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Art avant la Lèttre

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ABSTRACT. Art eludes definition. The heterogeneity of what counts as art, especially taking into account contemporary conceptual art, poses difficulties for any 'internal' definition which imposes substantial conditions on what artworks have to be like to be eligible as artworks. Hence it is tempting to settle for an 'external' definition which avoids such substantial conditions and refers exclusively to common practices of treating things as artworks. It has been noted that such a definition has difficulties with primordial art. Primordial art arguably precedes the practice of treating artworks as such. I argue that, for this practice to figure in the definition of art, it does not have to be cotemporaneous with the art it is used to define. Our present-day practice may determine what art was all along, just as our experts determine what our common word 'whale' referred to all along, although people using the word in former times were not in the know.

After Altamira, everything is decadence, Picasso.

Art eludes definition. The heterogeneity of what counts as art, especially taking into account contemporary conceptual art, poses difficulties for any 'internal' definition which imposes substantial conditions on what artworks have to be like to be eligible as artworks. Hence it is tempting to settle for an 'external' definition which avoids such substantial conditions and refers

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exclusively to common practices of treating things as artworks.[2] I shall discuss a problem for an approach along these lines and outline a new solution to this problem.

Tempting as an external approach is when we confine our attention to the most recent developments in the history of art, it leads to difficulties at the other end of the timeline. At some point, people must have begun to make art. As a paradigmatic but defeasible candidate for earliest art, one may think of upper Paleolithic cave paintings. Whatever their original context and purpose may have been, there is nowadays a near-consensus to classify them as cave *art*. But the creators of that primordial art could not rely on an established practice of treating it as art. One may doubt that people at that time had anything like a concept of art.[3]

Stephen Davies has drawn the consequence that a definition exclusively referring to established practices can only be partial. He thus integrates such a definition as one disjunct into a more comprehensive characterisation:[4]

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[2] I borrow the internal-external distinction from Carney (1994) without subscribing to his way of drawing the boundary.

[3] These observations weigh against Dickie's claim that 'the creator of the representation cannot recognize his creation as art and that, therefore, it cannot be art.'(Dickie 1984, 55)

[4] Davies formulates the characterisation as a sufficient condition, but I guess the disjunction is intended to be a necessary condition as well. Robert Stecker (1986, 129) suggests to account for some primordial art by qualities like 'expressive power'. But expressivity does not make an artwork. We need to add 'aesthetic expression' or the like, which leads to Davies' proposal.

something is art (a) if it shows excellence of skill and achievement in realizing significant aesthetic goals, and either doing so is its primary, identifying function or doing so makes a vital contribution to the realization of its primary, identifying function, or (b) if it falls under an art genre or art form established and publicly recognized within an art tradition, or (c) if it is intended by its maker/presenter to be art and its maker/presenter does what is necessary and appropriate to realizing that intention.(Davies 2015, 377-378)

In this definition, (b) is the part referring (among other things) to established practices of treating artworks as such. (a), in contrast, is the part taking care of primordial art. I have some misgivings about (a). (a) makes reference to aesthetic goals. It is challenging to generally tell what the relevant aesthetic goals are. Moreover, there are doubts as to whether primordial art was made with aesthetic intentions or goals. Some authors conjecture that these works were created in a trance state, which might be incompatible with intention-guided production (Whitley 2009). A more realistic alternative is that primordial art was only meant to signify the depicted objects without any aesthetic ambition. My main misgiving about Davies's definition is that it is unnecessarily gerrymandered.

I contend that, as far as primordial art is concerned, we can do without (a). Primordial art can be handled within an account exclusively referring to established practices. To be sure, the practices referred to cannot be practices of creating or appreciating art established before art was first

created. Instead, we have to refer to *our contemporary practices of creating and assessing art*. Primordial art is not art as judged by standards that were prevalent when it was created –there were no such standards, or so I shall assume. Primordial art is art as judged by *our* standards, standards established by making and assessing art in our linguistic community. It seems plausible that, in using the word 'art', we defer to 'experts', members of the artworld who are socially authorised role models of dealing with art. They are authorised by our present linguistic community. Cave art is art, the reason being that it is acknowledged as such by these experts. To put it in terms of Davies's (b), cave paintings 'fall under an art genre or art form established and publicly recognized within an art tradition', viz. our own tradition of painting, including wall painting.

I shall address three potential objections:

First, there is one great concern which prevented philosophers of art from pursuing the option I propose. Take a hypothetical primal scene of primordial art-making imagined by Levinson:

> Consider a solitary Indian along the Amazon who steals off from his non-artistic tribe to arrange colored stones in a clearing, not outwardly investing them with special position in the world. Might not this also be art (and note, *before any future curator decides that it is*)? (Levinson 1979, 33, m.e.)

Levinson plausibly insists that earliest art is art 'before any future curator decides that it is' (pace Carney 1994). But how could that be if our curators

later set the standards which make primordial art count as art in the first place?

The concern can be dispelled by distinguishing two different kinds of relativity. Our concept of art is relative to what counts as art among experts in our linguistic community, but it is not relative to the *present time*. Primordial cave paintings or stone arrangements did not *become* art when present-day curators decided to call them art. Curators did not make them art but contributed to establishing the notion of art that is prevalent in our community. According to that notion, earliest art was art *all along*.

I draw a comparison to natural kind terms. Back in the 19th century, there was a famous judicial controversy as to whether whales were to be classified as fish (Sainsbury 2013). Whales did not *cease* to be fish when the controversy was settled in favour of our present belief that whales are not fish. Judged by the standards of our concept *whale*, they never were fish in the first place.

My comparison to natural kind terms is limited, though. In the case of *whale*, one may argue that even before the deep structure of whales was detected, the concept aimed at this deep structure. I doubt that the same goes for *art*. The very rationale of going for an external definition was the following: there are no substantial conditions independently of a practice of appreciating art which artworks have to fulfil in order to be eligible for being treated as artworks. Present-day experts did not *detect* what art lovers in the 16th century could not have known: conceptual art like Duchamp's *Fountain* is art. In classifying conceptual art as art, the experts we defer to shaped our concept of art. Earlier aficionados would not have been wrong in

saying 'conceptual art is not art'.[5] They would have been right in light of the concept of art prevalent in their linguistic community, which determined their use of 'art'. But their word 'art' somewhat differed from ours. In the same vein, we are right in affirming that conceptual art is art –by the standards prevalent in our linguistic community. Notwithstanding the disanalogies to natural kind terms, my point stands: our practices can settle what was art before our time.

Second, there is a general concern that accounts of art referring to *art*istic practices, *art* genres, and so on are circular or at least uninformative. One has already to know what art is, it seems, in order to identify these practices (Stecker 1986, 128). This general concern seems aggravated when primordial art is not embedded in established historical practices of producing art but defined exclusively by reference to our practices of calling it art.

In reply, my aim was not to defend an external definition of art but to show that it can deal with primordial art. Still I shall say some words about circularity: even without presupposing any initial understanding of the concept of art, one can identify the practices which are relevant to determining the concept. Consider a situation of radical translation: a field linguist may use heuristic criteria of identifying the institutions we defer to in our use of 'art'. She may begin by counting the frequency of 'art' being used, thereby identifying both a word cluster and a social group especially

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[5] This example is only for illustrative purposes. Depending on how the counterfactual is spelled out, I can well imagine that 16th century connoisseurs might have acknowledged contemporary conceptual art as art.

relevant to the use of the word, refine the results by applying broadly sociological criteria for key scenes of authorised talk of *art*, thereby identify a range of uncontested applications of the concept, and then proceed to settling the more interesting cases. The result is not a *real definition* capturing the essence of art, but the very rationale of defining art in terms of practices of treating it as art is to avoid giving a more substantial definition. Third, my proposal seems faced with a dilemma. The first horn of the dilemma is *chauvinism*: it might seem unduly self-centred to define art by what *we* call art. This horn can be avoided by relativizing the concept of art to a linguistic community without privileging ours. The 'privilege' of the latter is only that *we* are bound to it. As a consequence, we seem to be driven on the second horn: *relativism*. Concepts of art established in different communities are incommensurable without there being any room for interesting cross-cultural discourse on art. As a consequence of relativism, any disagreement seems to become merely verbal, drawing on incommensurable concepts. But we can imagine a genuine disagreement between us and earlier art lovers who might have said 'conceptual art is not art'. This dispute is not simply settled by giving a translation scheme à la: 'art' by 16th century standards is 'art' by 21st century standards, but excluding conceptual art.

In reply, even if there is a certain incommensurability, there is a large overlap and a strong historical and even cross-cultural continuity in what is classified as art. This overlap ensures that the different notions can be called concepts of *art*. As for the suspicion that disputes about art become merely verbal, one may adopt a stance which resembles a Carnapian (1956) position

in meta-metaphysics: there are broadly pragmatic reasons for choosing one concept of art rather than the other. These pragmatic reasons have to do with the social role of art. Different ways of dealing with art and corresponding concepts of art compete for roughly the same social role. The dispute therefore is not *merely* verbal in the sense of having no impact on social practices of dealing with art.

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