

Chapter 1

Introduction: Different Types of Limits



§1. This book is about exploring interesting borderline cases of art. I'll discuss the cases of gustatory and olfactory artworks (focusing on food), proprioceptive artworks (dance, martial arts, and rock climbing *qua* proprioceptive experiences), intellectual artworks (philosophical and scientific theories), as well as the vague limits between painting and photography. Perhaps you'll find it obvious that some or all of these cases *are* genuine cases of art, and that the claims I will be making are trivial. In that case, I'll be happy to agree and I hope that this book will still be of interest as a fruitful discussion of these cases of artworks and their limits. Perhaps you'll find it obvious that some or all of these cases *are not* genuine cases of art—indeed, all of them, individually, *have* been denied the status of artworks at some point. In that case, I'll be happy to disagree and I'll try to offer reasons to change your mind. My aim in this short book is thus twofold. First, I hope that the discussion of this series of particular claims about these particular cases will be of interest for its own, first-level, sake; and second, from this discussion, a more general picture about the nature of art and about what counts as an artwork will arise. Indeed, the different cases will allow us to consider different types of limits. Some limits will concern our senses (our different perceptual modalities), some will concern vagueness and fuzzy boundaries between different types of works of art, some will concern the amount of human intention and intervention in the process of creation of an artwork, and some will concern the border between art and science. In these various ways, by understanding better such borderline cases, we will—or so I hope—get a better grip on an understanding of the nature of art.

§2. “What is art?” is a very general and cruelly difficult question. Perhaps, it is so cruelly difficult precisely because it is so very general. Indeed, any precise answer, that is, any *definition* of art, or artwork, which would precisely define what counts as art and what does not, is always in principle at great risk of leaving some possibilities out and of being open to possible counter-examples. The notion of art, or artwork, is a vague one but this is not only a problem of vagueness. The difficulty of providing a definition also stems from the fact that art evolves with time, that it is culture-relative, and that we need to *adapt* our understanding of what art is to this

ever-evolving process. A strict definition of what counts as art and what does not is bound to fail at some point. But not having a definition of something does not mean that this something is inexplicable (*contra* Adajian (2018, §1)). Indeed, if we keep in mind the ever-evolving nature of art, we can simply realize that there is no need for a definition (why would it be necessary to have one?) and that we simply should continuously update our understanding of what art is, and allow ourselves to be surprised from time to time when new, challenging forms of art emerge. Any definition that would try, for instance, to identify what is common to all artworks would simply be inadequate, perhaps precisely in the sense—highly relevant to the overall purposes of this book—that it would beg the question against non-standard types of artworks and classify them as not being art. In order to resist such a possibly question-begging stance, we can simply resist the need for a definition.¹ Walton (2007, p. 148) even suggested that the question does not even make much sense: “It is not at all clear that these words—‘What is art?’—express anything like a single question, to which competing answers are given [...] The sheer variety of proposed definitions should give us pause. One cannot help wondering whether there is any sense in which they are attempts to [...] address the same issue”. This does not mean, however, that we should somehow become sceptical about the very notion of art and that we should abandon the very idea of trying to understand what an artwork is. On the contrary, the lack of a precise and fixed definition is all the more reason to try to improve our understanding of the nature of art, while embracing its impermanence and vagueness.

§3. To this end, let me list some points I propose to take on board as working criteria for a discussion about what counts as an artwork and what does not. Keeping in mind what I said above, these do not constitute a set of necessary and sufficient conditions. Rather, they are merely indicators or pointers that help us clarify the discussion about the nature of art. I take it that this list is rather standard (although it is, of course, controversial),² and I am simply going to use these points as more or less optional guidelines, by examining whether they apply to the various cases I am going to discuss below and whether they are useful or not. As a general rule, I’ll work with the idea that if something does not satisfy all of these points, this is *not* automatically a reason to think that it is not an artwork.

- (1) Artworks possess aesthetic properties
- (2) Artworks are subject to aesthetic judgements
- (3) Artworks have the capacity to trigger aesthetic experiences
- (4) Artworks have the capacity to trigger emotions
- (5) Artworks have the capacity to convey meanings and ideas
- (6) Artworks are challenging (both for the artist and the observer)
- (7) Artworks require skill to be produced

¹Adajian (2018) offers an extensive discussion of definitions of art. Discussion concerning the project of defining art can be found, *inter alia*, in Kennick (1958), Stecker (1996, 2005), Weitz (1950), Ziff (1953).

²Schrenk (2014) uses a similar list. Compare to Gaut’s (2000, 2005) discussion of art as a cluster concept.

- (8) Artworks *qua* objects can have relevant non-aesthetic features and a non-aesthetic function.

(1), (2), (3), and (4) lie at the heart of what I want to take on board as a rough idea of what art is. (Perhaps, (3) and (4) are about the same thing.) In the following chapters, I am going to put these criteria to work, and see what can be learned by applying them to quite non-standard cases.

§4. In addition to these criteria, there are some notions that emerge as being characterizations of works of art that we often appeal to when we talk about art. Let me quickly mention them, since they will also prove to be useful in the discussion of the non-standard cases I am going to focus on in the chapters to come. *Harmony* (and related notions such as symmetry) is perhaps the most often cited. In Western culture at least, the idea of something that is a coherently integrated whole, where proportion, symmetry, and harmony play an important role, is often central to the way we evaluate it as being a (good) piece of art. While Aristotle insisted especially on symmetry, Plato insisted on unity, and the way we evaluate artworks today has inherited and developed both of these criteria, at least when it comes to classical and standard works of art. The notion of *balance* is also often put forward, relatedly to harmony, unity, symmetry, and similar notions. These notions are of course implemented in different ways in different kinds of artworks such as music, sculpture, painting, or architecture, but they seem to provide a relatively common ground to such different types of cases.

The notions of *complexity* and *simplicity* also often play an important role. While being contradictory, they can both be seen as positive features of an artwork and characterize its aesthetic value. A complex work can be intriguing, intricate, and sophisticated; it can be baroquely appealing, and its overall balance will often be emphasized. Simplicity will often be taken to be elegant in a straightforward way—indeed, simplicity and elegance just seem to go together.

Intensity is another feature of works of art that often plays a crucial role in their appreciation and evaluation. It can manifest itself in different forms, but perhaps what it relates to on a general level is the traditional idea insisted upon by Burke that beauty causes *passion* in the observer. This lies at the heart of criteria (3) and (4) above, offering a response-dependent understanding of what makes something to be art. As Hume (1740, 299) puts it, beauty “[...] is fitted to give a pleasure and satisfaction to the soul. Pleasure and pain, therefore, are not only necessary attendants of beauty and deformity, but constitute their very essence.” He adds that “beauty is no quality in things themselves: it exists merely in the mind which contemplates them; and each mind perceives a different beauty” (Hume 1757, 136). This kind of subjectivism is useful to be taken on board; it will, however, need to be weakened and refined (as Hume himself did) in order to account for the fact that more or less objective judgements of the aesthetic value of an artwork can be made—this will be apparent in my discussion of the different types of cases, and I’ll come back to this general issue in due course.

In addition to the criteria (1)–(8), let us then keep in mind: harmony, symmetry, unity, balance, complexity, simplicity, intensity, passion, pleasure; and let us start exploring some non-standard cases of art.

References

- Adajian T (2018) The definition of art. *Stanford Encycl Philos.* <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/art-definition/>
- Gaut B (2000) ‘Art’ as a Cluster Concept. In: Carroll N (ed) *Theories of art today*. University of Wisconsin Press, pp 25–44
- Gaut B (2005) The cluster account of art defended. *Brit J Aesthetics* 45(3):273–288
- Hume D (1740) *A treatise of human nature*. Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1988
- Hume D (1757) *Of the standard of taste, essays moral and political*. George Routledge and Sons, London, 1894
- Kennick WE (1958) Does traditional aesthetics rest on a mistake? *Mind* 67(267):317–334
- Schrenk M (2014) Is proprioceptive art possible? In: Priest G, Young D (eds) *Philosophy and the martial arts*. Routledge, New York, pp 101–116
- Stecker R (1996) *Artworks: meaning, definition, value*. Pennsylvania State University Press
- Stecker R (2005) *Aesthetics and the philosophy of art: an introduction*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers
- Walton K (2007) Aesthetics—What?, Why?, and Wherefore? *J Aesthetics Art Criticism* 65(2):147–162
- Weitz M (1950) *Philosophy of the Arts*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge
- Ziff P (1953) The task of defining a work of art. *Philos Rev* 62(1):58–78

Open Access This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter’s Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter’s Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.

