

On What Art Is: An Experimental Approach

A. Question of Method. Experimental philosophers have begun to kindle fires under well-worn armchairs in areas of philosophy as varied as epistemology, normative ethics, theories of reference, and the free will controversy.¹ Yet the philosophy of art has remained largely untouched. As Denis Dutton observes in *The Art Instinct* (2009): “There is precious little reference to empirical psychology in contemporary philosophical aesthetics, almost as if philosophers of art have wanted to protect their patch from incursions by psychologists.”² My aim in this paper is to show how techniques borrowed from experimental psychology can begin to bring new warmth and light to the old debate over what art is. The data I have collected from a recent survey suggest that none of the principal theories of art advanced in recent years succeed in tracking or explaining the diverse and idiosyncratic intuitions and judgments of art professionals and others about what art is.

The stock challenge to a theory or definition of art is that it includes things that are not artworks or excludes things that are. Yet most philosophers of art say little or nothing about the method(s) they use to identify whether something is being correctly identified as art—apart, of course, from the criteria proposed by their theories. Were a philosopher to insist that she needs no method for identifying works of art other than what her theory picks out, critics would pepper her with accusations of circularity and dogmatism. “How do you know,” they might demand, “whether picking out a particular object as an artwork is an instance of success or failure for your theory?” “How can you settle quarrels between your theories and other theories over the artwork status of disputed cases?” “How do you decide against what evidence your theory should be tested?” Her critics would be right, of course, but their confident recognition that she needs a

method other than that afforded by her theory makes one wonder why this question of method is so often passed over in silence.

One philosopher of art who has not remained silent on this question is Noël Carroll. In his admirably clear *Philosophy of Art: A Contemporary Introduction* (1999), he addresses head on the question of how one determines the correct application of the classificatory category art. He says: “One does not settle it by taking polls, running experiments, or making observations. One settles the issue conceptually, by reflecting on the idea of art. . . . testing it intellectually against what we believe to be established applications of the concept, and even using thought-experiments . . . to see whether proposed reconstructions of the category of art mesh with our considered intuitions. Of course, intuitions are anathema to social scientists, but they are mother’s milk to analytic philosophers.”³

In practice, most philosophers of art do implicitly what Carroll says explicitly. They rely on some combination of their own intuitions and established applications of the concept art. Who *establishes* these applications? For the most part, they are established by consensus or common practice among art professionals. If there is widespread agreement among art professionals (artists, critics, art historians and teachers, curators, gallery owners, fellow aestheticians, etc.) that something is a work of art, then most philosophers of art will accept that judgment. But philosophers of art need their own intuitions as well. They need them to deal with hypothetical cases, actual cases on which an appreciable number of art professional have yet to pass judgment, and cases on which art professionals are deeply divided. They may also draw reassurance from their own intuitions when they have normative objections to established applications.

A case in point is Monroe Beardsley. Beardsley took on the art establishment when he argued that Duchamp’s *Fountain* (an ordinary urinal signed with name “R. Mutt”) and György

Ligeti's *Poème Symphonique* (100 metronomes that have been wound by ten performers running down in front of a conductor) were not works of art.⁴ Beardsley, like Carroll, openly disdained canvassing “popular or unpopular opinion about what art is ought to be,”⁵ but he was less deferential than Carroll to the judgments of art professionals. Beardsley defined an artwork as “something produced with the intention of giving it the capacity to satisfy the aesthetic interest” and was willing to challenge avant-garde works that seemed to him no more than “kidding art.”⁶

Another name for the practice of identifying or classifying things as instances of art is ‘concept of art,’ or, to be more precise, a descriptive or classificatory ‘concept of art.’ Whatever the underlying logical or psychological processes may be, one’s concept of art is manifested (perhaps even constituted) by one’s practice of identifying certain things as art. Similarly, the concept of art shared by a group of people is made manifest by their common practice of identifying certain things as art. If art professionals consistently identify *Fountain* and *Poème Symphonique* as art, then these works are conceived by them as artworks. One of the distinct advantages of experimental philosophy is that it substitutes systematic surveys of intuitions and judgments for guesswork. Instead of making assumptions about what people “ordinarily say,” “naturally think,” or “customarily conceive,” experimental philosophy conducts empirical studies. In another words, it seeks to compile statistically accurate accounts of people’s intuitions and judgments by employing the very methods that Carroll and Beardsley scorn as un-philosophical: taking polls, running experiments, and making observations.

B. “What is Art?”: A Survey. In the winter of 2009, I created an online survey designed to collect and tabulate subjects’ intuitions or judgments about what is art.⁷ I say “intuitions *or* judgments” because my survey does not attempt to distinguish between intuitions in the narrow sense—spontaneous seemings—and inferential judgments. Subjects are shown a

category (e.g. “urinal”) a brief description (e.g. “A urinal Marcel Duchamp submitted in 1916/17 under the name “R. Mutt” to the Society of Independent Artists, but not exhibited), and, wherever possible, a PowerPoint image of the object. The survey contains 35 objects. For each object, they are asked to check one of three responses: a) It is art; b) It is not art; c) I am not sure. Subjects are also asked to respond to eight demographic questions. Five of these serve to differentiate subjects into art professionals, art buffs (non-professionals with some continuing interest in the fine and/or performing), and ordinary folk. My criteria are spelled out in a footnote.⁸

The principal aim of my survey was to test the effectiveness of recent art theories in tracking and explaining people’s intuitions and judgments about what is and is not art. By *recent* art theories I mean the intentional, functional, procedural, and historical theories and definitions that have been developed in the wake of Morris Weitz’s (1956) challenge that “aesthetic theory—all of it—is wrong in principle in thinking that a correct theory [and definition of art] is possible”⁹ My working hypothesis was that none of the principal theories of art advanced in recent years would succeed in tracking or explaining the diverse and idiosyncratic intuitions and judgments elicited by my survey about what is or is not art. This proved to be the case.

Although I do not have sufficient space in this paper to summarize all of my findings, I can illustrate the pattern of my findings with a few examples and explain why I believe that pattern to be philosophically significant. I included in the survey the two objects that Beardsley singled out as not deserving the name of art: Duchamp’s *Fountain* [#30] and Ligeti’s *Poème Symphonique* [#29]. But most of my subjects did not share Beardsley’s fastidiousness about these works. *Fountain* was identified as art by 62% of all subjects; *Poème Symphonique* by 74%. Among art pros the percentages were even higher: 79% for *Fountain* and 84% for *Poème*

Symphonique. : (Much the same pattern held for John Cage’s 4’ 33’’. It received affirmative responses from 66% of all subjects and 79% from art professionals.)

Two of the objects in my survey were intended to test theories that imply that an object is art only if art-making social practices are already in place when the object in question is made. One is “the *Iliad* as regarded by pre-classical Greeks” [#4] and the other is a ceremonial mask from a primitive tribe in Patagonia [#5]. Whatever appeal or meaning these objects may have for us in our time and place, we do not know who their makers were (though we have the name ‘Homer’), nor how they intended their works to be received, nor how these works were in fact received and understood by their original audiences, nor whether the societies in which they were made and received had artworlds. Institutional theories and Carroll’s historical narrative approach have particular difficulty in accommodating examples of this kind because they require that art-making social practices already be in place when the object in question is made. Even Jerrold Levinson’s historical definition of art,¹⁰ a theory that counts as art any artifact made with an intention that already is *or subsequently* becomes a correct or standard way of regarding artworks, still has to wrestle with the question of how we know what its maker intended. In light of these considerations, one might expect subjects to respond to both cases by electing the “I’m not sure” option. But only a minority chose that option in either case. Sixty-two percent of all subjects identified “the *Iliad* as regarded by pre-classical Greeks” as art and 88% identified the mask as art. Art professionals were slightly more skeptical, with 58% for the *Iliad* and 84% for the mask.

Three of the objects in my survey are taken directly from recent efforts to draw or criticize art/utensil distinctions. A contemporary black Bugatti Veyron [#8] tests David Novitz’s claim that cars are not works of art. Novitz makes this claim in connection with his criticism of functionalist theories such as those advanced by Beardsley and Robert Stecker.¹¹ He says, “the

fulfillment of a eudaimonistic function is never sufficient for art. Our houses and our motor cars may clearly serve such functions, but they are not works of art.”¹² The hypothetical object “a Rembrandt painting used as a blanket” [#21] is an example Nelson Goodman’s proposed to call into question the idea that function alone is determinative of art status. He claims: “The Rembrandt remains a work of art, as it remains a painting, while functioning only as a blanket . . .”¹³ A small pile of cheap white envelopes [#22] is one of the examples Ted Cohen used to critique the first version of George Dickie’s institutional theory of art. Cohen argues that Dickie’s definition of art as an artifact “upon which some or some sub-group of society has conferred the status of candidate for appreciation”¹⁴ fails in one of its prime objectives: it fails to explain how an object like Duchamp’s urinal becomes an artwork because some objects such as Duchamp’s urinal, “ordinary thumbtacks, cheap white envelopes, [and] the plastic forks given at some drive-in restaurants” cannot be appreciated in Dickie’s sense of the term—namely in a way that is characteristic of our experiences of paintings, novels, and the like.¹⁵

What were the results? Novitz’s assertion that cars are not works of art conflicts with the intuitions (or judgments) of a majority of my subjects, since 58% identified the Bugatti as an artwork. Goodman’s and Cohen fare better. Fifty-eight percent identified “a Rembrandt painting used as a blanket” as a work of art. But only 5.4% identified the cheap white envelopes as art, while 88% deny they are art. Strictly speaking, this denial does not confirm Cohen’s claim that cheap white envelopes cannot be appreciated, since the question my survey ask is whether they are art not whether they can be appreciated. On the other hand, the 88% “not art” figure for the envelopes is revealing when compared to the lower percentages of negative responses elicited by two other objects in my survey: [#15] a spindly canal bridge in Amsterdam (54% “not art”) and [#3] a stolidly conventional, prefabricated railroad bridge (59% “not art”). One must assume that

there is something about the envelopes *other* the properties they have in common with the railroad and canal bridges to account for this difference. The envelopes like the bridges are conspicuously utilitarian in point of function and lack precisely those properties that contemporary theories of art deem critical to being works of art: properties such as intended capacity to satisfy aesthetic interest, artworld enmeshment or endorsement, art regarding intentions or narrative continuity with art history, and imaginative interest.¹⁶ What distinguishes the envelopes from the bridges are properties such as cheapness, mundane familiarity, simplicity of design, and obviousness of assembly-line origin, but contemporary theories of art seem ill-suited to explain why properties such as these should play a key role in distinguishing non-art from art.

Two of the objects in my survey, a tree [#13] and a nebula [#32], were intended to test the outer limits of artifactuality. I chose these objects because they are clearly natural objects in natural settings. Neither is in a museum or on a coffee table, and neither has a culturally specified function. In order to deter subjects from confusing the objects themselves with the photographs of the objects, I included the following warning in the instructions for the survey: “All images in this survey are photographic reproductions, but please do not judge them as photographs unless the word photograph appears in red at the top of the description. Every image description starts with a key word in red. If it says tree, the object for your consideration is a tree, not the photograph of a tree.” To reinforce this message I inserted the parenthetical reminder “(not photo)” into the tree and nebula questions and into the accompanying images. In both cases, an overwhelming majority of subjects gave negative responses. Over 82% of all subjects identified the tree as “not art,” while 11% checked “it is art.” Four percent chose: “I am not sure.” Seventy-three percent identified the nebula as “not art,” while 11% checked “it is art” and another “11%” checked “I am not sure.” Art pros did not differ appreciably.

These numbers make clear that most subjects—be they art pros or ordinary folk—judge neither the tree nor the nebula to be art. Still, it is surprising that these percentages are not higher or simply unanimous. The distinction between what nature bestows on us and what we make ourselves is one of the most basic distinctions that human beings draw. If we presented well-educated subjects with a list of objects and asked them to tell us which are plants, we would not be too surprised if some erroneously identified sponges and coral as plants, but we would be very surprised if some subjects, including science professionals, identified plastic flowers and tinsel Christmas trees as plants. By the same token, what is puzzling about my subjects’ responses to the tree and the nebula is not why 25% or less in each set or subset opted for “it is art” or “I am not sure,” but why *any* subjects chose those options.

C. The Philosophical Significance of My Findings. There are clearly discrepancies between what recent theories and definitions say or imply is *not* art some of the responses elicited by my survey. But the philosophical significance of those discrepancies is best illuminated by asking what job a theory or definition of art is to be used for.

Beardsley insists that the proper job of an art theory is to identify the “the noteworthy features of the phenomena” to which the word ‘art’ call our attention rather to match closely common (or uncommon) usage or opinion.¹⁷ The trouble this view is that we are unlikely to agree on these “noteworthy features” if the word ‘art’ does not call our attention to the same variety of objects. How am I to know whether my art theory has to account for Duchamp’s *Fountain* and a railroad bridge as well as Michelangelo’s *David* and the Parthenon? Scientists often cut short disputes of this kind by stipulating that ‘jade’ will stand for jadeite and nephrite; that ‘planet’ will stand for celestial bodies with such and such features, etc. But art professionals do not subscribe to a stipulative definition of art. Indeed, as my survey shows, the range of their disagreement is as

wide as that of non-professionals. One might try to reform their freewheeling ways by joining Beardsley in pointing out drawbacks of being too permissive about what is called art, but one should not join Beardsley in treating a plea for reform as a truer description of what art really is.

Another job one might ask a theory of art to do is to uncover the processes people actually employ in identifying some objects as art other objects as not art. Carroll suggests something of this kind in talking about the overall advantages of his own historical narration theory. Although he admits, that his theory has difficulty dealing with the hypothetical case of a solitary artist unconnected to any artworld, he falls back on the qualification that “identifying narratives” are sufficient not necessary conditions for identifying art.¹⁸ He says: “If the work of a truly solitary artist is art, then there may be exceptional grounds for calling it such. However, that would not call into question the central claim that identifying narration, with emphasis on art as a social practice, is by far our most typical means for establishing art status.”¹⁹ If this is indeed the central claim of his theory, then Carroll is in trouble. Having disavowed empirical methods such as taking polls, running experiments, or making observations and conceded that there may be other means of establishing art status, his assertion that his means are “by far most typical” can be nothing more than a guess. If one really wants to know what means are most typical, experimental research is required. My 2009 survey is not designed to do this job, but others surveys can be.

A third way of understanding the proper job of art theories is proposed by Dutton. He says: “Lawyers like to say that hard cases make bad law, and an analogous danger threatens philosophical analysis. . . .The obsession with accounting for art’s problematic outliers, while both intellectually challenging and a good teachers of aesthetics to generate discussions, has left aesthetics ignoring the center of art and its values. What philosophy of art needs is an approach that begins by treating art as a field of activities, objects, and experience that appears naturally in

human life. . . . The natural center on which on which such understanding exists is where theory must begin.”²⁰ I am sympathetic with Dutton’s naturalistic approach and believe we can achieve greater understanding of what is art by finding the biological, psychological, and sociological underpinnings of art than we can by contriving ever-more-subtle definitions of art. Nonetheless, I think he underestimates the role of “problematic outliers.” Hard cases may make bad law, but they make good science. Although Newton and Einstein proposed fundamentally different explanations of what gravity is, their theories yielded virtually identical predictions for “central” cases. It is only fringe cases like the slight deflection of light rays passing near a star or tiny traces of “frame dragging” produced by planetary rotation that allow us to decide between these theories on the basis of experimental tests. I believe the same is true of art theories and submit that my survey offers a way of testing the adequacy of recent theories about what art is.

¹ For a good introduction to experimental philosophy and the variety of areas it has touched, see: Shaun Nichols and Joshua Knobe, editors, *Experimental Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

² Denis Dutton, *The Art Instinct* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2009), p. 39. Dutton’s *The Art Instinct* is an elegant reexamination of issues philosophy of art in light of new research in psychology, anthropology, and evolutionary theory. Jesse Prinz has presented several papers that demonstrate the relevance of recent research in neuroimaging to key questions in aesthetics. Of particular note are: “Can Critics Be Dispassionate? The Role of Emotion in Aesthetic Judgment” (2004) and “Emotion and Aesthetic Value” (2007). Both are available at present (9/22/09) on Prinz’s homepage: jesse@subcortex.com. (“The Emotional Basis of Aesthetic Value,” is forthcoming in P. Goldie and E. Shellekens (eds.), *Aesthetic Psychology*.) The work of Dutton

and Prinz's are laudable examples of empirically informed philosophy. My approach is more "hands-on." I am conducting surveys specifically designed to test the claims and theories of philosophers about art, beauty, and other aesthetic issues.

³ Noël Carroll, *Philosophy of Art: A Contemporary Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 1999), p. 11.

⁴ Monroe Beardsley, "An Aesthetic Definition of Art," in *Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art: The Analytic Tradition*, edited by Peter Lamarque and Stein Haugom Olsen, (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), pp. 55-62. Beardsley refers to "Edward T. Cone's one hundred metronomes running down with nobody silly enough to wait around for them—even if this "musical composition" is titled "Poème Symphonique." (p. 60). Actually the work itself was "composed" by György Ligeti. Beardsley may be referring to Cone's staging of "Poème Symphonique."

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 55.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 58.

⁷ http://www.tcnj.edu/~phillab/what_is_art/index.htm.

⁸ I counted as "art professionals and practitioners" all and only those subjects who identified themselves as professional artists; amateur artists; employees of art organizations; teachers of the history, theory, appreciation, or practice of one or more of the fine or performing arts; teachers of the philosophy of art by their answers to questions #39 and #40. I treated "art professionals" as a subset of "art professionals and practitioners." I did this by excluding from the larger set all and only those members who were members solely by virtue of having identified themselves as an "amateur artist." I counted as art buffs all and only subjects who did not identify themselves as "art professionals and practitioners" by their answers to question #39 and #40, but indicated by their responses to questions #41 and #42 that they met at least one of the following conditions: 1)

they had taken three or more courses in the history, theory, or philosophy of any of the fine or performing arts; 2) they visited art museums at least twice a year; 3) they attended concerts or theatrical performances at least twice a year. I counted the remainder of subjects as ordinary folk.

⁹ Morris Weitz, “The Role of Theory in Aesthetics,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 15, No.1., September, 1956, 27-35, pp. 27-28.

¹⁰ See Jerrold Levinson, “Defining Art Historically,” *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 19, (1979), pp. 232-50.

¹¹ Stecker’s proposes a disjunctive definition of art: “An item is a work of art at time *t* if and only if (a) either it is one of the central art forms at *t* and is intended to fulfill a function art has at *t* or (b) it is an artefact that achieves excellence in fulfilling such a function (whether or not it is in a central art form and whether or not it was intended to fulfill such a function.)” Robert Stecker, “Historical Functionalism or the Four Factor Theory,” *British Journal of Aesthetics*, Volume 34, Number 3, July 1994, p. 256.

¹² David Novitz, “Disputes About Art,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 54:2, Spring 1996, p. 157. I believe it would have been wiser to choose a less exotic car to include in my survey, since the high cost, rareness, and cache of the Bugatti may have exerted undue influence on subjects’ responses. I was looking for a statistically interesting contrast between the new Bugatti and the old Bugatti poster, but nothing of particular interest emerged. Fifty-eight percent of all subjects identified the car as art, while 74% identified the poster as art.

¹³ Nelson Goodman, “When is art?” p. 69.

¹⁴ George Dickie, “Defining Art,” *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 6 (1969), 253-256, p. 254.

¹⁵ Ted Cohen, “A Critique of the Institutional Theory of Art: The Possibility of Art” in George Dickie and R. J. Sclafani, editors, *Aesthetics: A Critical Anthology* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1977), p. 191. Cohen treats conferring artwork status as an illocutionary act. He argues that, like other illocutionary acts such as promising, it has substantive constraints. One substantive constraint, to which Dickie is committed, is that the object on which candidacy for appreciation is conferred be an artifact. But Cohen argues that another substantive constraint is that the artifact be possible to appreciate. He then goes to claim that objects such as ordinary thumbtacks, cheap white envelopes, plastic forks given at some drive-in restaurants, and Duchamp’s cannot be appreciated in the sense required by Dickie’s definition—namely, in the way that traditional art works such as paintings and novels have been appreciated. But Cohen’s objection is questionable on two counts. First, whether the objects to which he refers can be appreciated in the same way that artworks such paintings and novels are appreciated is an empirical question. Alfred Barr is not alone in claiming that he found Duchamp’s readymades “beautiful.” Seventy-two percent of the art professionals who responded to my survey identified *Fountain* as a work of art, and one art professional identified the cheap white envelopes as a work of art. My survey was designed to deal with question “What is art?” rather than the question “What can be appreciated in way that is characteristic of our experiences of paintings, novels, and the like?” However, a survey keyed to the latter question could easily be designed. Second, it is debatable whether something cannot be made a candidate for appreciation because it cannot be appreciated. Perhaps I cannot promise to do what cannot be done (e.g. cure cancer with a wave my hand), but I can nominate unelectable candidates for office and tell hopelessly boring stories as candidates for humorous tales.

¹⁶ Dutton singles out “imaginative interest” as “perhaps the most important of all characteristics” on his list of cross-cultural, cluster characteristics that define art (*The Art Instinct*, p. 51).

However, the only characteristics he regards as necessary conditions are: (1) being an artifact, and (2) being normally made of performed for an audience (*The Art Instinct*, p. 60).

¹⁷ Monroe Beardsley, “An Aesthetic Definition of Art,” P. 55

¹⁸ Noël Carroll, *Philosophy of Art*, p. 262.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Denis Dutton, *The Art Instinct*, p. 50.