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Pitches and Paintings: A Conferralist Theory of Art

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ABSTRACT. This paper attempts to motivate a new theory of art, termed the *conferralist theory of art*, derived from the conferralist theory of social categories as advanced by Ásta (2018). According to the theory of art proposed here, artefacts are conferred the new property 'art(work)' by institutional authorities based on those authorities perceiving the artefact to have certain base properties (whether or not the artefact actually instantiates these properties). Communal conferrals, I argue, cannot successfully confer the property 'art(work)' as a *new* property of the artefact. Following the successful institutional conferral, the artefact — now artwork — gains new enablements and constraints that it did not possess prior to the conferral. While this theory meets the core desiderata often proposed of a theory of art, it diverges in an important way: it does not propose to offer a solution to borderline cases or cases of disagreement by way of definitive artistic or non-artistic status. Rather, it shows why disagreement and borderline cases matter. As such, the account tracks the uncertainty and messiness of determining artistic status, without sacrificing explanatory power in classificatory terms.

1. Introduction

Many platitudes admit themselves of the definitional project in aesthetics, the most informative of which (and agreed upon) are that we want a theory of art to be *classificatory* — to tell us what counts as art and what does not — and *evaluative* — to tell us why we care about, or value, art. Some other desiderata present themselves, perhaps in virtue of the *classificatory* desideratum, relating to being mistaken, disagreement, and borderline cases, namely that we want these resolved such that artefacts fit nicely on either side of the art/not-art division. I think this is a mistake. We should not attempt to produce a theory of art that, for *ad hoc* reasons,

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resolves the messiness of our classificatory practices in art such that it neither accurately nor faithfully tracks common, observable contention. Instead, we should aim for a theory of art that maintains the uncertainty and messiness, without sacrificing explanatory power in classificatory and evaluative terms, by investigating what is significant or interesting about these uncertainties. A theory of art, then, has the following desiderata:

D1: It should tell us what is art and what is not.

D2: Without sacrificing an explanation of why we care about, or value, art.

D3: It should explain how we can so often be mistaken about what is art (Fokt, 2017).

D4: It should show why disagreement and borderline cases arise and tell us why they are significant if disagreement is not resolved.

Here, I introduce an original theory of art termed the *conferralist theory of art,* based on its namesake theory of *social categories* introduced by Àsta (2018). I argue that the conferral of the property *art(work)* has the following profile:

Conferred property: art(work).

Who: institutional authority (themselves having that institutional authority via institutional conferral).

What: judgement as deployed through relevant mechanisms of institutional role.

When: in the context of the authority's institutional role.

Base properties: repetition, amplification, or repudiation of the narrative of art (Carroll, 1998).

This gives us a solution to D1. What is notable, indeed laudable, about Àsta's *conferralism* is that what matters is not so much the conferred property, but the *significance* — cast in terms of *enablements* and *constraints* in treatment and entitlements — that the object or agent gains following the conferral. Exposing what these are for artworks gives us a solution to D2. Moreover, Àsta draws a distinction between *institutional* and *communal* social properties, and I argue that artworks can only be institutionally conferred (which requires the whole profile

above to be met) and, therefore, that *communal* conferrals are always unsuccessful. This gives us a solution to D3. Finally, insofar as more weight is placed upon the significance — enablements and constraints — that follow a conferral or failed conferral, we are provided a solution to D4: what matters when people disagree about a conferral is not whether or not the artefact obtains that property, indeed, I do not think there is a determinate pull either way. Instead, what matters is that the artefact is treated differently by different people who do or do not confer. As conferralism provides D1-D4, thereby satisfying the classificatory and evaluative desiderata whilst tracking the messiness of artistic classification, it stands, I think, as a serious contender for a theory of art.

2. Social Properties: Conferred, but not Spooky

I want to make a (brief, in the interests of space) sidestep before we start: aestheticians get cautious when there is talk of social construction, kinds, or properties, in their domain. Instead, aestheticians would feel much more settled and content if artworks did not depend upon them or their attitudes about the artefacts for their existence. This is despite, of course, the fact that artworks are introduced *for* and *to* persons *by* persons (Höge, 1990; Reddy, 2018). Nonetheless, it would be fruitful to produce a brief sedative. That something is *ontologically* subjective — its existence is mind-dependent — does not (necessarily) render it *epistemically* subjective — facts, research, and value are not real, objective, or worthy in that domain — nor does it place that thing in a "spooky realm outside the natural universe" (Mason, 2016, p. 842; see Searle, 2006, for the distinction between ontological/epistemic subjectivity/objectivity). Instead, as Khalidi protests, something's being mind-dependent is a "red herring" in discussions of objectivity (2015, p. 11), and we can "maintain that our discourse about [social kinds] is truth apt" (Mason, 2016, p. 844), if not for the observation that social kinds are entities brought into existence for our valuing, use, wellbeing, coordination, and so on, by our own intentional action (Mason, 2016, p. 846). They are the hallmarks of human activity and, in at least this author's eyes, if anything is to have value in this world beyond bare sustenance of our biological wellbeing, it is surely those things created by social creatures for social creatures to pursue social and valuable ends. If that isn't convincing, then consider how itches depend on you for their existence — they are ontologically subjective (Searle, 2006, p. 55) — but that doesn't

stop you taking them seriously and scratching. We should do the same with — take seriously, perhaps not scratch — artworks.

Peacekeeping in place, let's look at *conferralism*. Àsta's account tells us not just what social properties are and how they are ascribed to (conferred upon) things and agents, but performs that classificatory pursuit with reference to what makes the properties significant. When a property is gained via conferral, the agent or thing gains not only the property, but certain enablements and constraints in what it can do and how it is treated. To a large extent, having a social property simply *is* having certain enablements and constraints (Àsta, 2018). The basic structure of conferral is: the conferred property, who does the conferring, what makes the conferral/how it takes place, when (and where) it takes place, and the base property/-ies tracked in order to confer (Ásta, 2018, p. 8). For baseball pitches being strikes, for example, the profile is:

> "**Conferred property:** […] being a strike.
> **Who**: […] the baseball umpire.
> **What**: […] the umpire's judgement.
> **When**: [….] in the context of a baseball game.
> **Base property**: […] the physical trajectory of the ball." (Àsta, 2018, p. 8).

The property of *being a strike* is conferred upon the pitch by the umpire on the basis that the umpire *perceives* the base property of the appropriate trajectory in the context of the baseball game. Importantly, the pitch is a strike *so long as the umpire says so*: it does not matter whether, nor need it be the case that, the ball actually tracked — and thereby instantiated the base property of — the relevant trajectory as declared in the rules of baseball. And, in performing such a conferral, "the new baseball fact that the pitch is a strike" is created (Àsta, 2018, p. 9), and in turn the role that strike plays in the baseball game.

As Àsta suggests, conferralism has advantages over other accounts of social properties. Consider constitutionalism, most notably Searle's "X counts as Y in C" (2006, p. 58). On this view, a pitch counts as a strike if it has the relevant trajectory, regardless of the umpire's call. Here, then, the "umpire's job is purely epistemic: he is supposed to discern what the baseball fact already is" (Àsta, 2018, p. 10). If this was the case, then we'd need to inflate our inventory

of properties to account for detected and undetected strikes, where only the former play a role in — have significance for — the game. But, if the property is missed or undetected, this means that there are strikes existing in the game that simultaneously do not play a role in the game. This is undesirable, as fans would therefore have to accept a faulty method for figuring out baseball facts (Ásta, 2018, p. 10). Moreover, it provides *prima facie* support for the claim that the conferral does ontological work: why think that *x* counts as *y* in *c* if it isn't actually counting — as in the case of undetected strikes — as *y* in *c*? If we don't detect the strike, then it ultimately *doesn't* count as a strike in *c*, and so it doesn't count as a strike in the context of the game to, in the first place, result in the conundrum of being a strike that is undetected.[94]

A distinction is then drawn by Àsta between those social properties *institutionally* and *communally* conferred. The former are conferred based on one's position within an organisation or institutional structure — things like chief executive, referee, editor, and so on — and are conferred by someone else within that institution that has appropriate authority within the context of that institution. Consider, for example, the declaration of a new President of the United States (Àsta, 2018, p. 22). The conferred property is *being the President,* via the speech act of the vice president, on January 6th following the November election, tracking the base property of having received 270 or more electoral college votes (Àsta, 2018, p. 22). By contrast, *communal* properties are conferred upon us by other members of our community in such a way that we are "thrown into categories by no one in authority, and often against our will. Yet, we are constrained and enabled by our placement in these categories" no less (Àsta, 2018, p. 18). The crux of the distinction is that institutional conferrals depend on *authority*, but only *standing* really matters in communal cases. For a communal property to be conferred, an agent must have standing or make deference to someone who does. For example, when conferring someone as *popular*, she who does the conferral must have herself some form of standing to perform such a conferral, and this standing "can have its source in a variety of sentiments that others have toward the individual in question" (Àsta, 2018, p. 20). Standing thus produces a safeguard against more *laissez-faire* conferrals, and instances such as a major number of conferrers, lacking standing, attempting to confer a social property against a smaller

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[94] Àsta gives further examples of her account's advantages, as well as over more accounts than just constitutionalist ones, but these are beyond this paper's scope.

number, with standing, not conferring the given property. The entity will not be conferred as having the property as the members of the community with standing do not confer the property, despite the majority (lacking standing) attempting to confer.[95]

Finally, then, conferred properties come with enablements and constraints; possibilities and impossibilities that, prior to the conferral, were unavailable or not present: a conferred property "comes not only with rights and privileges, but with duties and responsibilities" (Àsta, 2018, p. 17). A good example of this is, again, popularity. In the high-school cafeteria, popularity opens up a certain level of power, *enablements*: you can sit where you like, you can take lunch money off other kids, you can "say or do things that others can't" (Àsta, 2018, p. 20). Being uncool or unpopular, of course, comes with the inverse *constraints*; you can't sit where you like and you can't take away other kids 'lunch money. In institutional cases, a chief executive has new powers to fire people, to change salaries, and so on. What it is to have a social property, on Àsta's account, "*just is* to have the constraints and enablements in question" (Àsta, 2018, p. 29). These enablements and constraints grant social properties their *social significance* (Àsta, 2018, p. 44). Tracked or perceived base properties become socially significant just insofar as they contribute to the conferral of another property that then opens up constraints and enablements. So, Àsta's account offers us not only an account of how social properties and categories are attributed to persons, but why these social categories or properties matter, that is, their opening up of constraints and enablements.

3. D1, D2: Conferralism about Art

What can baseball strikes tell us about paintings? My proposal is that artworks are conferred their status institutionally by those with (institutional) authority, tracking (*perceiving*) the base properties of *repeating, amplifying* or *repudiating* the narrative of art (Carroll, 1998). *Communal* conferrals of art either track the base property of having been institutionally conferred, or are using art metaphorically, maybe in a "like art" or "resembles art" sense. But in all cases communal conferrals are unsuccessful in legitimately ascribing — and thus opening the artefact up to the enablements and constraints as a result of possessing — the property *art*

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[95] I note that Àsta does not have much to say about what constitutes *standing*, beyond the relative intuitiveness of her popularity example. This is noted by Griffith (2020), too, who suggests Àsta may benefit from the employment of Haslangerian social structures and schemas. As communal conferrals and their contention do not play a significant role in my account, I leave the question of what constitutes *standing* open.

as a *new* property of that thing (communal conferrals tracking institutional conferrals do not grant the work a *new* property). Here's the profile of the institutional conferral of art again:

> **Conferred property:** art(work).
>
> **Who:** institutional authority (themselves having that institutional authority via institutional conferral).
>
> **What**: judgement as deployed through relevant mechanisms of institutional.
>
> **When**: in the context of the authority's institutional role.
>
> **Base properties**: repetition, amplification, or repudiation of the narrative of art.

One major contention with the original *institutional theory* is that it leaves unclear who exactly counts as authority-enough to say what is art. I think this is only the case if one wants to ensure that persons acting outside the context of concrete institutions dealing with art — i.e., in the community — can do some conferring, which on my account is not a possibility. This is contained within my proposal that not only are conferrers those institutional authorities that have had their authority institutionally conferred, but so too that the conferral must take place within the context of their institutional role. Consider, for example, a critic writing a column, a curator hanging a portrait, or a dealer selling a sculpture. This is the kind of thing Davies (1991) and Fokt (2013) have in mind in their discussions of the *artworld* and artworld-institutionality, but I do not subscribe to the claim, by Fokt, that anyone can describe themselves as an institutional member should they deem *themselves* to have the relevant cultural knowledge (2013, p. 644). Rather, what is common amongst institutional members in my account is that their institutional authority is itself an institutional property (some higher person with institutional authority conferred their role upon them) *and* their actions that confer status are all undertaken within the remit of that institutional role. In the sense of the practice and social phenomenon we are typically talking about when we say something is art, all that matters are what institutional people do within their institutional contexts. And, it's because these people have these institutional roles that they are in the best position to identify, at least in their *perception*, when an artwork repudiates, repeats, or amplifies the art narrative (Carroll, 1998). What binds artworks together is their relation to the narrative of what has preceded them, what might come next, and their conferral as doing so.

I will show why communal conferrals are unsuccessful in consideration of D3 in the following section. For now, one worry might be that restricting conferrals to institutional authorities in institutional contexts does a disservice to the knowledge and capabilities of institutional authorities acting outside their institutional context, or subsequent to their departure of their role. After all, it seems absurd to say that they lose knowledge and classificatory prowess when leaving the building for the day, or even when retiring. These worries are easily dissipated, however, when we think of enablements and constraints. Consider when a foul is alleged to have occurred in a soccer game and the VAR decision is pending. Commentary teams will often defer to a referee who is not an official in the current game to gather their opinion whilst the on-pitch and VAR referees are deciding. The commentary-referee may judge the incident a foul or not, but that they do plays no role in the soccer game. All that matters for the game, and the enablements and constraints following the conferral of the foul or fair play, is the decision of the on-pitch and VAR referees. The commentary-referee's (attempted) conferral does not give the scenario a new property that has enablements and constraints within the soccer game. Now, perhaps an ex-art-institutional authority decides to write a column in an arts magazine about a new work, and this is how they are attempting to confer. Notice, though, that this is simply an institutional authority acting within an institutional context — they are no longer an 'ex' institutional member. Lastly, if the institutional member attempts to confer outside the context of their institutional role — say, in conversation about some artefact with other parents on the sideline of their daughter's football game — then the artefact does not gain the relevant enablements and constraints. Rather, it is only when the authority moves into their institutional context and acts within it that their conferral grants the artefact the enablements and constraints.

What kinds of constraints and enablements does the (institutional) conferral of art open up the artefact to? Quite a few. Artworks are opened up to particular and peculiar — indeed rigorous — modes of assessment (the artwork no longer needs to achieve some utilitarian success, or functional gain), some frameworks and categories of assessment matter more when the artwork is conferred so (form and stylistic conformity, for example), the artefact or event might be afforded certain moral protections (consider how the court would react to your suggestion that your masturbating in public was art, versus Acconci's *Seedbed* [1972]), as well as physical protections that, when breached via iconoclasm or vandalism, evidence the

significance of art (consider recent outrage at Channel 4's *Jimmy Carr Destroys Art*). Artworks are also entitled to fetch prices inflated far beyond mere material cost, and, artworks continue a long lineage of their predecessors in doing what they do and being treated the way they are. Artworks are considered to have social significance insofar as they open up new pathways to experience things, they require specific treatments, are entitled to certain modes of engagement, and continue a socially significant practice. And, these are entitlements that *prior to conferral the artefacts did not have*. What carves out a distinction between Pollock's *Number 1A* (1948) and your knocking over tubes of paint onto a canvas is, quite simply, that the former is treated in certain ways, and entitled to certain things, because it has been conferred within an institutional context by an institutional authority. That is, Pollock's work is socially significant, it matters in the context of the institutional practice — yours is not, and does not.

It is this social significance, these enablements and constraints, that tell us why and how we care about art: the particular and peculiar modes and frameworks for assessment, the use of certain terms to describe the work, the favouring of enriching experience over functional utility, perhaps even its economic power. And, importantly, we care about art because, upon conferral, an artwork continues a socially significant narrative: a narrative that contains things with specific enablements and constraints. One issue with defining art is meeting the evaluative desideratum (D2) without sacrificing the existence of *bad* art. This is because if we define art (D1) in terms of what is valuable about it (D2), then either art is art and has that value, or it does not have that value and thereby cannot be art. Hence, all art is valuable *qua art*, and there is no bad art (see, e.g., Hanson, 2017). On the conferralist picture, artworks are valuable because of their enablements and constraints, alongside their continuation of that narrative. No *one* particular value is the source of artistic value — value *qua art* — and all artworks are valuable (perhaps *simpliciter,* or *qua art narrative*). Consequently, works can be appalling, morally contentious, or formally repulsive, and be bad *qua art:* bad in terms of some properties or determinants we typically assess something with regard to when we've conferred it as art. Nonetheless, they are significant because they are treated in certain ways, entitled to these treatments, and continue a socially significant narrative. *Guernica* is *good art* because of its form and its ethical and political criticism. A sketch by Picasso that should never have surfaced, or indeed Picasso's more contentious works, are bad *qua art*, but they are valued because of their status within the narrative should they be conferred as art. Hence, conferralism tells us

what counts as art and what does not — via conferral — and tells us why we care about art — via enablements, constraints, and the continuation of a socially significant narrative — thus satisfying D1 and D2.

4. D3, D4: Classificatory Conundrums and Conferralist Clarifications

4.1 "Anything can be art these days!"

The scale of disagreement and uncertainty in aesthetics' classificatory project is matched only by the corresponding confusion in our everyday encounters with the newest art. We are often befuddled by what the artworld next says is art: Da Vinci's *Mona Lisa* (1503-6) and Verdi's *La Traviata* (1853) are lumped into the same category as dead sharks, things that are and are not pipes, and crustaceans-as-telephones. Two problems arise here. First, we disagree with the institutional classification: surely *that* can't be art. Second, we make claims of absurdity, "anything can be art these days", attempting to render the concept meaningless by way of attributing artistic status to, say, eyeglasses mistakenly left in the gallery space. Now, Fokt (2017) provides us with a simple and convincing response to the former issue. When we disagree with institutional conferrals based on radically diverging works, we're just applying different narrative timepoints, inappropriately, in our assessments. So, of course *Lobster Telephone* (1938) does not repeat, amplify or repudiate the works of Renaissance portraiture, but it *does* repeat, amplify, and repudiate themes running from Dada and expression, coupled with developments in psychoanalysis, to make a paradigmatic offshoot of surrealist painting. When people look at, and disagree with the conferral of, many works of contemporary art they mistakenly compare them with a romantic, fine, high art conception of representationalist painting. And we need not spend too much time grappling with the uncertainties arising from absurdity claims. When making claims about anything being art, it is most likely that the interlocutors know the stating person is being disingenuous — they don't really *mean* that anything can be art, just that they're pressing for something that unites *Lobster Telephone* (1938) and *American Gothic* (1930). And here, we can simply loop back to Fokt's cultural-comparative timepoints and criteria resolution.

However, the anything-can-be-art dictum does pose a threat for another reason. Suppose we want to contest — as I am sure at this stage many readers do — that sometimes we do

genuinely attempt to communally confer art. Instances, for example, such as our children's finger-paintings, or even Zangwill's (2007) cases of our holiday snaps being art. When it comes to cases like this, the anything-can-be-art dictum might be said to serve as a, very weak, justification — a kind of last resort for the communal conferrer. Some of these cases can be nullified by, as Matravers (2013) identifies, acknowledging that our use of *art* in these cases is metaphorical, we are using art in a *like art* or *resembles art* way. We don't really mean that our daughter's finger-painting should be hung next to, and compared or analysed in similar ways with, *The Starry Night* (1889). Indeed, if we were to pit the finger-painting against such evaluation, the results — unlike the finger-painting — might not be so pretty. Matravers (2013) also notes that these metaphorical instances are useful for deploying hyperbolic praise of the artefact. I think this, too, is correct, but can be cashed out in terms of enablements and constraints. We (metaphorically) describe things as art that matter to us *in our context* to grant those things enablements and constraints that have *significance in our context*: pinning the finger-painting to the fridge, making attempts to prevent its destruction via the dog's gnashers, framing the holiday snaps and donating to them a sentimental-symbolic kind of value. But the point is that these enablements, constraints, and significance are contextualised to what matters for *us* in *our* context, and not for an institutional context. Perhaps one last protest might be that we are *genuinely* conferring when, say, we have painted something which we intend to submit to a gallery or to our agent for consideration in an upcoming exhibition. Though, why are we submitting it? Audience, perhaps. Exposure, of course. But really, we're trying to access the enablements and constraints of the institutional label, displacing the ones mattering in our smaller, personal context. And the very act of submission to the gallery or agent presupposes that it's only (really) *art* when those submissions have been successful.

4.2 "But they're (basically) identical!"

A conundrum that often worries aestheticians in the classificatory project is indiscernibility, or even identity. In our everyday practice, this comes in the form of the exclamation in the subheading, or perhaps "I could have done that!". Suppose you construct some Brillo boxes and send them off to a gallery. Why should Warhol's be art, but yours not? I think this provides significant motivation for looking outside intrinsic, and towards relational, properties of artefacts to assign artistic status. The conferralist answer is that no one really cares about your

Brillo boxes — they haven't received the enablements and constraints that accompany a conferral. Now one might appeal to the process before, rather than after, conferral: if they're the same thing, why confer one but not the other? The repudiation, repetition, or amplification is the same, so the base properties are the same. What matters, though, is the *perception* of the base properties for conferral. Your latter boxes don't match up to the relevant base properties, they've been done before. We see, then, that the conferral itself does ontological heavy-lifting; it just *is*, alongside the resultant enablements and constraints, what makes something an artwork. In fact, conferralism actually allows that you *could indeed* have done that. But, of course, you didn't, and your Brillo boxes don't get the enablements and constraints.

Fortuitously, this provides a resolution to a dilemma in art classification that would arise were we to adopt a constitutionalist approach rather than conferralist, akin to that of pitches that are detected as strikes and those that are not. If we used *solely* the base properties to confer art — and not their *perception* and *contextualised* conferral — then we'd have lots of artworks that are legitimately, on the constitutionalist account, artworks but do not have significance or play a role in the artworld. In this way, there would be artworks surrounding us that no one, in a realistic sense, actually cares about, subverting the requirement that a theory of art tell us why we care about art. The point is that it is the enablements and constraints that matter. Here, we can see a resolution coming through for conferralism against Wollheim's (1987) dilemma. This dilemma is that either institutional authorities have reason to confer something art, or they do not. If the former, we should use those reasons (rather than the conferral itself) as our theory of art. If the latter, well, it's no theory at all. But, of course, it is the conferral beyond the base properties (the reasons) that does the ontological work, giving rise to the enablements and constraints. Without the conferral, we enter into quite redundant an uninteresting classificatory practice through which things that don't have the relevant social significance — enablements and constraints — are counting as art in the context without, just like undetected strikes, really counting as art in the context. It is the conferral, not just reasons for it, that make something art and thereby make it matter.

4.3 "I don't know who to believe!"

If we accept all of the above clarifications of our uncertainties and disagreements, we look to be in a pretty rosey position in the classificatory project. Save, of course, one glaring issue.

Institutional members by no means agree about what is and what is not art, no less than what is good and bad art. So, if one institutional member confers, but another does not, who are we to believe? Conflicting communal conferrals can be resolved by *standing*, as we saw, but we can't make such recourse in institutional cases. We need not look far for such an instance occurring in art history. Duchamp's *Fountain* (1917) was, of course, conferred as art by himself and fellow Dadaists, but rejected — or *suppressed* (Cabanne and Duchamp 1987) — by the Society of Independent Artists. For the latter, it was "immoral, vulgar […] plagiarism" (Anonymous, 1917, p. 5). For Duchamp and fellow Dadaists, it spurred critical reflection on art practice, criticism, and standards in America. Artworks could now be merely "CHOSE[N]" (Anonymous, 1917, p. 5). We can explain the non-conferral of the Society as their not perceiving the relevant base properties: "if no connections can be found between a new work and the practice, we would have no reason to call it art" (Carroll, 1988, p. 149). But for Duchamp, the lack of connection, the outright contradiction, and thus repudiation, were precisely where the relevant connection, and thereby base properties, could be perceived.

Whereas this explains the *conflicting* conferrals, it doesn't tell us with whom to side, and therefore whether *Fountain* is or is not art. But that isn't what is needed here; it's not what is interesting. What is interesting — and what *matters* — about social kinds are the causal consequences that follow conferral and non-conferral. The way, that is, that things are treated afterwards in terms of enablements and constraints. What matters, then, is that different people treat different things in different ways based on different social category conferrals. And this is evidenced in what did indeed follow the attempted conferral and non-conferral of *Fountain*; the Society suppressed and criticised it, whereas Duchamp and the Dadaists lauded its criticality of the art historical narrative, including what we take art to be. And conferralism's solution to D1-D3 paints a significantly accurate picture of what's happening in cases such as *Fountain*'s. Critics may write of the most appalling art, the formalistic failures, art that has little artistic *value*; but it *is* art, because it has been conferred, and they write of these works as art subsequent to such a conferral (D1). They matter, though, for a socially significant narrative that grants things enablements and constraints (D2). And, although we might question these institutional agents and what exactly they're up to granting such status to, literally, *The Lights Going On and Off* (2000), our questioning does not matter (D3). Only their perception of base

properties in their institutional context with their institutional authority, and the enablements and constraints that follow, do (D1-D4).

5. Conclusion

To suppose that a theory of art should neatly provide a resolution to borderline cases and to cases of institutional disagreement is a mistaken move. We should not look for determinacy where there is observably not any to be found. To do so is to assume the premise of an "ideal world" wherein "categories are clearly demarcated bins, into which any object addressed by the system will neatly and uniquely fit" (Bowker and Star, 1999, p. 10). But this isn't how things are: "[n]o real-world working classificatory system" can or may work in such a way (Bowker and Star, 1999, p. 11). What matters in cases of disagreement, uncertainty, and indeterminacy is precisely that there is disagreement, uncertainty, and indeterminacy. To provide a resolution to these cases is, essentially, to suck some of the fun out of the classificatory pursuit and not "accurately reflect the messiness of many of our interactions" in category attribution (Àsta, 2018, p. 24). In this paper, I have shown that conferralism about art can do much explanatory work in showing us what counts as art and what does not (D1), why art matters (D2), why we are so often mistaken in communal conferrals (D3), and why disagreement and uncertainty matter (D4). We should, I think, take social ontology seriously in aesthetics, something for which I hope this paper serves as a foothold.

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