility of weighting criteria is too quick. It is indeed awkward to say that being beautiful weighs five units of arthood while being intellectually challenging only three. At the same time, however, it seems quite natural to think that we weight criteria differently when we discuss art from different times. This, together with the following points I want to make, is from historical change, and will form my main argument against the cluster account.
To say that the cluster is history-dependant is to say that such things as how many and which properties should be included in the cluster, how those properties are weighted relative to one another, and which subsets of properties are sufficient for arthood, can all change depending on the historical context in which they are considered. In other words, determining the arthood of objects in different historical contexts calls for different, adequately indexed criteria. Moreover, showing that criteria and their cluster(s) are history-relative comes dangerously close to showing that what actually matters in determining the arthood of objects is not what criteria they satisfy, but what people think are the criteria they should satisfy at various times in order to be art. This, though, would lead one towards accepting a form of institutionalism.

Most modern definitions of art try to determine what ‘art’ means now, rather than what it meant historically, and the cluster theory is no different – so it seems that no historical arguments could threaten it. There are, however, two understandings of ‘historical’, and at least one of them can present a true challenge. On one hand, one can ask whether the composition and relative weighing of criteria in the cluster do not change historically, e.g. the cluster which we accept now is different from the cluster which people from the 16th Century would use. A cluster theorist could probably discard any objections based on such understanding and simply admit that his theory was only designed to apply to our current use.\footnote{As I will argue later, while this is not a drawback of a theory, a different theory which would be applicable both in modern and historical cases would enjoy a greater scope and explanatory power and thus methodological superiority; see section \ref{sec:clustertheories}}

On the other hand, however, one can ask whether when judging art from different times now we do not apply different clusters to art from different times, e.g. do we not judge mediaeval art differently from classical art, and differently again from modern art? I argue that we in fact do, and it is this understanding I adopt when speaking of history-relativity in following paragraphs. For example, when we judge mediaeval religious art, we ascribe a different importance to creativity or originality or imagination (Gaut’s criterion (vii)) than
when we judge modern art. For a modern artwork to be ascribed the property ‘imaginative’ or ‘creative’ it needs to be radically different from other works, whereas some mediaeval works can differ from their contemporary art in minute details and yet still be treated as very original. The reason naturally lies in the fact that we recognise modern art is created in a society that is rapidly changing, after the Avantgarde set certain standards, etc., while mediaeval art was created in a very conservative society and was largely funded by the conservative state or Church which discouraged ‘exercising creative imagination’. In fact, being imaginative was seen as a vice in an artist, and ‘thinkers as varied as Hobbes, Descartes, and Pascal declared it liable to fanaticism, madness, or illusion’ (Shiner 2001: 66). In such a context it seems natural that we should treat even rather moderate amounts of creativity with higher esteem than we would in the case of romantic art, where being creative was most actively encouraged.

Thus either the meaning of the word ‘creative’ is different when applied to these two types of art, and so Gaut’s criterion (vii) is in fact at least two separate criteria (perhaps: ‘is an exercise in creative-for-the-14th-Century imagination’ and ‘is an exercise in creative-for-the-21st-Century imagination’), or the amount of creativity required is relative to the types of art being judged, which are themselves relative to the historical and cultural contexts in which they were created. Either way, the composition or the weighing of the elements in the cluster is time-relative. Similar arguments could be run for other criteria – we require more aesthetic qualities from pre-avantgarde art than from modern art, more expressiveness from romantic than from classical art, more individuality from post-romantic than pre-romantic art, etc. Another comprehensive example is provided by Pettersson and concerns literature – as a matter of fact, the term ‘literature’ is applied to modern texts differently than it is to old ones, in particular, it includes only ‘imaginative literature’ with respect to modern texts, but practically any non-technical texts when applied to ancient or medieval ones (Pettersson 2001: 87-88; cf. Shiner 2001: 69). Thus while we do recognise Cicero’s speeches as literature, were texts in all relevant respects similar (i.e. fulfilling the
1.4 The Cluster Account

same criteria) written in modern times, they would likely not be literature (and thus not art)\[48\].

It could be objected that it is not in fact the case that originality in the above example is weighted differently – medieval art is treated as art simply in virtue of satisfying different subsets of criteria than modern art, even though it is not particularly original. However, actual practice supports my analysis. Medieval artworks often are described as extremely original, even though their actual innovation consists of something rather minor by modern standards, e.g. Duccio’s *Maestà* is often described as revolutionary in changing the iconography of the Virgin from the Byzantine style to a more ‘worldly’, approachable image (Perrig [1995] 44, 63), but clearly removing some gold from Mary’s robe and making her look more motherly cannot objectively compare with the Avantgarde standards of re-inventing art completely with every single work (Fig. 1.8). Yet it is common and indeed

\[48\] Pettersson argues that this is because the meaning of the term ‘literature’ has changed over time and ‘many older texts of kinds that would not now be seen as literary are still called "literature"’, mainly, I think, because they were literature according to early nineteenth century usage and have retained that historically acquired classification. As a consequence, histories of literature include almost all and any texts from early periods, while only imaginative literature qualifies when we come to the twentieth century sections.’ (Pettersson 2001 87).
Reconstruction of selected modern theories of classification of art

seems natural to think that it is this originality which partially makes works like *Maestà* artworks, i.e. it might be at least in some cases a non-disposable element of many sufficient subsets of criteria. But this would also suggest that ‘creative’ as applied in a modern context means something different, more demanding – thus what changes over time is how much innovation must be introduced in a piece for it to be called original.[49]

Additionally, if one were to take one artwork and change the historical context in which one judges it, it seems likely that the weight given to the criteria would change. Consider Malevich’s *Black Square* – as an avantgarde piece it is an artwork largely in virtue of its creativity (other criteria might include ‘being intended as art’, ‘being in the genre of painting’) (Fig. 1.9). However, were an identical object created by Masaccio, it is unlikely

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49 Whether most modern works actually live up to the high creativity standards is another thing. However, were a modern work creative in the same way as Duccio’s, i.e. took an established iconographic model and merely changed a couple details, it would likely not be treated as creative at all and if it would be art, it would be in virtue of satisfying a subset of criteria which would not include (vii).
that we would call it an artwork, and this is at least partially because in the case of proto-
Renaissance art we do not normally require creativity as much as expressiveness, successful
representation and showing a high degree of skill. What this example shows is that either
the originality criterion has a greater importance when applied to art created in modern
times (where 'showing a high degree of skill' is seen as less important in works created now
than before the Avantgarde); or the cluster we use to account for modern objects includes
the criterion 'original-as-for-20th-C.', while the one used for proto-Renaissance art includes
'original-as-for-15th-C.'; or the subset of criteria satisfied by Black Square is sufficient in
the cluster used for modern art, but is insufficient in the one used for proto-Renaissance
art.

A cluster theorist can choose one of two possibilities now: either time-index the prop-
erties in the cluster, or index the clusters. On the first option, the cluster of criteria
includes no universal properties such as 'being expressive of emotion' or 'being an exercise
of creative imagination', but only context-indexed properties such as 'being expressive-for-
pre-Romantic-art', 'being creative-for-14th-Century-European-art', etc. The alternative is
to index not the properties but the clusters - so we would judge Black Square according
to the sufficient subsets of properties from cluster_{Modernism}, and Maestà according to
cluster_{Medieval}, and while the properties in those clusters might be the same, different
combinations of those properties form sufficient subsets, and perhaps the same properties
are weighted differently in different clusters. A dilemma follows: either there is one cluster
which includes properties with all possible relevant context-indexes, or there are as many
clusters as there are relevant contexts.

On the first horn of this dilemma, the theory becomes impossible to use. To determine
which objects are artworks one needs to first know which subsets of criteria are suffi-
cient, and the method of finding out leads through inspection. Above I was trying to
show that this can be a rather demanding venture even if the cluster only included the
ten criteria proposed by Gaut – assuming that one did filter out all actual criteria from
the infinite unrelated properties an artwork-to-be might have, there are 1024 candidate sufficient subsets to check. Were one now to add only another ten properties indexed to art from Maestà’s time, the number would increase to 1048576 – over a million combinations to check by ‘looking and seeing’. Following the roughest art-historical divisions and distinguishing only prehistoric, ancient, Mediaeval, Renaissance, Mannerist, Baroque, Classicist, Romantic, Modernist and Contemporary art, takes the number to an astronomical $1.2676506 \times 10^{30}$. To actually tell whether an object is an artwork, technically a cluster theorist needs to first inspect an insane million trillion trillion potential sufficient subsets of criteria. When introducing finer distinctions, allowing for cultural variations, and allowing for future contexts, the number seems to grow to infinity.

Some might be tempted to say that this is merely a technical, computational difficulty which does not undermine the validity of the account – especially considering that Gaut is only interested in defending its structure rather than its content or the particular criteria involved. However, it seems that particularly in this case the common philosophical disdain for any practical difficulties in actually using the knowledge formulated in theory is rather out of place. Although it is not uncommon for theories to be rather complex in practice, the cluster account might be incomparably more complicated than any other theory. Moreover, Gaut specifically says that he is (and all theorists should be) ‘trying to model a real human capacity (to apply the word ‘art’), and that requires a finite list, if the list comprises variegated criteria’ (Gaut 2005: 286). Yet, as the above shows, even if the list is not infinite, it is definitely beyond ‘human capacity’ to deal with it. What is more, Gaut’s account has multiple connections to very practical matters and treats those connections as virtues of the theory – the fact that criteria are found by looking and seeing, the stress placed on having to explain the concept in a way which will allow for the evolution of the phenomenon it captures, the need to update the content of the concept with changing practices, etc. And regardless of the particularities of the cluster account, I truly hope that even the most condescending theoreticians will agree that when the number of actions
required to make a theory work passes the million mark, the issue becomes more than that of mere computational complexity.

On the second horn of the dilemma no such problems arise – it is fairly clear that in judging Renaissance art we test works against the sufficient subsets from cluster\textit{Renaissance}. Clearly in this cluster different subsets of possibly even exactly the same criteria are sufficient as in cluster\textit{Modernism}. But accepting such differences must force one to ask for their origin: what are the variations in the sufficient subsets of criteria relative to? Surely indexing a cluster to a certain time period does not mean indexing it to some abstract date-shaped numbers, but to the societies, cultures and beliefs of this period – thus a clear answer is: clusters are relative to historical and cultural contexts. And it makes perfect explanatory sense – surely the fact that the criterion of creativity plays a much smaller role when applied to pre-18th Century art is directly related to the historical fact of most art being sponsored by the conservative Church and nobility\textsuperscript{50} We recognise this and treat works from different periods differently. Thus it seems that while Gaut actively denies that ‘art’ is a concept of a social practice (Gaut [2000] 29), explaining differences in the composition (and possibly relative weighting) of elements in the clusters requires reference to a social practice by which they are determined\textsuperscript{51} Doing this, however, must lead to the rejection of the cluster account in its present form. While it might be true that we determine the art-status of objects by testing their properties against sets of criteria provided by the cluster, those sets of criteria are relative to our social practices or, more to the point, to the practices of the artworld. In fact, the question which should be immediately asked after agreeing that certain artistic rules are determined conventionally is: ‘by whom?’ and the simplest answer must be: ‘by the members of an artworld’. Thus the cluster account

\\textsuperscript{50}Interestingly, such a view might be closer to Wittgenstein’s original treatment of cluster concepts which allowed for the concepts to change their meaning over time. (Wittgenstein [2001]).

\textsuperscript{51}Although he has changed his view since, in an earlier paper Gaut suggests that the criteria and sufficient subsets are context-relative: ‘There are no necessary and sufficient conditions for an object to be a work of art, since what is counted as such is a matter of family resemblance, where the conditions of resemblance are extremely complex, historically variable, contentious and partly determined by the persuasive skills of those who have power in these matters’ (Gaut [1993] 606).
would in practice be degraded to the role of an auxiliary theory which fills in the details of some form of institutional view.

To sum up, the cluster theorists face a dilemma – agreeing that art has a history, and that the art of different times is treated differently, means that the cluster account is either so complicated that it is useless, or it must include an essential institutional element. Even those who insist on treating practical uselessness as a mere technical detail rather than a fatal flaw must agree that some of the account’s professed aims might now be beyond reach – it is no longer modelling a real human capacity to apply the word ‘art’, it can no longer serve as a theory of art identification and it may lose a great deal of its heuristic utility. Choosing the second horn might prove much more fruitful, providing some links with the actual treatment of art from various periods and our historical knowledge of the artworlds of those periods. As I will argue in section 2.2.6, developing the cluster account in this direction is the right thing to do.
Chapter 2

Cultural definition of art

In the previous chapter I tried to show that none of the major modern theories provides a satisfactory analysis of the term ‘art’. Yet at the same time I tried to stress that all of those theories do in fact capture some of the most important intuitions and common views we have on art, and are at least partially quite successful. In this chapter I will present a definition which is built specifically to preserve the advantages of all four theories, and sidestep or deal with the main problems they face. It is not a patchwork definition, or an eclectic one – I will not treat elements of all of those theories on equal grounds. Instead, I will present a form of an institutional definition, in which only the institutional element plays a truly critical part, and the other views are subordinate to it. Because the crucial element of my view concerns relativisation to cultural contexts, I call it: the cultural definition of art.

There are several reasons why I choose to present a form of an institutional definition which uses its competitors as its elements rather than e.g. adopt the functional definition and make it its part. Firstly, I think that while the problems which I discussed above are fatal for other definitions, the issues it faces can be resolved in a much easier way. Secondly, I tried to show that solutions to quite a few problems which other theories face can be resolved relatively easily if one refers to the artworld – but this clearly comes at the
price of making the institutional aspect important and perhaps essential for those theories. In basing my definition on Dickie’s I simply follow this route. Finally, I believe that this solution is methodologically superior to other options, for reasons to be discussed below.

The account I am about to present has one important advantage over other views. Since most theories say that what they define is what ‘art’ means now, suggesting that ‘art’ probably meant something else before, surely one should ask: how and why did we come about this modern meaning of ‘art’, whatever it is? However, the discussed views seem to give this question little attention – no explanation is given for how and why ‘it has turned out that way’, or how and why ‘ways of regard have changed’, etc.\(^1\) The cultural theory developed in this chapter can answer those questions in a rather satisfactory way, and what is more important, a way compliant with the actual history of art and the concept of art (see: Shiner \(^2\)2001). Additionally, as should be expected, answers to the questions: what is art? and: how did we come about our concept of ‘art’? are parallel and confirm one another, producing a more complete theory.\(^2\)

2.1 Methodological considerations

Apart from being able to solve problems the other theories faced, I will try to show that my definition is also superior methodologically. There are some issues I would like to mention before I move on.

Firstly, a theory of art should have the 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. All the discussed

\(^1\)Historical theories try to be applicable to what art was in the past (e.g. Levinson 1993: 412), though not as closely to the extent that I will develop below.

\(^2\)Similar strategies are employed by other authors in many situations – being able to show how a certain concept or theory developed can shed some light on the concept or theory themselves, and either support or weaken it. Dickie did as much tracing the ancestry of the causal conception of aesthetic experience (Dickie 1965: 134)
theories have their limitations in this respect. The institutional definition cannot account for private art, and most importantly, can provide little justification for why a given object has been given the status of candidate for appreciation (cf. Wollheim’s objection). The historical definition cannot account for alien art, suffers from vagueness of the notion of ‘correct regard’, and its use of intentionalism makes it hopelessly vague in determining the arthood of objects which were not intended to be art. Functionalism, while most discriminatory of all, similarly depends on intentionalism and cannot properly define what a ‘correct’ aesthetic experience is. Finally, the cluster account suffers from being ahistorical and has serious problems in determining the difference between clear and borderline cases of art and non-art. The theory I will defend will remove the limitations of the institutional theory and avoid falling into the difficulties of other views.

Explanatory power is often treated by philosophers not only as the power to account for factual, but also counterfactual cases. In defending my view I will follow a simple principle: being able to explain counterfactual or just plainly unlikely cases is definitely a virtue of a theory, however, it is a lesser virtue than being able to explain actual and common cases. I believe that a theory which can provide a perfect explanation why e.g. a child raised by wolves who never had any contact with any society could produce art, and yet cannot explain why Kafka’s novels are art, does not have a great explanatory power at all. In fact, since most aesthetic theories cannot account for all of actual art, I find their boasting applicability to counterfactual cases of little importance – they seem to strive towards one ideal of art themselves, being very pretty without being particularly useful.

To follow on this point, thirdly, simplicity and parsimony are often taken as virtues. While I agree that a theory should indeed be as simple and parsimonious as possible, I believe that sacrificing explanatory power or the ability to truly account for actual phenomena for the sake of simplification is a mistake. I take this point to be especially important in the context of past theories of art – Weitz’s criticism was precisely pointing out that the traditional theories over-simplify the complex phenomenon art is, and concluding that art
is perhaps too complex to be defined at all. While the modern theories try to provide more complex accounts, it seems that they still oversimplify things too much, losing explanatory power and ability to draw distinctions where one would expect them to be. My definition will try to capture the complex and slightly messy phenomenon of art as accurately as possible, even if this means sacrificing some simplicity; at the same time I will try to keep my definition as simple as possible — but no more.

Fourthly, philosophical theories are judged on the basis of their intuitiveness, or ability to solve things in an intuitive way. I believe that the general idea behind this aim is correct — it makes sense to doubt the expressivist definition of art because it has extremely counterintuitive consequences: it entails that Bach’s fugues and Kandinsky’s geometrical abstractions are not art. Similarly, while we could perhaps agree that conceptual art, or readymades, or anti-art are not art at all, functionalism also entails that jewellery, lingerie and military parades are art — and this is a rather counterintuitive conclusion. However, I also believe that intuitions are often given more attention than they deserve and are unjustifiably equalled with proper evidence or argumentation (cf. Weatherson 2003). Similarly to Gaut, I think that while it is good if a theory confirms our intuitions, it is even better if it explains them, and notably, explains them either as justified and worth following, or biased and untrustworthy (Gaut 2000: 30-1). Importantly, exposing a bias in our intuitive thinking does not make the theory counterintuitive in the same sense expressivism might be — only being in clear disagreement with an intuition which is in fact justified and worth following might be counted against a theory.

Finally, while this point is rarely picked up in philosophy, I believe that it is important to note the fruitfulness and heuristic utility of a theory. Theories are not only supposed to

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3 In general, I follow Walton who said that artists can have many acceptable reasons for calling *outré* objects ‘artworks’, ‘but their objectives are not those of philosophers. They do not have our interest in elegant, comprehensive theory. So it would be naive and foolish of philosophers to accept uncritically their way of classifying things’ (Walton 1977: 100).

4 One example of an approach that is interested in the practical use of a theory can be found in Carroll (1994).
be clever and elegant, they actually should explain something, help us perceive the world more accurately. While it might be true that philosophical theories are usually quite far from having a practical application, surely being more practically applicable than the competition should be seen as an advantage. As I mentioned in discussing the advantages of the cluster theory (see section 1.4.1), if certain concessions are to be made to make the theory more fruitful, they are at least worth considering seriously. I agree here with Shusterman and Ahlberg that this is precisely what analytic aesthetics could learn from pragmatic aesthetics (Shusterman 1994; Ahlberg 1995). Thus in defending my view I will not be ashamed to admit that some things cannot be defined in the analytic way by providing necessary and sufficient conditions, moreover, I will not be ashamed to admit that certain elements of the definition are not to be determined philosophically, but rather left to be considered by social sciences. To those who frown at such an approach, I answer: *amica philosophia analytica, sal magis amica veritas.*

### 2.2 Developing the Cultural Definition

I take as my starting point Dickie’s first formulation of the institutional definition:

\[
\text{IT: } x \text{ is an art work } \overset{\text{def}}{=} x \text{ is (1) an artifact (2) a set of the aspects of which has had conferred upon it the status of candidate for appreciation by some person or persons acting on behalf of the artwork.}
\]

I believe that this definition is in many respects superior to Dickie’s later formulation. To show that, let me start developing the cultural definition by considering the objections which convinced Dickie to amend his view.
2.2.1 Fixing objections which led to the later formulation of IT

Two issues led Dickie to change his view (see pages 19f.), but they can both be solved more successfully by introducing the notion of cultural competence. The objection raised by Beardsley regarded the supposed informal nature of the artworld being in contrast with the very formal-sounding elements of the definition – ‘conferring the status’ and ‘acting on behalf of’ were singled out as particularly problematic. What follows is naturally the observation that no such formal practices exist. Dickie avoided this problem by abandoning those notions, and adopting a less legally-sounding phrase: ‘creating an artefact of a kind to be presented’. I believe that this solution is too robust – the change made seems to be much more than just nominal (explanation to follow), whereas really all that is required is simply stating: you need to understand those phrases in an informal way. Similarly, it could be said that one can act on behalf of the bikers in conferring the status of cult objects on Harley Davidsons without assuming that bikers need to form a formal organisation. While it might be the case that the phrase sounds a little out of place, it is not the first time that philosophers come across an issue which cannot be described in any *prima facie* appropriate way, and utilise only relatively appropriate phrases noting that they should be understood slightly differently than in common language. There is no reason why Dickie should not be allowed to do this as well.

The notion of ‘conferral’ itself has been looked at suspiciously – what exactly counts as conferring a status? But surely this issue is not as problematic as it is portrayed. There are a number of other practices in which statuses are conferred in formal or informal ways, and which are unproblematic: knighting, marriages, fashion, creating cult objects, etc. In all cases, formal or informal, the status conferral proceeds by engaging in certain conventional and often culture-specific practices, such as uttering specific words by a priest, a couple conducting seven circuits of the Holy Fire, or simply moving in together in case of marriage; the Queen wearing something, or Vogue writing about something in case of fashion, etc.
2.2 Developing the Cultural Definition

The artworld has its own conventions, and some of those conventions determine which practices count as status conferrals. Of course, it would take an empirical study to provide a complete list (see section 2.2.5 for details), but some likely candidates seem quite obvious – presenting to an artworld public is definitely one of, if not the most common one, but giving a title or opus number, or an art magazine writing about some folk-artefacts might be another. All it takes now is that the person who confers the status is culturally competent, i.e. has the appropriate knowledge of her culture’s conventions, and thus is able to employ them correctly.

Danto’s objection considered the requirement for specifically aesthetic appreciation – while Dickie explicitly denies the need for it, he has to implicitly assume it to explain how we know which aspects of the work to focus on and appreciate (Danto 1974). The later IT completely bypasses the problem by not mentioning appreciation at all and instead focusing on presenting of a work by the artist.

Again, I think that Dickie throws the baby out with the bathwater. While he may sidestep the problem, I am not convinced that removing the notion of appreciation altogether is appropriate, and moreover, I believe that shifting the explanatory burden from those who appreciate or present for appreciation to just the artist is wrong. Similarly, in the answer to Beardsley’s objection, substituting ‘status conferral’ and ‘acting on behalf of’ with ‘creating an artifact’ strengthens the role of the artist. While the artist can be (and usually is) included in the group of those who present for appreciation or confer the status, or act on behalf of the artworld, he does not need to – e.g. Byzantine icons were clearly presented by their authors to an audience, but not an artworld audience, and more often than not they were presented anonymously (the audience was led to believe that icons were painted ‘by the hand of God’); those who later presented them to the artworld

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5 In fact, it seems that in most of the following discussion the phrase ‘conferring the status’ could be substituted with ‘presenting to an artworld public’ – although I believe that something would be lost in this way (as there are other conventional ways of conferral than presentation).

6 In some places Dickie explicitly says it is the artist who confers the status (e.g. Dickie 1993).
audiences were no artists themselves, or at least did not need to be. Unfinished works are common cases of conferring the status by someone else than the artist – Schubert never completed his 8th Symphony and did not present it to the public, instead it was presented only 37 years after his death by Anselm Hüttenbrenner and even though unfinished, it was appropriated by the artworld public as a complete artwork. Following those examples, I think that both of Dickie’s solutions simply limit the power of the institutional theory without offering much in return.

In answer to Danto’s objection, I propose to bite the bullet and admit that yes, in appreciation one does indeed need to know which aspects of the work to appreciate, but I argue that this does not require one to assume aestheticism. Instead, it requires cultural competence. Firstly, it is not clear at all why one should only appreciate aesthetic properties or aspects of paintings – its artistic properties seem just as worthy of appreciation, and it so happens that sometimes people do appreciate properties which are neither artistic nor aesthetic (for example the fact that a painting was recovered after being stolen last year, or perhaps even the dreaded property of ‘being expensive’). As I will argue below, these are not to be discarded too lightly. Secondly, it seems that the issue can be resolved really easily: it is a matter of cultural competence of all the members of the artworld to simply know which aspects of the work are to be appreciated and which are not. It is not because the front of the painting is more aesthetically pleasing than its back that we know to appreciate the front, but because in our culture paintings are created in such a way that fronts of canvasses are their only relevant elements, and anyone with appropriate cultural competence knows that this is the case.

It might seem that already here my definition enters a tight circle – for is cultural competence not to be defined as competence in the matters of art? There are two reasons why this is not the case. Firstly, similarly as in Levinson’s definition, a given object can

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7 See (Lamarque 2010: 37f.) for a detailed discussion of unfinished works, and see (S. Davies 1991: 89-90) for more on how the audiences can confer the status.
be judged as an artwork on the basis of cultural competence concerning other, past or already known artworks, i.e. the reference of ‘artwork’ in the explanandum and explanans are different (a discussion will follow in section 4.1). Secondly the cultural competence does not only refer to art in this context. One is usually required to have rather vast extra-artistic knowledge to properly understand any artwork – one needs to know a lot about Christianity and counter-reformation to understand why Caravaggio’s naturalistic paintings are spiritual, and one needs to know the difference in density of terracotta and marble to appreciate the skill of an artist who sculpts in the latter. Let me now skip over the details of this issue until sections 2.2.5 and 2.2.6 where they will be discussed at length.

In any case, I believe that at this stage introducing cultural competence is not a particularly significant change to the institutional definition, as Dickie in his later definition did in fact refer to something quite similar when talking about creating works ‘with understanding’ (see p. 20).

The definition should be thus reformulated as follows:

\[ \text{IT}_1 : x \text{ is an art work} \overset{\text{def}}{=} \text{is (1) an artifact (2) a set of the aspects of which has had conferred upon it the status of candidate for appreciation by some culturally competent person or persons acting on behalf of the artwork.} \]

### 2.2.2 Dealing with intentionalism

The cultural competence can be used to at least partially resolve another issue. While the institutional theory does not need to refer to artistic intentions, Dickie did mention them saying that an artwork cannot be a result of an accident, but must be intended (Dickie 1997: 71). I presented some significant criticisms of intentionalism (see section 1.2.2) arguing that it introduces an unbearable vagueness to any theory which employs it, and I believe that if one can do without referring to intentions, one has an advantage over all those who
cannot. I do not want to deny that artistic intentions may play a role in art appreciation, interpretation, and perhaps even classification, but I do want to deny them an essential explanatory role – partially because I want to free the aesthetic discussion of fruitless ‘what if the author wanted that’ guesswork, but most importantly because my theory will provide an explanation of why an artist might have had a given intention, i.e. the cultural analysis I offer has explanatory primacy over intentionalism. Ultimately, I argue that employing the notion of cultural competence can substitute references to authorial intentions in all relevant places in the theory.

Dickie’s worry about creating artworks ‘by accident’ is an odd one. It seems that even if one has created something by accident, one is still free to ascribe it the status of a work – allegedly this is how the first abstract painting was created, after all. If by ‘creating artworks’ we understand only the conferral of the status, perhaps the point can be strengthened – an artist may have made something by accident, but in conferring the status upon it he should better know what he is doing, i.e. have the appropriate intention.

However, this seems to be a pseudo-problem. While it is easy to imagine a case where someone creates something by accident, it is harder to see how status could be conferred in an accidental way. Think of a situation which might illustrate a completely implausible case of the type beloved by some philosophers (note the use of the word ‘unbeknownst’, too).

An artist had an unfortunate bicycle accident in which one of its wheels was broken. While taking the wheel to a repair shop he stops on the way to ask for directions in one of the buildings he was passing, and while looking for the janitor he hangs the wheel on a hook conveniently left in the wall. Unbeknownst to

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8. Kandinsky said he was led to create his first abstract paintings by an accident, after having found one of his figurative works lying on the side, unable to tell what it represented, but struck by the beauty of its forms. The first abstract works were attempts to recreate those accidental ‘sideways’ forms (Kandinsky 1994: 369-370).

9. To paraphrase Terry Pratchett, if something has a million-to-one chance of happening, nine times out of ten it succeeds to be a subject of a philosophy paper.
him, this building is actually a gallery in which an exhibition of readymade art is taking place, and after he comes back with the janitor he finds an interested audience discussing the wheel as one of the artworks in the exhibition.

Both the making of the artifact and the fact that it was presented to an artworld public are accidents completely unintended by the artist, who just wanted to get the wheel fixed. However, if we do not take intentions into account then according to Dickie’s theory, since the artist has presented an artifact of his making (after all, his accident is responsible for the shape of the broken wheel) to an artworld public, he should have thereby created an artwork. This seems like a very counterintuitive conclusion to make.

The solution to this issue is in fact really simple. Remembering the above-mentioned advantages Dickie’s early definition had over the later one, one is free to say that if the bicycle wheel has in fact had the status of a candidate for appreciation conferred upon it, it was not conferred by the artist, but by the public. While it might be the case that the wheel was not intended as an artwork, and not recognised as one by its maker, it is recognised by other competent artworld members and thus can gain the art-status.

This might seem like an odd move to make. However, do similar things not happen on everyday basis? When a piece of Greek mosaic is found by archeologists, even if it is known that it was not created with an intention to produce art (instead the relevant intention was e.g. religious) and was not treated as art by the contemporaries – it is still art for us. Similar issues can be raised with regards to Leonardo’s sketchbooks and other works which were intended as exercise, as well as a host of unfinished works, like Schubert’s 8th. However, if an institutional theorist wants to affirm that they are all art for us, he needs to tell who conferred the status upon them, and because it was not the artist himself it seems that the obvious choice is: members of the artworld. In fact, we can easily tell why in the bicycle wheel case they would do that – the artworld members are culturally competent in the domain of modern art and know that ready made objects can be displayed in a gallery.
and ready-mades can be art; having stumbled upon such an object in a gallery, they are justified in treating it as an artwork.

However, there is an obvious point to be made against this sort of reasoning. Clearly Leonardo’s sketchbook and Schubert’s 8th are treated as art more legitimately, because the artworld members have *good reasons* to confer the status — they have aesthetic value, are historically grounded, have been created within established art forms, there are similar objects which are already treated as art, etc. However, while it seems that the bicycle wheel case is much less legitimate, it is hard to point out exactly why. It can also have *some* aesthetic value, readymades are historically grounded and an established art form now. Still, perhaps it could be argued that the reasons for treating the Unfinished Symphony as art are in fact better, or perhaps whatever the reasons are in the case of the bicycle wheel, ultimately it is treated as art because of an accident, and this is definitely no legitimate reason. However, as will become apparent in section 2.2.6, it can still be an artwork, though perhaps a poor one, if there was at least one good reason to confer the status.

What does it mean, exactly, that a culturally competent public is allowed to confer the status whatever the artist’s intentions, and how is it that it does seem to care for those intentions after all and in most cases acts in accordance with them? All this can be explained by employing the notion of conventions. As Stephen Davies has argued (S. Davies 1987, 1991: 211-18), the intentions of the artist are recognised because in creating their work artists follow conventions known to the public. The fact that there are conventions is sustained by the fact that artists intentionally use them when creating their works, but this only ensures that the public familiar with the conventions is successful in deducing the intentions of an artist from his work. Similar accounts are offered by Carroll — artists and audiences learn certain traditions of art making and appreciating, and perhaps modify them in historically explainable ways (Carroll 1994: 19); and Becker — ‘the possibility of artistic experience arises from the existence of a body of conventions that artists and audiences can refer to in making sense of the work’ (Becker 2008: 30). Thus in this sense the
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cultural competence I require entails the knowledge of artistic conventions (or traditions),
the ability to follow them in creating one’s work and conferring the status on it, as well as
the ability to deduce the intentions of others from them in conferring the status on their
work.

In the end, I argue, the artist is merely a highly privileged artworld member, one who
is typically doing the conferring and who is ascribed the authorship of the work. She might
influence the audience to the point in which they change their views on art to include her
works, she might convince them not to confer the status on some objects she does not like,
but ultimately she is just a member of the audience who has a more powerful voice than
others (cf. ibid.: 35).

To sum up this section, the notion of cultural competence can successfully replace refer-
ces to intentions in explaining how status of a candidate for appreciation is conferred.
One need not enquire whether an artist has an appropriate art-intention, because either
in conferring the status he expresses it already in a conventional way which is recognised
by culturally competent members of the artworld (e.g. by displaying his work in a gallery,
giving it a title, creating it in the style of, etc.), or if he does not, competent members of
the artworld can confer the status themselves after having recognised that the work fits
into appropriate conventions (e.g. is a beautiful painting, hangs on a gallery wall at a
ready-made exposition, etc.) and for reasons discussed in section 2.2.6.

2.2.3 History and context

The ahistoricity of the artworld is another issue brought up against the institutional theory.
Summed up by Davies, it amounts to pointing out that Dickie has nothing to say about
the fact that things such as who can be an artist, what types of actions count as conferring
status, who is authorised to confer the status, etc., seem to change over time (S. Davies
Following that, the artworld seems to be time-relative, and a valid institutional definition should account for its changes.

In contrast, Levinson’s historical theory explains perfectly how artworks are both influenced by the past and influence future art, or how history both causes artworks to change and is itself caused by the changing artworks. The subject is described perhaps even better by Carroll, who showed how historical narratives can explain not only that something is an artwork, but also how it developed from past art and society, and how it influenced the future (Carroll 1994: 24-6). This is exactly what Davies would like the IT to explain as well (S. Davies 1991: 93).

By the same token, I begin to answer my second main question: how did we come about our present concept ‘art’? By accepting the historicity of the artworld, I can show that our concept has been changing together with the changing institution – on one hand, the artworld keeps being influenced by other human practices (e.g. the two World Wars may be thought to have destroyed naive aestheticism), and on the other, it keeps changing under its own influence (‘art’ just means something else after Duchamp’s Fountain). A much more detailed story will be provided soon.

It seems indeed quite odd that Dickie should refrain from phrasing IT in time-relative language. Taken that he allows there to be many artworlds, perhaps even independent of one another, there is no reason to hold that all those artworlds have to be contemporary. What is more, Dickie allows for certain artifacts to become artworks ‘mid-life’. It seems only natural to think that one of the reasons why certain objects which were not recognised as art once have been recognised later, is because the artworld – the practices and beliefs of people involved in production, presentation and reception of art – has changed.

I agree with Davies that instead of talking about the artworld we should talk about artworld-at-\( t_1 \), artworld-at-\( t_2 \), etc. This allows us to say that while at \( t_1 \) a person with little skill in painting but a great imagination could not produce an artwork (because the beliefs and practices of the artworld at that time would entail that such a person is not
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competent enough to produce art), while at \( t_2 \) they could (because the beliefs and practices of the artworld at the latter time would entail that such a person is competent enough). Moreover, I think that the sole temporal index is not entirely sufficient – it is unclear why the distinction between artworld-now from artworld-in-17th Century is any more justified than a distinction between artworld-in-Europe and artworld-in-India, or perhaps even high-culture-artworld and pop-artworld. Clearly different contemporary cultures can also have differing requirements regarding who can be an artist, or what type of actions count as conferring status. In fact, both the time and location indexes can be freely mixed, and perhaps other relevant ones could be introduced. Because of this I propose to use a wider notion of \textit{context} rather than just time.

Invoking such relativism is not particularly uncommon in established philosophy of art – it is widely accepted that artworks have aesthetic properties dependant on the context of their creation, and this context clearly includes the time and place where they were made. I see no reason why contextualism could not be applied to defining art as well. If one already agrees that two identical objects produced in different contexts can have differing aesthetic properties (cf. Levinson \citeyear{1990, 1996}, D. Davies \citeyear{2004}, Walton \citeyear{2008} etc.), there seems nothing more permissive about saying that of those two objects only one can count as an artwork (Why such claim does not need to presuppose aestheticism will be discussed below). In fact, the initial anti-essentialist arguments suggested exactly that `art' should be understood as always relative to a context, though while some took this to show that no general definition of `art' is possible (Kennick \citeyear{1958} 324), I agree with others who thought that such relativism can be made part of the definition (Tatarkiewicz \citeyear{1971} 147).

\footnote{Interestingly, Levinson makes a curious point about this issue when arguing in his `Extending art historically' that the historical theory can be applied to other times in the Western tradition, but that to try to account for the concept of art of other cultures would be a folly (1993: 413). Surely the Western culture in the past was just as different from our present culture as many other present cultures are.}

\footnote{Given his later writings, I believe Davies would agree with me, (see: S. Davies \citeyear{1997, 2000}). Also, I distance myself here from a different indexical interpretation of IT presented by Catherine Lord, who in a series of unsupported statements claimed that the institutional theory only makes sense if we completely disregard the possibility that there can be other artworlds than ours (Lord \citeyear{1987}).}
The definition should be thus reformulated as follows:

**IT**₂: \( x \) is an artwork in context \( C \) \( \overset{\text{def}}{=} \) (1) \( x \) is an artifact (2) a set of the aspects of which has had conferred upon it the status of candidate for appreciation by some culturally competent in \( C \) person or persons acting on behalf of the artworld in \( C \).

What is specifically worth noting is that the notion of ‘cultural competence’ is likewise relativised to the context – clearly one’s competence is in the cultural context of one’s own artworld.

Introducing the indices requires some more clarification – in what way should the history and context relativity of art be understood? There are several options. Firstly, the term ‘art’ can change reference over time. This, admittedly, is rather uninteresting from a philosophical point of view, as long as people use different terms to cover the same ground.

Secondly, the concept ‘art’ can change its meaning over time, and while in the Renaissance it meant ‘beautiful representative artifacts’, now it means e.g. ‘artifacts capable of affording aesthetic experiences.’ This is far more interesting, and there is evidence that such changes have indeed taken place (Shiner 2001). The theorists who claim only to capture the ‘modern Western understanding of "art"’ usually admit that the concept might have once had a different meaning, yet usually they fail to follow the consequences of such a claim. Surely if the concept changes over time, then most likely the present structure of the concept is (partially) determined by its past structure, and a theory of this concept could benefit from taking that into account. Moreover, if the concept changes over time, this is not simply because some time has passed – it changes under the influence of other things which changed at that time, i.e. if the concept ‘art’ changed between the Renaissance and now, it is because of the cultural, technological, etc. changes. Thus if the modern concept should be analysed as (partially) determined by the past structure of the concept, and the concept changes under the influence of cultural changes, it seems that the modern concept...
of art is partially culturally constructed, and a theory of art can benefit from presenting it as such, or making the social construction of the concept a part of the theory. Following this, since the definition is different at different times, different things may count as art at different times and the same things may count as art at one time but not the other, e.g. if Leonardo painted *Black Square*, his contemporaries would not think it was art, because it would not fall under their definition.

Thirdly, as I was trying to show when discussing the cluster account (see s. [1.4.2]), people from one time conceptualise art from different times differently, i.e. when we talk about Renaissance art we select beautiful representative artifacts, and when we talk about modern art we talk about e.g. artifacts capable of affording aesthetic experiences. Again, surely if we apply different concepts to art from different times, such concepts are not just relative to a generic number – 19th Century or between 1680-1750 AD. Instead they are relative to whatever the world was like at the time, and at least partially to what we think the people from that time thought was art. I.e. we apply concept $\alpha$ to art from time $t$ at least partially because we think that the members of the artworld at $t$ would have determined what is art based on concept $\alpha$. If so, the concepts we use are relative to what we think were the artworlds from those times (if Leonardo painted *BlackSquare* we would not think it is art because it would not fall under the definition we apply to Renaissance art).

Fourthly, not only the concept itself, but also the content of the concept ‘art’ can be historical. In Levinson’s or Carroll’s theories the historical aspect is made into an element of the concept – what is art at $t$ is directly determined by what was art prior to $t$. Here, if Leonardo painted *BlackSquare* it would not be art because at the time when it would have been created it could not (have been intended to) resemble any artworks prior to it / there would be no narrative joining it with prior artworks. Such views do not predetermine whether the concept is historical in the second sense, i.e. whether art is defined historically only in the modern times while in the Renaissance it was simply beautiful representations.
However, it seems to exclude the third understanding – we use the same concept for all art, but because the content (the reference of ‘prior to $t$’ in the definitions) changes over time, things from different times qualify differently.

Finally, here is what the cultural definition does. It can on one hand allow that the structure of the concept ‘art’ remain the same at all times (i.e. ‘art’ has the same general meaning, making the concept continuous), and although the content does not directly refer to history, it contains history-relative terms and thus does change historically. How is this possible? Similarly as the content-historical concepts, the concept contains variables which are indexed to historical and cultural contexts. 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 the reasons for status conferral (which will be discussed in section 2.2.6). Such indexical terms change the extension of the concept they define depending on what they are indexed to. But unlike the historicists, I argue that the variables are not relative to time, but to the state of the artworld at that time, or not relative to what was art before, but to what were the commonly shared beliefs and practices (including the beliefs regarding good reasons for status conferral) at any given $t$ (more on this in section 2.2.5). Of course, those beliefs and practices (or the culture) are themselves influenced by what the beliefs and practices were like before $t$, but this is not directly mentioned in the definition. Simply, the best way to find out what the culture is like at $t$ is to trace its development, but one need know nothing about the development to consider any particular given stage of it. In practice, an aesthetician can simply ask historians and anthropologists what $C$ was like at $t$, and trust them to have arrived at the description of $C$ in whatever are the appropriate anthropological means, including tracing the history of $C$.

On this view the concept of art is not historical at all in the second sense, because the structure of the concept remains the same at all times. The reason why it seems that it changes is because reasons for status conferral change over time. Thus if Leonardo painted *BlackSquare*, his contemporaries would not think it was art, because at their time the
criteria it satisfies would provide no good reasons to confer the status on it. But this does not mean that in Leonardo’s times there was a different definition of art, it merely means that at the time the cultural context was such that people of different levels of competence were conferring status for different reasons. For the same reasons, neither is ‘art’ historical in the third of the above understandings. We do not use different definitions for different times, we merely change the indexes in the cultural definition and, since different indexes pick out different contexts with different competence requirements and reasons for arthood conferral, different things qualify as art at (and from) different times.

Of course, there are many other concepts which have history or are context-sensitive. ‘Fashion’, for one, seems to be quite like ‘art’ in many respects. Many similar concepts might differ from ‘art’ merely in what the variables in the definitions refer to. But this does not mean that pretty much any concept is culture-relative. ‘Car’, for example, used to denote ‘a four-wheeled vehicle’ (including what we would call ‘carts’ and ‘carriages’ today), and now it is ‘a four-wheeled engine-powered vehicle’ – but this concept is merely historical in the second of the above understandings. It is perfectly possible that there are actually two concepts with those two meanings under one term, and the intended meaning is inferred from the historical context in which the term is used. How about ‘physics’ then? The body of knowledge we call ‘physics’ developed historically, so different things were meant by it at Newton’s time and different at Bohr’s. But ‘physics’ is not a culture-relative concept the same way ‘art’ is. 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]).

Finally, the above discussion allows further expansion of the answer to how we came about our concept of 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.
2.2.4 Authority

I can now solve another issue by employing the notion of cultural competence. Stephen Davies pointed out that the institutional theory is perhaps too democratic in determining which members of the artworld are *authorised* to confer the status of a candidate for appreciation (S. Davies [1991]). It would seem now that my view is even more permissive, as in the above discussion I not only allow for anyone to be an artist and confer the status, but also for the status to be conferred by the public (or any members of the artworld who are not artists).

As I mentioned above (see section 1.1.2), I agree that a person who is conferring the status on an work has to be authorised to do so. However, I believe that the notion of authority is entailed by cultural competence – after all, people who are authorised to confer the status of art are those who are competent enough to do so. What competence exactly is required to gain authority will be discussed soon, and I will return to this issue in section 2.2.7. I also agree that the criteria for being authorised change over time, i.e. are historically dependant on the state of the artworld at a given time – but so do criteria for being culturally competent. Moreover, ‘what is regarded as the irreducible core of what an artist must do . . . changes over time’ (Becker [2008] 19). Thus while in the 17th Century one would not be authorised to confer the status unless one had proven one’s competence by possessing sufficient skill to produce a complex work in an established genre, little of this requirement is left in post-avantgarde art. Davies mentions that perhaps in modern times when ‘anything goes’, or when the Hegelian prophecy of the ‘end of art’ has been fulfilled, it is true that there are no requirements left whatsoever, and literally anyone is authorised to produce artworks, i.e. it takes less to be culturally competent enough to produce art (see section 4.7 for a discussion of ramifications of this claim). Still, while this might be the case now, it seems that a good theory of art should account for why at some point in history it was not.
Dickie may well discount this challenge by simply claiming that his definition was only supposed to be applicable to modern times when indeed the authority to create artworks is democratic – however, since the same notion of cultural competence which was already employed can also resolve this problem, I see no reason why I should avoid it.

2.2.5 Cultural context explained

The above points are highly dependent on what is understood under the notion ‘cultural context C’. While Davies also suggested that a similar sort of context should be incorporated into the definition, he limited himself to temporal context and offered little in terms of explaining how it should be understood. At first, it might seem that the simple temporal index might be easier to justify and explain than the richer and more difficult cultural context. However, there are some obvious problems with such an approach. One was mentioned above – if one agrees to notice that in, say, 17th Century the requirements for being an artist (or having the authority to confer art-status) were different than today, then it is hard to justify why one should overlook the similarly obvious fact that these requirements were different in 17th Century Spain and China. The decision to include the temporal, but not the cultural index, is (at least within the institutional framework) made purely ad hoc and cannot be seriously held. Secondly, it seems that temporal context alone is no easier to justify than a wider cultural context. After all, it is not just the fact that some time has passed that determines the change in what the members of the artworld require of someone they would authorise as an artist, but (arguably) a certain shift in their beliefs and related practices which happened in that time. However, different cultural contexts can be described in exactly the same way – as differing in commonly held

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12 I would like to thank Dr Mark Harris for consultations regarding the anthropological views on culture.

13 Social scientists, naturally, agree: ‘we cannot, as self-respecting anthropologists, assume right from the start that people the world over utilize the same aesthetic criteria as ourselves’ (Layton 1991: 12).
beliefs and practices – and thus a definition which refers to them is no more complicated, while having a wider scope.

How is the cultural context to be defined then? How can we know what are the features of a given cultural context? The first of these questions can be answered by philosophy of culture, however, the answer to the second belongs to the social sciences. While the anthropologists themselves are divided as to how ‘culture’ should be defined there seems to be a wide agreement in the basic components which any definition should include. Culture is on the one hand about a system of shared ideas, concepts, values, and rules – in one word, beliefs of various sort – and on the other, a system of behaviours, activities, resource exploitations – in short, practices (Goodenough 1966; the latter is often referred to as ‘sociocultural system’ and the former as ‘ideational system’, or culture proper). Even though there is a fair bit of disagreement on how exactly the belief systems are related to the practices, they are rather unimportant for the present enquiry – 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 for the present enquiry whether the ideational systems exist in the minds of individual people (i.e. are psychological phenomena) as Goodenough thought, or are public and transcend individual minds, as argued by Geertz (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

\[ \text{To provide a sample of definitions: } \] \[ \text{[Culture is] that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society} \] \[ \text{(Tylor 1871: 4); } \] \[ \text{Patterns, explicit and implicit, of and for behaviour acquired and transmitted by symbols, constituting the distinctive achievement of human groups, including their embodiment in artifacts} \] \[ \text{(Kroeber and Kluckhohn 2001: 357); } \] \[ \text{Historically created designs for living, explicit and implicit, rational, irrational, and nonrational, which exist at any given time as potential guides for the behavior of man} \] \[ \text{(Kluckhohn and Kelly 2007); } \text{etc.} \]
system of practices and institutions' (Shiner 2001: 9,11). Although he follows on to make some rather fine distinctions in the characteristics of the concepts (beliefs) and practices, I will limit myself here to the bare minimum the cultural theorists will need, hoping that thanks to this it will be more universal.

What the cultural theory does require is this: (1) any given culture at least partially is a set of commonly shared implicit or explicit beliefs and accompanying practices which follow those beliefs; (2) two cultures are different if their beliefs and practices are saliently different; (3) the differences are marked by differing contexts, e.g. Western and Eastern, modern and medieval, democratic and totalitarian, etc.; (4) various subdivisions within cultures are possible – artistic culture subsystem is distinguishable from legal, linguistic, religious, political and other subsystems; (5) 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, and practices of one system can change beliefs of another system, etc.

The cultural definition incorporates those notions. A ‘cultural context C’ is a context in which the set of commonly shared beliefs and accompanying practices is markedly different from any other set, e.g. the modern China is different from the medieval Europe context, because there are some significant differences in the beliefs and practices of people living in those contexts. 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 of English conservatives of all times, and perhaps even differentiate high and popular culture.

To be ‘culturally competent in C’ can now be analysed as follows: to have an appropriate explicit or implicit knowledge and awareness of the various systems of beliefs and ability to participate in the related practices present within a given social group.

With this analysis it is even clearer why the notion of authority is redundant. To be ‘authorised (to confer art-status) in C’ means: to possess the knowledge and skill which
according to the beliefs present in a given social group are sufficient for participation in the social practice of conferring art-status on objects. However, this is a part of what being culturally competent in the artistic subsystem of $C$ involves.

The main advantage of introducing the notion of context lies in explaining a very general and basic intuition – it is now easy to say why the artworld was different in the 17th Century than it is now, or why it is different in Spain and in China, or why people who are authorised to confer art-status in modern Spain would not have been authorised to do so in 17th Century China. Simply put, the belief systems and practices characteristic of particular cultures are different, and since who can confer art-status, or what types of objects are likely to be recognised as art by a competent public is relative to particular cultures, what is art is also relative to various cultural contexts.

Following this, the answer to how we arrived at our modern concept of art gains another element: not only do we know that it resulted from cultural changes over time, but we can trace those changes and analyse them in terms of changing practices and belief systems. With some proper historical research one could provide a really detailed account of those changes, though a rough sketch is not hard to think of. Under the influence of social movements of the early 19th Century and through emancipation of artists from being bound by state and church commissions, art changed and could no longer be defined by the beauty theory – the expression theory matched the Romantic artist much better. The belief which stressed originality encouraged a more rapid development of styles, and together with the technological progress which encouraged the use of newly developed materials and techniques, led to abandoning the expressive function of art and 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, bounded with such events as the World Wars, 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).
2.2 Developing the Cultural Definition

Such an account ties very well with defining art culturally. Here is why: if the reasons why we arrived at our modern understanding of art follow from (non-artistic) cultural changes in beliefs and practices, a valid theory of art should take those culturally relative beliefs and practices into account. And moreover: if there is a theory which can not only provide an answer to the question ‘what is art here and now’, but also, through tracing the development of the concept, answer what ‘art’ means in any given context, then (assuming that it is sound) it should be preferred to any other theory of a more limited scope. Naturally, all this does not mean that the other theories are useless – it does, however, show that the cultural theory is much more broadly applicable, and as such, an improvement on the other views.

Before I close this section, let me draw the attention to the implications of cultural relativism I advocate. As mentioned before, the above account only shows how cultural contexts can be understood. What are the features of any particular cultural context, is however beyond the scope of philosophical enquiry – finding out about commonly respected beliefs, as well as the practices present in a given culture, is a job for a social scientist. By the same argument, any philosophical definition of art which refers to such a context, mine included, is dependant on the sociological data, i.e. it is impossible to tell whether a given object is art or not within a given cultural context without empirical data about that context. But while such a limitation may seem very serious from a purely philosophical point of view, from a wider perspective it ensures that the definition is much more accurate, while retaining a great deal of explanatory power.

What is more, these limitations only arise when my definition is applied to contexts different than that of modern Western culture. The great majority of other definitions of art claim nothing more but to explain what art is here and now, simply accepting that were they to be applied to other contexts, they might prove less successful. Were my view to be similarly bound to contemporary understanding of ‘art’ only, the empirical limitations would cease to exist entirely – all that would be needed is a tacit assumption that we are
culturally competent members of the modern Western culture and judge objects within the framework of beliefs commonly held within our culture. This seems to be a fairly common assumption and by sharing it my definition would be no worse off than most. However, while other definitions are limited to our modern context only, mine has the potential of providing explanations of what is or could be art in different contexts as well. The only difference between them is that while we assume that we are culturally competent within our own cultural setting by default, to gain cultural competence within other cultures we need to ask the social scientists for data. Seen in this way, my definition is not a limited version of IT, but a potentially infinitely expandable one.

Finally, it is worth adding that the relativism I propose is not a subject to the criticism presented by Paul Crowther in his ‘Defining Art, Defending the Canon, Contesting Culture’. Even assuming that his claims concerning the racism of the relativistic treatment of the concepts ‘art’ and ‘aesthetic’ is correct and the way they are employed indeed imposes the Western consumer-centred way of thinking, and even assuming that the notion of ‘racism’ is applicable to aesthetics in the way the author proposes\textsuperscript{15} – the cultural theory would not be a subject to his criticism. It is hardly necessary for it to assume that all art should be treated from a consumer-centred perspective – on the contrary, one can easily accept that in different contexts objects have their status conferred by different kinds of competent people, and that different contexts attach different importance to the making, presenting and consumption of art.

Moreover, Crowther’s argument to the conclusion that there must be something special about art which distinguishes it from other human activity, which could subvert the cultural theory, is insubstantial. His claim that the representative nature of art allows for ‘extraordinary bonding – or "at homeness" with the sensible world’, and these] intrinsically valuable experiences facilitate the belief that representation is the kind of privileged

\textsuperscript{15}Incidentally, it seems odd that the author criticises the racism of relativists, while continuously writing about the characteristics of ‘non-Western art’, treating it as if it were a unified undistinguished phenomenon (e.g. ‘The example of non-western art shows the centrality of making’ (Crowther 2004: 372)).
activity which can realize metaphysical and religious effects’ (Crowther 2004: 369) seems purely ad hoc. Save for the fact that such a view would not explain the privileged status of non-representational art, it seems that one can only hold it when completely disregarding anthropological and psychological theories on the evolutionary usefulness of representations, their worth as symbols, etc. A cultural theorist can simply not accept that there is anything metaphysically special about art which would distinguish it from other forms of cultural activity, and Crowther’s paper can hardly force her to.

2.2.6 Wollheim’s dilemma and the cluster theory

Probably the most serious challenge presented against the institutional theory is the dilemma posed by Wollheim – either the members of the artworld have reasons to confer the status on a given object, or not. If they do, a valid theory should mention those reasons, and it seems that if this is done, reference to the institution is superfluous; 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 completely uninformative (Wollheim 1980: 157-166, 1987: 13-16).

As I mentioned in section 1.1.2 answering this objection is one of the main motivations for the cultural theory I develop. I argue that while the members of the institution do have reasons for status conferral (and these reasons should be mentioned by the theory), this does not render the references to the institution redundant, because the reasons themselves are artworld-relative, and providing reasons does not remove the need for the act of conferral. Thus it is quite possible to sit on both horns of Wollheim’s dilemma and yet defend an informative and useful theory.

Let me start with addressing the first horn of the dilemma. Not only do I agree with Wollheim that the members of the artworld do have reasons to confer the status – I also
think that these reasons have been quite well explored. In fact, also the way in which they are applied has been discussed in some detail. I refer here to Berys Gaut’s cluster account, which argues that objects are art in virtue of satisfying a number of disjunctively sufficient criteria. I propose to treat the cluster account as an auxiliary theory within the institutional definition, and reformulate it for this purpose in such a way that what Gaut calls sufficient subsets of criteria for arthood are to be treated as reasons the members of the artworld take into account when conferring the status of a candidate for appreciation on a given artifact. This, together with the cultural relativisation, is the most important modification of IT I will make, and one of my main claims.

Recall the cluster theory’s claims: the term ‘art’ is ascribed to objects which have a certain non-arbitrary subset of an expandable set (cluster) of properties commonly ascribed to art. My idea is to rephrase this as follows: members of the artworld confer the art-status on objects, taking the possession of selected properties included in the cluster of properties commonly ascribed to art as reasons justifying such conferral (why this does not make the account circular will be discussed in section 4.1). Similarly as in Gaut’s account, none of these properties are individually necessary, and sets of properties are jointly sufficient for an object to have the status conferred upon it. To rephrase this, the possession of no single property from the cluster is a reason always ensuring conferral of the status, but in general properties ‘count towards’ conferring it. In practice, members of the artworld confer the status on objects satisfying a subset of properties $\alpha$ because they hold the belief: ‘satisfying $\alpha$ is a good reason for arthood conferral.’

The modified definition could be formulated as follows:

\begin{itemize}
  \item IT\textsubscript{3}: $x$ is an art work in context $C$ \(\overset{\text{def}}{=} (1)\) $x$ is an artifact (2) a set of the aspects of which has had conferred upon it the status of candidate for appreciation by some culturally competent in $C$ person or persons acting on behalf of the artworld in $C$, (3) for reasons determined by a cluster of criteria for arthood respected in $C$.
\end{itemize}
This formulation can now be easily linked with what was discussed above – the list of criteria for arthood is a part of what I described as the practices and beliefs a given social group has about art. Just as any other beliefs, those regarding criteria for arthood are relative to a given culture. The changing context determines changes in the practices and beliefs, and by the same token, in which criteria are included in the cluster and/or which subsets of criteria are considered sufficient. The exact composition of the cluster in $C$ and sets of sufficient criteria in $C$, similarly as any other facts about beliefs and practices of a given social group, are discoverable through empirical research by the social sciences.\footnote{I am in agreement with Richard Kamber who claimed that the only way to find out which properties are treated as necessary or sufficient for arthood, one has to engage in proper empirical research (Kamber 1998 35). However, I would be looking for respected criteria, or sufficient subsets of criteria, rather than essential properties.}

This move naturally requires relativisation to cultural context, however, it adds no further limitations to those already discussed above. What is more, it is perfectly in line with what the original anti-essentialists argued for – it acknowledges that there is no one reason or criterion for arthood, instead there are many, and moreover, they can change over time or be different in various contexts (Kennick 1958 321, 324, 331-333).

It is the case that the members of the artworld have reasons to confer the status of a candidate for appreciation, but this does not mean that the institution is superfluous and all we need to know is the cluster of reasons – and for two reasons. Firstly, while the conferral is based on recognizing that a given artefact satisfies a sufficient subset of criteria for arthood (which gives one a reason to confer the status), it is impossible to tell which subsets of criteria for arthood are sufficient without referring back to the artworld (a similar thought has been expressed by Matravers, 2000). It is not a universal truth that satisfying subset $\alpha$ constitutes a good reason — instead it is merely one of the beliefs that make up the artworld. In fact, the only reason why satisfying this rather than that subset of criteria should constitute a good reason, is because it is believed to be so within the artworld. The institution, or the cultural context is in this way inescapable, because were
one to ignore it in the first instance and refer to the list of reasons it uses only, one would
soon encounter it again when justifying the composition of the list of reasons itself. In
other words, ignoring the institution may allow one to replace the IT with a list of criteria
for arthood, but to justify why one should accept this list and not any other, one has to
refer back to the institution.

The issue can be approached from the other end. 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). I believe that one should do exactly
that: empirically find out which subsets of criteria are treated as sufficient for status
conferral. But by such looking and seeing one will not find out what those criteria are
in a deep metaphysical and human-independent way — instead one will find what people
think those criteria are. In fact, were one to look elsewhere than among modern Western
art lovers, one would likely find that other people think that the criteria might be slightly
different[17]. In institutional terms, members of different artworlds can differ in what they
believe are sufficient subsets of criteria for arthood, and treat satisfying different subsets
of those criteria as reasons for status conferral. Following this, again, since what are
reasons for status conferral is determined by artworld members’ beliefs, and what is art is
(partially) determined by the reasons, what is art is (partially) determined by the artworld
members’ beliefs, i.e. the artwork.

It might seem at first that this is not enough to make a definition institutional — after all,
all sorts of definitions look at the artistic practice for confirmation of their claims. However,
while other definitions tend to explain why the society acts in a certain way (e.g. treats
a given object as an artwork) by referring to something outside the society (e.g. because
there are art-relevant properties or relations between objects and the human mind, etc.),
on my view it is the particular social groups that come first, i.e. it is because the given

[17] I believe that though Gaut agrees with this point, he basically, on one hand, wants to defend the
general disjunctive framework of the cluster rather than the particular criteria, and on the other — is really
only interested in applying the account to modern Western notion of art.
social group treats certain objects as artworks that certain properties and relations become art-relevant within this group. Thus the institution has an explanatory primacy and as such cannot be discarded. Moreover, the historical issues discussed above can only really be given justice by reference to cultural contexts – my theory can not only explain how it is that what we view as criteria for arthood change over time (as it is the social context that determines the changes, a reference to this context cannot be omitted), but can also account for the fact that changes in what is considered art are clearly related to changes in wider cultural practice (politics, religion, even availability of resources).\textsuperscript{18}

Secondly, the cultural definition only entails that having reasons is necessary for arthood – it only becomes sufficient together with the conferral itself (in this sense my view may be treated as a case of weak institutionalism, (see: Matravers\textsuperscript{[2000]})). For Wollheim conferring was unnecessary once the reasons for it were salient, but one can resist this conclusion through preserving a part of the arbitrary nature of Dickie’s view (the following is akin to Dickie’s own ‘knighthood’ argument – 1998: 131). The institutional theory’s appeal lies largely in the fact that it can occasionally simply cut the definitional Gordian knot by stating: ‘it has turned out that way’, or ‘because the artist said so’ (Dickie\textsuperscript{[2000]} 100). Such arbitrariness does not, naturally, seem particularly attractive to many philosophers, because it denies them the ability to explain things philosophically, offering brute facts about the (art)world in place of lists of necessary and sufficient conditions. Following Dickie, however, I prefer to provide an account of art as it is actually understood, practised and treated, and I am more concerned with the theory fitting the real world, not some ideal for an elegant theory – thus if in the real world it so happens that certain distinctions are

\textsuperscript{18}For a detailed analysis of how the artworld depends on and interacts with other worlds, see (Becker\textsuperscript{[2008]} 34-39, 68-130).
made arbitrarily, the theory should recognise that.\footnote{Noël Carroll in a similar context wrote that ‘there is an underlying philosophical dream such that, ideally, all the relevant answers [. . . ] should fit into a tidy theoretical package’ (Carroll 2009: 7). Needless to say, I agree that providing answers which are less tidy but actually true is better than dreaming up ones which would be nice, but are wrong.} Below I will try to show that allowing for some arbitrariness is not as problematic as one could think.

There are numerous cases in which the actual practice of art is somewhat under-justified, and below I discuss two which seem most obvious.

(1) Folk art that has been appropriated by the artworld. Many folk artworks which fill galleries have had the status conferred upon them by curators, critics, etc., while being identical to folk craft works which never left their place of origin and are simply used as utility objects (Shiner 2001: xv). For example, Susan Arrowood’s *Sacred Bible* is a quilt displayed in the American Folk Art Museum (Fig. 2.1). For all we know, the artist did not intend her work to be art – not only was she not an active or perhaps even competent member of the artworld, but quilts were not even considered an art form at the end of the 19th Century. Furthermore, one can reasonably assume that the work was intended to serve decorative and devotional functions. Needless to say, it is in all relevant respects (i.e. those which are related to the set of criteria for arthood) identical to multiple religious-themed quilts, like those made by my grandmother – decorated and used as bed throws. Naturally, there is a reason why *Sacred Bible* can be art – it satisfies at least one sufficient subset of criteria, and in conferring the status the curators certainly took this into account.

But my grandmother’s quilts seem to satisfy the very same criteria! If the conferral were of no importance, one would have to say that since both objects satisfy the same subsets of criteria they should either both be art or both not be art. This is, however, not the case, and I doubt that anyone should ever seriously call my grandmother’s decorated bed throws art.\footnote{It might be that *Sacred Bible* has multiple contextual properties by which it differs from my grandmother’s quilts, e.g. being selected by an expert in art, being placed in the context of art history, etc. – however, it clearly had no such properties before the status conferral, at the time when it was chosen, and while choosing, one could have just as well given the same properties to any other comparable craft work (S. Davies 1991: 66ff.).} What follows is that while satisfying subsets of criteria respected as sufficient
Figure 2.1: Susan Arrowood, *Sacred Bible*, Possibly West Chester, Pennsylvania, 1875–1895, cotton, silk, wool, and ink with cotton embroidery. American Folk Art Museum, New York

is important because it gives one reasons to confer the status, someone still has to do the conferring.

(2) Dog shows. A great number of human practices are in many respects similar to art and their products are often quite like artworks – and yet are not artworks. In fact, a modern performance art piece and a dog show or a military parade (or a Mackintosh’s Art Nouveau chair and a carved Victorian chair) can satisfy the very same subsets of criteria for arthood. Were one to consider the reasons or criteria only, both should be either art or not art. The only reason why this is not the case is because the status has been conferred only on the former, not the latter. Indeed, there seems to be little good explanation for why objects such as classic cars, lingerie, military parades, etc. should not be art, other than Dickie’s ‘it has turned out that way’. However, if this is accepted, it seems inevitable
to acknowledge that again, there not only have to be reasons to confer status on an object, but also someone has to actually do the conferral.\footnote{The arbitrary decisions to exclude some works made by the artworld members in both those examples will be discussed and supported in section \ref{section2.3}.}

But here comes the second horn of Wollheim’s dilemma – if the artworld’s decisions are arbitrary, is the theory uninformative again? Why, for example, should we trust Duchamp and agree that \textit{Bottle Rack} is indeed art, but its twin bottle rack is not?

The answer is: artworld’s decisions are not arbitrary \textit{enough} to make the theory uninformative. While on one hand one does have to sometimes agree that \textit{x} may not be an artwork even though it does satisfy a subset of criteria respected as sufficient, simply because no one has conferred the status upon it, introducing the talk about reasons for conferral allows one to (1) explain why certain objects are artworks and others are not (i.e. because only the former satisfy a subset of properties respected as good reasons for arthood conferral, and got the status conferred upon them); (2) say that were one to confer status on an object which does not satisfy any subset of criteria respected as sufficient (i.e. there are no good reason to confer the status), the object is not an artwork (or at least not an artwork within the given artworld) and one was mistaken in conferring the status or treating the object as art; (3) predict which objects could become artworks were one to confer the status upon them (i.e. those which satisfy a subset respected as sufficient).

This seems to be most if not all that one would expect of a classificatory theory. In fact, if anything, I believe that my reformulation makes the institutional theory more informative than it was in the first place, providing it with a way of accounting for mistaken status attribution, thus giving it the edge it lacked.

Moreover, such modification allows one to explain why the original institutional definition seemed so unattractive to some, including Wollheim. It indeed seems odd that we should ever need an artworld member to tell us that \textit{Mona Lisa} is art – surely we can just see for ourselves. The explanation is simple. At least one of the things which makes
some artworks so paradigmatic is that they satisfy virtually all criteria accepted within the artworld. This, in turn, means that they satisfy multiple subsets of criteria respected as sufficient, i.e. there are dozens of good reasons to confer the status onto them. Unsurprisingly, it takes no art-scholar to notice that – it seems blindingly obvious that *Mona Lisa* should be art to even marginally competent artworld members. However, this does not mean that conferral is obsolete, merely that no great competence is required to perform it, and that were Leonardo to die before he managed to present the painting to anyone, pretty much any artworld member who found it could have done it. The same is not true of less obvious and borderline cases, and perhaps it is in here that the workings of the institution are more apparent.

Finally, a full answer to my second question can be given: how is it that we came about the concept of art that we have? In fact, we never changed it. It seems that all art at all times could be defined in exactly the same way – by the cultural definition (while this statement may seem rather bold, I will defend it in section 4.5). The continuous changes in the extension of the concept can be explained by the changing set of reasons for arthood conferral. I claim that all the confusion in defining art, as well as the changing shape of art, styles and genres, follows from the culturally determined changes in the composition of the cluster, relative weighting of the respected criteria in it, and changes in which subsets of criteria were considered sufficient for arthood. Simply put: at different times and in different contexts people thought different reasons were good for arthood conferral, and acted accordingly. Thus there never was a development from naïve aestheticism to expression theory to significant form to functionalism, etc. – instead first people considered an artifact’s beauty as the main reason for arthood conferral (or beauty was weighted very heavily and 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 arthood conferral 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.

2.2.7 Tidying up

Once all the elements of the definition are in place, it seems that some of them double in explaining the same thing, and can be removed for the sake of simplicity.

The notion of ‘artworld in C’ now seems to be 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 a culturally competent member of a given social group. Thus the artworld seems to be similar to the notion of authority: while they are both implicitly present in the definition, they can be both substituted with more appropriate expressions.

Yet it seems that both ‘authority’ and ‘artworld’ are notions more specific than the general cultural competence, and thus substituting them may lead to a significant loss of precision. This is not the case – with the addition of the last part of my definition, the reasons for arthood conferral, both notions can be rather well specified: the authority required is derived from being competent enough to recognise or employ the respected reasons for arthood conferral in C and confer the art-status accordingly; similarly the artworld describes those beliefs and practices which centre around the respected reasons for arthood conferral in C.

In fact, my theory could be used to define the artworld in a more precise way. An artworld is a system of beliefs and practices present in a given context which are related to art, and a member of the artworld is a person competent in those beliefs and practices. The cultural definition preserves the notion of competence and only further specifies which
beliefs and practices are relevant in conferring art status – those which concern criteria for arthood respected in $C$. Using my terms, ‘artworld’ could be re-defined as follows:

\[
\text{Artworld in } C \overset{\text{def}}{=} \text{a system of beliefs and related practices present in } C, \text{ centred around the reasons for arthood conferral respected in } C \text{ and artifacts which satisfy them.}
\]

For example, if in $C$ satisfying the following set of criteria: (‘having positive aesthetic properties’, ‘being expressive of emotion’, ‘being set in a traditional art medium’) is respected as a reason for arthood conferral, then the artworld in $C$ is likely to include such beliefs as: ‘one should pay attention to the aesthetic properties of works’, ‘artists have a special insight into human emotions’, and practices such as: praising the work’s beauty rather than price, hanging paintings on walls rather than ceilings, etc. Because all this is included in the cultural competence, and thus already a part of the cultural definition, the notion of the artworld becomes redundant, and from here on I will use the terms ‘artworld’ and ‘institution’ mainly for convenience.\(^{22}\)

Those who are authorised to confer art-status, on the other hand, could be re-defined as follows:

\[
S \text{ is authorised to confer art-status in } C \text{ if and only if } S \text{ is culturally competent in } C, \text{ has sufficient knowledge of reasons for arthood conferral respected in } C \text{ and sufficient proficiency in acting according to those reasons.}
\]

On the above example, $S$ would have the authority to confer status if she knew which sets of criteria constitute reasons for conferral in $C$ and knew that to confer the status one needs to, e.g., display a painting and draw the public attention to its artistic properties,

\(^{22}\)Note that this move has two additional advantages: it allows me to remove the phrase ‘acting on behalf of’ which may still seem too formal to some, and it partially resolves or at least delays the problem of circularity (e.g. art being defined in terms of a social practice-belief system concerning art) – I will address this issue separately at length in section 4.1.
rather than spread some mango chutney on it and call the neighbours for lunch. Importantly, in most cases in order to confer the status one does not need to be capable of creating works which satisfy sufficient subsets of criteria oneself (though certainly to confer status on one’s own work, one does). Certainly also, the knowledge and competence required to gain authority is in some cases greater, and perhaps correlated with the complexity of the reasons for arthood conferral in $C$—e.g., it is harder to gain authority in the symbolic art of the 16th Century or the Avantgarde, than it is in pop art.

Another thing which becomes obsolete is singling out the art-relevant aspects of a work. While Dickie needed to specify that appreciation should be directed at only particular elements of the work, e.g., the front of the painting rather than the chemical structure of the canvas, once it is said that the status is conferred because $x$ satisfies some reasons for arthood, it is clear to any competent member of $C$ that it should be appreciated for the aspects which correspond to those reasons. In the above example, the status of the object of appreciation is conferred on the parts of the work which have positive aesthetic properties, express emotion, and were traditionally seen as important in this particular medium—and since it is the front of the painting and the shape of the sculpture, etc., which satisfy those criteria, not their chemical structures, it is clear that appreciation should be directed at those aspects.

Finally, there is one element of the definition which seemed obsolete even in the original institutional theory. Since Dickie thought that an object can become an artifact simply through being selected by an artist (Dickie [1997: 45]—i.e., having had the status conferred on it—and taken that for an institutionalist anyone can be an artist, it seems redundant to mention the artfactuality requirement in the definition which already requires conferral of the status. Simply in the moment in which one confers the status on any object, this object becomes an artifact (object-used-as-an-artistic-medium). This is not to say that artworks are not required to be artifacts—but since an object’s artfactuality is ensured by status conferral, 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 context \( C \) has had conferred upon it the status of candidate for appreciation by some person(s) culturally competent in \( C \), for reasons determined by a cluster of criteria for arthood respected in \( C \).

### 2.3 Arbitrariness

One more issue, which I find extremely important, has to be mentioned before my theory is fully explained. The institutional theory allows that members of the artworld can confer or fail to confer the status of a candidate for appreciation arbitrarily (see section \ref{sec:arbitrary}). Now that the cultural theory enables one to identify reasons for conferral, it seems that one should resign from the arbitrariness and simply state that conferring the status on an object only makes it an artwork if it is done for *good reasons*, i.e. reasons respected as sufficient in \( C \). If, on the other hand, someone was calling \( x \) an artwork without having such reasons, or for *bad reasons*\footnote{Note that what I call a 'bad reason' might not be that bad at all in some cases. We might think that conferring the status on a work partially because it has the property 'questioning common social convictions' (i.e. this property is a non-disposable element of the sufficient subset of criteria satisfied by the work) is quite good – nevertheless it would not have been in contexts such as 14th Century Europe.} e.g. because he wanted to play a joke on the critics or she was bribed to display \( x \) in a gallery, discovering those reasons could serve as a good indicator that \( x \) is not an artwork after all, and people were mistaken in treating it as one.

All this is essentially right, but the picture is somewhat more complicated than that. Let me analyse it in detail.

First, one has to distinguish two kinds of arbitrariness. On one hand, one can arbitrarily confer art-status on an object which does not fulfil any subset of criteria respected as sufficient in \( C \) (i.e. confer the status even though there are no good reasons to do so). On the other, one can arbitrarily not confer the status on an object although it does fulfil at least one such subset.
While the former kind is somewhat problematic, the latter is perfectly consistent with the cultural theory, and I take it to be its very important part. The fact that \( x \) fulfils at least one subset of criteria respected as sufficient in \( C \) is necessary, but not sufficient for \( x \) being art. It is merely a reason for conferring the art-status and becomes sufficient only when coupled with conferral itself. Thus it is perfectly possible that some objects should be left out simply because no one ever noticed that there are reasons to call them art, or perhaps even though people did notice, they consciously decide not to confer the status for completely different, art-irrelevant reasons. Arguably, some works which could easily count as art, never had the status conferred upon them for prudential reasons (e.g. fancy lingerie, artful pornographic movies), because they are strongly associated with other cultural practices (e.g. military parades, computer games), or just because they seem to mundane or vulgar to be art (e.g. dog shows). Neither of those are defeating criteria for arthood, nor are they somehow essentially incompatible with all sufficient subsets of criteria – they simply obscure the judgement of those who could confer the status on a work, causing them to arbitrarily exclude it from the domain of art. Occasionally, one such type of objects can be lifted to the Parnassus by an adventurous artist who questions its traditional neglect, in this way confirming the arbitrariness of the former exclusion – this seems to be what Art Nouveau artists did with furniture and interior design.\(^{24}\)

In the end, I argue that this type of arbitrariness is simply a feature of our world and a theory of art need not deny it if it can explain it. The explanation provided by the cultural theory is much more informative than Dickie’s – one can now say *why* ‘it has turned out that way’ that dog shows are not art, by tracing good and bad reasons which must have influenced the fact that no one ever conferred the art-status onto them. In this way, my theory remains informative, even though it allows for some degree of arbitrariness.

\(^{24}\)The case of pornography and art has been recently discussed in this context, the arguments often being that the properties which have been taken to be incompatible with arthood, are not really such, and we are merely refraining from classifying some objects as art for prudential reasons, (Fokt 2012; Kieran 2001; Maes 2011, 2009).
It is the first kind of arbitrariness which seems more problematic. It seems that there are many cases in which certain objects were called art, and were even appreciated as art by many people, even though it seems that there were no good reasons to treat them as such. Moreover, one can identify the bad reasons which caused people to treat something as art: bribing a gallery owner to display a given object, an upcoming critic wanting to make a name for himself by ‘discovering’ a simple craftsman as a folk artist, deciding to confer the status for political gain, etc. How should a cultural theorist treat such cases?

Let me analyse the problem in detail. In terms of the above discussion, art status is conferred on an object \( x \) for good reasons in \( C \) if that \( x \) satisfies at least one of the subsets \( \alpha_1, \ldots, \alpha_n \) of the set of all criteria for arthood \( \alpha \), respected as sufficient by culturally competent persons in \( C \). The status would be conferred on \( x \) for bad reasons in \( C \) if \( x \) satisfies a subset of criteria \( \beta \) such that \( \beta \notin \alpha_1, \ldots, \alpha_n \), and an arbitrary property \( P \) such that \( P \notin \alpha \) (it is not even considered as art-relevant in \( C \)). This can be expressed by a counterfactual which may sound quite familiar: if \( x \) did not have the property \( P \), it would not have become an artwork in \( C \) merely in virtue of satisfying \( \beta \) – ‘if the author’s uncle didn’t write the review, this would never make it to a gallery’, ‘if this village craftwork wasn’t made during the October Revolution, it would never be singled out as folk art’, etc.

The simple answer a cultural theorist can give here is: since the conferral of the status is not sufficient by itself (i.e. good reasons to confer it are necessary), an object which was called art for bad reasons is not art after all, at least not in \( C \) and any other context in which none of the subsets of criteria it satisfies is respected as sufficient for arthood conferral. However, this is somewhat complicated by the possibility of changing contexts, and often what seems like cases of arbitrary conferral might in fact be something else. Below I will consider a few examples of what seem to be cases of arbitrary conferral to clarify my position.
1. A great deal of objects seem to have gained the status simply because they are old. For example, it seems unlikely (or at least uncommon) that any modern commemorative letters, celebratory prayers or funerary texts should be art, yet it is perfectly normal to treat texts of this kind as art if they have been written by Ancient Egyptians or Greeks (see: Pettersson 2001: 87-88) – the celebrated Egyptian Book of the dead for one, is essentially an illustrated funerary manual and a list of pieces of advice for the afterlife (Fig. 2.2). Thus it seems that at least in some cases the main reason why something is treated as art is because it has the property ‘is old’ – which can hardly be seriously treated as criterial.

A cultural theorist can easily resolve this issue. Firstly, one should ask historians and anthropologists which subsets of criteria for arthood were respected as sufficient in x’s ancient context, and check whether x satisfies them. Secondly, one should check whether x satisfies any subsets of criteria applied by us to ancient art. If the answer to both questions is positive, x could have been art in antiquity and could be art now (and if someone conferred the status, it was, or is). If only the first answer is positive, x could have been art, but now is a mere artefact, and as such belongs to a museum,
not an art gallery. If only the second, $x$ is like the African masks presented by Picasso – it can only become art mid-life. Finally, if the answer to both is negative, $x$ is not and was not art.

2. In a number of cases some of an established artist's work was left intentionally unpublished during his lifetime and got published posthumously because it offered some rewards to the family or publisher. In at least some cases the works published were of mediocre quality, were specifically left out by the artist (perhaps because they were thought of as exercises or were created at a very young age) and even the person publishing them recognised that they did not satisfy the socially respected standards for arthood – yet decided to publish them and thereby confer the art-status nevertheless. Examples include such famous figures as Baudelaire whose mother published his poems after he died to pay off his debts, Leonardo, who never intended his drawings and sketches as artworks, or Rubens, who produced a number of painting models for his disciples to execute in big format, intended to be discarded after use, but now treated as artworks in their own right. In all those cases one can definitely say: if the publisher didn’t want to make some money or get famous, those would never be presented for appreciation as there would be no good reasons to treat them as art in $C$.

There are three possible solutions to this issue. Firstly, the artist as well as the publishers might have actually wrongly recognised the properties of the work or mis-interpreted the criteria for arthood in their context, or both, and the work does actually satisfy at least one of $\alpha_1, \ldots, \alpha_n$. In practice, they may simply have thought either that the work was worse than it actually was, or that the requirements for arthood were steeper than they were. In this case after the status is conferred by the publisher, the work becomes an artwork – though possibly a rather poor one.
Secondly, the artist might have rightly recognised that there were no reasons to call his work art (none of $\alpha_1, \ldots, \alpha_n$ was satisfied by it in $C_0$), but in time, perhaps even as a result of his own creations, the criteria have changed and when the publisher calls it art in $C_1$, the work does satisfy at least one of $\alpha_1, \ldots, \alpha_n$. In this case the work was not art at the time when it was created, but became art in the new context. Arguably this is what happened to such works as Leonardo’s sketches. Finally, it is possible that the work did not satisfy any sufficient subset in neither the context of creation nor conferral, and in this case it is simply not art (at least until the context changes appropriately).

3. More examples can be given from the field of politically engaged art. The communist regime of USSR has been involved in recovering folk artists and artworks – often objects which were hardly close to satisfying any sufficient set of criteria for arthood ascription (Fig. 2.3). These objects had subsequently art status conferred upon them for bad reasons – usually because they somewhat resembled art and had the property ‘created by a member of the proletariat’ or ‘expressing love for Stalin’, etc. An extraordinary number of communist poems were acknowledged as art even though it is more than likely that apart from praising the regime they satisfied subsets of criteria as insufficient as those satisfied by pretentious love poems or commercial slogans. An additional proof for the arbitrary arthood of those works is evident from how they were treated after the collapse of the regime – largely despised or forgotten, even though for a number of years they were treated with utmost seriousness.

A cultural theorist can easily account for that phenomenon. It is possible that in some specific cultural contexts certain seemingly arbitrary properties become criteria for arthood – there are cultural ‘bubbles’ in which ‘expressing the will of the proletariat’, or ‘being understandable for all members of the working class’ are regarded as
very important. However, once such properties are included in the cluster of criteria for arthood and become parts of subsets respected as sufficient, they are no longer arbitrary – instead they simply make for a very specific cultural context. Thus while in any other context outside USSR some of Soviet works are not art, they are art within the regime. Unsurprisingly, once the regime has fallen and the cultural context has changed, they lost the status.

4. A great amount of popular art and music seems to be similar. It is at least doubtful whether pop stars would have been called ‘artists’ if they were not promoted and advertised and if their managers did not hope to earn a great deal of money on their careers. In fact, their music might not satisfy any sufficient subsets at all; moreover, more often than not pop artists do not actually create the music ascribed to them (i.e. they perform the work of other people), and in many concerts they
do not even perform it – instead they pretend to be singing while what is heard is a tape recording. In this case it seems that they are called artists even though they have done hardly anything to produce an artwork that is ascribed to them. More importantly, in case of performances while we think that we are dealing with a performance of a musical work, we are in fact dealing with some sort of mime-performance. If this is the case, then at least some pop stars are artists even though there are absolutely no good reasons to call them that – instead there is a host of bad reasons, e.g. they look good, they are willing to become celebrities, they happen to embody a certain popular personality model, etc. Neither are there good reasons to call their performances of their songs artworks – not only do they hardly satisfy any criteria for arthood we are willing to explicitly accept, but also at least sometimes (in playback cases) they are not really performances at all, or at least not musical performances. Instead, they are treated as artworks for bad reasons, partially basing on the deception of the public.

5. Another example can be provided by paintings and drawings created by modern celebrities – actors, pop musicians, otherwise famous people (Fig. 2.4). Although in some cases there might indeed be good reasons to confer the art-status on those objects, there are a number of works (e.g. paintings by Johnny Deep or Sylvester Stallone) which are exhibited as artworks in galleries, reproduced and displayed in books, on the internet, etc., while they hardly merit higher than an average exercise sketch of an art student. In such cases it seems that although a work satisfies subsets of criteria which are as insufficient as those satisfied by a poor art student’s sketchbook, it becomes an artwork in virtue of having the property ‘produced by a celebrity’.
The solution here is parallel to the above. While the context of USSR was separated geographically and had clear time boundaries, a cultural theorist need not limit himself to such clear-cut cases. Thus pop songs and the like are in fact art, but only in specific contexts, namely contexts of popular culture in which the requirements for arthood are extremely relaxed (i.e. there are many more sets of criteria which are considered sufficient). What is more, it is perfectly possible that in such contexts properties such as ‘created by a celebrity’ might be treated as criteria. At the same time, in the context of high culture, such works do not merit arthood and are not art. Such contexts need not be geographically or temporally disjoint – they can be parallel. It is now merely a matter of choosing which context one is interested in and judging the chosen works accordingly.
Some of those solutions seem to imply a sort of relativism – if the arthood of objects can vary depending on the context, what is there to stop us from having to consider every artwork in an infinite number of ever weirder contexts and conclude that everything is art in some context? Fortunately, this problem can be avoided. As I will show in section 4.4, we should classify works not just in any, but in those contexts which for one reason or another matter to us. Selecting the contexts which matter is also not arbitrary – all a philosopher needs to do in this case is to find out how anthropologists distinguish particular contexts and what historians have to say about a given work that could determine for which context it was intended, or in which context it was seen as appropriate, etc. With such data it seems easy to say that Vanessa Paradis should be considered in the context of modern pop culture, rather than by the criteria of the Italian Renaissance (which would not be appropriate given the contextual data) or within the context of Johnny Depp, his pool cleaner and all the actors in Kurosawa’s Seven Samurai (which would hardly matter to us). Moreover, it seems that even if a cultural theorist were choosing contexts arbitrarily, she would be no more arbitrary than others – surely the definitions which are limited to explaining the concept of art in the modern Western world arbitrarily choose the modern Western context, likely selecting it precisely because they think that this context matters most to us. All a cultural theorist does is make a similar choice a few more times, using the very same criteria for what is important.

The cultural theory is far from being vague or allowing too much arbitrariness. In fact, one can fairly easily distinguish the cases in which art-status has been conferred for what we agree are good reasons, for reasons which were good only within a limited context, or simply for bad reasons. Similarly, it can answer in which contexts people would be right to call something art, and in which contexts they would be mistaken. Thus the answers provided by the cultural theory may be relative, but definitely not arbitrary.

An additional advantage of such treatment is that it can shed light on certain issues in history of art. Some of the greatest artists have created works which were so visionary,
that they remained misunderstood for years before they found appreciation. Beethoven’s late string quartets, Michelangelo’s late sculptures were so original and different from other works at their time, that most if not all of their contemporaries thought that they were not art. A cultural theorist may now provide an account on this phenomenon. Beethoven’s opus 133 is a work which satisfies a set of properties $\beta$ such that in the context of 1826 Vienna ($C_0$) $\beta \notin \alpha_1, \ldots, \alpha_n$. At the same time, when his quartet is judged by the standards of the Great Avantgarde’s context ($C_1$), it is clearly a magnificent artwork (i.e. in $C_1$ $\beta \in \alpha_1, \ldots, \alpha_n$). This is exactly a part of Beethoven’s genius – he was able to outrun everyone in his time and foresee the development of music and wider culture to the point in which he can be said to have created works which met the standards of $C_1$ while still living in $C_0$. (Moreover, and considering who is being spoken about this might be quite appropriate, a cultural theorist could stretch things and say that Beethoven in a way established a new cultural context, with which the rest of the world only caught up a hundred years later.)

A similar story could be told about quite a few important breakthroughs in art history: they can be analysed as cases of an artist creating something which satisfies a future sufficient subset of criteria. It can be also added that in some such cases such artists actively work towards changing their cultural context in accordance with their vision. For example, it could be said that at the time when Duchamp presented his Fountain (in $C_0$), there were no good reasons to confer the art-status onto it. And indeed, Duchamp actually meant his work to be a joke, not art. However, as a result of his act, the context changed slightly, and soon ready-mades gained some recognition in the artworld – either by becoming a recognised genre (and thus satisfying the criterion ‘belonging to an established artistic form’), or following a relaxation of some other criteria. What this illustrates is that historically some works turn out to be influential enough to change the way people think about art – after their creation the criteria they fulfil start to be respected as sufficient, and subsequently they are judged by those criteria.
Characteristics and appeal of the cultural definition

The cultural definition is not a particularly good one in the sense of being what philosophers usually expect of a definition. It does not meet Carroll’s objection to IT – it is a contextual definition, perhaps even more contextual than Dickie’s. It is also quite weak, because instead of defining ‘art’ in a definite way it relativises the extension of the term to social practices and convictions regarding criteria relevant for arthood, which are quite contingent. What is more, these practices are something philosophy can say little about, however they may be perfectly describable for a social scientist. Additionally, it is not only the fact that a given object satisfies a given set of properties which is respected as sufficient for arthood within a given culture that makes artworks – what is required is an act of status conferral which can sometimes not happen for arbitrary reasons. I fully realise the weaknesses of this definition, however, and this is perhaps the central point of my view, I hold that this definition is the best we can get if we are to remain faithful to the actual artistic practices and artworks.

At the same time I hold that this definition is a very good one if considered without the prejudices of analytic philosophy. Specifically, one needs to lift the requirement for every definition to provide answers that are universal and necessary, agree that some things can and should be context-relative, and mainly, accept that relegating some of the definitional burden to empirical social sciences is not a stab in the very heart of Philosophy, but a rational and scientific move which tries to use the best tools to do the job. I believe that neither of those concessions are particularly hard and at least in the case of philosophy of art, all of them are most appropriate.

Before I proceed to showing how the cultural definition preserves the advantages and solves the problems of other theories, I would like to make salient its intuitive appeal. There are several common ways of thinking about art which it explains, perhaps better than any of its competitors.
Art has to do with human practices and beliefs

Art is something people do, and something that is done in a way that reflects what people think, believe in, like, value, admire, etc. There is an obvious connection between the dominant styles and types of art created, and the changing human beliefs and practices – religious societies are dominated by spiritual art, art in the time of revolutions is bold and realist, art of the Enlightenment is regular and structured. It is also natural to try and explain why the history of Chinese art is different from the history of European art by referring to the social settings in which they developed. It might be unclear what type of connection there is between artworks and the societies that produced them, but it seems natural to think that there is some connection.

The cultural theory can easily account for such intuitions – after all practices and beliefs of a given social group is the very centre of my definition. Dickie’s institutional theory could perhaps refer the reader to the same social context, but my view is better in pointing out the connections the artistic practice (the artworld) has with other cultural practices and belief systems which clearly influence it. Further, the cultural definition specifies what are the particular human beliefs and related practices which are connected to art – the ones expressed as commonly respected reasons for arthood conferral.

What counts as art changes over time

Especially in the post-avantgarde time it seems strikingly obvious that what passes as art now would have never been accepted as art in the past. It is quite natural to think that ‘4’33’ would not be an artwork if it were composed by Beethoven rather than Cage, nor would ‘Black Square’ if it were painted by Botticelli not Malevich.

Most definitions of art are surprisingly unconcerned about this. Trying to define what art is now, they think it absolutely irrelevant that art might have been something different once. In my opinion the fact that what is art changes over time tells one something about
the nature of the thing one is trying to define, and turning a blind eye to this fact is rather odd. Naturally, there are possible interpretations of this fact stemming from each of the discussed theories – Dickie might simply claim that in a different artworld different things are art; Levinson could argue that in the past artists intentionally creating objects to be regarded as past art was correctly regarded, had a different reference for ‘past art’, so no wonder their art was different too. Functionalists and cluster theorists would seem to have a harder time explaining the changing nature of art, but most importantly, neither of the theories truly explains why what is art changes, or what is it that causes the changes.

To this, the cultural definition has a simple answer. In time (and wider – in cultural contexts) societies change their views on many things, including their beliefs and practices related to art, and among other things, they change their views on what are the good reasons for conferring arthood on objects. In other words, the requirements for having the status of art conferred upon an object change over time (and context), because the people who do the conferring change their views on what are good reasons to do the conferring.

Not only can my theory fully embrace the intuitive historicity of art, but it can also explain it by pointing out the mechanisms which cause the change of commonly respected views on art. As I was trying to show in section 2.2.5 there are simple ways of explaining the changing nature of art by appealing to the influences artistic practice has on beliefs about art and vice versa, as well as to the influences other cultural practices and belief systems have on them.

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 passes as art these days…’ A great amount of people feel that although certain objects make it to the gallery and are treated as art by the critics, they somehow do not deserve to be art, or are called ‘art’ unjustifiably. This is exactly why readymades, found art, minimalist paintings, junk sculptures, etc. are so controversial – because people
disagree whether they are art or not. On the other hand, one can find critics looking with
disregard at pop artists and amateur painters thinking the same – this should not be art.\footnote{This intuition is captured rather well by the functionalists, see section 1.3.1.}

The cultural theory shows that in some cases such judgements are mistaken or vacuous.
One can for example claim that abstract paintings are not art because one is not aware that
being representational is not required of paintings anymore after the Great Avantgarde.
If one tries to say that an abstract painting is not art in $C_{\text{post-Avantgarde}}$, one is mistaken
and has insufficient cultural competence to adequately judge the arthood of objects in this
context.

However, the main advantage of the cultural theory lies in being able to explain \textit{how}
people are mistaken. 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 $C_1$’.
Most likely this is the best explanation for most of our everyday quarrels about art – the
disagreement over \textit{Fountain} being art or not may be analysed away, because the sides
simply talk about different things. On one hand, some say that \textit{Fountain} is an artwork
and actually mean that it is an artwork because it satisfies a set of properties respected
as sufficient for arthood conferral in $C_{\text{post-Avantgarde}}$, while on the other some say that
\textit{Fountain} is not an artwork and actually mean that it is not because it does not satisfy
any set of properties respected as sufficient in $C_{\text{pre-Avantgarde}}$. Naturally, there is no logical
contradiction between the two at all.\footnote{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.}
In this way it is easy to explain why a great amount
of people has reservations when it comes to accepting the art-status of some of the modern
art – it is simply because they try to judge the arthood of the piece relative to a past
context (most likely relative to the context of Classicism and Romanticism, because that is what most people are most familiar with).\footnote{A sensible objection to raise at this point would be: surely a theory which allows one to pick any context one pleases, even the context of my next door neighbour and his two mates, cannot be of much
People can be mistaken about what is art

Dickie claimed that one cannot err in conferring the art status, rather merely err by conferring it. The cultural theory, however, provides one with tools powerful enough to provide some conditions in which one can be mistaken after all. Thus on one hand, I want to hold, after Dickie, that one cannot be mistaken in not conferring the status — it is no one's mistake that dog shows and fancy lingerie are not art, it just 'turned out that way'. However, one can still err in calling something 'art' which does not deserve the name.

Firstly, one can try to confer art status in $C$ while being culturally incompetent in $C$. If one has utterly no clue about art, and one decides to confer the art status on some object, one will fail (a fact expressed later by the lack of acceptance and mockery from the competent members of the artworld). Similarly, if one would try to confer the status of a married couple without being appropriately competent (e.g. being a priest or a state official), one would fail to confer it. Admittedly, this is more and more difficult in the modern times — as Danto argued, at the time of the end of art the competence requirements are so minimal it is quite difficult not to meet them, and thus in practice it might almost never happen that one will fail to confer the status. Still, I believe that this point has an important historical value — it seems rather reasonable to say that in Leonardo's times a number of paintings were created which were not considered art, precisely because their creators were seen as not competent enough in $C_{Italian Rennaissaince}$ to produce art.

Secondly, one can be mistaken in taking an object which is an artwork for a non-artwork. As mentioned above, this happens most often when one considers it relative to cultural context $C_1$, while in fact it was created and should be considered relative to some $C_2$. This is how people used to Classical and Romantic art can be mistaken in thinking that post-Avantgarde art is not art.

\textsuperscript{use} — we should have a better definition of cultural contexts than that to work on. This point will be discussed at length in section \[4.4\]
And most interestingly, one can be mistaken in taking an object which is not art, for art. If one attempts to confer the status on an object even though there are no good reasons to do so in a given context, it is not art in this context. It is perfectly possible that the person will fool quite a few people into believing that it is an artwork, but this only enlarges the number of people being mistaken about it. However, it is still perfectly possible that it should gain art status once the context changes in such a way that the object’s criterial properties do form a subset respected as sufficient, i.e. there are good reasons to confer the status on it. Moreover, it is also perfectly possible that the change of context is influenced by this very object, and all the mistaken people who believe it is art – arguably this might have been what happened with Duchamp’s readymades.

**Painting, dance, literature – all arts are different, yet they are all art**

With all the differences between the various arts, it is common to think about art as a single, diverse yet somehow unified phenomenon. After all, we use one word to refer to all kinds of art, the same formal institutions are dealing with their matters (e.g. ministries, foundations). Even though it is common to introduce explicit divisions for practical matters (e.g. paintings are exhibited in galleries, not concert halls), the divisions between particular arts are much weaker than the division between arts and non-art (e.g. it is more likely that a gallery will invite a classical music concert than a bikers night or a goldfish lovers convention).

It is hard to explain this intuition on the basis of ontology – rather than offer a unified view, modern ontology of art leans towards pluralism which diversifies various arts (e.g. Wollheim [1980] Levinson [1990]). While I do not think that the burden of explanation lies on a classificatory theory, I do think that it would be an advantage of a theory if it could at least be compatible with the unifying intuition, and perhaps even hint at its explanation.

The cultural definition can do both those things. First, by inheriting the Wittgensteinian element of the cluster account, it can explain that the reason why various arts...
are brought under the same concept, is because of their family resemblance. In particular, various arts resemble one another in the following: it takes people with similar competence to produce and to appreciate works of various arts; similar practices are involved in the production, presentation and reception of various artworks; similar beliefs are commonly held with regards to various arts concerning their value and place in the society; various arts share a similar history, and some were historically treated as a unified phenomenon; etc. Thus while it is obvious that art forms differ from one another, they are seen as similar enough to be treated as one.

Secondly, by inheriting a part of the arbitrary nature of IT, the cultural theory can explain why certain phenomena are art and others are not, even though there is little ontological difference between them. However, where Dickie could only say that ‘it has turned out that way’, a cultural theorist can point at particular reasons (often bad reasons) for such unjustified divisions: perhaps dog shows are not art because at the time when the main art forms were developing, dogs were thought to be (for religious, cultural, political reasons) an inappropriate medium for artistic expression; similarly lingerie might not be an art form simply because for centuries displaying it was seen as indecent. Tracing the influences various social practices and beliefs had on the artistic practice and belief system is likely to provide justifications for many similar facts.

**What is art is objective vs. what is art is subjective**

Common sense seems helpless when it comes to deciding whether what is art is a subjective or an objective matter. The issue has been under philosophical discussion at least since Hume (although he spoke about the beautiful rather than art, the common definition of art was the aesthetic one), but intuitions about the matter seem to be in serious conflict. On the one hand, one is happy to admit that what is art for one man may not be art for another, e.g. for you this work by Lucio Fontana may be art, but for me it is just a slashed
Figure 2.5: Lucio Fontana, *Concetto spaziale 'Attesa'*, 1960, Tate Modern, London

canvas. On the other, it is common to argue over the arthood of controversial objects as if it were an objective matter after all.

Classificatory theories generally try to argue for the objectivity of arthood, but offer little explanation of the subjectivity intuition. Perhaps it is enough to simply say that such intuitions are uninformed by philosophical thought and ignorant, yet it seems that a theory could at least try to accommodate them somehow (especially if it does not want to risk being asked why then is it not the opposite intuition, or any other intuition that is ignorant and untrustworthy).

A cultural theorist can hold that what is art is objective, but relative to a given cultural context. Thus it is objective that Fontana’s *Spatial Concept ‘Waiting’* is a work of art in *modern western art*, but this does not yet mean that it is a work of art in any other context as well (Fig. 2.5). It might be, but it might not.
Using this framework, both intuitions can be explained as follows: that $x$ is an artwork seems intuitively objective to $S$, because $x$ is objectively an artwork in the context $S$ lives in $(C_S)$, and most likely $C_S$ is the only context $S$ knows or cares about. On the other hand, $x$’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. Whatever it seems, however, $x$’s arthood is objective, but context-relative.

\footnote{To quote Beardsley, the arthood of an object rests on judgements which are accepted so commonly that they seem to be universal, i.e. objective (Beardsley 1982a 137).}
Chapter 3

Advantages of the Cultural Definition

The cultural definition has more than just some intuitive appeal. In this chapter I will review its advantages to show that it is attractive not only at face value, but also after somewhat more careful philosophical examination. The main advantage of the cultural theory is that it can explain virtually everything that any of the other discussed theories can explain, in most cases it does it in greater detail and with wider scope, and without falling into the traps which plagued those theories. In the following pages I will discuss how my view preserves the advantages and solves or sidesteps the problems of other definitions (in doing so I try to keep the same structure of enquiry as I did when first introducing them). After this is done, I will show that apart from being an improvement on the existing theories, the cultural definition has some specific advantages of its own.

3.1 Making the best of the institutional theory

Anything goes

As I argued in section [1.1.1] the institutional theory has the advantage of being able to account for the actual modern practice of art, characterised by the famous quote from
Andy Warhol: ‘Art is anything you can get away with’ (cf. Dickie 1974: 49). Similarly to IT, the cultural theory does not dwell on resenting the fact that after dadaism ‘anything goes’, but accepts it as given and tries to explain it. Perhaps it even makes searching for the explanation easier, providing terms for analysing art as a social phenomenon. For example, the Avantgarde changed our thinking about art, and now originality (and related crossing of boundaries) is commonly respected as perhaps the most important criterion for arthood, figuring in most subsets respected as sufficient, and outweighing possible lack of aesthetic appeal, not being cast in a traditional medium, etc. The common modern thinking about art simply encourages artists to do whatever they want, provided what they do is original.

A cultural theorist has also a ready explanation of why the commonly respected set of criteria changed at this particular time. With proper data from social sciences one can draw a complete picture of the cultural impact of the technological jump of the early 20th Century, the accompanying social change and the World Wars, on artistic culture – they all encouraged experimenting with new materials and forms, and rejecting the untrustworthy tradition.

Arbitrariness

Dickie argued that there is no deep explanation for why some things are not art other than pointing out that artistic practice, like all social practices, is somewhat messy, unstructured and arbitrary (Dickie 2000: 100). The institutionalists also allow objects to gain the status of art in an arbitrary (and unjustified) way, not because of their actual merit (Dickie 1974: 50).

The cultural theory can preserve a part of those insights, ensuring that at the same time some arbitrary features of artistic practice are properly accounted for, while the theory as a whole does not become trivial. Thus on the one hand I agree that some things (e.g.

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It is notable that some theorists have even seen this as a duty of modern art (e.g. Pevsner 1960).
dog shows, jewellery) could by all standards be art and yet are not, because for arbitrary reasons no one ever conferred the status onto them. On the other, however, when someone confers the status even though there are no good reasons for her to do so, a cultural theorist can stop and deny that the object is art – at least within any context in which it does not satisfy a subset of criteria respected as sufficient. In this way the cultural definition allows for exactly as much arbitrariness as is necessary to account for actual practices, without descending into the triviality of ascribing art status to whatever anyone fancied to call ‘art’.

**Indistinguishable objects**

Since the cultural definition retains the notion of conferral in its central place, it preserves the ability to explain indistinguishable objects cases – the main driving force behind the institutional theory. What is more, it also explains why readymades remain controversial – while in the contemporary context their criterial properties form subsets respected as sufficient for arthood, in some cases readymades are judged according to the criteria of past contexts.

**There are no institutions**

While the institutionalist does not require the institution to be formal, I suggested that its informality and the fact that anyone can be its member if they just wish to, may introduce an unbearable vagueness to the theory (see page 25). There are at least two ways to answer this issue. One is to simply deny the conclusion – a number of other social practices are completely informal and yet perfectly intelligible, e.g. informal partnership, fan groups, fashion, etc. The cultural theory allows for specifying this answer. Since an artworld is described as a social practice and related system of beliefs, it makes absolutely no difference whether those practices and beliefs are somehow formalised or not. It may be easier for a social scientist to learn about them if they are, but studying the common
beliefs and practices is everything that is required to provide a description of an artwork, and following that – art.

The second solution concerns the respected reasons for status conferral. It is not the case that anyone can do anything they want, because a person conferring the status must be culturally competent and have reasons for conferral, i.e. the given object should satisfy a subset of criteria for arthood respected as sufficient within their artwork. Thus the cultural theory may allow a lot, but is anything but vague.

Ahistoricity

It has been claimed that IT does not account for historical changes in the artworld and the characteristics of a person authorised to confer art-status (see page 26). While it is possible to answer this objection without modifying Dickie’s view too much (see S. Davies 1991), the cultural theory can again provide a more detailed reply. Firstly, it explains what changes over time – the subsets of criteria commonly respected as sufficient for arthood. Secondly, it explains how is it that things which are art now would not have been art in another place and time – in the context of the present Western culture $C_1$ an object, say Malevich’s Black Square, can have the art-status conferred upon it because it satisfies a subset of criteria $\alpha_1$ which is respected as sufficient in $C_1$, while the same object would not be art in 16th Century China ($C_2$) because even though it still satisfies $\alpha_1$, $\alpha_1$ was not respected as sufficient in $C_2$. Finally, the cultural theory can explain why is it that when we, present day Westerners, tend to judge art from different times differently, i.e. we would not say Black Square is art if it were painted in 16th Century China. Parallel to the previous case, in judging objects from different contexts, we apply different criteria and while we would judge an object known to be created in $C_1$ according to the criteria respected in $C_1$, we tend to judge objects created in $C_2$ according to the criteria known to have been respected in $C_2$. 
Private art

A somewhat more detailed treatment is due to the issue of private art. It seems intuitive for some to think that a person completely detached from the society and blissfully unaware of any artistic practices or beliefs present within it, could nevertheless produce artworks. It cannot account for that intuition, because it requires the artist to be a member of an artworld, i.e. a social institution (see pages 27 ff.).

While I do not share the said intuition, the cultural theory does allow for the existence of lone artists. I do not require an artist to be a member of a society – it is enough that she acts within a certain cultural context, i.e. respects certain beliefs and follows certain practices. While such contexts are typically present within societies, it is perfectly possible that a lone artist could hold beliefs and follow practices of her own, or hold beliefs and practices that unbeknownst to her are also held by a larger society. In other words, a lone artist may respect her own reasons for arthood conferral, and if it turns out that those reasons are somewhat similar to the reasons we respect, it is more than likely that we will recognise and treat her works as art as well.

In this case, the solution I offer would be fairly similar to the one offered by Levinson: an object created by a lone artist can be an artwork and be recognised as such by us because it satisfies a subset of reasons for arthood $\alpha_1$ respected as sufficient in $C_1$ (in practice – by its creator, within her own cultural context) such that $\alpha_1$ is also respected as sufficient in $C_2$ – our cultural context.

The cultural definition, however, does not conclude that an object created by a lone artist is an artwork \textit{simpliciter}. Instead it concludes that it can be an artwork in any context in which the properties it has are commonly respected as sufficient reasons for arthood conferral \textit{after someone has done the conferring}. In fact, I believe that such treatment conforms exactly with our actual practice. If an object identical to \textit{Mona Lisa} were created by a lone artist, it would have been art before it was found by anyone familiar
with other art (because it would satisfy criteria respected by its creator and because he conferred the status upon it) as well as after (because it satisfies criteria respected by us and anyone who would find it would acknowledge its art-status). The African masks found by Picasso are definitely art for us (they satisfy our criteria and had arthood conferred upon them by Picasso), but it is uncertain whether they were art before (it is unclear whether their properties were seen as sufficient for arthood conferral by their creators, or whether anyone ever did the conferring). In another case, a text written by a hermit in Linear A script might have been an artwork for him (it satisfied criteria for arthood he respected and he did the conferral), but it might not be for us (because we cannot read it, we cannot even tell if it is a poem or a prayer, or whether it satisfies our criteria, and at least until someone will decipher Linear A, it will remain a mere artefact).

**Ignoring the artist**

It is said to not give enough attention to what the artists actually do or intend, placing the stress on the decisions of the artworld members (see page 30). I argued that the institutional theory should not turn away from the seemingly unwanted conclusion – a host of works, including objects created as primarily magical or religious artefacts, Leonardo’s sketchbooks, Kafka’s novels, are artworks not in virtue of what their creators wanted, but because the public decided they should be.

The cultural theory provides two motivations for explaining and defending the involvement of the public. Firstly, it does not require that it be the artist who confers the status, but any person competent in $C$. While typically this person is the actual creator of the object, she need not be. Secondly, the cultural theory provides an explanation of why the public may decide to confer the status – because it recognises that there are good reasons to confer it even though the artist did not do it, or there were no good reasons for conferral at her time. Thus it might be the case that old religious or magical artefacts did not satisfy any subset of criteria commonly respected as sufficient in $C_1$, but because now, in $C_2$ they
do, the public may decide to confer the status even though their creator did not intend it. Leonardo’s sketchbooks seem to be similar in this respect. Kafka’s novels, on the other hand, may have in fact satisfied a subset respected as sufficient in $C_1$ but Kafka may have been unaware of that (or more plausibly he held somewhat more demanding criteria) and decided not to confer the status. In this case a public member Max Brod conferred the status for him, recognising that he did actually have good reasons to do so.

Wollheim’s Dilemma

Wollheim argued that either the members of the artworld have reasons for conferring the status and thus the institutional theory should include those reasons and likely would not need to refer to the institution, or they do not, in which case the theory is completely uninformative (see page 36).

The solution, discussed at length in section 2.2.6, is to sit a little on both horns of the dilemma. The members of the institution do have reasons to confer the status, however, those reasons are themselves dependant on the institution which determines which subsets of criteria count as sufficient in the first place. What is more, it is not sufficient that an object satisfies the criteria – someone still has to do the conferring, and failing to do so might sometimes be quite arbitrary.

Ultimately, the cultural definition escapes Wollheim’s charges, because firstly, it retains the institutional character of the definition by stressing the cultural dependancy of art and the necessity for the act of conferral; and secondly, it retains a great deal of informativeness, as it allows one to tell if and why a given object is an artwork in a given context and what sort of objects could be artworks given the context.

Other problems

The cultural theory does not in any straightforward way solve IT’s circularity (see page 31). Dickie argued that it should be regarded more as a feature of the theory than a
problem, and that even though circular, IT is still informative. However, it seems that the issue calls for a more careful treatment, which I will present in section 4.1.

Finally, the cultural theory gives substance to rejecting Carroll’s objection – the charge that IT does not meet the open concept challenge, and thus does not tell one anything about art but merely about how it fits into a social context, or what people think art is (see page 38). The question posed is simply misplaced – for both institutional and cultural theorists there is nothing more to the concept of art than what the members of the art-world say, and the cultural theory allows one to find out what do they actually say it is. Asking an open question in this case is a little like asking: ‘we all know how people think a rook can move in chess, but how a chess rook can actually move?’ The short answer is – this is just a silly question, there is no such thing as a chess rook moves in themselves, because the game of chess is a social practice governed by conventionally established rules, and if there were no people to play chess, there would be no rules concerning the way a rook can move. Similarly, there is no point asking what is art independent of human (or alien) artistic practice, because the concept of art makes no sense outside this practice.\(^2\)

### 3.2 Making the best of historicism

**Stressing the historical nature of art**

In section 1.2.1 I stressed what I believe is the most important point of historicism – recognising that art has a history and that its current shape (or the shape of art at any time) is determined by what art was before. While I do not agree that this link is essential or even necessary for art, I do find it extremely important.

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\(^2\)Note that this does not bring about the problem of private art again, as it is perfectly possible that a lone artist can have her private artistic practice and belief system. On the other hand, this solution neatly fits the intuition that were there a rock formed by wind and water randomly in a shape exactly the same as Michelangelo’s David, it would not be an artwork – at least not unless an artist would claim it as found art, by this making it a part of the artistic practice.
The cultural theory not only recognises the historicity of art, it builds on Levinson's idea. Firstly it provides a framework within which one can assert that art was something different at a different time, and moreover, try to find out what it actually was – one can study the historically commonly respected sufficient subsets of criteria for arthood and determine whether object $x$, given its properties, is likely to have the art-status conferred upon it in that context or not. Secondly, the cultural theory stresses the fact that the importance lies not only in the temporal, but in the wider cultural contexts – not only was art something else in 17th Century Spain than it is now, it was also different in 17th Century Spain and China. Moreover, a cultural theorist may, after receiving some appropriate data from the social sciences, try to determine why was art different once than it is now.\footnote{E.g. one can explain that in 17th Century Spain the subsets of reasons for arthood commonly respected as sufficient were thus and so, because e.g. the Counter-reformation promoted deep spirituality, opposed the protestant strive towards unaesthetic simplicity, and discouraged any originality.}

**Explaining how historical changes are possible**

This brings up another great advantage of historicism – it explains how art changes over time: artworks at $t_1$ are influenced by artworks at $t_0$, and in turn influence artworks at $t_2$. Simply because artists are aware of what is past art to them, intend their artworks to be regarded as this past art was regarded, and by making them they determine what ‘past art’ refers to for future artists engaged in the same process.

The cultural theory explains historical change slightly differently. On my account the historical change is not explained by the play between the state of art at $t$ and the artist’s intentions, but between the state of art at $t$ (or in $C$) and the subsets of reasons commonly respected as sufficient for arthood conferral at $t$ (in $C$), as well as the conventions for art-making at $t$ (in $C$). On Levinson’s view a new artwork alters what ‘the state of art at $t$’ refers to, while on my account it influences the conventions of art-making and the common views on the reasons for arthood conferral.
In practice, however, the explanatory power of both accounts is similar – in fact thanks to placing art among other cultural practices, the cultural theory might be a fair bit more specific. A detailed story can be told about the influence of the Counter-reformation and religion on Baroque art, and similarly in specific cases, an explanation of how *Fountain* changed (our thinking about) what art is can be given.

**Private art**

For a historicist a lone artist completely detached from any artistic practice can create an artwork by intending it to be regarded in a way $\phi$ such that $\phi$ is a way in which past artworks have been correctly regarded. As I argued above, the cultural theory can allow for private art, because it is perfectly possible that a lone artist has a system of beliefs and practices to follow, and it is natural that we would recognise his work as art provided that his belief-practice system is sufficiently similar to ours.

**Correct regard problem**

The historical theory entails that a work has to be intended to be regarded *correctly* as past art has been regarded, in order to be art (see page 44). However, it offers little in terms of explaining what a correct regard is, and with this unsettled, it is at best vague. Levinson’s reply that a correct regard is a relatively complete one, is rather unhelpful – it is now hard to say what counts as ‘relatively complete’, and the problem is merely postponed.

On the cultural theory the problem ceases to exist – the correct way of regarding artworks is culturally determined and is known to culturally competent members of the artworld. Similarly as in the historical theory, the correct ways of regard can change over time and context.
Alien art

Currie’s alien art thought experiment shows that were alien artefacts looking similar to our modern art found, the historicist would have to claim, counterintuitively, that they are not art because they do not bear the significant relation to our Ur-art. It seems, thus, that there can be art which does not stand in any historical relation to past art, i.e. the historical relations are not an essential feature of artworks (see page 46).

While I find it rather odd that we should worry about science fiction problems for a theory which has trouble establishing the arthood of things much more real, e.g. Kafka’s novels, I would like to briefly show that the cultural theorist needs not worry about such laser-sharp objections. The treatment of alien art is in my case identical to the treatment of private art – it is possible that objects created in another cultural context, even extraterrestrial, were a product of an artistic practice and related belief system, and if it so happens that this practice-belief system was sufficiently similar to ours (i.e. the same subsets of criteria for arthood were respected as sufficient), those objects could be art in our context as well.

Intentions are cheap

Historicism suffers from a host of problems related to intentionalism – because of its vagueness, it struggles with establishing which works should be included and which excluded from the domain of artworks. As I argued on pages 49 ff., this problem may be fatal to historicism.

The cultural theory, on the other hand, simply does not depend on intentions at all. All it does is to acknowledge that being intended as an artwork is one of the reasons to confer the status, but does not give intentions any essential role to play.
3.3 Making the best of functionalism

Having an edge

Functionalists boast a definition which is rather discriminative, clearly states what is art and what is not, and provides clear conditions under which people can err in calling something an artwork (see page 58). Unlike the procedural definitions, functionalism is anything but vague and uninformative.

While I recognise the advantages of drawing sharp distinctions, I believe that it is not half as important as drawing those distinctions in the right places – here, however, functionalism fails. The cultural definition is an attempt to provide as much edge as possible, while still following the actual artistic practice. On the one hand, it follows the institutional framework which indeed does not offer much of an edge, but on the other, it provides one with tools for determining whether there are any good reasons to confer the art-status. In this way it tries to both provide some distinctions and avoid situations in which it could be easily falsified with examples of unjustified inclusion or exclusion of particular artefacts, or with the simple fact that artists may in the future decide to do art differently. I believe that this is the most fruitful trade-off between being as informative as possible, and being simply to crude to be accurate.

Incidentally, if what a functionalist really wants is a distinction between ‘good old art’ and ‘modern mumbo-jumbo’ or simply popular taste kitch, the cultural theory can also supply a solution. All that needs to be done is to shift a context – arguably aestheticists simply judge art according to criteria which were respected before the Avantgarde. In this case all that is needed is a normative judgement that one context is better than another, and a decent basis for excluding certain objects is ready.
Capturing the pre-theoretical meaning of ‘art’

The functionalists claim to have actually captured the common-sense meaning of the term ‘art’. While it might be the case that some gallery owners and high-brow critics say that a urinal put in a gallery is an artwork, most people simply shake their heads and mourn the death of art. It may be that the functionalists overestimate this point and are simply too exclusive, but they certainly capture one thing right – there is indeed a tension on certain lines, and one specific one definitely has aesthetic art on one side and modern art which often escapes aestheticism on the other.

The cultural definition can, however, give a solution to this issue which would not be followed by issues related to unjustified inclusions and exclusions characteristic of functionalism. A cultural theorist can simply say that in some cases artworks are judged according to different criteria, and what is referred to as the ‘common sense criteria’ are simply those which are tacitly accepted as part of the common cultural competence, and in most cases concern pre-Avantgarde art which indeed was in a great majority aesthetic. In other words, our artistic common sense is largely shaped by the ideals of Classicism and Romanticism, and following this we tend to intuitively judge all artworks as if they were a part of the classical-romantic tradition. The tension can thus be explained as follows: the high-brow critics accept Fountain as an artwork since it had the status conferred upon it because it satisfies a subset of criteria $\alpha_1$ which is respected as sufficient for arthood in $C_1$; at the same time the common public does not accept Fountain as an artwork because while it might have had the status conferred upon it, the subset of criteria $\alpha_1$ it satisfies is not respected as sufficient for arthood in $C_2$, the common sense classical-romantic context.

The answer to the puzzle is simple – since Fountain is created in $C_1$, it is an artwork, at least within $C_1$ (and any other context in which $\alpha_1$ is respected as sufficient for arthood). Any further discussion concerning the matter must be normative in nature – i.e. try
to determine which context is better than the other, and as such is not a matter for a classificatory theory.\footnote{One would be justified at this point to ask how a cultural theorist can distinguish a case of judging an object according to two differing contexts, and of simply being wrong about the object’s status. This issue will be discussed in section 4.6.}

\textbf{Sufficiency and necessity}

As I argued in \[\text{1.3.2}\] the functional theory suffers from a very straightforward problem – there are objects which do not have an aesthetic function and yet might be art, and there are objects which do have an aesthetic function but are not art.

The solution to this problem is banal to a cultural theorist. Firstly, the aesthetic function is not an essential one, and thus it is perfectly possible to have non-aesthetic art. It likely is one of the criteria for arthood which is widely respected in many diverse contexts – but this only makes it characteristic, or typical of art, not essential. Secondly, the reason why certain objects are not art even though they do satisfy subsets of criteria respected as sufficient, is because no one has conferred the status on them. Understood more broadly, there is no reason whatsoever why certain classes of objects, e.g. jewellery or military parades, are not art, other than the fact that in our cultural context ‘it turned out that way’.

\textbf{Other objections}

The cultural theory completely sidesteps two problems – that of correctness of the aesthetic experience (see page 60), and of intentionalism (75). Neither of those notions play any role in my definition.

Similarly, while functionalism may ultimately be overly exclusive (see page 69) and apart from readymades, found art, anti-art and conceptual art exclude a good deal of artworks which were created as religious or magical artefacts, the cultural theory does not
3.4 Making the best of the cluster account

entail such counterintuitive consequences. Instead, my definition allows for the function of art to change and accepts that objects can become or stop being artworks ‘midlife’.

Finally, Davies’ objection (see p. 77) suggested that functionalism may lose to proceduralism simply because it does happen that objects gain their aesthetic properties, and thus function, only after they are given the art-status in a procedural way. A cultural theorist needs to do no more than nod and agree.

3.4 Making the best of the cluster account

Giving justice to the actual messy nature of art

In section 1.4.1 I suggested that one of the main advantages of the cluster account lies in striving to provide an accurate description of what art actually is rather than what one would like it to be, and acknowledging its somewhat messy and unstructured character.

I completely agree that art as it is now is a messy phenomenon not susceptible to a neat and straightforward definition. The cultural theory preserves this insight by acknowledging that the reasons one can have to confer art-status can be very diverse. Additionally, my view not only allows one to acknowledge that since art has evolved in a messy way, it is a messy thing now – it provides one with tools to investigate how exactly it evolved, i.e. points to the mechanisms of influences within artistic culture, between artistic cultures and between artistic and other parts of culture(s). Following this, it not only allows one to say what is art now, but also what was art in other temporal and cultural contexts.

I also agree that one should find out about what art is by ‘looking and seeing’, i.e. empirical investigation of the society. However, I draw a further, institutional conclusion from this – what is art is actually dependant on the societies and their cultures. Thanks to this, the cultural theory can, once again, account for the facts that what is art has been changing over time (i.e. people of various cultural contexts would ascribe art-status to
different things), and that we judge works from different times differently (i.e. from our cultural context we ascribe art-status to artefacts from varying contexts differently).

**Accuracy and fruitfulness over elegance and simplicity**

The cluster account recognises and values what surprisingly many theories seem to disregard – that rather than being neat and elegant, a theory should actually be useful for something. Its great advantage is that it does not give in to the general trends in analytic philosophy and instead of desperately trying to provide a definition set in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions, it offers a disjunctive account which is simply better at capturing the phenomenon it is set to describe.

I try to follow the same principle. Thus while the cultural theory is context-relative, not a proper definition just as IT, embraces partial arbitrariness of the artwork and inherits some of the disjunctive nature of the cluster account, it provides as much explanatory power, accuracy and fruitfulness as possible – and equally importantly, it does not pretend to provide any more than is possible.

**Other advantages**

The cultural theory shares all of the ‘better off than’ advantages of cluster account – explains private and alien art, allows for art to change its function, does not fall in Wollheim’s trap. Also similarly, it strives not to slavishly follow intuitions about art but rather explain them, or expose them as biased and thus unreliable.

**Error theory for everyone**

Gaut uses error theory to explain why other definitions of art are wrong, it seems, however, that the very same argument can be turned against him (see page 85). To answer this *tu quoque*, Gaut states that it might be that the defenders of other definitions have less support to make this move, as it is common to make the mistake of over-simplifying complicated
things, yet it is rather rare to over-complicate simple things – our intuitions tend to simplify, not complicate.

Similarly, I hold that the mistake of other theories is to overestimate and treat as a necessary condition for arthood, what is merely a reason for artworld members to confer the art-status. I also follow his reply to the objection. What is more, I can run exactly the same error theory as well as Gaut’s own reply to the objection, against him. Thus the cultural theory entails that Gaut was wrong in treating as universal criteria for arthood something that are actually reasons for arthood conferral – and merely the reasons relative to the modern Western culture. Were Gaut to object that it is my theory that is in error, he would be susceptible to his own reply, as it is the cluster theory that is a simplification of my view – it selects merely one cluster, the modern Western one, whereas the cultural theory recognises its context-relativity and can account for other cultural contexts as well.

Utility and Institutions - a historical dilemma

In section [1.4.2] I presented a long argument which placed the cluster theorists in front of a dilemma – if we allow for the fact that art from different time periods is classified according to different criteria, then either the account is insanely complicated and unusable, or one has to relativise clusters to the said time periods, thus introducing an institutional element.

The cultural theory explores the second of those options, and in this sense it can be seen as a synthesis which solves the cluster account’s historical problems by marrying it with the institution, and Wollheim’s dilemma by marrying the institutional definition with the cluster. But the cultural theory does more than that, as through this solution it gains a very significant advantage over practically every other theory of art – it can not only explain what art is now, but also provide a framework for explaining what art is or was and perhaps even will be in pretty much any cultural and temporal context.
3.5 Making new best of’s

3.5.1 Accounting for actual artistic practice

The primary aim behind developing the cultural theory is to provide a definition of art which would be extensionally adequate, fully capturing the meaning of the term as it is actually used as accurately as possible. Most theories of art were focused on first explaining what is art in terms of the (contextual) properties of artworks, and then worrying whether the explanation fits the artistic practice – or at best took the artistic practice into account when determining the properties of artworks. The cultural definition, on the other hand, takes the practice first and defines art in terms of this practice. Broadly, it is the artistic practice that determines what art is, not some universal nature of art that determines the practice.

While it could perhaps be shown that the cultural definition does not fully reach the ideal of perfectly capturing the meaning of ‘art’ as it is actually used, it seems that it is much closer to it than any other theory. As such, even though it might not mark the end of the quest for a definition of art, it should be treated as an important improvement on the road to it.

Some specific practices the cultural theory can explain were described in section 2.4. The most important points include: allowing modern art, e.g. ready-mades, found objects, political art, etc., to be art; allowing objects that have not been intended as art, to be art; allowing objects created with no or a different concept of what is art, to be art; allowing artists to be even extremely original; allowing for the typical characteristics of artworks to change over time; allowing for the treatment of art from various contexts to be different.
3.5 Making new best of’s

3.5.2 Methodological advantages

Apart from capturing the way the concept ‘art’ is actually used better than other theories, the cultural definition is simply more useful and practically applicable. All of the following issues add to the theoretical and heuristic utility of my view.

Explanatory power

Despite all the limitations of the cultural definition, it has a great deal of very practical explanatory power. If a cultural theorist is asked: ‘is $x$ art?’, he needs to do the following:

1. Establish the cultural context $C$ for which to answer the question (e.g. establish that the question actually means ‘is $x$ art in modern Western society?’).

2. Establish what properties are considered criteria and which subsets of criteria are considered sufficient in $C$ (in one’s own context one can simplify things and assume that one just knows that in virtue of being a competent member of $C$; in other contexts one has to establish relevant facts using methods available to social scientists).

3. Establish whether anyone has conferred the status of a candidate for appreciation on $x$.

4. If so, establish whether this person was culturally competent in $C$.

5. Establish whether among $x$’s properties there are those which are considered criteria for arthood in $C$ and whether at least one subset of such properties is respected as sufficient for arthood conferral in $C$ (i.e. if there are good reasons to confer the status in $C$).

If answers to points (3), (4) and (5) are positive, $x$ is art in $C$ and in any other context where satisfying the subset of properties which $x$ satisfies and which constituted a good reason for arthood conferral in $C$, also constitutes a good reason for arthood conferral.
Additionally, the more subsets of properties respected as sufficient in $Cx$ has, 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 for arthood conferral (i.e. it is accepted only by some competent participants in $C$, or it is considered an unclear case), $x$ is a borderline case of art.

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.

(Very limited) Predictive power

It would be unfair to claim any great predictive power for the cultural theory – or indeed any other theory of social practices or beliefs. After all, artists want to do unexpected and original things. It is also quite clear that some other theorists can claim predictive power for their definitions – anyone can make educated guesses about the future.

However, for what it is worth, I think that the cultural theory has a small advantage over the other theories – it can not only be based on educated guesses and intuitions about the future, it can follow the methods of the social sciences and benefit from their predictive power. To be sure, this is not to be overrated, as the predictive power of social sciences is very limited itself – however, it is still better than philosophical guesses and intuitions. Thus while I do not believe it to be a major advantage, or an important point, the predictive power of the cultural definition is at least slightly better than in the case of other theories.

In practice, one can attempt to plug an expected future state of a given culture gathered through predictions of social scientists into the above steps (1) and (2), and try to predict what objects will be artworks in the future. Two questions in particular can be answered in this way. Firstly, the question about general trends: ‘if the cultural (non-artistic) context in year 2050 will be $C_{2050}$, what sort of objects are likely to be art in $C_{2050}$?’ A cultural theorist
can try to roughly determine, using the postulated context, which properties are likely to be considered criteria (i.e. belong to $\alpha$) and which subsets of criteria $\{\alpha_1, \ldots, \alpha_n\}$ are likely to be respected as sufficient reasons for arthood conferral in this context. Following that, he can answer: objects likely to be art in 2050 are those which will satisfy at least one of $\{\alpha_1, \ldots, \alpha_n\}$.

Secondly, one can ask: ‘if the cultural (non-artistic) context in 2050 will be $C_{2050}$, is $x$ likely to be art in $C_{2050}$?’ If after substituting $C_{2050}$ for $C$ the answer to (5) is positive (i.e. $x$ satisfies any of $\{\alpha_1, \ldots, \alpha_n\}$), one can safely say that $x$ could well be art in 2050. Whether it actually will, will depend on whether someone culturally competent in $C_{2050}$ will confer the status on it, but since this is purely incidental and cannot be predicted, one should stop at saying that $x$ is likely to be art in 2050, or that there would be good reasons for it to be art. Thus the cultural theory can also have some predictive power in particular cases.

**Scope**

The cultural definition has a general ability to explain whether and why certain objects were or could have been considered art at certain other times and places, actual and, as will be pointed out in [3.5.4] counterfactual. All that is needed is to find out about the appropriate context from cultural anthropologists or simply making one up (for the sake of prediction or a thought experiment) and plugging the relevant data into (1) and (2).

This point is perhaps one of the greatest strengths of my account, as hardly any modern definition of art can boast applicability to contexts other than the contemporary Western one. The cultural theory has a much greater scope than any modern theory of art – it can not only talk about what art is now, but what art was, is elsewhere and what it might be. Moreover, while being able to account for much more, it does not lose any of the accuracy required of a definition, nor does it become less specific about the most interesting, modern meaning of ‘art’. Since the term ‘art’ as it is commonly used is simply analysed as ‘art
in the speaker’s contemporary context’, it is considered in exactly the same way as in any other context.

Parsimony

It might seem rather unjustified to claim parsimony as an advantage of a theory which is indeed quite complicated. As I wrote in section 2.1 I think that simplicity and parsimony are far less important than the theory’s accuracy and explanatory power, however, I also believe that one should make one’s theory as parsimonious as possible. Thus while the cultural theory might not be the simplest or most elegant because to simplify it would be to oversimplify it and sacrifice its accuracy, at least in one respect it is very parsimonious indeed.

My definition does not need to base itself on a number of notions which play an essential role in other views, but are inherently vague. The most important ones include: artistic intentions, aesthetic appreciation, correct regard, correct experience. Other theories have been criticised for being unable to clearly determine what these notions mean, and thus inheriting their vagueness. Being able to do without depending on any of those is definitely parsimonious.

3.5.3 Explaining diversity and continuing unity of art

Most theories of art try to focus on what ‘art’ refers to now, allowing that it might have meant something different once. It might seem that this is a perfectly acceptable strategy, however, it completely fails to account for a very general truth about art: that it is very

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5 While those notions can appear as criteria and partially constitute reasons for arthood conferral, they are not an essential part of the definition.
diverse and yet continuous and unified at the same time. At least some authors (e.g. Tatarkiewicz [1971: 139; S. Davies [1991: 179]) think that a valid definition should provide an explanation here – after all, what good is a theory that strives to encompass and find unifying properties in 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? After all, one would hesitate before saying that there is no such thing as a historically continuous concept of ‘art’ and that in fact ‘art_{post-avantgarde}, ‘art_{19th Century Europe}’ and ‘art_{17th Century China}’ are completely separate things, or at least separate enough that they should be covered by different definitions. If any theory should like to accept such a conclusion, it seems perfectly reasonable to ask about its domain, and it looks like e.g. an institutional theorist may have serious problems in saying whether art is defined institutionally since 1917 and Duchamp’s Fountain or perhaps already since 1914’s Bottle Rack, and in either case, are such works as Rachmaninoff’s perfectly neo-Romantic Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini of 1934 to be treated as art on the basis of their place in the artworld, or still by the old aesthetic criteria.

The cultural theory is, however, perfectly suited to give an exhaustive account for the diversity of art, both historically and at any point in time, and show that with all this diversity it is a continuous phenomenon. The diversity is a result of the differences in which subsets of criterial properties are considered good reasons for arthood conferral within particular contexts – naturally various arts are different and art is different in various contexts, because all arts and all contexts have their own sufficient subsets of criteria. The continuity holds on two levels: theoretical, as with all the differences, all contexts can be researched using the same methods and all cases explained on the same model, the cultural theory; 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 arthood conferral are very different in their cases, the evolution of those reasons can be historically traced).

‘Art’ as an open concept

The cultural theory actually meets the challenge initially raised by Weitz – I provide a definition which does allow ‘art’ to be an open concept, i.e. one that can expand (or even change) its meaning over time (Weitz [1956] 31-32). Although Weitz might not have given the most convincing reasons to believe that it must be the case (see: Difey [1973] and Kamber [1998] 36ff. for reviews of anti-essentialist’ arguments), it is quite clear that ‘art’ did change its extension in the past (the history of those changes is carefully traced by Shiner [2001]), and while it is by no means guaranteed that it will keep changing, there seems to be little reason why it should not (Kamber [1998] 41). The cultural theory can do what Weitz thought impossible – it can allow for the concept to be open, i.e. allow that different things will qualify as art in different contexts and that the extension of the term may change in the future, and yet provide a definition.

It has been argued that the institutional theory itself can easily provide an analysis of the open concept ‘art’ in virtue of being an implicit definition (Scholz [1994] 315-7). The cultural theory, however, can provide a definition while remaining quite explicit. The crux of my analysis is this: while what art is in different contexts can change, all the changes are limited to what contextual information is plugged into the definition, while the structure of the definition remains unchanged. It might be that in the 18th Century ‘art’ referred simply to beautiful crafted objects, but in practice such treatment is merely a simplification of the cultural theory. Instead of saying ‘X is art if it is crafted and beautiful’, one should say: ‘X is art in $C_{18}$ iff someone culturally competent conferred on it the status of a candidate for appreciation for reasons respected as sufficient for arthood in $C_{18}$’ and add that in $C_{18}$ virtually all subsets of criteria respected as sufficient included ‘being crafted’ and ‘being (seen as) beautiful’. Surely what counts as art can change over
time, but the definition which picks it out need not change – it merely requires plugging in the appropriate contextual information.

To relate to Weitz’s criticism directly, the cultural definition is anti-essentialist in content, allowing the meaning of ‘art’ to change, while remaining essentialist in structure.

The same point provides an answer to some reservations expressed by other authors, e.g., Nietzsche and Ortega y Gasset, who claimed that concepts which have a history are undefinable (Difffey 1973: 117). Again, the solution is to incorporate the history- and context-relativism into the definition.

### 3.5.4 Aliens and possibilia

While the main aim for the cultural definition was rather practical – to explain the term ‘art’ as it is actually used – the theory can provide a good framework for less mundane enquiries. Firstly, it allows one to determine 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 simply assume any counterfactual set of beliefs and practices (including commonly held judgments regarding criteria for arthood and subsets of those criteria commonly respected as good reasons for status conferral) and plug it into the theory. After establishing the context $C_1$ in which $x$ is to be art, one needs to counterfactually assume the properties of the object, assume that someone competent in $C_1$ conferred the status, and ask: ‘if $x$’s properties were $α_1$, would $x$ be art in $C_1$?’ What is more, this can be asked about both the context in which the object was created (i.e. a possible world context, or 5th Century BC), but just as well one can consider it in modern Western context – e.g. ask whether this other-worldly object with all it’s properties would be art for us.
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 artifact found which satisfied a subset of criteria sufficient in $C_{humans}$, and we had contextual reasons to believe that this artifact was treated as art by the aliens (i.e. someone conferred the status onto it), 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 artifact satisfied a subset of criteria respected as sufficient in $C_{aliens}$.

Though essentially, a cultural theorist who wants to stay true to the spirit of the theory would simply not care about cases of alien art – at least not until they are actually found and can be researched empirically.
Chapter 4

Fixing problems

The cultural theory states that $x$ is an art work in context $C$ iff $x$ has had conferred upon it the status of candidate for appreciation by some person or persons culturally competent in $C$, for reasons determined by a cluster of criteria for arthood respected in $C$. Several issues may seem problematic – the definition may look circular, one might feel that it forces one to focus on too many unimportant issues, it may seem vague or even trivial. Below I try to defend the theory against such charges.

4.1 Circularity

In developing the cultural definition a lot has been done to remove the circularity of Dickie’s original theory – there is now no need to mention the artists, artwork, its systems and public. However, the cultural theory defines art by referring to reasons for status conferral, some of which mention ‘art’, which does indeed seem circular. Moreover, it is assumed that the cultural competence required to confer the status includes the knowledge and skills related to art. Surely a definition which is circular cannot be right?
There have been various attempts at rescuing the original institutional definitions from circularity. Barbara Scholz offered an analysis which could remove it by using Ramsay sentences and \( \lambda \)-reduction (Scholz 1994: 312-4), while Catherine Lord argued that it can be avoided if the crucial terms in the definition are treated as indexicals (Lord 1987).\(^1\) However, the cultural definition will not need to call external forces to the rescue – it is more than able to stand on its own.

There are two possible circles in the theory, the first of which concerns art being defined in terms of reasons for arthood conferral. The problem surely does not lie with the term ‘arthood’ which is just a convenient short for ‘status of a candidate for appreciation’ – it rather lies with the particular criteria of which the reasons for conferral are composed: e.g. ‘being intended to be art’, or ‘being set in one of the major art forms’. This, however, should not worry a cultural theorist any more than it worried Gaut when he was facing the very same problem presenting his cluster account. Firstly, ‘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 – in some cases one can ask the author what her intention was, or deduce the intention from contextual data.\(^2\) Secondly, similarly as Gaut, I am not particularly attached to the specific criteria listed in the cluster. However, neither am I free to choose which criteria are included in the cluster, since, as mentioned before, those are determined not by philosophical discussion, but looking and seeing, or empirical research of the social sciences. Thus I will remain agnostic as to whether this solution is actually adequate, and leave this issue open as a point of investigation for experimental philosophy.

\(^1\)I am somewhat unconvinced that these solutions are even remotely adequate – Scholz’s argument rests on an assumption that "artwork" is a primitive term which, as the author acknowledges, Dickie does not share; while Lord’s indexicality solution assumes that there can be only one artworld and seems purely ad hoc in its application of the twin earth thought experiment.

\(^2\)Note that this does not mean that a cultural theorist falls into the vagueness trap of intentionalism discussed in section 1.2.2, as she is free to refer to the intentions when they are known, but needs not rely on them when they are not.
4.1 Circularity

Most importantly, however, the cultural definition can resolve those particular issues by using the tools it itself provides. ‘Being intended to be art’ can be analysed away somewhat similarly to how Levinson has done, as being intended to be similar in relevant respects, or be regarded similarly, to other objects in the extension of ‘art’ in C (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). The only difference from how Levinson employed the same strategy is in replacing references to time and history with references to cultural (and naturally also historical) contexts. If anything, such a replacement makes the solution stronger, because it does not obviously entail a regress to first art, which itself must be defined differently.

‘Being set in one of the major art forms’ can likewise be analysed away. What a particular art form (or artworld system) is, is a matter of convention, tradition, or simply beliefs and practices shared within a cultural context – different practices and beliefs relate to modern and Ancient theatre, and yet different to Renaissance painting. Thus whether something belongs to a certain art form is a matter of whether the beliefs and practices regarding this object are similar to the beliefs and practices related to other objects which are considered to be in a certain art form. For example, if it is believed of $x$ that ‘one should look at it rather than attach it to the outside wall of one’s house and cover with plasterwork’, or that ‘one should appreciate it for the expressiveness of colour contrast rather than complain that the depicted persons don’t move much’, one can reasonably assume that $x$ (say, Matisse’s La Danse) is a painting rather than a house insulation sheet or a ballet. If this is the case, however, then once again there is no circularity. Belonging to a certain art form does not mean being an artwork of a certain kind, but being an artifact about which competent participants in C hold beliefs and engage in related practices, such that those beliefs and practices are characteristic of other artifacts which are considered to
be in a certain art form. Since the definiendum deals with the meaning of ‘art form’ and the definiens with its extension, the definition is not circular.\footnote{This account is somewhat similar to Walton’s reasoning behind categorising artworks based on their standard, variable and contra-standard properties (Walton 1970: 338). What defines a category, or art form, or artworld system, is what properties are standard, etc., for objects in this category – but what properties are standard, etc., is itself determined by conventions and traditions, or beliefs and practices of the artworld members.}

The second possible circle in which a cultural theorist could find herself, concerns the notion of cultural competence, which seems to, among other things, include knowledge and ability to participate in practices concerning art. However, the problem can be avoided in ways very similar to the above. Most importantly, cultural competence entails knowledge related to artworks already known to the competent persons, rather than knowledge of the meaning of the term, or the particular object the status of which is to be determined. Thus identically as in the above cases, the term ‘artwork’ has a different meaning in the explanandum and the explanans.

What is more, there is simply much more to cultural competence than judgements concerning art. A great deal of extra-artistic knowledge is required to competently judge art, for example, to determine whether producing a marble sculpture was ‘a display of great skill’ one has to know first that sculpting in marble is harder than in soap, what sort of tools the artist had access to, etc. The knowledge which is directly related to art, on the other hand, will largely be formulated in the same terms as the criteria for status conferral discussed above – if there was no circularity there, neither is there any here.

### 4.2 Artist’s dinner

One problem which resulted from the institutional theory’s circularity concerned the difficulties in distinguishing artworks from other objects presented to an artworld public for appreciation by an artist – e.g. a dinner which follows an exhibition (see section \textsection 1.1.2). Is
the cultural theorist in any better position to resolve this issue? Can she clearly determine
the art-status of paintings presented by an artist to his guests, a dinner cooked by him and
presented to the same guests, and an identical dinner cooked but with an intention for it
to also be art? Moreover, can she provide decent reasons for her conclusions?

I suggested previously that the paintings and the non-art dinner can be distinguished
within the institutional theory, because while painting is an artworld system, cooking is not.
I assumed there that Dickie does not have to present one with reasons why one should be an
artworld system but not the other, simply cutting the discussion with the institutional ‘it
has turned out that way’. Although I believe that such an answer is perfectly respectable
within the institutional framework, I agree with Walton (1977: 98) that it may be somewhat
unsatisfactory – arbitrary solutions might be sometimes necessary, but when they are not,
they should be avoided. And indeed, the cultural theory can provide a better answer. My
explanation goes along the lines of the second solution offered by Walton and my arguments
regarding negative arbitrariness (see section 2.3). The dinner presented by the artist is not
art, because it is true that in cultural context $C_1$ it is believed that ‘dinners are not art’
(which is equivalent with saying that dinners are not an artworld system). However, this
is not an entirely arbitrary fact about $C_1$. Instead this is historically traceable to previous
states of this cultural context, in a way very much alike those described by Carroll (1994:
24-26). It might be, for example, explained by a belief shared in $C_0$: ‘things which do not
last and cannot be repeated, cannot be art’, which itself is explained by previous cultural
states, probably down to religious beliefs concerning what things are adequate in expressing
praise for gods, what was successful in raising the social status of those who commissioned
works, and the like. Perhaps the only reasons why dog shows or circus performances are not
art lie in the snobbery of our ancestors – these are nevertheless historically valid reasons.
After all, many agree that the fact that tapestries or needlework were not regarded as art
(or at least as much lower art than painting, sculpture, etc.) from the Renaissance to the
20th Century, is explained by the prevailing sexism of the past centuries – in the newly
developed family model tapestries were typically made by women, and since nothing made by women could achieve a particularly high status, tapestry-making never developed into a full-blown artwork system (Shiner 2001: 7).

Ultimately, the dinner presented by the artist is not art, because he and his guests, all competent in $C_1$, do not confer the status onto it (although they might perform appreciative actions which resemble status conferral). Were any of them to confer the status, they would be considered incompetent in $C_1$, the conferral would be void, and the dinner would still be a mere dinner.

This might seem somewhat puzzling at first – does it mean that the belief that dinners cannot be art makes ‘being a dinner’ a defeating condition for arthood in $C_1$? Although I believe that this may be one way of putting it, it is somewhat overcomplicated, as the same can be explained without the need of referring to defeating conditions. Consider a parallel. It is only since quite recently that (some of) folk art is given art status – decorative objects such as quilts, cross-stitches, embroidery, etc., typically served practical or devotional functions. As such they were hardly ever considered art before the 20th Century (and definitely before Romanticism), even though they often easily satisfied even multiple subsets of criteria for arthood considered sufficient – thus it could be said that ‘being a folk craft work’, or perhaps ‘being a quilt, etc.’ was a defeating condition for arthood. Some of those works, however, are now placed in folk art galleries and museums and displayed similarly as paintings and sculptures. It does not seem that any substantial change in how they were made has occurred when galleries decided to display folk artworks, and indeed a lot of what is displayed dates from long before this increase of interest. Instead, what has changed was the beliefs – it was now believed that folk art can be art. While one could say that ‘being a quilt, etc.’ was a defeating condition for arthood before that change, it seems more in line with the cultural theory (and more parsimonious) to simply say that were one to confer the status on a folk craft work before that change, one would have failed on account of not being competent in $C_{pre-20th}$. Similarly, attempts
at status conferral on a dinner are doomed to fail in any context in which it is believed that dinners cannot be art.

What, however, about the second case – distinguishing a non-art dinner from an art dinner? This naturally assumes that the above solution is unavailable, since in $C_1$ it is believed that ‘dinners can be art’ (cooking is in fact an artworld system). Here the difference lies in the reasons one would have to confer the status – while a mere dinner might satisfy a subset $\beta$ of criteria for arthood respected in $C_1$, the artwork-dinner, in virtue of its contextual properties, satisfies a subset $\alpha = \{\beta, \text{‘being intended as art’}, \text{‘being a commentary on other artworks’}, \ldots\}$. While $\beta$ is not respected as a good reason for status conferral in $C_1$, $\alpha$ is. Consequently, conferring the status on a dinner which satisfies merely $\beta$ will not make it into an artwork (although it might fool some people), while conferring it on the dinner which satisfies $\alpha$ will.

This naturally entails that should the cultural context change in a way which will make satisfying $\beta$ a good reason, dinners will start qualifying as art. I believe that this is not a problem, however – it seems that it is precisely how certain other art forms, such as happenings or street art, have emerged. There is no reason to think that the future will not bring food-art.

4.3 Wollheim Strikes Back (at a meta-level)

A defender of Wollheim might still be unconvinced: does providing reasons for status conferral really solve the problem, or does it merely defer it? After all it seems like the dilemma can be now restated in exactly the same form, but targeting the reasons: why is it that members of the artworld have those reasons and not other ones? Once again it seems that either they are justified in having those particular reasons (in which case the
institutional element is obsolete), or the reasons are selected *ad hoc* (and then the theory is no more informative than IT was).

However, I believe that this is less problematic than it seems. The response to taking the dilemma to the meta-level is taking my defence strategy to the meta-level as well – surely members of the artwork may well have reasons for having specific reasons. For example, believing that satisfying the subset of criteria which Duchamp’s *Bottle Rack* satisfies is a good reason, is justified by beliefs such as ‘art should look for new media and means of expression’, the somewhat exaggerated post-Romantic status of the artists who had enough authority to convince the public to almost anything, the historical facts about Art Nouveau artists who created utility objects such as bottle racks, etc. These are naturally only some *prima facie* ideas for what the reasons might be – to find out what they are exactly one would need to once again apply the method of looking and seeing, or perhaps ask art historians. As long as it is possible to find adequate reasons, my analysis is safe.

Still, one may not be satisfied with such a response – why should Wollheim not just keep asking for reasons for reasons for reasons, etc., thus forcing the cultural theorist into a regress? But the dangers of such a move should not be exaggerated. Firstly, I think that the above discussion sufficiently shows that even if a regress would ensue, it would be a benign one. At every new meta-level where the dilemma could be stated, an answer can be given, and while some looking and seeing may be needed to provide it, there is no reason why at any point one should stop being able to look and see further. Secondly, it seems that the majority of the reasons which can be provided do not require one to enter new meta-levels – instead they are historical. What constitutes good reasons in the modern artwork is justified largely by what constituted good reasons in the past, and by whatever other historical developments happened in the meantime. Asking for reasons would then be nothing else but simply tracing history backwards, explaining the meaning of the current concept by referring to its past extension, perhaps as far back as whatever religious,
4.4 Why not more artworlds? *Reductio* objection

magical or social practices art developed from. As mentioned in section [4.1] this is hardly problematic for a cultural theorist. Finally, even if at some point any part of the explanation found any sort of foundational reason, e.g. somewhere down the line from \(\alpha\), simple aestheticism may be justified by the evolutionary advantage of taking pleasure in certain patterns described as 'beautiful', such reasons would be effectively mediated by so many levels of artworld- and history-dependant factors and changes, that they cease to matter. After all, no one would seriously explain that *Bottle Rack* is art because it was important from the evolutionary perspective that humans could appreciate the contrast between red and green to find fruit — at least not without taking into account all the history in between.

### 4.4 Why not more artworlds? *Reductio* objection

The reader’s initial response to the cultural theory might be that through its partial relativism it becomes vacuous and uninteresting. If, as I argue, \(x\) can be art in, say, liberal 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 cultural context of all the Scots who still speak Gaelic, or all to 80’s pop fans, or just my next door neighbour an his pals? Surely the fact that my grandmother’s cross stitches are treated as art by her family and friends is of little interest to anyone who wants to give an account of what ‘art’ means — yet it seems that the cultural theory would require us to consider exactly such small and unimportant issues. In fact, it seems that anything can be art in some context, and there are infinitely many contexts in which any object can be placed, being art in some but not others. If this is the case, then it seems that the definition I offered becomes very diluted, gets lost in details instead of providing a comprehensive picture, and as such is basically quite useless.
The simple answer to this point is that the fact that accepting my definition means that one can consider an object’s arthood in pretty much any context one wishes, does not mean that one should do so, or that doing so will yield any interesting knowledge about the object. To offer a parable, Einsteinian physics allows one to calculate the motion of Alpha Centauri relative to my left hand, and do all sorts of completely irrelevant and useless things – but this does not mean that one actually should go and do them, and even less go on to complain that modern physics can tell us nothing about Alpha Centauri, because instead of providing one universal measurement of its motion it provides multiple relative ones. Instead, what we do in the case of physics is choose those frames of reference which actually for some reason or another matter to us. The cultural theory is exactly the same, and cultural contexts are its frames of reference. It is not necessary to determine a work’s arthood in all possible contexts – instead what a cultural theorist should do is determine its arthood in those contexts which matter, for one reason or another.

One could further argue here that such an approach does not actually solve the issue, it merely pushes it back a little. For how are we to choose the contexts which matter? Wouldn’t it result in making completely arbitrary choices, or perhaps even biased ones? Pretty much any context matters to someone and it is unclear how and why we should choose some over the other. If the choice of contexts that matter is arbitrary, the objection would go, then either we do need to consider all contexts anyway, just in case they are important after all (thus coming back to the initial point), or the whole theory is arbitrary and once again, uninformative.

There are several answers to this issue. Firstly, it seems simply somewhat naive to flag it as a problem. Most philosophers of art are pretty arbitrary as it is, choosing to only speak about modern Western understanding of art, and often implicitly assuming their own cultural context for the basis of their theories. There is no reason why one should not ask institutionalists, or functionalists why they choose to focus on a fraction of what

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4This has been pointed out already by Weitz and Margolis, (see: Margolis 1968: 90).
‘art’ can mean. The likely answer would be – we choose to focus on what art means for the modern Western audience because this context is important to us. Yet this is exactly as arbitrary as any choice a cultural theorist would need to make, the only difference is that it is a choice others make once, while a cultural theorist can choose again if they wish to. It seems that there is no essential difference in how arbitrary those selections are, and a theory which allows one to choose again does not introduce a new problem, but simply repeats the same one. Obtaining a good deal of new information for the price of falling into a problem one has already fallen into anyway, may not be such a bad thing after all.

Secondly, there are other areas of aesthetics in which exactly the same kind of choices are called for, which do not suffer from similar criticism. It is commonly agreed that artworks can have different properties depending on the context of their creation, or more broadly, depending on which category of art they fall into (Walton 1970). However, at least according to Walton’s analysis of this issue, a single artwork can legitimately fall into many categories – one can consider Raphael’s *The School of Athens* in the category of painting, or the category of Renaissance painting, or Raphael’s paintings, or paintings located in the Apostolic Palace, or all frescoes depicting Socrates, etc. Interpreted in any of those categories the work will have slightly different properties than when interpreted in any other category. Of course, Walton provides four suggestions for choosing the correct category, thus limiting the freedom of interpreting works in any context one wishes (ibid.: 357-8). However, (1) he still allows that a work can legitimately be judged in more than one category (in the above example, ‘painting’ and ‘Raphael’s works’ seem both perfectly appropriate); (2) there is nothing preventing a cultural theorist from applying similar restrictions: one can say that the arthood of *x* can be determined for any context, but *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, etc. It seems now that the choice of a cultural context is no more arbitrary than a choice of a
category, and thus if the latter does not present any serious problems to a theory which requires it, neither should the former.

Thirdly, it is simply not the case that the aesthetician’s choice of a context in which to judge a work is completely arbitrary. In fact, I would like to claim that it is not an aesthetician’s choice at all. Instead of choosing whatever context one thinks is important, one should ask the anthropologists and sociologists about it. A good part of what social scientists do is determining the characteristics of various social groups and cultural contexts, assessing their importance and the importance of various divisions within the societies. The most important divisions include those based on race, nation, religion, dominating mode of production, social status, or government type, while others may focus on education, access to and use of media, dominating ideologies, or attitude to environmental issues (Giddens 2006: 33-43, 295-300, 485-90, 534-6, 608-13, 704-14, 844-50, 939-40). It is possible to distinguish particular cultural contexts based on such criteria, at least partially, by finding out whether the beliefs and practices of a given society match the model of, say, a racially mixed and (largely) unprejudiced, multinational, mostly secular, industrial and democratic society composed of mostly middle and upper classes, reasonably well educated and environmentally conscious people with mostly liberal views and access to modern media – i.e., the modern Western art audience.

A philosopher need not guess where to place divisions between various cultural contexts, or arbitrarily choose the contexts he thinks are important – all he needs to do is to check the data available from the studies conducted by the cultural anthropologists. Thus it is simply not the case that a cultural theorist can get lost in the myriads of possibilities, determining arthood for all possible contexts without being able to tell one from the other. Instead, all he needs to do is acknowledge the findings of the cultural anthropologists which determine the borderlines and distinctive features of various cultural contexts, and point at contexts which are more important, influential or interesting than others – and provide classification of works into art and non-art in those contexts.
4.5 Claiming too much

A reader may be surprised with how much the cultural theory claims to explain, and sceptical whether it really has as wide a scope. Considering that a cultural theorist tries to, wherever possible, base on empirical evidence rather than intuitions or *a priori* reasoning, why would she just assume that, say, the Medieval concept of art was a cultural one just as ours is? Surely some empirical research into the use of the concept at the time would have to be conducted before any such claims could be made, and it is not impossible that such research would reveal that in the Middle Ages ‘art’ had a purely functional meaning. If so, 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 thought of as an objection. In fact, it only proves that my theory is valid in a Popperian sense – it is falsifiable (see: Popper [1983] 78f.).

The cultural theory is, as any other methodologically conscious theory, open to falsification. I claim nothing more for it than what scientists claim for their theories – I hold that it is a hypothesis which is corroborated by a great deal of evidence, and as such stands until falsified. Of course it is possible that there are some contexts in which ‘art’ is not a cultural concept in the way I describe – after all we can always come up with some counterfactual alien culture and just stipulate that for them 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, and thus ensures that the theory is *falsifiable*, not vacuous or tautologically true. It is a completely different question as to whether such conditions *actually do* obtain and the theory is *falsified*.

I could rest my case here simply stating that unless an opponent of the cultural theory finds evidence that in a given culture the concept of art was definitely and without exceptions non-cultural, and provide a non-cultural definition which covers all and only
those objects which were considered artworks in that culture, my theory is safe. But I can also provide some evidence 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 changes in theoretical treatment of art followed from changing practices – the need for the expression theory arose precisely because the old ‘beautiful representation’ theory did not cover everything that was considered art. At the point in which the amount of art which did not fit the old definition became too obvious to ignore, a change of paradigm ensued. This suggests that at any given time there were always objects which were art even though they did not fit the theoretical framework. Considering that there seems to be no culture which does not develop historically in similar ways, the same should be true of any known cultural context. Such objects falsify the definitions held by their contemporaries, and the criticism provided in chapter [1] suggests that the same applies to modern definitions. A cultural theorist on the other hand, accepts them as works which are art because they satisfy some sufficient subsets of criteria, even though such subsets might be much less popular or less often used than those approximated by whichever essentialist theory people held at the time.

Nevertheless, a cultural theorist is open to the possibility of there being contexts in which art is not defined culturally. If evidence for such contexts were found, she can simply tactically retreat to where she is 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 better off than other theories which merely cover one or two. Ultimately, similarly to the scientists, I do not claim that the cultural theory provides
4.6 Mistaken beliefs

The cultural theory was designed to be mainly a descriptive rather than a normative theory, one which would tell us what art actually is rather than what it should be, and mainly one which could not be easily falsified by future artistic practice or even present objects which I might not think are art, but others do. However, I have argued that it is not completely deprived of any normative edge – after all, one would expect a theory to be able to tell when people mistakenly believe that something is art (see sections 3.3 and 3.5.2). Thus according to the cultural definition \( x \) is not art even though some people might think that it is, if it had the status conferred upon it by an incompetent person (e.g. a Playboy photo does not become a ready-made artwork when Smith tells Jones that he totally thinks it is a piece of art), or if the status was conferred even though there were no good reasons to confer it.

However, one could take the lacking-an-edge objection to a higher level and argue the following: whether there are good reasons to confer the status depends on the beliefs regarding sufficient subsets of criteria shared by competent participants in cultural context \( C \). One can be certainly mistaken if one thinks that \( x \) is art in \( C \), while at the same time sharing beliefs regarding subsets of criteria respected as sufficient in \( C \) and when \( x \) does not actually satisfy any of those subsets. However, what if one believes that \( x \) is art in \( C \) because it satisfies a subset \( \beta \), even though \( \beta \) is not actually respected as sufficient in \( C \)? In other words – can one be mistaken in thinking that something is a good reason for arthood conferral in \( C \) while in fact it is not? If one is allowed to be mistaken, i.e. not share some of the beliefs commonly respected in \( C \), in virtue of what exactly is one still
a participant in $C$? How many beliefs is one allowed to get wrong before one becomes incompetent? If there is no perfect belief convergence required, how large a percentage of people participating in $C$ have to hold a certain belief to make it the right one? It seems like the theory suffers from serious vagueness and perhaps even indeterminacy.

The problem, although it looks serious, can be solved rather easily. Several of the claims I made before can help here. Firstly, any person can be a member of more than one cultural context, and more than one artworld. Secondly, in the great majority of cases one becomes a member of a context or artworld by self-appointment (e.g. one just needs to want to be a punk to join the punk-culture), and in cases in which such self-appointment is not sufficient, there are clear and often formal social appointment rituals in place (e.g. although one cannot become a Christian just by wanting to, one can be christened) – and so it is never unclear whether one is a member of a context or not. There might also be impossible cases: no matter how much I want to be a citizen of the Roman Empire, I cannot become one simply because it does not exist anymore; I can, however, appoint myself a Ancient Rome fan and have all the knowledge and beliefs Ancient Romans had, but not engage in all their practices. Thirdly, acts of status conferral are conventional and the conventions they follow are relative to specific contexts – and thus it is never unclear in which context a person wishes to confer the status, i.e. the employment of conventions characteristic of $C_1$ means the person thinks $x$ is an artwork in $C_1$, not $C_2$.

If $S$ appoints herself a member of $C_1$ and holds all the relevant beliefs and participates in all the relevant practices of $C_1$, then $S$ is a competent member of $C_1$. Importantly, she is allowed to differ hugely from other members of $C_1$ in all her beliefs which are not relevant to this context, without becoming incompetent – e.g. while being a competent punk does require sharing certain beliefs regarding politics, punks are allowed to think whatever they wish about art, astrology and ontology of numbers. However, if $S$ appoints herself a member, but holds a belief contrary or incompatible to the set of beliefs making up $C_1$, she is by the same an incompetent member, and the more beliefs she gets wrong, the more
incompetent she is. Still, the fact that she is generally somewhat incompetent does not mean that she cannot be relevantly competent in some cases (and thus some of her actions, such as status conferral, may be successful), because not all of her actions and judgements depend on all the shared beliefs. For example, even though believing that slavery is good makes one an incompetent modern liberal, one can be relevantly competent when passing judgements promoting legalisation of gay marriage, simply because such judgements are in no way related to the views on slavery, or the set of beliefs informing this particular judgement does not contain any beliefs that are wrong in the context of modern liberalism.

Imagine now that a person $S$ tries to confer the status of a candidate for appreciation on $x$ in $C_1$ because it satisfies a subset of criteria $\beta$, even though $\beta$ is not a good reason for conferral in $C_1$. A cultural theorist would solve the situation in several steps. (1) Enquire whether $S$ is a member of $C_1$. If she is not, then the problem vanishes – perhaps she was trying to confer the status in some $C_2$ but mistook it for $C_1$. If she is a member of $C_1$, the cultural theorist needs to (2) acknowledge that by thinking that satisfying $\beta$ is a sufficient reason for status conferral in $C_1$, $S$ exposes herself as an incompetent member of $C_1$. Moreover, (3) this belief is clearly relevant to the action $S$ wants to perform, and thus she is relevantly incompetent. Following this, (4) $S$'s conferral is unsuccessful and $x$ is not art in $C_1$. At the same time, (5) since $S$ is allowed to belong to multiple contexts, she is allowed to successfully confer the status on $x$ in a different context, say $C_2$ of which $S$ might even be a sole member, in which $\beta$ is a sufficient subset. Thus $x$ is art in $C_2$, but not $C_1$ – but the fact that it is art in some obscure private context needs not worry us, simply because we are not obliged to care the least for such contexts. (6) It is also perfectly possible that in time people who participate in $C_1$ will start changing beliefs and in effect the context will change in such a way that $\beta$ will become a sufficient subset – perhaps this
can even happen under the influence of $S$. If so, $x$ will be an artwork in the resulting $C_1$, as well.

To sum up, a person can be mistaken about some beliefs which make up a cultural context they appointed themselves a member of, and thereby be a more or less incompetent member. If holding such mistaken beliefs impacts one’s judgement about art classification, one is relevantly incompetent in those matters and thus one’s acts of status conferral will be unsuccessful. One is still, however, allowed to get some beliefs wrong and successfully confer the status, provided the status conferral is not actually informed by those beliefs (e.g. a modern artist can successfully confer the status on their abstract painting even if they firmly believe that *Macbeth* was written by Diderot and that one ought to sing along the orchestra in a concert hall). Also, with some luck and persuasive power, one can convince other members of a context that even though one’s work does not merit art status in that context on its current rules, perhaps the rules should be changed so that it does.

### 4.7 Triviality

It seems that one issue underlying many objections against the institutional theory is that it trivialises the question ‘what is art?’, or that if one accepted it, pretty much anything can be art. The cultural theory improves on this point – while for Dickie all decisions of the artworld members are pretty much arbitrary (or at least not explainable within the theory), a cultural theorist can explain *why* they made them, i.e. point at the reasons for status conferral. However, one can be justifiably sceptical about the practical usefulness of such a solution. Assuming for the sake of simplicity, that the ten criteria listed by

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5 Becker provides an interesting analysis: artists who create things which are unlikely to be accepted by an institution because they do not comply with the standards of the common art distribution systems within an artworld (e.g. are too big to fit in a gallery), can become nuclei of a new artworld in which different distribution systems develop, allowing their works to gain art status (Becker 2008: 129).
Gaut are the actual ones the modern Westerners respect, it would be instructive to ask how demanding we actually are in choosing the subsets of those criteria which are good reasons for us. It seems that we are in fact extremely relaxed, to the point where satisfying a subset consisting of merely one criterion might be a good reason. Assuming that A. Litvin-Laing Bradford’s *An I for an eye* (Fig. 4.1) is indeed art, it seems that it is art pretty much because the artist intended it to be art and because it is a painting (i.e. it satisfies Gaut’s criteria 9 and 10). While the author might have wanted it to have a capacity to convey complex meanings, or positive aesthetic properties, or hoped it would exhibit an individual point of view and be intellectually challenging, the work can hardly be said to actually have any of those properties. Thus, if it is art, it is art simply because it was intended to be one, and it belongs to a genre – which is not a particularly hard requirement to meet. If we are so relaxed about what gives us good reason for status conferral, then pretty much anything can be a good reason, and once again – pretty much anything can be art and the theory is trivial. What is more, it seems that we are similarly quite relaxed in what is required of a culturally competent person – while in the past it took an artist or a very knowledgeable person to confer the status, now it can be done by almost anyone. This is only made worse by the fact that many objects are not art even though they certainly satisfy sufficient subsets of criteria: jewellery, classic cars, dog shows. If they are not art just because no one ever conferred the status onto them, and it is not at all impossible that someone will actually do that in the future, then once again – it seems that they also can be art and the borderline between them and art is very weak, and a theory which claims that they, and pretty much anything, could be art, is rather trivial.

I will not even attempt to challenge this objection. I bite the bullet. I simply think that this is a very valid point of criticism, but it is not a criticism of my theory, but of modern artistic practice. The fact that the cultural theory correctly recognises that modern artistic practice is very indiscriminative and, frankly, often quite disappointing in what it chooses as worthy of status conferral, hardly makes the theory false. Perhaps Danto was right in his
`The End of Art’, or perhaps modern humans just lost the ability to set clear boundaries – whatever the reason, it simply is the case that it doesn’t take much these days to make an artwork. However, this does not make the cultural theory trivial. It makes it a non-trivial theory which explains what turns out to be a fairly trivial phenomenon.

Two further points support this analysis. For one, the cultural theory does not only define what is art here and now, it also provides ways of defining what is or was art in other, past and possibly more demanding contexts. If in those other contexts the triviality problem does not arise (because the good reasons are more sparse and involve more criteria, and because adequate cultural competence is harder to achieve), then it seems clear that the problem is not with the theory – it is with the modern Western context. In fact, it
does indeed seem that the cultural theory can provide one with as much edge as one could wish for if, for example, 18th Century art is considered. Arguably, in $C_{18th \, C.}$ virtually every sufficient subset of criteria had to include ‘possessing positive aesthetic properties’ and ‘belonging to an established artistic form’, while ‘being expressive of emotion’ and ‘a product of a high degree of skill’ were not far behind in popularity. Since the cultural theory is applicable in exactly the same way to art in the 18th Century and modern Western contexts, and it seems that it can be used unproblematically in the former, there is no reason why it should not be used in the latter case.

Most importantly, however, I believe that the cultural theory may not be what one would want a theory to be, but it is nevertheless the best one can get. We may wish that art were definable in better ways which would not entail that, at least in some contexts, pretty much anything can be art. Theories, however, are not about hopeful wishes, they are about what in fact is the case. It seems that the great majority of other theories of art have this in common — they are more likely to tell one what things their authors think should be art, not what actually is art. While there may not be anything wrong with thinking that the author, through sound argumentation, can arrive at a better picture of what actually is art than however many members of the artworld, it seems that no theory actually manages to exclude all unwanted borderline cases without thereby also targeting some of the most canonical works (e.g. see sections 1.2.2 and 1.3.2). Surely a theory which can exclude some dubious cases only at the cost of entailing that Kafka’s novels or Byzantine icons are not art, is hardly satisfactory. The cultural theory does not have this problem and, as mentioned above, it is very successful in determining the arthood of works from less artistically promiscuous cultural contexts than ours, thus not leading to any unwanted exclusions.

The question is: is being overly exclusive really worse than being overly inclusive? Since I want to claim that the cultural theory might not be what we want, but is the best we can get, then I should show that it is indeed better than its exclusive competitors. And indeed,
save for all the reasons listed in chapter 3. I think that there is one reason in particular why the cultural theory is better.

Following an over-exclusive definition means that some works are simply lost to us and nothing can be done with them – some things are excluded from the domain of art and that is it. But accepting an overly inclusive theory of art does not necessitate a similarly irrecoverable loss of the ability to orient ourselves in the world of art. I am perfectly happy to accept that the question: what is art? is somewhat trivial in the modern western context – but this is fine as long as we can tell what is good art. It might be that the cultural theory entails that many objects which one would think cannot be art, could be or are art, but it at the same time allows that they are simply really bad art. In fact, it is in this respect quite similar to many anti-essentialist views which claim that art cannot be defined and we should rather spend our time on determining what is good art. The cultural theory not only is sympathetic to such views, but actually suggests how one can deal with their evaluation, and is compatible with other successful theories on this subject (see section 5.1 for details).

The ultimate answer to the charge of triviality then, is this. It is true that the cultural theory makes the matter of what is art in the modern world somewhat trivial at points, and is very relaxed in accepting objects under the domain. The fact that pretty much anything can be art, however, is simply a characteristic of modern artworld, not a fault in the theory – while other contexts were much more restrictive, the modern artworld did in fact lose a lot of its past edge and exclusivity. It is, therefore, a fact correctly recognised by the cultural theory that in the modern Western context pretty much anything can be art. The conclusion one should draw from this is that while explaining the concept of art is fascinating, the actual classifying is fairly trivial (and somewhat boring), and that we should perhaps focus on distinguishing what is good art.
Chapter 5

Conclusion

My enquiry started with a review of the most prominent modern definitions of art, showing that none of them is fully adequate and successful in capturing the phenomenon in all its complexity and diversity (see Chapter 1). In their critical evaluation I found that a great deal of problems result from the lack of context-sensitivity of those theories – the ahistoricity of the institutional theory (1.1.2), functionalism (1.3.2) and the cluster account (1.4.2), or the reliance on intentions rather than conventions in historicism (1.2.2). Trying to provide universal, non-context-relative definitions those theories end up being overly general and vague – the institutionalists cannot explain why certain things get status conferred upon them (1.1.2), functionalists and historicists rely on ‘correct’ aesthetic experience or type of regard (1.3.2 1.2.2), cluster theorists may be unable to say which properties are actually criteria for arthood and which subsets of criteria are sufficient (1.4.2). Following this, the classifications provided by those theories are simply inaccurate and do not conform to the actual artistic practice – they are either too exclusive (e.g. institutionalists have problems with private art (1.1.2), historicists with alien and unintended art (1.2.2 1.2.2), functionalists with a great deal of modern and non-aesthetic art (1.3.2)), or too inclusive (institutionalists may be unable to tell artworks from dinners (1.1.2), historicists may have to take broken crockery as art (1.2.2), functionalists have a
hard time excluding classic cars, jewellery and military parades (1.3.2), or, as the cluster account, simply struggle to actually spell out on what basis something should be included or excluded (1.4.2).

One thing which drew my attention in the course of this enquiry was the fact that a great deal of the problems which the theories face could be easily solved by simply admitting that certain rules and criteria in art classification are not written in time-independent universal metaphysical stone, but are conventional, determined by people who are actually involved in art making and appreciating, and influenced by multiple historical and contextual factors. This led me to believe that, although very vague in detail, the institutional theory did in fact capture the essence of the phenomenon – what is art is dependent on certain social beliefs and practices, the artworld. However, as it stands, institutionalism suffers from all the negative sides of relying on a social institution: arbitrariness, vagueness and arguably limited explanatory power.

In Chapter 2 I argued that relying on an institution does not have to lead to those problems and most of the vagueness and arbitrariness can be avoided. The cultural definition I developed preserves the essential institutional element thanks to which most of the problems of other theories can be averted. At the same time it avoids the traps of institutionalism, thanks to the context-sensitivity (2.2.3), increased precision in determining what an artworld actually is (2.2.5), and by providing reasons for classifying objects as art (2.2.6). Ultimately, I argue that the cultural theory retains just enough of the institutionalism’s arbitrariness to remain flexible (i.e. not overly exclusive or inclusive, or likely to be out of date a day after it is published), but not enough to make it uninformative and useless (2.3).

Simultaneously, I tried to address a separate yet related (and for some reason often forgotten) question: why is it that we have the concept of art we have? Once again, since in all likelihood the concept ‘art’ has not been given to humans by Apollo or Saraswati, but simply developed historically together with other concepts such as ‘law’, ‘fashion’, etc.,
it seems reasonable to think that its content is determined by whatever had influence on its development. Since it was shaped by various cultural influences throughout history and in all likelihood had a different meaning in different cultures, it only makes sense to accept its culture-relative nature. I argued that answering the questions ‘what is art?’ and ‘where did our concept of art come from?’ together reinforces my theory – the fact that ‘art’ developed in various cultures suggests that it is a culture-relative concept, while being culture-relative explains why it could develop the way it did.

The main reasons why I believe that the cultural theory is really attractive (see Chapter 3), are the following: (1) it retains virtually every advantage of all the other definitions discussed before, while not falling for any of their problems – it basically does the same job, but better (3.1-3.4); (2) it is much better connected with the actual practice of art – it explains what art really is, not what it should or could or what we would like it to be (3.5.1); and (3) it succeeds in explaining both why art can be so incredibly diverse, and how all those diverse things are nevertheless the same – art (3.5.3). In addition, it can boast some methodological advantages, being heuristically useful and being complementary with other academic disciplines, notably anthropology and art history, and being able to account for alien, future, possible, and whatever other kind of art the philosophers of science fiction thought experiments can come up with.

It might initially seem that the definition, although solving multiple problems of other accounts, is itself plagued with irresolvable issues. However, as I argued in Chapter 4, these are merely apparent difficulties. The three problems which the cultural definition could have inherited from institutionalism are in fact easily solvable. Although I would be happy to accept the circularity of my definition on similar grounds as Dickie, it seems that the cultural definition can avoid it altogether – thanks to the history- and context-sensitivity it is apparent that the term ‘art’ present in the definiens is used differently than the same term present in various elements of the definiendum (4.1). Likewise, while institutionalists might have had problems distinguishing artworks from other objects made by artists for a
public, e.g. dinners, the context-sensitivity and stressing the reasons for status conferral central to the cultural theory prevents any confusion (4.2). Finally, while it seems that Wollheim’s dilemma which my definition purported to escape can be simply restated at a meta-level (i.e. asking whether the members of the artworld have reasons to have those particular reasons for arthood conferral), it can be equally easily escaped again, and again if needed (4.3).

I also discussed and rejected some specific objections which seem to arise because of the context-relative nature of the definition. Firstly, it may seem that my account dilutes the question ‘what is art?’ by making the term relative to multiple (also completely arbitrary and uninteresting) contexts. I argued that this can hardly be seen as a problem or limitation – one can surely choose and focus on the contexts which matter to one (just as all other definitions in fact do), and such a choice, if properly informed by appropriate reflection and empirical data gathered by social scientists, would be far from arbitrary (4.4). Secondly, I showed that the fact that there can be some contexts in which ‘art’ is not a cultural concept, is either not a problem at all (not until such contexts are actually found), or is a minor issue which might expose a slight limitation of the theory without seriously damaging it (4.5). Thirdly, one could doubt whether a cultural theorist can draw a clear line between cases of being mistaken with regards to some beliefs which make up an artworld A but yet being its member (though perhaps not a very competent one), and holding the same beliefs and because of that being a member of a separate artworld B. I argued that it is in fact not at all difficult to determine whether one is relevantly competent in their cultural context, and following this, whether one’s status conferrals are successful, or in which contexts they are successful (4.6). Finally, given the state of the modern culture in which ‘anything goes’, the cultural theory seems rather trivial – if in the modern context the criteria for arthood and competence requirements are extremely relaxed, then pretty much anyone can make anything into art. Here, I bite the bullet and argue that while this
is true, such criticism should be directed at the permissive artistic practice, not a theory which simply correctly recognises its existence (4.7).

5.1 Evaluation

There are several general implications and wider consequences of the cultural theory which are worth mentioning.

Although throughout this thesis I followed the principle which distinguishes the classificatory and evaluative meanings of ‘art’, I also generally believe that the answers to classificatory questions should be related to, or at least not clearly at odds with, theories of evaluation. The cultural theory is designed to work well with all sorts of pluralist theories of artistic and aesthetic value.

Before I proceed, here is what the cultural definition does not require one to believe about evaluation. A cultural theorist is not compelled to think that all matters of evaluation are culture-relative as classification is. It is perfectly possible that some (or all, though I find that unlikely) criteria of evaluation are not dependent on contexts (for example, the success value of a work, as described by Carroll (2009: 53f.)), or at least are dependent only in their details, not general form (e.g. a work’s originality value always means being inventive and different from other works, even though from what works and what sort of differences are required may change depending on the context). Following this, even if it is indeed the case that in the modern permissive society matters of classification are fairly trivial (see: 4.7), this does not mean that so are matters of evaluation. In fact, that is perhaps one major conclusion of this thesis: given the current state of the art world, determining what is art is a fairly uninteresting venture – we should instead focus on determining what is good art. To take some edge off the triviality objection, while it is true that aesthetics may have no means of stopping pretty much anything from becoming art, it can still separate the sheep from the goats on the next level – while a generic pop song
may enjoy art status similarly as Beethoven’s 9th, we may still have ways of clearly stating that the Symphony is startlingly magnificent, while a generic pop song is just pretty bad art.

Similarly as with pluralist theories of evaluation, the cultural theory holds that there are multiple reasons and criteria for classification. While I do not believe that the same criteria which are used in classification should now be re-used, I do think that there might be a great deal of overlap. Following pluralists, a cultural theorist could say that a work’s value is indeed measured on several separate scales, and some of those scales are: the number of sufficient subsets of criteria for arthoood conferral satisfied; the number of contexts in which the subsets satisfied are sufficient; and the degree to which some of the criteria are satisfied.

Firstly, some of the properties included in the cluster of criteria can clearly be used in an evaluative sense. Objects not only ‘possess positive aesthetic properties’, but also possess them to a lesser or greater degree, they are not only ‘original’, but less or more original. Thus while the criterial properties used by the cultural theorist to classify works cannot be just straightforwardly transferred and used for the purposes of evaluation, there seems to be at least a significant correlation between the kinds of things that matter in both cases.

Secondly, one could risk a larger leap (for the moment warranted only by intuition) and claim that a part of what matters, or perhaps is just strongly correlated with what matters in evaluation of works, is how many sufficient subsets of criteria for status conferral a given piece satisfies, how many reasons there are to confer the status (in a given context). Thus if, say, *Mona Lisa* satisfies a subset of criteria $\gamma = \{1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10\}$ (i.e. all criteria) and *Fountain* satisfies a subset $\delta = \{3, 5, 6, 7\}$, both of which are sufficient.

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1 Importantly, while what I present below is somewhat similar to Graves’ claim that artistic value is ‘the ability of a work of art to satisfy value criteria of Artworld systems intra-systematically and inter-systematically’ ((Graves 1997: 63-4)), I do not wish to make as strong a claim as he does. I at best believe that the following is *a part of*, or *contributes to*, or perhaps is merely *a guide to* a work’s value.
for status conferral, then if $\delta \subseteq \gamma$ and $(\gamma \supseteq \{\eta, \theta, \ldots\}) \& (\delta \not\supseteq \{\eta, \theta, \ldots\})$ such that \{\eta, \theta, \ldots\} are sufficient subsets (i.e. satisfying $\gamma$ means satisfying more sufficient subsets than satisfying $\delta$ does), then *Mona Lisa* is, at least in this respect, a better artwork than *Fountain*. Simply put, since there are more reasons to think that *Mona Lisa* is art in the first place, or perhaps there are more ‘ways’ in which it is art, it is in that respect better than any other work which is less endowed.

This might initially seem like a very crude and *ad-hoc* stipulation – why should one follow it? While I will not try to defend this proposal in detail here (and I admit that it is indeed rather crude and in need of development), it seems that there is at least one reason to think that satisfying more subsets makes a better work. It is often said that a work’s value is found in the test of time. While some find this notion to be rather vague and simply unhelpful in determining the value of works now, before centuries will test them, it does seem to point at something that is indeed valuable: being appreciated by so many diverse people at so many diverse times gives some measure of a work’s universality. I believe that this is precisely what follows from satisfying multiple sufficient subsets. A work which satisfies more sufficient subsets will be recognised as art in more contexts and even if over time some contexts will change in such a way that some of the subsets this work satisfies will no longer be sufficient, it will still be recognised as art in virtue of satisfying multiple other subsets. Satisfying more subsets means having more to offer in more diverse contexts, being appreciated by different people for different things i.e. being more universal. Conversely, a work which satisfies less subsets might find itself falling out of grace as cultures change (as e.g. some socialist realist works had), thus failing the test of time.

Thirdly, a related point regards satisfying a subset of criteria which is considered sufficient in more contexts. Universality in the above sense depended on the number of subsets – by satisfying a hundred the work in a way ensures one or two hits everywhere. But a work can be universal even if it satisfies only one subset, provided that this subset is
considered sufficient in all (or most) contexts. Thus a part of a work’s value might reside in the fact that its particular properties provide a good reason to confer the status onto it for competent members of a great number of cultural contexts.

Finally, a part of a work’s value may lie in the degree to which it satisfies one or more of the criteria. Thus while *Fountain* might not match *Mona Lisa* in the number of sufficient subsets, it is probably much more original (after all, Leonardo’s work does not establish a new genre nor is it really that different from his earlier paintings) and is more intellectually challenging (while *Mona Lisa* does require intellectual interpretation, it hardly questions received views and modes of thought). If this is the case, then although *Fountain* may not be good at everything, it is at least really great at some things, and therein lies a part of its value.

### 5.2 History and contextuality

Other general implications of the cultural theory follow from its specific context-relative nature. One relates to the historicity of art. Analytic aesthetics has been said to be remarkably uninterested in the fact that art has a history, and to have adopted a universalist approach to it, behaving as if art popped into existence just before the Great Avantgarde – Richard Shusterman announced ahistoricity to be a distinctive feature of analytic aesthetics (Shusterman 1989: 11) and Pierre Bourdieu commented on the futility of ahistorical approaches (Bourdieu 1987: 202). A lot has been done to change this, and the work of Danto, Wollheim, Carroll and Levinson should be mentioned here. Yet it seems that aestheticians still treat history- and context-relativity with a great deal of suspicion, and are at best inconsistent in applying it in various branches of aesthetics. In my arguments against other theories I tried to show that ahistorical treatment can lead to serious problems or limitations, while by presenting the cultural theory I hope to have proven that taking art’s
5.2 History and contextuality

history seriously can be quite fruitful. In particular, I think that there are four issues which need to be addressed by any theory of art:

1. Both the practice and the concept of art must have originated somewhere.

2. Art evolves over time, styles and forms come and go, later artworks are influenced by their predecessors, etc.

3. People’s views on art change and what is likely to be treated as art at one time might not be treated as such at another time.

4. The evolution of styles, forms, etc. is correlated with, and likely influences and is influenced by wider cultural beliefs – art history is parallel to histories of religion, politics, economy, etc.\(^2\)

Most of these points are either not addressed by art theories at all, or are addressed partially or unsuccessfully. It is rather remarkable that even the historical definition struggles with the origins of art, and most definitions treat it as if it were completely detached from all other human activity.

Similarly, while most theorists agree that art is shaped by other practices (e.g. Baroque art was motivated by Counter Reformation, futurism by fascism and technological advancements), they fail to reflect on the possibility that those practices may shape not only the form and content of artworks at various times, but the very understanding of what art is. Yet it seems rather reasonable to say that if not for the shaping of modern gender-divided domestic family model, embroidery would have been art alongside painting and architecture, if not for democratisation of the societies, a large part of folk art would not be seen as art, if not for commercialisation, pop art would not be art. Even more strikingly, it seems

\(^2\)I take those claims to be rather unproblematic – they do not require arguments to back their truth, they are simply facts about our world. As Larry Shiner put it, treating the concept ‘art’ as historical is ‘more faithful to the evidence and more illuminating for the present than traditional narratives of continuity and inevitability. It is up to those who believe in the universality or ancient origins of the ideals and institutions of fine art to [prove ‘art’ to be ahistorical]’ (Shiner 2001: 15).
that the very reason we give when explaining why functionalist and minimalist art became possible in the 20th rather than 17th Century, is because it could only arise in a society which was amazed with machine-like shapes and functions, while the Counter Reformation policies of the Church would have abhorred its plainness and lack of spirituality. Surely this suggests the modern understanding of ‘art’ is different from the past because over time it was influenced by multiple other practices and cultures?

In section 2.2.3 I presented the cultural theorist’s understanding of the historical nature of the concept ‘art’ – relativising the concept to the cultural contexts in given times is done by applying appropriate indexicals to its definition. Thanks to this, although the definition remains the same for art of and from all times, different indices applied to different contexts allow for different objects to qualify as art in those contexts. Thus while the extension of the concept might change over time, the concept remains the same. Since the indices refer to the state of cultures in given contexts, the relation between what is art and the political, religious, economical, etc. climate of the given time is obvious – those things are just elements of the cultural context of which art is a part as well.

Such treatment allows a cultural theorist to answer questions not only about the development, but also the origins of art. She can hold that both the concept and practice of art evolved from other cultural practices – since the artworld is just one among many social systems all of which constantly influence one another, it is perfectly acceptable that it developed from other systems, just as psychology developed from philosophy. Moreover, it allows that separate artworks could develop independently and only later merge. Further, the changes in the practice of art and people’s beliefs about it, are the very centre of the cultural theory which stresses that art is something different in different contexts, depends on and shapes both art-related and non-art-related beliefs present in those contexts, and allows that those contexts evolve from and influence one another.

To sum up, one of the main things this thesis underlines is that art is not a lone island on top of an ivory tower – it is instead one of many interrelated systems such as politics,
religion and commerce, all of which constantly influence one another and change over time. Consequently, any theory which seeks to define art as if it was completely detached from other human practices, simply misses the point and provides at best an incomplete image. Although my thesis does not establish this directly, the same can probably be said about theories of art evaluation, interpretation, aesthetic properties, and many other fields in aesthetics.

5.3 Methodology

I suspect that one of the reasons why many philosophers shun away from including cultural and historical dependance to their concepts, is because by doing so they open the door for historians and social scientists who have more to say about history and cultures than they do – and philosophers don’t like to be told that they need anyone to solve their problems. Although there are naturally some genuine concerns about the usefulness of the solutions of other disciplines for philosophical purposes, it seems that the lack of will for cooperation is largely irrational. The practical issues related to the situation of arts and social sciences in the modern world only make such quarrels more puzzling – surely in a world in which those disciplines have to struggle for survival, it is focusing on the connections and possibilities for cooperation rather than pointless quarrels that are going to win humanities more credit and increase the public perception of their legitimacy.

One of the reasons why I believe that a large part of the ‘philosophical separatists’ concerns are irrational, is the resistance I expect to see against the cultural theory I presented. I am certain that the major accusation against it will concern its history- and context-relativity, since for many philosophers to say that something is relative is the same as to say ‘I give up’. The irrationality of such concerns regards two points. Firstly, the cultural theory is relative to history and context in exactly the same way as any other modern
definition of art – the only difference is, most of the other theories relate to the modern Western understanding of ‘art’ only. If this is all one is interested in, the cultural theorist can cover exactly the same ground without being any more relativist. While I am sure that the difficulties the cultural theory might have in establishing the exact boundaries of particular cultural contexts will be pointed out, it is curious that no one ever asks what the other theorists actually mean when they say that their definitions account for the ‘modern Western’ understanding of art. Does ‘modern’ start in 1917 with Fountain? Or in 1907 with Les Demoiselles d’Avignon? Does it include art created by the Amish? Does ‘Western’ include Russia? Or the Chinese immigrants in Europe?

It seems thus that criticising relativism is a double-sided blade. In fact, I believe that doing so only points out the advantage the view I propose yields – while the other theorists can answer the above questions with some informed guesses at best, the cultural theory’s approach which encourages listening to what anthropologists and historians have to say may actually give one some historical or sociological reason justifying placing the boundaries here rather than there.

Secondly, being suspicious about the relativism I advocate is irrational because the external help needed is simply much more limited than it seems. All that the historical and social sciences are required to contribute, is to provide a cultural theorist with raw idiographic data concerning (a) which contexts are worth exploring, (b) what are the characteristic beliefs and practices of people participating in those contexts, and (c) what properties are considered criterial for arthood and which subsets of criteria are considered sufficient by those people. Essentially, the connection with historians and anthropologists the cultural theory calls for is restricted to asking them to provide solid data obtained

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3Some notable exceptions include Stephen Davies and Dennis Dutton, who studied and tried to accommodate the understanding of ‘art’ of other cultures (S. Davies 2000; Dutton 2000), however, they remain exceptions to the general modern-Western-centrism.
through legitimate and sound research, to be used by philosophers in place of their intuitions and limited art-historical knowledge. Surely asking for help can only be a good thing if it allows to substitute somewhat naive and incomplete guesses with genuine research?

In a wider perspective, the cultural theory calls for establishing a practice of cooperation with history and social sciences. Since art is a historical phenomenon embedded in a wide spectrum of other social practices, it only makes sense to explain it by referring to history and those practices; since history and social practices are researched by historians and social scientists, there is no need for philosophers to use their intuitions and, by necessity, incomplete knowledge of art’s and civilisation’s history – we can simply ask those who deal with these things professionally. While it is true that any information they might provide will not be as unshakeable as laws of logic, surely it will be more reliable than our intuitions and limited knowledge (which, incidentally, are usually derived from books written by historians and sociologists of art anyway). With this I hope to encourage the rise of experimental philosophy of art, a discipline which will not assume the universality of our intuitions regarding social facts, but simply test them.
Bibliography


