

# On the Definability of Art

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## Abstract

There are many key concepts that, even while being part of everyday life, elude definition. One such is “Art.” Here, possible ways are identified to define Art, along with a description of a few factors that underlie the challenge in arriving at a definition. Additionally, a candidate definition from a scientist’s viewpoint is proposed for an abstract, encompassing model.

## 1 Definability of Art

### 1.1 Variety of Definitions

Consider the question “What is Art?” Candidate answers come in several forms. The following (non-exhaustive) sampling of possible responses illustrates the variety.

#### Art Resists Definition

- Art is fundamentally, inherently undefinable
- Perhaps because it is too “fuzzy” for words to capture it adequately or precisely

#### Art is Expansive

- Defining Art takes too much description
- Hence it is futile to describe it because of the volume needed

#### Art is Irreducible

- The body of tangible and intangible objects that are termed Art are by themselves the complete description and the only possible irreducible description

#### Art is Multi-formed Simultaneously

- There are many acceptable definitions of Art
- All definitions may be acceptable
- Hence a single definition of Art is not possible

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### Art is Etymologically Definable

- Etymologically traced in archaic English, as in *Thou Art*, Art may be “Existence”
- Etymologically trace in Sanskrit, as in “Aarta” (the final ‘a’ being a declension to mark its noun form), “Art” may be “Passion-laden Seeking”

### Art is Entirely Subject-Object

- Art is perceiver-specific, subjective
- Hence undefinable generally
- Yet definable subject-wise

### Art is Amorphous

- Definition of Art keeps changing
- Across time, across geographical space, etc.

### Art does not Need Definition

- Art need not be defined

### Art is disturbed by Definition Attempts

- Defining Art perturbs Art, hence is counter-productive
- It loses its meaning when dissected (e.g., a mechanical description of the movements of a dancer bleaches the dance of its color; dissection of a joke invariably deprives its funny-ness)

## 1.2 Art Challenges its Definer who frequently Challenges the Artist

### Limitation of a Definition

- A conventional definition is a mapping of the “thing” being defined to a set of linguistic words.
- Hence, a definition of Art assumes one or more of the following:
  - It is possible to find an invariant among all instances of Art
  - It is possible to map that invariant to a (small) string in a language (compression)
  - The user of the expressed mapping may need additional effort in expanding the meaning conveyed in the compressed linguistic form (decompression)
  - The choice of language is itself potentially open; hence the language may itself be artistically chosen (symbols, drawings, patterns, mimes, action, and sculpture)!
  - If an information-theoretic is applied to the definition of Art, then the sender and receiver are not physical bodies, but spirited souls; the sender is conveying a compressed definition, and the receiver must receive it and decompress it. Note that the conveyed matter is the definition of art (not an artifact instance)

### The Speaker and the Audience

- Who is asking the question "What is Art?"? Scientist or Artist or Art Critic or the "Public"?
- Who is listening to the answer?
- Who would care?
- Who should care?
- Why should they care? (social health/well-being; full richness of humanity)

### The Sheer Range in Modes of Expression of Art

- Visual (painting, sculpting, ...)
- Performing (song, dance, ...)
- Literary (prose, poetry, ...)
- Multimedia (audiovisual, ...)

### Scientist's Approach to Defining Art

- What is that which characterizes anything that is considered Art of any medium/mode by any person at any place and at any time?
- The Science of Art could be a model that attempts to capture it in the most encompassing way.

### Artist's Approach to Defining Art

- "Do not try to pin the structure down too firmly; otherwise, it will become just a table or chair, and it will not dance."

### Artist Critic's Take on Defining Art

- "All art is only the playing of the needle on the dial of the index of the soul."

## 1.3 The Manifold

In order to ask the question "What is Art?" perhaps it is worth first to consider the manifold of the space within which the responses are accommodated.

### Recognizing Authority

Does the Definition of Art need an Authority?

Who can be accorded the Authority to Define Art?

Who is acceptable as an Authority to define it?

### Universality or Invariance across Space and Time

- Universality – Necessary/unnecessary?
- Geographical-, medium-, modal-, temporal

### Complementarity

- Must a definition of Art be restricted to be secular (non-spiritual)?
- Must a definition of Art necessitate a separation the definer from Art, as a pure, unperturbed, untainted witness?

## 1.4 Additional Notes

### The Essence of Experience Underlying All Art

What is that X that a masochist is seeking? What is that X that a horror movie watcher is purchasing? Identify that X, not as a psychiatrist (who studies for remedy), but as an unbiased witness of those phenomena. I say that it is that X which is the same as the X that one seeks in watching a comedy, romance, or drama; it is just that the X has *flavors*, just as the same juice to quench thirst may come in multiple flavors.

### Simplicity versus Complexity, and Positivity versus Negativity

Propagation dynamics of diseases and computer security attacks have an aesthetically pleasing mathematical expression as a logistic curve or differential equation. In contrast, laughter from the audience of a stand-up comedy show may be extremely unwieldy and ugly to characterize mathematically. Albanian mafia violence may be characterized by a few "beautiful and handful principles" such as BESA in its KANUN, but the more just/fair/compassionate judicial system may be characterized by an extremely complex and voluminous law book.

## 2 Defining Art: A Scientist's Approach for a Model

### 2.1 Proposed Definition

Art is anything that reflects someone's personal sensitivity to appreciate a given configuration of objects.

### 2.2 Elaboration

An elaboration of keywords used in the definition follows.

#### REFLECT

"Reflect" here is as in "reflection of light", not "introspection."

This verb is (intentionally) used to define that an OBJECT by itself does NOT constitute or embody Art, but it only serves as a custom-designed medium (like a mirror, be it dull or shining or of gradations in between thereof) that is capable of bouncing back the enjoyer's<sup>3</sup> inner jet/fountain of an/the essential capability to FEEL (or "perceive in a state of bliss") in the purest form of feeling (that is, untainted or unfiltered by blinding elements such as likes and dislikes).

#### SENSITIVITY

This is analogous to the aperture size of a camera lens combined with the impressionability of the camera's film. The larger the aperture, the more forceful

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<sup>3</sup> Note that "joy" of the "enjoyer of feelings" is different from "happiness" or some such disposition of wellbeing. This is called "rasa" or the essence of perception, which underlies all types of feelings, be they comical, romantic, tragic, scary, and so on. [Beside the point, but this is reason horror movies also make money.]

and intense is the outpouring of the person's inner fountain onto the object. The more impressionable the perception of the enjoyer, the greater is the appreciation.

### **PERSONAL**

The "personal" nature as used here is similar to the personal nature of people's noses. Although the concept of "nose" is the same, and everyone has a nose, there are many different individual types of noses. Similarly, sensitivity varies with people. An object may be considered Art by several people, yet their individual inclination for the same artistic object is dependent on that person's sensitivity. This does not preclude the possibility of a large number of people resonating with the same object (such as the Mona Lisa), but such mass-agreement/consensus is simply a special case entirely contained and explained within the general definition of person-specific sensitivity.

### **APPRECIATE**

This is the phenomenon of the enjoyer gaining a sense of completeness (or closure) upon receiving back his own fountain of blissful feeling when it falls on and gets reflected from the object.

### **CONFIGURATION**

Commonly appearing as presence (but could also be defined by absence) of objects in physical space, or in material/property space, or in vocal space, or in psychological space, or any combination of all. EXAMPLES: sculpture: physical/property space; dance: physical/psychological space; poetry: vocal/psychological space; painting: material/property space.

### **OBJECTS**

Candidates are just about any collection of things physical and/or intangible, internal or external to my person as body and mind, temporally anywhere from past, present or future. EXAMPLES: Painting: tangible; story: intangible; dream girl: internal; painting/sculpture/etc.: external; Ms. Universe: body; Einstein: mind; dance: tangible/intangible/body/present; poetry: tangible/intangible/internal/external/vocal/mental/past/present/future; etc.

## **2.3 Logical Completeness**

Note that "What is Art?" is a valid question to pursue if and only if the pursuit does not start out with the presumption that there is (or ought to be) something that is not Art. The reasoning for such a caveat on logical completeness is as follows. The fact that we are setting out to define what is Art is proof that we do not know what Art is. Being so, we must allow for all possibilities. In particular, an important possibility is that there is never a "non-Art" (that is, EVERYTHING is Art) and our pursuit might end in the conclusion that everything is in fact Art (briefly suspend your disbelief that may negate the logical possibility of reaching this potential conclusion, as it will be further elaborated shortly).

If we do not accommodate the possibility that everything is Art, then we might as well admit that an equally valid question with which we could have started out is "What is NOT Art?" We do not start with that question (of what is not Art) possibly

because our daily experience seems to indicate a relative minority of what we tag as Art, compared to what we do not<sup>4</sup> regard as Art. (Note: The term "what we do not regard as Art" is not the same as the term "what we do regard as not Art").

## 2.4 Apparent Contradictions - And Resolutions

Does not this definition allow for the possibility that anything, and, more importantly, EVERYTHING, could be Art, and hence is an invalid definition? How is it even possible that everything could be Art?

### Prima facie contradiction

Is there not a contradiction of terms to even entertain the possibility of viewing everything as Art, considering the fact that I am now posing the question "What is Art?"?

**Answer:** No, there is no contradiction. There is indeed a contradiction of terms if Art-ness is assumed to be a property of certain objects or activities. However, this contradiction does not arise when Art-ness is a subject-object relation, and when Art-ness is not a binary property.

### Intuitive Inclusion and Exclusion

If everything is Art, how could I currently be considering certain things as Art and not other things?

**Answer:** It is due to the degrees of personal sensitivity. There are people who may not even have a notion of Art in them (for example, the poorest who have little spare mind for any art because they lead a hand-to-mouth life), and there are people who consider the entire cosmos (all matter plus action) is a single gigantic piece of Art with the property that any extract of it is also Art (for example, the highest "men of realization.")

### Intuitive Inclusion and Exclusion

Doesn't the fact that I currently identify some specific things as Art prove that only certain types of things are Art?

**Answer:** No. In light of the above definition, the distinction may be only an indicator of personal sensitivity. What is not appreciated as Art by many may in fact be glorified as great Art by "connoisseurs" and vice versa. The playing field must be level when trying to define Art in a fundamental way.

### Sanctity of Intuition

But, for certain objects (and perhaps not for other objects) I actually have an inner feeling of agreement with another person's claim that they are Art. Does not that have any sanctity in defining Art and not-Art?

**Answer:** In this case, the labeling, and/or the agreement with labeling, of something as Art is in fact based on an unconscious appreciation that has been sensitized to those (types of) object configurations. It does not preclude the possibility of increasing and expanding that sensitivity. There is the subject's privilege of choice

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<sup>4</sup> Note that the term "what we do not regard as Art" is not the same as the term "what we do regard as not Art"

from a very wide variety of aspects (too numerous to list here) that different people resonate with for the same object.

### Uniqueness despite being Singleton

Wouldn't the qualification "Art" lose its very meaning if everything were Art?

**Answer:** Not at all. In fact, it is greatly enhanced by accommodating a greatly expanded set of things as Art, subsuming the entire cosmos in the limit. It is the subject, not the object itself, which is the challenge.

### Uniqueness despite being Singleton

How does that explain the factual existence of something called Art-making (professions)?

**Answer:** See *Who Is An Artist?* in the following sections.

## 2.5 Corollary: Antonyms of Art

By the above definition of Art, the following are all equivalent as antonyms of Art.

- "Boredom"
- "Uninterest"
- "Non-existent"
- "Meaningless"
- "Purposeless"
- "Seeking 'something more'"

Note that, by the above definition of Art, the following are some examples of what are NOT considered antonyms: "Disgust" "Hatred" "Dislike" "Ugliness" "Simplicity".

## 2.6 Who Is An Artist?

An Artist is one who is (naturally or by training) observant of the trends<sup>5</sup> among personal sensitivities of a few or of a large number of people (including, or sometimes restricted to just, the Artist itself) and, with an explicit or implicit understanding of such trends (or even with an inexplicable spontaneity that nevertheless targets the sensitivity), configures objects. The Art objects may either simply reflect the existing sensitivity or may help improve the sensitivity across more subjects and/or more time, but they never diminish sensitivity. The effort for manifestation of objects by the Artist may be quite fleeting and/or localized (as, say, in a whistling on a pleasant morning walk) or may become universal and/or last a long time (as, say, in a popularly accepted master piece like the Mona Lisa).

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<sup>5</sup> Trends can be across any combination of mindsets, life conditions, cultural inclinations, political settings, economic conditions, geographical places, cultures, media of expression, times (of past, present or future), and so on