Grounding Art

Andrei Marmor

What makes something a work of art? Can we answer this question in a philosophically satisfactory way? I think that we can, as long as we understand the question as one about metaphysical grounding. The main argument of this paper aims to show that any plausible metaphysical grounding of artworks is going to pull in the direction of an institutional theory of art. Institutional theories of art, however, raise their own problems and challenges, but I'm hoping to show that at least within the particular context of our concerns, those challenges can be met. Before we get there, however, it would help to clarify what questions in the vicinity we are bracketing and setting aside. For one thing, we will set aside the many interesting and difficult ontological questions that arise with respect the conditions of existence and persistence of different kinds of artworks. For example, there are fascinating questions about what it is for, say, a symphony or a novel to exist (or cease to exist), what is the ontology of a play or a street-art performance, is a sculpture ontologically distinct from the mater it's made of, and so and so forth. A great many questions about the ontology of various kinds of works of art are discussed in the literature, and this paper is not meant to engage with those issues.[1] Secondly, we need to separate the concern of this paper, about what makes something a work of art, from the wider and much more ambitious question of What is Art? This needs some explanation and I will start with that.

1.

Noel Carroll rightly noted that the question What is Art? can be understood in a number of different ways.[2] One way of understanding the question is definitional. Like Carroll, I'm assuming that if there is any point in trying to define art, it is a real definition we would seek, not a kind of dictionary definition of what the word "art" means. A real definition is a metaphysical

[1] For an extensive survey of the multifarious questions about ontology of art, see Livingston, "History of the Ontology of Art".

[2] See Carroll "Identifying Art", at 5. I'm more or less in agreement here with Carroll's distinctions. Similar ambiguities exist about the question What is Law?, which is rather instructive, actually. But I will not dwell on the relevant analogies here.

business, not a verbal one. It takes items in the world as its objects, not linguistic expressions. If art lends itself to a real definition, we would be seeking some set of necessary and jointly sufficient conditions for something to be art.[3] A real definition of X in terms of a, b, and c, can be expressed:

$X =_{df}$ a, b, and c.

And then, if X is something in the world that exits, we can also express the real definition in terms of an identity formula: "to be X *just is* to be (a, b, & c)". So the question is, is there any hope for a real definition of art? Given the extraordinary vagueness of concepts and ideas we tend to associate with practices of art, the significant, not to say radical, transformations of various arts over time, the considerable variance between cultures and their respective artworks, and the very fuzzy boundaries of art relative to such things as craft, design, decoration, ornamentation, entertainment, etc., the prospect of a real definition seems extremely dim.[4]

Another way of understanding the question of What is Art? can be seen as a quest for the essence of art. If you are willing to entertain essentialism about such things, it makes sense to ask what is, and what is not, essential to art or, what are the essential features of artworks. Now of course views about what might be the essence of something vary. In fact, there is no reason to assume that only one conception of essence is metaphysically useful. In the context of social ontology (viz, non-foundational entities), I think that an essential feature of an X has to be somewhat informative about the nature of X, and yet it does not have to be a necessary feature for something to be an X.[5] For example, it is essential to chairs that they are artifacts made for a particular purpose or use, sitting, but a broken chair you cannot sit on might still be a chair. It is essential to law that it purports to guide people's conduct in certain ways by giving them reasons for action; but some laws have no action guiding functions whatsoever.

There is a close affinity between a feature of X that is essential (though not necessary) for an *o* to be an X, and a *defining feature* of X. Taking the inspiration from Wittgenstein here, we can say that a defining a feature of X is the feature that would make us use the same word (or

[3] See, for example, Rosen, "Real Definition".

[4] Not everybody agrees, of course. Attempts to define art have a long history and some persist. (See, for example, Adajian's survey in "The Definition of Art".) George Dickie can be understood as purporting to offer a real definition of *artworks*, see his *Art and the Aesthetic;* and *The Art Circle*. (The definitions differ in these two works, but both purport to provide one.) Not quite the same as trying to define art but comes very close, too close for comfort, I think. I will have more to say about Dickie's theory below.

[5] For a very different view that ties essence to necessity, see, for example, Fine, "Ontological Dependence".

concept if you will) for things of X type or, for any object we take to be an X. Wittgenstein's famous *family resemblance* argument purports to show that many concepts we use in our natural languages have no such defining features.[6] Perhaps, though elsewhere I argued that family resemblance concepts are much more rare than Wittgenstein assumed, and in fact, his own famous examples, such as 'game', do actually have defining features.[7] Be this as it may, whether art can possibly have defining features or whether "art" stands for a family resemblance concept, is a separate question: There might be certain essential features of art even if none of them is a defining feature of "art".[8]

Now the question of what are essential features of artworks would have been easier to answer until about 100 years ago, at least in the European traditions of art. You could have said, for example, that it is essential to art that it aims to evoke some aesthetic experience, or otherwise has some aesthetic qualities, that it takes some special and relatively rare skills to produce, and things like that. But none of this is true today. Sometime around the first decade or two of the 20th century, art divorced aesthetics, and soon thereafter, special skills in its production were no longer seen as necessary, in fact, in some artistic genres (e.g. conceptual art) were no longer seen as a virtue at all.[9]

The lesson from this is that even if art has essential features, art itself changes over time, sometimes radically enough to shed one essential feature and wear another.[10] In fact, I think that this has always been true in a cross cultural comparison: what was essential to art in one culture may not have been essential, or even present, in another. Even today, cultures and societies differ in their distinctions between what is craft or ornamentation and what is art. And there is no

---

[6] Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, sec 65-67

[7] See my *Social Conventions*, 98-102.

[8] In the 1950s, clearly influenced by Wittgenstein, some philosophers made a great deal of the realization, as it were, that "art" is a family resemblance concept. See, for example, Weitz, "The Role of Theory in Aesthetics" and Ziff "The Task of Defining a Work of Art", (For an interesting critique see Dickie *The Art Circle*, ch 2.) I don't think that we gain a great deal of insight into the nature of art, and we certainly do not get any closer to answering the question of what makes something a work of art, by realizing that our use of the word in natural language is of a family resemblance kind. We would still need an account of why other artifacts are not works of art, even if they closely resemble artworks in various ways.

[9] I find it rather ironic that conceptual art, revolutionary and socially radical as it was, actually contributed a great deal to the elitist and highbrow environment of contemporary art. By practically eliminating the need for artistic skills in the production of visual arts, skills that could be readily recognized by winder audiences, the determination of what counts as art these days, and what kinds of art people should appreciate, inevitably falls in the hands the privileged elites, such as curators, publishers, and art scholars. Art has become more, not less, elitist. (Interestingly, skillful performance is still very much valued in music and dance.)

[10] See, for example, Danto, "Modalities of History", Levinson, “Artworks as Artifacts", Thomasson, "Ontological Innovation in Art".

reason to think that anyone is mistaken here. Art itself changes all the time, and then there is no reason to assume that the world needs to follow the changes in one part of it rather than others. To be sure, I'm not suggesting that we must discard any interest in essential features of art (or of similar social practices). What we must do, however, is to recognize that the essential features of art or, rather, I should say of the different arts, are culture relative and change with changes of the practice itself and its self-understandings by those who engage in it. Essentialism about art has to come with a good measure of cultural relativism. Alternatively, if you think of essential features as necessary, you might need to concede that art has no essential features, at least none that would be non-trivial.

The question of What is Art? can also concern epistemic issues. Can we come to know that something is a work of art or is it the case that artistic features of an object are essentially in the eyes of the beholder? Or, more plausibly, perhaps, in the eyes of the social elites that bankroll the arts and consume the products. There are, actually, more nuanced questions about the epistemic dimensions of art, but I will not be able to address them here.[11] And then, finally, the question of What is Art? is closely related to questions about values. Obviously, no theory about the nature of art would be complete if it can tell us nothing about reasons for appreciating art, and reasons for caring about it. What makes art valuable and worthy of our admiration and respect is something that is rightly seen as part of the question of what art is, it is an integral part of an account of the nature of art. Now by this, of course, we should not be fooled to deny that there is bad art, artworks not worthy of any particular appreciation. In other words, reasons for valuing art are not necessarily instantiated in every object that is, in some sense, a work of art. Some art is not good art. It seems to me that any theory of art that fails to account for this, namely, that something can be art without being good in any relevant sense, would be deficient and suspect. (I will get back to this at the end.)

My focus in this paper, however, is not going to be the question of What is Art? in any of the above mentioned senses. I am interested here in the metaphysical question of *what makes something a work of art*, when it is? This is a question about grounding: *in virtue of what* is an object a work of art? Understanding this question in terms of metaphysical grounding is almost inevitable. A grounding account of certain aspects of reality presupposes a hierarchical structure

[11] See Thomason, "The Ontology of Art and Knowledge in Aesthetics", and my *Foundations of Institutional Reality*, ch 6.

of the world, whereby certain aspects or parts of it are more foundational than others. When you think about the metaphysics of art, you would immediately realize that it is not the kind of thing that is foundational; artworks, as such, would certainly not form part of the basic fabric of the universe. If something is a work of art it has to be so in virtue of other things that are metaphysically more foundational.

What is it for one thing to be more foundational than another? A good start would be to assume that if an A aspect of X is more foundational than its B aspect, then there is a sense in which we should be able to utilize the A aspect in order to *explain* the existence or essential features, or nature, of the B aspect. Better still, we should be able to say that X is B *in virtue of* X being A. And this is the idea of *grounds*. A grounds B just in case that something is B in virtue of being A.

There is a lot of grounding talk in contemporary metaphysics, but it doesn't mean that there is a great deal of consensus on what exactly grounding is, and what it applies to.[12] I will mostly rely here on some basic characterizations of grounding that are widely accepted, so let me state, briefly, what I will be assuming here.[13] We have already tied the notion of grounding to that of explanation. The grounding relation is meant to be explanatory, like causation, (in contrast to modal concepts such as necessity or supervenience that are not, by themselves, explanatory). So there is this way of thinking about grounding as something that explains the relation between things. But grounding, like causation, is also a relation between things in the world that may obtain regardless of our explanatory interests. In other words, it is widely accepted in the literature that metaphysical grounding is a relation between worldly facts.

Admittedly, this dual role assigned to grounding may seem troublesome from the start. Explanation, generally speaking, is often relative to our theoretical interests and questions raised by our theorizing about this or that. What is in need of explanation often depends on prior explanations, and theoretical frameworks often determine what would count as an adequate explanation within that framework.[14] But if grounding is also a worldly metaphysical relation,

---

[12] The idea of grounding permeated contemporary metaphysics only in the last twenty years or so. Many have contributed to this endeavor, including, for example, Fine, "The Question of Realism" Rosen, "Metaphysical Dependence"; Schaffer, "On What Grounds What"; Audi, "Grounding", Bennet, *Making Things Up*, and others. For a critical view on the idea of grounds see, for example, Hofweber, "Ambitious, Yet Modest, Metaphysics".

[13] On some of the more controversial aspects of grounding and my stab at some of those issues see my *Foundations of Institutional Reality*, ch 2.

[14] I am not endorsing here a wholesale pragmatic view of explanation, certainly not in science. But it is difficult to deny that, generally speaking, explanations are tied to our interests and modes of theorizing about the world.

then it is not tied to our interests and our ways of seeing the world. Can one and the same relation be both? Probably yes, as many would think about causation, for example. And this leads some philosophers to suggest that grounding is a kind of *metaphysical causation*. When there is no causal connection between two items, but one nevertheless exists *in virtue of* the other, we have a grounding relation.[15]

So when we say that A grounds B, we say that *B is what it is in virtue of it being A*. (Or, X is B in virtue of X being A.) Grounding is a worldly metaphysical relation between things or facts, explanatory, presupposing a hierarchical structure of the world in which A is more foundational than B. Therefore, it is widely assumed, and I take it rightly so, that a grounding relation between A and B must be asymmetrical, irreflexive, and transitive.

Asymmetry: If A grounds B, B cannot ground A.
Irreflexivity: A cannot ground itself.
Transitivity: If A grounds B and B grounds C, then A grounds C.

At this point one might have hoped that we could give some simple and uncontroversial examples of grounding. Alas, simple examples, maybe, but not uncontroversial. The use of grounding is wide and varied, but in almost all cases controversial. We can say, for example, that dispositional properties of objects are grounded in their categorical features. A glass is fragile in virtue of the molecules that make it up and perhaps laws of physics and chemistry. Some would say that moral properties are grounded in nonmoral facts. Some might want to say that colors are grounded in the reflection of light waves from physical surfaces and the biochemistry of our eyes and brain. Grounding possibilities are almost endless. But almost all of them are philosophically, and sometimes scientifically, controversial. However, it is precisely this nontrivial aspect of grounding that makes it potentially fruitful. When we can distinguish clearly enough between different types or categories of facts, and ask a question about the potential grounding of one type by another, we are given a powerful tool to focus our inquiry in a way that is nicely structured. For example, if there is a suggestion that facts of type A ground facts of type B, but

[15] We should be careful with this idea of grounding as "metaphysical causation." There are some similarities between causation and grounding, for sure, but saying that grounding is metaphysical causation is no more than a metaphor, and one that is not easy to unpack.

then it turns out that, under some conditions, B would ground A (violating asymmetry), we would know that something went wrong. Similarly, if transitivity fails, we would know that either the grounding relations we assumed are incorrect or, at the very least, incomplete.

One more clarification before we proceed: There is an important distinction between complete and partial grounds, which also bears on the question of transitivity. So the idea is this: A would be a complete ground of B when the fact that A obtains is sufficient to account for the fact that B obtains. A partially grounds B when B obtains in virtue of A, but not only A. So here's a schematic version:

Grounding: The fact that A grounds the fact that B.

A consists of items (x, y, z).

Complete grounds: The fact that (x, y, z) grounds the fact that B.

Partial grounds: The fact that [(x, y, z) and φ] grounds the fact that B.

In both cases, facts (x, y, z) stand in a grounding relation to B. But in the second case, (x, y, z) is not sufficient to ground B—it also takes another fact, φ, to provide the complete grounds of B. Notice that, in the case of partial grounds, transitivity might fail (but not asymmetry and irreflexivity). If A partially grounds B, and B partially grounds C, it may not be the case that A grounds C. So there is a crucial difference between complete and partial grounds. In some contexts even a partial grounding relation might be interesting or controversial. For our purposes, however, I will assume that the grounding we seek is complete, not partial.

2.

Now that we have a sketch of the tools we can use, let me state the main question as precisely as possible. The question we ask takes the form -- What makes an *o* an *F*? -- whereby '*o'* stands for any object that can be a work of art, and '*F*' stands for 'work of art'. There is, of course, a great variety of objects that can be works of art and their respective ontologies might differ; objects can be of the tangible kind, such as painting or sculpture or any physical structure; they can be intangible such as stories, poems, and generally all sorts of narratives; and then they can be a mix of the tangible with the intangible, such as music, the performing arts, cinema, etc.,.. As I mentioned at the beginning, there are numerous fascinating ontological questions

about the existence and persistence conditions of different kinds of artworks. We do not need to go into any of that. One thing I will assume here, however, without argument, is that whatever an object of art is*,* it has to be an artifact, a product of human agency. A beautiful sunset, spectacular as it may be, is not a work of art.[16]

Now the nature of *'F',* of what we can mean by calling something a work of art, is more tricky. I take it as an historical-social fact that many human cultures, in a great variety of places and over millennia, practiced the deliberate creation of various kinds of works of art and identified them, more or less, as such. But there are two important caveats to bear in mind here. First, an epistemic one: we do not always know whether objects that look like works of art to us, were created within cultures that took their creations, and their functions, to be something we can translate to art, or artistic, in our language. For example, we have no idea, and probably will never gain a sufficiently convincing answer to the question of what Cro Magnon, who created the beautiful cave paintings in Southern Europe tens of thousands of years ago, took themselves to be doing. To assume that they thought about these cave paintings artistically, or something sufficiently similar to that, is a bit of a stretch. Or, to take an example much closer to us in time, and more controversial: It is certainly possible, even if not certain, that the African masks admired by Picasso and his artist friends at the turn of the 20th century in Europe, were created in cultures that did not see their creation and uses in ways we can translate to art or artistic in our language. In some cases I think that we may just never know.[17]

Bearing this caveat in mind, we can assume that works of art have been created, as such, for millennia in different cultures, by which I mean that there are objects that were identified *in the cultures that created them* as *works of art.* This doesn't mean, of course, that the culture in question must have had a word for "art" in its vernacular. Furthermore, and this is the second main caveat to bear in mind, we should definitely not assume that cultures in which artworks were created and identified as such, necessarily had a general concept of Art, with a capital A,

[16] Needless to say, this is not a naive assumption, and it has considerable epistemic implications. See my *Foundations of Institutional Reality*, ch 5. See also Thomason, "The Ontology of Art and Knowledge in Aesthetics".
[17] See also Dickie, *The Art Circle*, 55. The danger of retaining colonial prejudices about these things does not allude me. I'm not doubting that many objects that used to be displayed in anthropological museums, for example, popularized during 19th century in Europe, are actually works of art, not crafts or idols. But in some cases it is difficult to know, since most African cultures left us with no written records of their history, religion or customs. In other words, colonial prejudices and practices of prioritizing Euro-centric art should be put behind us, for sure, but that, in itself, does not lead to the conclusion that any object that may look like a work of art to us was created in a culture that had practices of art.

subsuming various artistic kinds and genres under a general concept.[18] The idea that the different kinds of artworks, distinguished from crafts, ornaments or various forms of entertainment etc., are instances of general artistic ideals, is probably something that may have only emerged with the Renaissance in Europe, not much earlier. There were artworks, identified as such, long before the Renaissance, of course: music, poetry, iconography, architecture, book illustrations, sculptures, and so on and so forth. It is safe to assume that these artifacts were created as artworks even in times and cultures that would not have seen the various genres of art as species of a genus. In Medieval Europe, for instance, people could have recognized poetry as artwork, music as artwork, iconography and religious books' illustrations, etc., as artworks, without necessarily having a general concept of art that would subsume these different kinds and genres under anything like a unified concept of Art.[19] Thus, from now on, when I use the term 'artwork' or 'work of art', I will use it narrow scope, in a genre-specific sense, not wide scope subsumed under some general concept of "Art". The only general assumption we have to make here is that there are social-linguistic domains, cultures if you will, in which an assertion of the form "Object *o* is a work of art" is a meaningful assertion, possibly, at least, true or false, and potentially trans-culturally translatable. And then the question is, *in virtue of what* a given object *is a work of art*? What are the kind of facts that ground the identification of certain objects as artworks?

One might immediately object here that this cannot be a question about metaphysical grounding, at least not according to my earlier characterization of what grounding is. Why so? Grounding is meant to be a metaphysical relation between worldly facts, not concepts or modes of representation. Worldly facts, we can assume here, are facts about things that exist and their properties, including their relational properties to other things that exist. One might argue, however, that a work of art, as such, is not a worldly fact. Let us assume, for example, that a Rembrandt self portrait is a work of art, if anything is. The tangible, physical aspects of the work, such as the canvas, the layers of paint on it, etc., are worldly facts; perhaps the facial image in our minds created by looking at the layers of paint on the canvas is also a worldly fact. But being an object *of art* seems more like a conceptual matter, a way of representing or conceptually organizing aspects of the world. To say that Rembrandt's self portrait is a work of

[18] See also, Thomason, "Ontological Innovation in Art", 121.

[19] It is very unclear whether in ancient Greece during Classical and Hellenistic times the different arts were seen as species of a genus. Plato and Aristotle do not discuss them as such.

art is to say something, partly at least, about our minds, collective minds, perhaps, not about the world, as it were.

Of course all this is true, but it does not prove the point of the objection. Worldly facts do not have to be mind-independent aspects of reality. In other words, if we contrast the kind of worldly facts grounding relations can take as their relata, with what Audi calls "a *conceptual* view of facts, according to which facts will differ if they pick out an object or property via different concepts"[20], then we might end up with the view that mind-depended aspects of reality do not admit of metaphysical grounding. Surely that cannot be right; grounding relations can obtain between facts that are clearly mind dependent, and in ways that would be extremely difficult to identify, as the kind of facts they are, without relying on concepts and modes of representation. In the context of social ontology, this is particularly obvious. There is, undoubtedly, a grounding relation between corporate entities and laws; there is a grounding relation between laws and institutional facts; there is a grounding relation between institutional facts and social rules. None of these facts can be identified or individuated without relying on some modes of representation. Different concepts of what is a corporate entity would pick out different entities and different facts about those entities.[21] I think that it is hopeless to aspire for an individuation of facts that is independent of concepts and modes of representation. However, even if the individuation of facts or things in the world often depend on concepts or modes of representation, it does not mean that the relevant fact is a conceptual matter. Different conceptions of what is a corporate entity would pick out different items in its extension, but the items are not conceptual—they are not facts about concepts, just facts about things that exist and relations between them, even if some of those things are mind-dependent. In other words, I will also assume here, along with Audi and others, that grounding relations pertain to worldly facts, but I will assume a more permissive attitude to the individuation or categorization of facts that can be subject to a grounding account.[22]

Applied to the grounding possibilities about art, the idea is that what we try to ground here, as it were, cannot be individuated or singled out without reliance on a fairly thick social

[20] Audi, "Grounding," 103.
[21] Would you think of the Catholic Church for example as a corporate entity? What about Hizballah? and so on and so forth, different conceptions of what a corporate entity is are available. According to a strictly legal conception, the former is probably a corporate entity, and the latter is not. But in a less formalistic sense, the answer could be yes, or no, to both.
[22] See also, for example, Schaffer "On What Grounds What".

and cultural context. Surely what a work of art is, depends on cultural and social contexts that change over time and certainly differ between different cultures. The important point to realize here, however, is that we can acknowledge all that, as we should, and still ask, quite generally, irrespective of particular cultural contexts, *in virtue of what something is a work of art,* if and to the extent that it is identified as such in a given context? As long as we can say that an object is a work of art (in some familiar context), we can ask what makes it so, which is to ask, what are the kind of facts that ground the identification of objects as artworks. But what if it is doubtful whether an object is a work of art or not? Same thing, I would say. We need an answer to the question what makes it doubtful, in virtue of what might it be a work of art or not. A good answer to the question of what makes *an o an F*, is such that it should also apply to an o_x that is a borderline case of *F*. Once we know what makes an *o* an *F*, we should also know what would make an o_x a borderline or doubtful case of *F*.

3.

What can possibly ground the characterization of an object as a work of art? There would seem to be a limited number of possibilities. Since we have assumed that artworks are artifacts, an easy answer could be that the creator's intention is what makes the object a work of art. If A intends to make x as a work of art, then x is a work of art, albeit not necessarily a good one. One intuitive implication of this is that art cannot be created unintentionally, as if by accident or inadvertently. That seems generally true, and later we will see why.[23] But there are two serious problems that render the intention-based answer inadequate. First, people can intend to create a work of art only if they already possess a fairly concrete idea of what art is; one would first need to have a pretty good sense of what is art for an artifact to be intended to be an artwork. So there is a circularity problem that looms large here.[24] Secondly, and more importantly, the main problem with the creator's intention account is that it's just not sufficient. People can intend to create a work of art and miserably fail at that. What renders such endeavors a failure is not their intention, of course. People who intend to create a work of art normally intend to succeed in that.

[23] Even if some early 20th century episodes can be mentioned as counterexamples. Marcel Duchamp, (who else?) would come to mind. His famous bicycle wheel on top of a chair is said to had been in his studio long before it dawned on him to present it as a work of art.
[24] See Thomason, "The Ontology of Art and Knowledge in Aesthetics", 224-225.

So we need an account of what can possibly make an attempt to create an artwork to fail, what is it that the agent would have not succeeded to accomplish. In other words, to the extent that there is some grounding relation between creators' intentions (purposes, aspirations, etc.,) and artworks' identification as such, as works of art, this grounding relation is only partial, not complete. And then the question is, of course, what would complete it, what else is needed?

The most natural and historically rooted answer is that failure to create a work of art is failure to imbue the object with certain qualities that would qualify it as a work of art. Perhaps the object lacks minimal aesthetic qualities, or perhaps it fails to evoke the kind of aesthetic experience such works are supposed to conjure; perhaps it lacks features that would have taken some special skills or talent to produce; or perhaps it just lacks the semantic-representational features that are essential to work of art of its kind. Let us call the family of views which strive to ground works of art in their inherent qualities the *Objective List views*. By and large, however, objective list views, philosophically popular in the 18th and 19th centuries, were rendered obsolete by the impact of modernism in the early 20th century. In particular, the association of art with aesthetic qualities has been brutally severed. Cubism, Dada, and in particular, conceptual art and so called "ready-mades" art, convinced the artworld that works of art need not have any aesthetic qualities that distinguish the objects of art from ordinary, otherwise mundane objects. Creating or invoking an aesthetic experience is not something that works of art necessarily aim to accomplish anymore.[25]

One remnant of objective list views that lingers on concerns the semantic version of it. Wollheim[26] and Danto, for example, maintain that modernism has not changed the fact that works of art, as such, embody certain representational intensionality; as Danto says, they have to be *about* something.[27] Some philosophers of art seriously doubt this, however (e.g. is music necessarily about something? seems doubtful), and in any case, it is doubtful that semantic or quasi-linguistic features can provide the metaphysical grounding of works of art. How could such features account for the distinction between success and failure to create an artwork? Does it make sense to say that it is *in virtue of* its intensionality, in virtue of its aboutness, so to speak, that Dostoyevsky's *Brothers Karmazov* is a work of art? Is it aboutness that renders the *Aya*

[25] I am assuming, without knowing all that much about it, that the advent of atonal music, by Schoenberg and others, is somewhat parallel to the distance created between artwork and aesthetics in the visual arts.
[26] *Painting as an Art.*
[27] *The Transfiguration of the Common Place*, ch 3.

Sophia a spectacular architectural work of art? In other words, even if Danto is right that works of art are, essentially, about something, they cannot be works of art in virtue *of that.*

There is one aspect of the semantic approach that seems to go in the right direction. Danto's early work, arguing that works of art tend to come with a theoretical background that is essential for understanding their artistic status, as it were,[28] and his later ideas about intensionality, get us close to an approach that emphasizes the importance of an historical narrative in our ability to recognize artworks as such. Carroll, for example, argues that we cannot understand what makes something a work of art, at any given instance and point in time, without the actual, historical narrative that renders intelligible the creation of that object in relation to objects that had been recognized as art until that point. As Carroll notes, we need "a certain type of historical narrative, one which supplies the sequence of activities" connecting the dots between a work and its predecessors, say, between a ready-made, such as Warhol's *Brillo* boxes and Rembrandt's paintings.[29] The role of an historical narrative is particularly revealing when the art status of an object is disputed. To show that it is art, Carroll says, "we should be able to tell a story that connects the disputed work x with preceding artmaking contexts in such a way that the production of x can be seen as an intelligible outcome of recognizable processes of thinking and making within the practice."[30]

I think that there is a lot going for the historical narrative view. But it cannot be the fundamental answer. An historical narrative account, by itself, cannot provide the metaphysical grounding we seek. It makes little sense to suggest that something is a work of art solely in virtue of a (true) story we can tell about ways in which it responds to previous works of art. The narrative account must rely on some kind of a cultural recognition of works of art in the past. Even if you can tell a true story connecting all the dots between Warhol's *Brillo* boxes and Rembrandt's paintings, you would still need to answer the question: in virtue of what Rembrandt's paintings are works of art? As Carroll himself says, we can only identify an object, say x, as a work of art by "a historical narrative of how x came to be produced as an intelligible response to an antecedent art-historical situation *about which a consensus with respect to its art status already exists*."[31] [emphasis mine] So this, I think, shows quite nicely, that at the bottom

[28] Danto, "The Artworld".
[29] Carroll, "Identifying Art", 16.
[30] *ibid*.
[31] *ibid*, 17

of things, at the foundation of what renders something a work of art, there has to be some kind of a social consensus. (Though I will come to qualify this shortly.) Which is basically the view of the so called institutional conception, associated with the work of George Dickie.[32]

The main idea of the institutional conception is that something is a work of art in virtue of the fact that it is considered to be an artwork by a certain community. The relevant community is usually taken to be the kind of community Danto called the "artworld".[33] The artworld these days is rather complex but not difficult to identify; it consists of those who produce artworks; those who fund the productions by their purchases, donations, subsidies, and the like; those who display artworks in their respective spaces and mediums; curators, producers, and publishers who pick what and how to present as works of art; art critics who write about artworks and interpret them for others; scholars who study the arts and their history; and to some extent, ordinary folks like us who consume the artworks by visiting the galleries, reading the poems, going to concerts or to the theater, etc., etc.,. Now of course the artworld in centuries past, or in other cultures, consisted of different players. There was art long before there were museums, concert halls, curators, and art critics. For many centuries, millennia, actually, and in many cultures, the main players of the artworld were monarchs and royal courts, wealthy nobility, religious institutions like the great Temples in ancient Egypt, the Catholic church in Europe, Muslim rulers and Wakf in the Islamic world, and so on and so forth. Where there is art there is a community of different kinds of players, some more central and more important than others, that together, in some lose and informal coalition, so to speak, constitute the artworld.[34]

Members of the artworld in any given society or culture that has art, engage in, and contribute to, what we might call *practices of recognition* of art. Engaging in practices of recognition is what constitutes membership, as it were, in the artworld. These days, for example,

---

[32] Dickie's institutional theory of art went through several stages of presentation, the most complete one, probably, is his *The Art Circle*,(1997). I think that Thomasson's views about the artifact nature of art are essentially of the institutional kind as well. See Thomasson "The Ontology of Art and Knowledge in Aesthetics" and "Ontological Innovation in Art".

[33] Danto, "The Artworld". Many saw in this early article by Danto the inauguration of an institutional theory of art, of the kind later developed by Dickie. However, Danto himself seems to have distanced his views from the institutional theory in later writings.

[34] What about tribal art, one might ask, what would be the artworld in such tight-knit communities? Are we forced to conclude that tribal art is not art? Or perhaps the whole tribe is the artworld? I don't know enough about the sociology of tribal communities to give a detailed answer, but I'm assuming that even in homogenous and tight-knit tribal communities there is a division of labor and ways of determining what counts as this or that, including, presumably, artworks where relevant.

by buying works of art or otherwise supporting financially their production, curating exhibits or producing various artistic performances, writing about art, consuming it in various ways, even researching and studying it, are all practices of recognition. Together these practices make up for the artworld's understandings or "consensus" as it were, of what is considered art in the relevant culture or community.[35] Now of course, this is not really a matter of consensus. People don't have to actually agree to recognize something as a work of art. Informal agreements and understandings, including sometimes conventions practiced over time, emerge as upshots of these practices of recognition. Like rules of a game, they usually exist not because players agreed to their content, but in virtue of the fact that they tend to play by the rules. Furthermore, most people who engage in these art recognition practices do not have the recognition function at the front of their minds (unless it is in their line of business, of course, such as curators, producers, editors, and critics). The practices of recognition, taken together, as it were, ground the communal understandings and opinions, and sometimes long lasting conventions, of what is an artwork of this or that kind, and what is not quite art but only, say, craft or ornamentation, etc. To try to create a work of art, therefore, is almost necessarily an aspiration to gain recognition by the artworld or, at least, some significant subset of it, of one's product as a work of art.[36] Which is also one of the reasons why art can hardly be created inadvertently or by accident.

I mention the possibility of a subset of the artworld because an aspiring artist may wish to create a work that is displayed or performed as art, for example, but not necessarily sold and bought. Graffiti, to take an obvious example, is not intended to be put in market circulation and yet sometimes it is definitely intended to be art. But then you may wonder, can one not create a work of art that is not intended to be presented to anyone else? Can I not write a great poem and keep in the drawer, never showing it to another soul? Of course such things can be done, but understanding them as creating art is conceptually parasitic on the public-presentation model. As I mentioned earlier, essential features are not necessary features. Certain deviations and exceptions are always possible, because we understand them as deviations, and we can normally tell how and why they deviate from the standard cases. An object that could have been artwork if presented to others is just that, an object that could have been an artwork.

[35] The understandings and views about art that emerge in an artworld are just as much about the past as they are about the present.
[36] See also Dickie, *The Art Circle*, 66.

Now, we do know from instances of transitional periods, when practices of recognition undergo changes and developments, that recognition sometimes lags behind, catching up, as it were, years later, sometimes, sadly, after the death of the artist. In most actual cases, however, what lags behind is not so much the recognition of the object *as a work of art*, but its appraisal as good art. Artworld contemporaries of Cezanne and van Gogh would not have doubted that their paintings are works of art, they just thought that they are not the kind of art worthy of their appreciation (or their money, in van Gogh's case). And that's a different story. In principle, however, I see no reason to deny that an artworld's recognition of certain object[s] as a work of art can happen some time, perhaps even a generation, after the work had been created. Notice however, that delayed recognition would normally make sense only if there is an historical narrative that connects the dots between the creator's struggles for recognition and the social recognition that finally emerges.

The conclusion that I hope emerges so far is that the facts that make something a work of art are fully grounded in the practices of recognition of the relevant artworld community. An object *o* is a work of art if and to the extent that it is recognized to be an artwork by the practices of recognition of the artworld or, at least, some significant subset of it. So this is the basic institutional conception of grounding artworks that I want to defend here. And some defense it certainly requires, since there are a number of important objections one can raise, and those possible objections and challenges need to be met.

4.

The institutional theory of art is a relatively easy sell when you present it against the practices of contemporary art, especially the kind of art that is displayed in galleries and museums or performed somewhere. Even if you are a fan of conceptual art, ready-mades, abstract compositions, (atonal music) and all of that, you must have had the experience of looking at some totally banal object (like a piece of driftwood or a pile of sand), displayed in a modern art museum or a trendy gallery, wondering what makes *this* a work of art, why is it here? Faced with these kinds of examples or experiences, if you will, makes the institutional answer, combined with the narrative account, eminently plausible. *This* is art, we would say, because it is displayed here, in the museum, recognized by curators and critics as a work of art, and they so recognize it partly because they know the story, as it were, they know (or, at least, think that they

know) how to connect the narrative dots with objects and creations previously recognized as art. But then you might wonder why would we have very different experiences looking at, say, Michelangelo's frescos of the Sistine Chapel, Leonardo DaVinci's *Last Supper,* or Picasso's *Guernica.* Looking at any of these objects you are rather unlikely to scratch your head and wonder if what you are looking at is a work of art or not.

My point here is not to lament the loss of aesthetics, the role of the genius, or special talents, association with art, far from it. The possible objection to the institutional conception I have in mind here is twofold: first, it might seem just intuitively suspect, not to say incredulous, to suggest that what makes the Sistine Chapel frescos a work of art depends on the artworld's recognition of it as art. One might be tempted to think that even if you encountered these marvelous frescos totally out of context, knowing nothing about their place in the history of art, you would have immediately recognized it as a work of art. The second aspect of the objection here has to do with the question of whether the institutional conception can account for the role of the artist's genius, creativity, and originality contributing to, even if not quite defining, what a work of art is. So in a way, we are back to the intuitive pull of the *objective list* view of art: Aren't there certain qualities to Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel that single it out as a work of art? Just look at it, one is very tempted to say, can you not see what a great artwork this is?

In response to both of these concerns, the crucially important distinction to bear in mind is the distinction between the kind of things that make an object a work of art, and those that make it great art, worthy of our admiration. The institutional conception, understood as a metaphysical grounding of what makes something a work of art, is confined to the former question; it is only an answer to the question of what makes something a work of art, not what would make it appreciable or admirable. There is a lot we can say, of course, about what makes the frescos of the Sistine Chapel not just artwork, but a great work of art, admirable, awe-inspiring, etc.,. Furthermore, it is likely that some of the things we can say about the artistic excellence and aesthetic values of the Sistine Chapel are not very closely tied to the conventions and understandings of any particular artworld; perhaps they are universal, in some sense. I'm not suggesting that these evaluative or aesthetic issues can be fully grounded in patterns of social recognition and social practices.

The distinction between the two questions mentioned above also goes a long way in answering the concern about the role of the artist's originality, genius, talent, and similar

attributes in the identification of something as a work of art. The role of these attributes is twofold: the first is causal and the second is evaluative. To begin with, as I mentioned before, the aspiration to create a work of art is almost necessarily an aspiration to gain recognition by the artworld of one's product as a work of art, and presumably, as a good one at that. Originality, ingenuity and talent, are all contributing (but not necessary) factors to recognition and acceptance. The more original, surprising, nuanced, talented, etc., a work is, the more likely it is that it will gain the kind of artworld recognition that it seeks. So there is this causal link here between creation and recognition. This causal link is neither necessary nor sufficient of course. There is a lot of great talent and genius that is lost to the artworld, and vice versa, a great deal of mediocracy and banality that gains outright recognition as artwork; the causal link is pretty weak. Secondly, as a matter of evaluative judgments and appraisals, we tend to think of good art in terms of originality, creativity, and similar attributes. It is, partly, what we tend to value about art. [37] In other words, attributes and accomplishments of the artist certainly bear on the appraisal of the work and its excellence. But the qualities that would make something a good work or art, whatever those qualities might be, are not necessarily the facts that render it an artwork to begin with. A lot of things can be good, original, beautiful, talented, and admirable, etc., but not a work of art. Think about the marvelous cave paintings at Lascaux (at least 20,000 years old); difficult not to see them as works of art, but the truth is that we just do not know what they are. An object is a work of art in virtue of its recognition as such by the relevant artworld or some significant subset of it; whether it is good art, or whether it should have been recognized as art even if it isn't, are questions about values and evaluative judgments, obviously more interesting and central to art criticism, but they are not about metaphysical grounding. This essay is about metaphysics, not about aesthetics or art criticism.

The metaphysical grounding of artworks I have presented here faces another, and I think more serious, objection. The objection is an old one, originally raised by Kendall Walton in a review of Dickie's first book.[38] So here's the issue: Suppose we agree with the institutional conception that recognition by the relevant artworld is what makes something a work of art. And

[37] Of course I need to qualify who is "we"; originality and innovation were not necessarily seen as artistic requisites in earlier times and other cultures. Putting the artist's genius and originality at the forefront of what artworlds appreciate is an achievement of the Renaissance. It may have existed before, such as in Greco-Roman times, and some parts of the Islamic world, especially in architecture, but not to the extend that it gained prominence in Euro-centric art after the Renaissance. But I'm not an expert in art history and I should not assume too much here.
[38] Walton, Review of *Art and the Aesthetic*.

then we dwell on characterizing the artworld by its practices of recognition in creating, funding, consuming, maintaining and sorting of artworks. But now, Walton's point is, very similar practices of recognition are constitutive of many other practices, such as sports, religious practices, fashion, high-end cooking, games, and so on and so forth. To suggest that some of them are art while others are something else, requires some principle of unity between the different practices and genres that are recognized and celebrated *as art*, as opposed to all these other similar social activities (which I will call "non-art-world"). And now the problem is that any search for a principle of unity is bound to bring back the search for defining features of artworks, that is, some version of the objective list view. If, on the other hand, we give up the idea of unity, then we are forced to admit that the distinctions between artworlds and non-art-worlds is, essentially, contingent and arbitrary. It just so happens, as it were, that sculptures are potentially artworks and souffles are not; or that theater is art but boxing is not.

Dickie thought that the only way of answering Walton's objection is to deny the arbitrariness charge by assuming some conceptual unity to what artworks are, acknowledging that this only shifts the charge from arbitrariness to circularity. Since Dickie saw his own endeavor in terms of a definitional project, he immediately recognized that circularity would be a serious concern, and was at pains to explain why not every circularity is a logical fault.[39]

Unlike Dickie, however, the project I examine here is not definitional. I do not think that a real definition of artworks can be fashioned. As I have repeatedly claimed, the question here is about metaphysical grounding: in virtue of what something is a work of art? The Walton challenge creates a circularity problem only if you try to avoid the arbitrariness concern by assuming a unifying factor determining what is and what is not thought of as art in any given artworld. Dickie (and perhaps Walton as well) thought that the arbitrariness problem is a very serious one, it needs to be avoided. Hence they were drawn to the conclusion that some unifying idea of art, subsuming the various artworlds under a principled account that can distinguish artworlds from non-art-worlds has to be fashioned somehow. I seriously doubt it, however, on two accounts. First, it seems to me like a hopeless quest for something that is not there. All the reasons we had for discarding the objective list view, apply here as well.

Secondly and perhaps more importantly, it is far from clear that arbitrariness is a real concern here. A grounding account of artworks relies on practices of recognition and their

[39] Dickie, *The Art Circle*, 76-80.

accompanying sets of attitudes people tend to share about their activities. Patterns of conduct and widely shared attitudes and dispositions would normally constitute the contents of what is recognized as artwork by a certain artworld community. In other words, an object is a work of art in virtue of people's conduct and attitudes instantiated by the relevant practices of recognition. Crudely put, whatever people think that is art is art, and only in virtue of their thinking that it is. This is the gist of the institutional conception. Walton forced on us the question of what could possibly ground people's categorization of their activities and practices in a way that allows for distinctions between artworld and non-art-worlds, such as worlds of sports, cooking, religion, and whatnot. If there is nothing beyond peoples' habitual, contingent, and path dependent categorizations, the distinctions would be arbitrary. If there is a social world -- actual or possible -- in which cooking is art, there cooking is art; and if there is a world in which athletic competitions are art, then athletics is art in that world. And so on and so forth.[40]

But now you should wonder, why would this be a troubling result for the institutional conception? Why is it problematic, philosophically speaking, that the distinctions between artworlds and non-art-worlds are path-dependent, contingent and potentially arbitrary? The arbitrariness of artworlds boundaries would seem to be troubling only if you are somehow still in the grip of the objective list view. If you think that there is, deep down, something unique to art as opposed to countless non-art products and activities, then of course you would see arbitrariness as a problem here. But if we discard the objective list views, it would seem that the arbitrary, contingent and potentially unprincipled distinctions between what constitutes an artworld at any given time and place where there is one, and non-art-worlds, is not something that we should worry about. Afterall, that is the point of the institutional conception of grounding art: whatever a community of people think that is art is art, and only in virtue of their thinking that it is. Furthermore, remember that communities of artworlds need not be uniform across the different arts. How unified or conceptually coherent different artworlds are, is also a contingent matter that may vary from culture to culture.

The truth is, however, that it is not only the intuitive grip of the objective list views about the nature of art that might seem to be troubling about the arbitrariness implications of the

[40] Whatever you think of the world of high fashion, one cannot deny that it has become mainstream art, at least here in New York, where the Metropolitan Museum is one of the main pillars of our artworld; The Met's fashion exhibits are their greatest crowd (and money) drawing projects. If the Met claims that X is art, then surely X is art in New York and much beyond.

institutional conception. Many people think that even in a post-Duchamp world, we have special reasons for appreciating art.[41] And then it is tempting to think that a work of art deserves our appreciation, as such, as an artwork, even if it is not a particularly good exemplar of its kind; if an object is a work of art, ipso facto there is something appreciable about that, even if it is not good art. But this line of thought would be difficult to reconcile with the idea that the distinction between artworks and other kinds of artifacts is potentially arbitrary. In response, I think that the institutional conception has to bite the bullet here, if a bullet it is. If you think that the answer to the question of what makes something a work of art is fully grounded in recognition practices of artworlds, and you also acknowledge, as I argued we should, that the distinctions between artworlds and non-art-worlds is generally path dependent and contingent, and thus potentially arbitrary, then you need to acknowledge that there is nothing necessarily good or appreciable about an object simply in virtue of it being an artwork. By recognizing an object as a work of art one is not committed to any particular appreciation of it. But then, you might wonder, why would it ever matter whether an object is a work of art or not? Why should anyone argue about that?

One possible answer is that even if having the status of an artwork, so to speak, does not necessarily entail any particular reason to appreciate the object, it entails that the object is a *candidate for appreciation of certain kinds and not others*. We know that certain types of appreciation would not be in place, while other types of appreciation are quite relevant. From a vacuum cleaner you expect practical efficiency; but if a vacuum cleaner forms part of an installation in an art gallery, you would wonder whether the artistic gesture here is sufficiently original or interesting to warrant artistic appreciation of it. But of course the answer to this evaluative question would not depend on how good that thing is as a vacuum cleaner. Thus the artistic status of an object, its recognition as an artwork, would have a fairly direct bearing on the kinds of reasons to appreciate it, deriving, presumably, from values we associate with art, even if the mere recognition of it as an artwork does not give us, by itself, a reason to appreciate the object. The mere recognition of an object as an artwork does not endow the object, as it were, with any particular value.

An artwork is valuable and worthy of our appreciation only if it is good art. In other words, to the extent that there is any point in arguing about the art status of a disputed object,

[41] See for example, de Duve, *Kant After Duchamp*, Danto, *After the End of Art.*

whether it should be recognized as art or not, the point of the argument has to be about values. It has to be about the question of what would make this object good art, an artifact worthy of appreciation in some sense, connected of course to many other things we value about arts, and not about the question of whether its recognition as an artwork is warranted or not. Debates about borderline cases only make sense if they are about values and reasons for appreciating the relevant artifacts. The distinctions between creations we call art here and now, and those we call something else, are indeed somewhat arbitrary, path dependent and obviously culture relative, without any particular unifying principles backing them up.[42]

[42] I'm indebted to Esra Akcan, Emad Atiq and Avinoam Shalem for helpful comments on earlier drafts.

References

Adajian, Thomas. "The Definition of Art", SEP (2018).....

Audi, Paul. “Grounding: Toward a Theory of the In-Virtue-of Relation.” *Journal of Philosophy* 109, no. 12 (2012): 685–711.

Bennet, Karen. *Making Things Up* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

Carroll, Noel. "Identifying Art", in Yanal, Robert ed., *Institutions of Art: Reconsiderations of George Dickie's Philosophy*, (University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994) 3-38.

Danto, Arthur. "The Artworld", 61 Journal of Philosophy, (1964), 571-584.

Danto, Arthur. *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, (Cambridge MS: Harvard University Press, 1981)

Danto, Arthur. "Modalities of History: Possibility and Commodity" in his *After the End of Art*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014), 193-219.

de Duve, Thierry. *Kant After Duchamp*, (Cambridge MS: MIT Press, 1996)

Dickie, George. *Art and the Aesthetic, An Institutional Analysis* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1974).

Dickie George, *The Art Circle: A Theory of Art* (Chicago: Spectrum Press, 1997)

Fine, , Kit. “The Question of Realism.” *Philosopher’s Imprint* 1, no 1 (2001): 1–30.

Fine, Kit. “Ontological Dependence.” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 95 (1995): 269-290.

Levinson, Jerrold. “Artworks as Artifacts.” In Margolis and Laurence (*eds*) *Creations of the Mind: Theories of Artifacts and Their Representation*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).74–84

Livingston, Paisley. "History of the Ontology of Art", *SEP* 2020:....

Marmor, Andrei. *Social Conventions: From Language to Law* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009).

Marmor, Andrei. *Foundations of Institutional Reality*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023).

Rosen, Gideon. “Metaphysical Dependence: Grounding and Reduction.” In *Modality: Metaphysics, Logic, and Epistemology*, edited by Bob Hale and Aviv Hoffman, 109–136 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

Rosen, Gideon. “Real Definition.” *Analytic Philosophy* 56, no. 3 (2015): 189-209.

Schaffer, Jonathan. “On What Grounds What.” In *Metametaphysics: New Essays on the Foundations of Ontology*, edited by David Chalmers, David Manley, and Ryan Wasserman, 347–383 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

Thomasson, Amie. "The Ontology of Art and Knowledge in Aesthetics", *63 The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, (2005), 221-229.

Thomasson, Amie. "Ontological Innovation in Art", 68 *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, (2010), 119-130.

Walton, Kendall. Book Review: Dickie, George. *Art and the Aesthetic, An Institutional Analysis, 86 The Philosophical Review*, (1977), 97-101.

Weitz, Morris. "The Role of Theory in Aesthetics", *14 Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, (1956) 27-35.

Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Philosophical Investigations*. 1953. Translated by G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 1958).

Wollheim, Richard. *Painting as an Art*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987).

Ziff, Paul. "The Task of Defining a Work of Art", *62 Philosophical Review*, (1953), 58-78.