IS “ART” A USELESS CONCEPT?

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Abstract
In the field of aesthetics, it would appear that one of the most fundamental tasks ought to be to analyze the concept of art itself. However, philosophers have struggled deeply to formulate a coherent and workable definition of what exactly “art” is. In this paper, I examine two of what I consider to be the most successful attempts, namely, the institutional theory of art and the cluster concept. In my analysis, I seek to demonstrate that even these relatively strong definitions are still riddled with problems: they fail to go much beyond our intuitions of what works we consider art, and thereby offer little of the practical guidance and normative rigor we expect of philosophical theories. I thus conclude that while entirely excising the term “art” from our evaluative vocabulary is impractical, we may want to abandon the expectation that it carries significant substantive meaning.

Introduction
In the philosophical tradition of aesthetic theory, many attempts have been made to define both the nature of art in general and those of particular art forms. While we have succeeded in varying degrees in characterizing the more specific genres and subgenres (such as music, painting, tragedy, sculpture, etc.), coming up with an acceptable overarching definition of what links these forms has proven frustrating, to say the least. So frustrating, in fact, that some have drawn the conclusion that the concept of “art” has become too diffuse and confused to be of any use at all. While I believe the conclusion that the concept is completely useless is a bit extreme—it is hard to argue that, despite its ambiguity, the term “art” still holds some evaluative force (even if more of a placeholder than anything), for example—the basic point that it does little philosophical work is worth dwelling upon. I will do so in this essay by looking at what I believe to be the least confused accounts of the ontology of art offered in contemporary literature, those of the institutional analysis, proposed by writers such as George Dickie, and the cluster concept defended by Berys Gaut. I hope to demonstrate that even if we find these theories relatively clear and descriptively valid, the practical guidance offered in both identification and evaluation of art instances is minimal. I will then conclude by considering the implications of potentially abandoning the concept of “art” at this abstract level and focusing our most rigorous discussion on the more tangible particulars of the various forms we have traditionally recognized as falling under it.

Institutional Theory
In its most basic formulation, the institutional analysis offered by philosophers like George Dickie¹ holds that art is essentially a status conferred by people in certain roles in the “artworld.” In other words, to be a piece of art is synonymous with being considered so by at least one museum-goer, critic, artist, curator, or any person who conceives of himself as a member of the loose system of institutions that comprise this so-called artworld of museums, galleries, theatre, performance, etc. Contrary to traditional accounts, art under this theory is not necessarily defined by the exhibited (that is, easily perceived) characteristics such as beauty, certain formal features, and artifactuality. Rather it consists of implicit qualities that give it the potential to be recognized by art, though it cannot be so called until this act takes place.

The institutional analysis possesses certain advantages as a theory. For one, it gives weight to the intuition that ‘we know art when we see it’ while also attempting to go beyond this by explaining why. For as long as we consider ourselves members of this art world, and given the interest in identifying and evaluating art implicit in the mere consideration of this statement, we actually influence what counts as art. It also allows a great deal of flexibility, which may be desirable in a number of circumstances. For instance, it allows for truly revolutionary artworks that seek to depart from the recognized canon, the sort that a historical/traditional account such as Jerrold Levinson’s might struggle with (though he denies such an objection on the grounds that an artist must still expect similar treatment of his work given that he chooses to call it art and not something else). Similarly, this brand of analysis accepts that new genres may emerge at any time and can still be embraced alongside traditional forms. The institutional theory of art is also supported by the increasing instances of more bizarre art displayed in galleries in more recent years, objects that lack the exhibited properties traditionally emphasized in philosophies of art, but still strike enough people as fitting under the concept. Along these lines, the institutional theory also deals with the “readymades” (conventional objects construed as art by the likes of Duchamp) and “found art” such as a piece of driftwood displayed in the manner typical of a painting.

So far, so good, but we may note that all of these positive consequences of adopting an institutional theory of art are largely if not entirely descriptive in nature. They explain the ways in which we do seem to deal with certain works, falling short of any a priori definitions of art and thereby failing to give any sort of guidance in terms of how to identify an entirely new work as art or not art. When faced with this practical task, then, we are in fact left with no more than the “we know art when we see it” intuition, which is sufficient for the majority of cases, but provides little help for what we intuitively feel to be borderline cases—elegantly presented food, for example. It is also normatively weak, unconcerned with whether identifying art by reference to its institutional position is a correct method.

Cluster Concept

If we are willing to sacrifice some of the simplicity offered by the institutional analysis in favor of a more substantive account, Berys Gaut’s proposal of a cluster concept may hold some appeal. He suggests that there exist no individually necessary and sufficient criteria for the concept of art, but rather a cluster of characteristics that the concept encompasses (for example, he offers beauty, expressivity, originality, complexity, and coherence). For a work to fall under the concept of art, it must fulfill some subset (not necessarily all) of these conditions.

The cluster concept possesses certain strengths where the institutional analysis is lacking. It accords with traditional accounts in holding that features typically associated with art (e.g., beauty and originality) do count in favor of an object’s being identified, yet allows more flexibility in claiming that these conventional elements do not constitute an exhaustive set for the definition of art. It therefore allows similar growth and development for the artworld, as does the institutional theory, while better incorporating the history of attempts to define the ontology of art and claiming some normative force (in implying that these were justified but insufficient).

Another distinct advantage, as Gaut notes, is cluster concept position’s ability to provide some guidance in borderline cases. Returning to the example of elegantly presented food, we can identify some elements associated with accepted artworks, such as beauty and intentionality or care for display but also see that it may miss the mark by failing to meet enough criteria (though the cluster concept does not give a hard quantitative account of what counts as enough, so it too still relies to some extent on the ‘know it when we see it’ intuition). Being able to analyze a questionable work against this framework not only gives judges some instruction (again, the work would have to meet multiple criteria from the cluster), but also explains why the case might pose difficulty (if, for example, it meets a smaller than average number of the conditions encompassed in the art concept). This accordance with the intuition that there really are borderline instances is very much appealing as the artworld continues to grow in complexity.

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Despite these benefits, the cluster concept possesses a number of weaknesses as well, mainly centering on the lack of precision in the details and application of the method (though the general notion is quite clear). As I already observed, we are left uncertain as to how many criteria must be met for an object to qualify as art. Perhaps it avoids doing so because the qualitative nature of certain combinations holds more weight—in other words, a work might meet five criteria and seem less deserving of the title of art than a work that meets two. This possibility may incline us to move toward a more tiered approach, offering a set of necessary but insufficient criteria accompanied by an assortment of characteristics only some of which a work must have to complete the picture. However, as soon as we make this move, we begin to lose some of the advantages with respect to growth offered by the cluster concept in the first place. Alternatively, if we move in the opposite direction and keep expanding the cluster, things that bear absolutely no resemblance to each other may be considered art alike, and at some point this begins to jar with our intuitions.

Implications of Abandoning the Concept

Given the frustrations accompanying even the relatively clear accounts of the institutional analysis and the cluster concept of art discussed in the preceding sections, we may wish to consider the potential implications of abandoning the concept (by this I do not mean extinguishing it from our vocabulary altogether—such a task is logistically impossible—but rather accepting that it does not do much philosophical or practical work). In order to do so, we must first think about where it is that we do expect the concept of art to be of use. One fairly obvious situation is in the case of identifying a work as art or non-art. If the work in question is aimed at fitting under an established form, we need not worry about classifying it as “art”; it is more important and decidedly less difficult to determine whether or not it works within a genre. What about the case of an entirely new form? Here we may feel compelled to seek some guidance from an overarching concept. But what work does the label of art do for us? It does not reveal a resemblance to existing forms—either we already see that one exists, or we cannot find it, in which case the accounts of art would provide little help, as they tend to rely on resemblance in the definitions offered. Perhaps we might think the concept would be of use at a subsequent stage—figuring out the rules for such a new form, for example. However, it still appears relatively impotent in my view. If the form is truly revolutionary, it is unlikely that we would want to rely on rules common to existing genres, as doing so would detract from its originality. If not, the form likely bears a stronger resemblance to one genre over another, and we could consult the more specific rules of that form to establish the new one as more of an offshoot than a distinct form.

In terms of the use of art as an evaluative concept (e.g., “X is a work of art!”), I think the consequences of letting go of the illusion that the term “art” holds any rigorous definitional value are even less dire. Rarely when we make this sort of remark do we mean to categorize the work in question according to a specific and comprehensive set of criteria. Rather, we generally use it as a vague placeholder to indicate that the object in front of us is one of beauty, or formal elegance, or simply provides aesthetic pleasure—all qualities that can be true of things we seem to exclude from this ambiguous category of art, for example, natural wonders.

Conclusion

In this essay, I have suggested that even the clearest accounts of the nature of art put forth today (i.e., the institutional analysis and the cluster concept position) fail to give sufficient practical guidance and do the amount of normative work we desire in the philosophy of art. While I understand the impracticality of entirely abandoning “art” as an overarching concept and evaluative term, I do not believe it would be devastating in any way to divorce our usage of it from the expectation that it carries real substantive meaning. We can already identify a disconnect between the way we use the term in evaluative situations and those focused on more rigorous identification. Furthermore, our classificatory tasks can be accomplished—perhaps even more precisely—using the more refined (though still challengeable) concepts that define the particular forms and genres.