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Definitions of Art and Fine Art's Historical Origins

I. INTRODUCTION

Over the past decades, several authors, among them Paul Oskar Kristeller, Larry Shiner, Pierre Bourdieu, Terry Eagleton, and Paul Mattick, have argued that “fine art” is of recent origin—in fact, that it originated (along with its name) in the eighteenth-century West.¹ They also note that the word ‘art,’ as we now use it in reference to paintings, sculptures, concerts, and the like, has come to mean approximately the same thing as ‘fine art’ did then. So they may be taken as claiming that art is of recent, Western origin.² Finally, many of these same authors claim that art has an inherently ideological function within modern society. Most readers of this journal are familiar with these views. I find them persuasive, but with the exception of some brief remarks about the descent of art from fine art, I do not defend them in this article.³ Rather, I argue that if they are correct, the project of defining art is misconceived and should be abandoned, as should arguments (at least by philosophers) about what should and should not count as art.

I begin by clarifying what I am assuming, for it is easy to misunderstand what these authors are saying. On the surface, they appear to contradict some well-established facts. Human beings have been drawing and painting, carving and decorating, singing and dancing, telling stories and acting them out for tens of thousands of years. Likewise, as Ellen Dissanayake puts it, we have always been inclined to “make things special.”⁴ We have always valued a wide variety of skills, whether they promote our survival, facilitate social interaction, or please and entertain us. Most societies have traditions within which standards, training, and critical discussion regulate the practice of such skills,

and some of these are continuous in Western culture from Greece and Rome to the present. In particular, whatever happened in the eighteenth century, there is continuity as well as change in the Western traditions of all the arts mentioned above, as well as in the arts of other cultures as they have traveled from antiquity through the shock of the modern and of globalization.

More often than not throughout this history, various arts have also been combined in such forms as drama or public celebrations. And in many if not all societies, we have reflected on and categorized human skills, pleasures, and practices in ways that may initially resemble modern groupings of the arts; this adds to the initial implausibility of what Kristeller et al. have to say. Thus, the ancient Greeks had the Muses (though a close look at the variety of arts they sponsored, including history and astronomy, quickly shows that they did not embody *our* category of art). Classical Indian society reflected on the nature of *rasa* (variously translated as “relish” and “transcendental enjoyment”) as produced by drama, poetry, and song.⁵

The authors mentioned in my first paragraph are aware of these facts and accept them. What can they mean, then, by saying that fine art, indeed *art* as we now understand it, originated in eighteenth-century Europe? What is new, they say, is the eighteenth-century idea that what came to be identified as the fine arts share a unique essence, in virtue of which they should be called “fine art” and distinguished from other activities such as craft and popular entertainment. Also new is the interlocking set of fine art concepts, institutions, and practices that formed around this core notion. Following Kristeller and Shiner, I call all of this (the arts themselves, plus the concepts,

institutions, and practices) “the modern system of the arts”; sometimes I also use Pierre Bourdieu’s term ‘the field of art,’ which has approximately the same breadth.⁶ Some common conceptual elements of that system (or field) are the notions of the artist as free and visionary genius, the artwork as valuable for its own sake independently of any use it might have, and the relative independence of aesthetic from other sorts of value, requiring of the art appreciator a certain kind of disinterested contemplation. The development of the modern system parallels the emergence of modern economic and class structures in the eighteenth century, and the two, according to these same authors, are integrally related. Bourdieu, Mattick, and Eagleton in particular emphasize the ideological role played by the modern system in support of Western capitalist society.

In very compressed form, my argument goes like this. Philosophers attempting to define art (or engaging in the closely related project of developing a theory of art) seek a definition (or theory) that is cross-culturally and transhistorically applicable. Yet if Kristeller et al. are correct, prior to the eighteenth-century West and outside of its sphere of influence, these various practices were not united and distinguished from other activities by a concept of art in general, for no such concept existed. That concept grew out of the Enlightenment idea of fine art. So if people outside the influence of the eighteenth-century West were making *art*, they were doing it without knowing what they were doing. The only way this would be plausible would be if we took the Enlightenment notion of art to be a kind of mature differentiation of a human activity formerly fused with others. But this interpretation of things does not hold up.

So if the modern concept of art is a recent invention, it is unlikely to encode some unique human universal for which we might seek a definition. This improbability is strengthened by the apparent incoherence of the concept and the many failed attempts, using a wide variety of methods, to define it. Its ideological function in modern society, however, provides a plausible explanation for the fact that it persists and retains its power while making it even more likely that the unity of art and its separation from other things is not defensible. Hence, the theses of the historical origins and ideological function of art support each other in giving reason to believe that definitions of art will not succeed. For similar reasons, if these theses are accepted,

discussions about whether some new set of practices, or some individual work, “is art” appear in a different light and should most likely be abandoned. In fact, if the story that Bourdieu, Mattick, Eagleton, and to some extent Shiner have told is true, then attempts to define art, or to prove that something is or is not art, may aid and abet the ideological function of the modern system by misrepresenting its central notions, and this is presumably something philosophers want to avoid.

II. ABOUT DEFINITIONS OF ART

Since I argue that definitions of art cannot succeed, it seems appropriate to ask first what it is that philosophers are trying to define when they seek a definition for art. I believe there are three possibilities: the word, the concept, and the thing itself. Except as the usage of words provides clues to our concepts, I think we may rule out the lexicographical option, for one can be a competent user of the English word ‘art’ (or its foreign-language equivalents) without having an answer to the question philosophers are asking when they try to define art. In fact, I argue that all of us are in that boat. Because we do know how to use the word, the claims introduced in the first paragraph of this article sound initially ridiculous. “*Of course* the plays of Sophocles are art,” we are likely to say. “They’re *plays*, are they not? And powerful ones at that.” And in the ordinary English sense of art, we would be right. But knowing how to use the word ‘art’ does not tell us why these practices and products but not others are grouped together as art. That is what philosophers trying to define art want to know. If they can, they would like to find necessary and sufficient conditions for something’s being art, and if they cannot exactly do that, they would at least like to find some way of characterizing art that locates and illuminates its distinctiveness.

If we seek necessary and sufficient conditions for something’s being art, then we might see the quest for a definition of art as an exercise in ontology. If a definition of X is a set of necessary and sufficient conditions for something’s being an X, then such a definition can help us determine what exists in the world. Such definitions have often been called “real” or “essential” definitions and are well suited to defining natural kinds. ‘Water is H₂O’ is an example. Because they describe things that do or might exist in the world, and

because these things may be commonly recognized by other characteristics, real definitions often differ from dictionary definitions. They are true or false. They often represent discoveries. And they need not state the meaning of the name or express the common concept of the thing being defined. Thus, to know the use of the word 'water' and to have the concept of water (whatever *that* is), one need not know that water is H₂O. Similarly, if art were a natural kind, and a definition could be found for it, that definition might or might not overlap with the dictionary definition of 'art.'

But art is not a natural kind. While it is something in the world, it is something we have made. If it is a kind at all, it is a rather complicated artificial kind with some natural roots. In seeking a definition of it, philosophers are engaging in what we like to call conceptual analysis. We seek to understand the conceptual contours of what may (or may not) be a persistent human practice. Human practices are social inventions. Like languages, they have a kind of stability at any given time and place, we change them over time, they differ from culture to culture, and they often have a basis in our biology and our common experience. Practices are intentional: someone who has no idea what chess is may pick up a chess piece and relocate it on the board in accordance with the rules of the game, but that person is not playing chess. Because they are intentional, shared, and continuing, practices incorporate and depend on shared concepts, which therefore partly determine what exists in the world (games of chess, for example, would not exist without our shared concept of chess).

In the case of art, if a definition is to succeed, it needs both to delimit what exists in the world and to clarify our concepts. For the field that we are exploring is one where our concepts and what exists in the world are intertwined, each shaping and being limited by the other. What we need to determine is whether there really is a coherent notion of art that in some way covers the various practices on that open-ended list, one that we might sensibly say applies across cultures and back to those first cave drawings and bone flutes. Obvious and familiar challenges face any attempt to theorize about such a broad swath of human experience. But it is not those general challenges that concern me here. Rather, I argue that it is the recent historical origins of our notion of art, together with its

apparent incoherence and its ideological function, that should lead us to think that the notion itself really is incoherent and that the attempt to clarify and define it is misdirected. I turn now to a fuller statement of that argument.

III. WHY THE HISTORICAL ORIGIN THESIS SUGGESTS THAT ART CANNOT BE DEFINED

Suppose that Kristeller et al. are correct. More specifically, suppose that the following claims are true:

- (1) The modern system of the arts, including the notion of fine art with its associated institutions and practices, as well as the notion that the fine arts share a unique essence, originated in the eighteenth-century West.
- (2) From its inception to the present day, the modern system of the arts has played a powerful ideological role in support of modern capitalist society.
- (3) The modern notion of art is the direct descendent of the notion of fine art; with due allowance for historical development, it is the same notion.

Let us look more carefully at these claims and see what they imply. The first, famously put forward by Kristeller in "The Modern System of the Arts," has been recently fleshed out in Larry Shiner's *The Invention of Art*. In the first part of his book, Shiner surveys various premodern classifications of "the arts." The concept of an *art* at work in these classificatory schemes is essentially the Greek notion of a skilled practice. Their division between vulgar or mechanical and liberal arts is related to whether or not the art involves manual labor. One can see class distinctions operating in these early categories, but they place painting, sculpture, architecture, and musical practice among the servile or mechanical rather than the free arts. In spite of some preparatory sixteenth- and seventeenth-century developments, among them the campaign by painters to be classed as liberal artists, at the beginning of the eighteenth century there was as yet no standard grouping of anything like the fine arts.

In order to make the transition to the modern system, says Shiner, "three things needed to come together and gain wide acceptance: a limited *set* of

arts, a commonly accepted *term* to easily identify the set, and some generally agreed upon *principle(s)* or criteria for distinguishing that set from all others.⁷ During the eighteenth century, various membership lists for the set emerged. Painting, sculpture, poetry, and music were always included; architecture and dance made some lists and not others. Likewise, various names emerged, including ‘beautiful arts’ (*beaux arts*), ‘elegant arts,’ ‘fine arts,’ and ‘polite arts.’ As for the principles or criteria that distinguished these arts from others, there were several candidates. The “single principle” to which the Abbé Batteux “reduced” the beautiful arts in his 1746 treatise was the imitation of beautiful nature. Other proposed criteria were that these arts were designed for pleasure rather than for utility, that it took refined taste to appreciate them, and that they were the product of imaginative genius. By the end of the eighteenth century, Kant had codified several of these criteria in his influential theories of aesthetic judgment and genius.

Along with the emergence of fine art went the development of the institutions, practices, and structures of the modern system of the arts: museums, concert halls, salons, reading rooms, literary criticism, academies, and the like. The burgeoning market for the arts began to replace patronage with sale of work through galleries and sale of tickets to concerts. And a growing public discourse trained people in the correct appreciation of fine art.⁸

What can we learn from this historical account about the definability of art? The answer derives from a look at what changed and what stayed the same. More or less the same *arts* existed at the end of the eighteenth century as had existed at the beginning, although the advent of the modern system did bring significant changes in their practice and their reception. No new human *capabilities* were discovered, though the changes did open up some new *possibilities* (more about this later). Perhaps they produced some new kinds of *experience*: certainly the new sensibility appropriate to the fine arts needed to be taught. People had to learn to be quiet in the theater and in art museums and to look at nature and art in the right way.⁹ But imagination, pleasure, creativity, contemplation, skill, and taste were not eighteenth-century inventions. What had been invented was a new *category*, namely fine art, and along with it came a new role for the artist, new institutions, and

new practices of art appreciation. Shiner aptly describes the change by saying that art was divided in the eighteenth century, separating artist from artisan, art from craft or entertainment, and aesthetic regard from mere enjoyment. A medieval or Renaissance artisan like Fra Angelico or Michelangelo was, in our modern terms, both an artist and a craftsman. But this combination became much rarer after the eighteenth century. Painting, sculpture, and the other newly christened “fine” arts were now the province of artists, who in theory were expected not to involve themselves in mere craftwork. Ceramic arts, weaving and embroidery, woodworking and stonemasonry, and many other activities that had enjoyed more respect in previous times were now more likely to be seen as unimaginative manual labor.

Should we say, then, that before the eighteenth century, or outside its field of influence, people made art without knowing what they were doing because they lacked the concept of art? In a sense, that is the obvious truth, for they made what we now call art, and without a time machine they could no more have known that they were making *that* than Praxiteles could have known that he was making museum-quality sculpture. But this does not help us answer the question at hand, for it is mere knowledge of a relational property possessed by those people because of what we now do. It only tells us what we already knew: that we label lots of things from the past and from other cultures as art. The question we are trying to answer is whether the label gives us any insight into what those people did and made or whether we are simply assimilating their practices to our categories.

At this point we might remind ourselves that it is impossible to make art without making music or painting or sculpture or poetry or one of the other things on that open-ended list. (To recognize the truth of *this*, we can depend on the ordinary use of the word ‘art.’) And it is impossible to make any of those things without doing so intentionally—that is, without having at least some idea of what one is doing.¹⁰ So premodern people did not make music, painting, and the like without knowing what they were doing. But is there some substantive sense in which they might, while knowingly making music (for example), have been unknowingly making art?

The only sense I can make of this proposal is to see the eighteenth-century developments as a kind

of cultural differentiation in which a common and valuable kind of human activity grew up, moved out, and got its own space. This is not, in principle, an unreasonable suggestion, and it is what many people believe.¹¹ Such specialization, maturation, and diversification are obvious features of human cultural life, and they have accelerated rapidly in the last two centuries. If we accept this picture, we might say that the art making of people outside the influence of the eighteenth century was fused with other activities, and our modern practice is a mature differentiation of this formerly fused activity. As evidence in favor of this view, we might take the fact that much of what they did was done to order for patrons and not “for its own sake.”

But the story of the invention of fine art does not really match this model. If it did, the modern concept of art should illuminate what premodern people were doing; we should be able to see them struggling toward it without yet clearly understanding it. There are at least two problems with this picture. In the first place, premodern practices of music making, painting, drama, and other particular arts were often highly mature and differentiated, had a context of critical discussion and theory, and, in the context of making work to order or for use, certainly allowed room for individual expression by the artisan. How do we see what they were doing more clearly than they did?

In the second place, no one has yet produced a clear and generally accepted account of what art is. If fine art is a mature differentiation of activities formerly fused with others, our concept of it should help us see those activities more clearly than we did before. But it can hardly do that if we do not know what it is. In Kendall Walton's terms, the notion of art does not present us with a folk theory that, when analyzed, leads to any better understanding.¹² The “concept” of art neither suggests a definition nor provides us with good material for constructing one. It fails to do this, I think, in several ways. It does not contain any clear intuition about just what all art has in common that makes it art. Of the various suggestions meant to fill this role, good examples can almost always be found of things the definer takes to be art that do not have the relevant property. (Ellen Dissanayake's “making special” may be an exception.)¹³ Likewise, the supposedly distinguishing properties always turn out to be shared by things the definer takes not to be art. These problems were present in the eighteenth century, and

they continue to plague efforts to define art to the present day. The definitions keep failing. Kendall Walton goes a step further, noting that it is not even clear that they are about the same thing. In his pointed words, “[T]he sheer variety of proposed definitions should give us pause. One cannot help wondering whether there is any sense in which they are attempts to capture the same concept or clarify the same cultural practices, or address the same issue.”¹⁴

So premodern people did know what they were doing when they made music, dances, paintings, and the like, just as they knew what they were doing when they hunted or made dinner. But by assumption, they had no concept of art when they did these things. And we have no clear notion of something *else* that they were doing in the first three cases but not in the last two (namely, *making art*) such that we know what it is though they did not. For these reasons, it does not make sense to say that premodern people made art without knowing what they were doing. Hence, if Kristeller et al. are right about the eighteenth-century origins of art, then in the substantive sense that matters, those people were not making art at all. Therefore, there cannot be a conceptually correct definition of art that would include what they did, but this is the sort of definition philosophers seek. Hence, if Kristeller et al. are right, art is not definable.]

IV. ART'S IDEOLOGICAL FUNCTION AND THE DEFINITION OF ART

The preceding paragraphs leave the argument in a somewhat unsatisfying place. What accounts for the emergence, the persistence, the spread, and the transformation of the notion of fine art and for the way it draws the boundary between art and non-art? Analytic philosophers have tried to answer this question by analysis of the concept of art, as if this concept were independent of others and relatively timeless. But the question is an historical and social one. Bourdieu, Mattick, Eagleton, and Shiner all maintain that it cannot be answered solely by reference to “the concept of art” considered independently of its historical and social context. Integral to art's historical origin, they say, is its ideological function in support of the economic and class structures of modern capitalist society.¹⁵ In particular, the supposed autonomy of art vis-à-vis social and economic aspects of

modern life is central to its ideological function. The apparent autonomy of art sustains the impression that these modern social structures bear the fruit of something free, transcendent, and humane and thereby helps to validate them.

What is meant by ascribing an ideological function to art? “To call a discourse ideological,” says Paul Mattick, “is to read it differently than did its originators: in particular, to recognize at its basis a set of assumptions not explicitly recognized by them.”¹⁶ As the term ‘ideology’ is used in critical philosophy, where it has its natural home, those hidden assumptions usually have to do with class, race, gender, wealth, and other structures of power. A key characteristic of ideological discourse is misdirection; useful truths are emphasized, and inconvenient truths are denied, distorted, or ignored in such a way as to protect and reproduce beliefs and practices that protect those structures of power.¹⁷ So like Dorothy in her interview with the Wizard of Oz, if we want to know what is really going on where ideology is at work, we must ignore the projected image and pay attention to what that man is doing behind the curtain. Here is Mattick’s description of one primary way that ideology works in modern times, and how it includes art:

Characteristic of modern ideology is the idea that culture has a history of its own, with a logic of thought operating independently of the other factors operating on the thinkers of those thoughts. Only in relatively modern times has the set of practices grouped since the eighteenth century as the fine arts become an important element of ideology in this sense, demanding to be considered historically autonomous, part of the domain of “mind” alongside law, morality, religion, and philosophy, as opposed to that of productive labor or quotidian life generally. This peculiarity of the modern idea of art cannot be explained within the terms set by that idea. Art developed along with the commercialized mode of production that became capitalism, and it is only by understanding art as an aspect of this mode of production that the supposed antagonism between them (central to aesthetics)—and so the idea of art’s autonomy—can be understood.¹⁸

The form of ideological thesis about art that I assume for the sake of the argument to be true is a moderate one; it is that the field of art has an ideological function of the sort that Mattick describes, but that art is not pure ideology.¹⁹ On the view

I assume, one can (for example) consistently see that the doctrine of art’s autonomy and spirituality has an ideological function while being profoundly *and appropriately* moved by Mark Rothko’s meditation chapel. That is to say, seeing the ideological function need not involve seeing the art as fraudulent.²⁰

How does this moderate ideological thesis strengthen the case against defining art? First, it immediately sends most current proposed definitions back to the drawing board, because as attempts to define art without paying attention to ideology, they are likely to be wrong in ways that are invisible to the definer. That is especially true if, as claimed by writers on the ideology of art, it is precisely the supposed unique, distinguishing essence of art (the very thing definitions attempt to capture) that is central to the ideology. Most current philosophical definitions of art ignore the connections between art and other things and set out to find the (perhaps illusory) essence that sets art *apart* from other things. So-called institutional and historical theories are no exception to this pattern. The social circumstances they take into account are those of “the artworld.” They say little enough about the actual structure and operation of artworlds and next to nothing about the past and present connections of the field of art to the rest of the social world.

Second, the moderate ideological thesis provides an alternative explanation for the origin and persistence of the category of art, one that seems more promising than the hypothesis that it is held together by its (as yet undefined) conceptual coherence. The category of art may be incoherent and indefinable, yet persist and retain its importance because of the social payoff of keeping it around. Paul Mattick thinks that this is the case. In his words, “the importance of the role of the practice of art in the development of modern society, visible in the use of the museum and concert hall as reliquaries for the material embodiments of its ‘higher self,’ means that it remains with us despite the ever more apparent incoherence of its conceptual structure.”²¹

Third, the apparent arbitrariness of the boundary between art and non-art and the apparent lack of an essence shared by all the arts are serious obstacles to definitions of art. But they are no obstacles to art’s ideological function. As long as the *illusion* of a unified field with a nonarbitrary boundary can be maintained, that function can

continue. This makes the ideological thesis a *better* explanation of the actual contours of the field of art than the thesis of conceptual coherence.

Fourth, the ideological thesis explains changes in the boundary between art and non-art that are not well accounted for by definitions and theories of art. Consider just one example, namely, the recent rise of “fine crafts,” such as fine art furniture, wood turning, and “fiber arts” within the world of art. “Fine crafts” appear to bring into the fold of art activities that were excluded from it in its eighteenth-century beginnings. They appear to violate the constraint of nonutility, inherited from the eighteenth century and still strongly operative in the field of art, that definers of art have struggled to incorporate or to exclude. But seen in the context of money and class, they pretty clearly do not violate that constraint at all. Handmade objects are no longer the stuff of the everyday; that position has been filled by mass-produced objects, and “fine crafts” are now sold in galleries at prices much higher than one would pay for their everyday equivalents. They have taken on a different meaning and now play the same *social* role as does any high art. But, of course, they must be *fine* crafts. What is bought and sold for small amounts of money at local craft fairs does not, by and large, count. Class divisions, in other words, are rather reproduced than dissolved by the advent of these new art commodities.

Finally, close attention to examples of art’s supposed ideological function (for example, the division between art and the commercial) regularly reveals the boundary between art and non-art being drawn *in a different way* than conceptual consistency in the concept of art would suggest, a way better explained by ideological function. That was true in the eighteenth century, when for a time one contender for the English name of the new category was “The Polite Arts.” The phrase ‘polite arts’ both validates the social position of middle-class and aristocratic citizens and picks out those arts that they had the money and leisure to appreciate.²² It highlights the arbitrary character and the social function of the division between these arts and other works and activities (for example, embroidery, ceramics, wood carving, popular songs) not classed as art. For nearly any of the supposedly distinguishing characteristics of “fine art,” items on both sides of the divide clearly exhibited it. But the craft items were also still useful in ordinary and obvious ways, whereas the use of apparently use-

less art to distinguish the middle class was a less obvious form of utility.

In the seventh chapter of *The Invention of Art*, Shiner traces the shift from the “irremediably social,” overtly class-linked concepts of politeness and taste to that of aesthetic judgment, understood by Kant and Schiller as a human capacity whose proper exercise floats free of any particular social conditions and makes universal claims. But has their social role disappeared from these new, supposedly universal notions of fine art and aesthetic judgment? No, says the critical theorist. Might they simultaneously reflect and mask and thereby help to legitimate the class structures from which they emerge? Yes, says Pierre Bourdieu in *Distinction*. Aesthetic preferences and values are a regular part of the taste (or in Bourdieu’s broader term, the *habitus*) of one’s class and serve to validate one’s class membership and status. According to Bourdieu’s painstaking survey research in France, the correlation of aesthetic values to class status in highly stratified Parisian society is quite exact and even extends to the presence or absence, depending on one’s social level, of a Kantian sense of aesthetic detachment.²³ In contemporary American society, class stratification is less sharply defined and more complicated, but it certainly exists, and the same may be said about the correlation of taste with class.²⁴

In its origins, then, the category of “fine art,” the taste for it, and its separation from “mere craft” is suspiciously well correlated to the social interests of the rising middle class. It served their interests and their need for “distinction” from the working classes on the one hand, and the “luxurious” aristocracy on the other. Critical philosophers claim that this function has continued to the present day, and that far from becoming less prominent, it has become stronger as the notion of fine art has spread, diversified, and transformed itself into the contemporary category of art. If they are right, it is likely that the ideological factor plays a strong role in the persistence, the contours, and the values of the cultural field of art. To neglect those relationships and their history is therefore to miss some key sources of the values and the changes in values that circulate in the artworld (for example, the increasing importance of sale prices at art auctions). To return to the Oz analogy, to work in this way, if the ideological thesis is right, is like trying to learn the true nature of the wizard by carefully analyzing the image on the screen. It is not that

you might not learn *something*, but crucial information is systematically omitted, and you do not know what you have missed.

In sum, considered together with the historical origin of the notion of art and the repeated failures of the art-definition project, the ideological function thesis greatly strengthens the case against defining art. It provides an explanation for the origin and persistence of the category of art, whereas analysis of the concept of art appears, so far, not to be able to do so. That explanation is functional, and while it does not logically entail that a definition of art is impossible, it does not depend in the least on there being a coherent concept of art of the sort such a definition requires. Furthermore, it strongly increases the likelihood that no such concept will be found, but rather that the notion of art is misleading and conceals false assumptions and distinctions, for that is how ideology generally works. Thus, if accepted, the ideological function thesis shifts the burden of proof decisively onto those who claim that art can be defined.

V. TWO OBJECTIONS WITH REPLIES

i. The “small ‘a’ art” objection. Several philosophers are willing to grant that fine art originated in the eighteenth-century West and that it has an ideological dimension, yet they continue to seek a general definition of art, or something very like one.²⁵ They are able to do this consistently by claiming that the modern, Western notion of fine art is only one specialized form of art in a more general sense; it is that, they claim, that is universal across cultures and throughout human history

Will this strategy rescue the project of defining art? Each philosopher’s version of it is different, and I do not have room in this article to evaluate each in turn. But I attempt a general response to the strategy based on what I have already argued. If the small ‘a’ art defense is going to work, its proponents need to be able to do two things that, so far as I know, no one has yet done. First, they need to present a definition (or a theoretical account) that captures the core of something that can plausibly count as art across cultures and back to ancient times and that includes such diverse practices as music, dance, image making, poetry, and drama. If they want it to include the fractured world of modern and postmodern Western

and global art and anti-art, it might need to be a “historical–institutional” definition à la Levinson or Davies, but it needs to work its way back through generations of “intent to be received as previous art was received” (or whatever characteristic plays this role in the definition) to what Stephen Davies calls “First Art,” which must be identifiable by a plausible core of art-making characteristics.²⁶ Second, to meet the demands of the historical origin–ideological function thesis, the proponents of the small ‘a’ art defense must pay attention to the relation of art to the rest of society to make sure that they have not missed the effect of other social forces on arts practices. At a minimum, they must deal with facts about so-called arts practices in cultures outside the field of influence of the eighteenth-century West. Do they claim that those cultures had a notion of *art* as distinct from other activities, if by art is meant anything more than skilled practice? Did those cultures group those various practices together as art in that sense? If not, this small ‘a’ art defense needs to claim that those people were making art without knowing what they were doing, and, for reasons already stated, this makes no sense.

In short, the small ‘a’ art defense needs to show that those other cultures, practically if not consciously, divided a group of practices and experiences from others as art, just as we do but without our ideological baggage, or that, while they did not do so, those practices and experiences do in fact form a coherent separate aspect of human life, a fact that we now recognize, although they did not. Insofar as I can tell, the defense cannot go between the horns of this dilemma or successfully grasp either horn. The evidence with which I am familiar, and that these authors cite, does not support the existence of a notion of art like that of the modern West arising elsewhere in the world, except through the global process of modernization. And the “coherent separate aspect of human life” claim, made about art in general, is exactly what the ideological thesis denies. So if one really accepts the historical origin and ideological function theses and does not just nod at them from afar, this second option is not available.

ii. The inappropriate reductionism objection. I want to respond here to one other possible objection to my argument, namely, that one of its key assumptions is inappropriately reductionist and that this feature has invaded my argument

as well. An important piece of my argument has been that the moderate ideological function thesis, if accepted, does a better job of explaining the location and character of the divide between art and non-art than any attempt to define art would do. It might be objected that this cannot be true, because while the ideological thesis may explain *some* things, it does not explain the *right* things. It purports to explain why we value art in a special way by referring to social and economic factors, rather than by talking about things like beauty, sublimity, surprise, play, profound meaning, formal elegance and balance, satisfying narrative, intensely delightful experience, a sense of wholeness or completion, contemplative depth, remarkable skill or creativity, constructive provocation, powerful protest, or any of the other reasons why the apparently superfluous arts are nearly as important to many of us as air, food, drink, and shelter. Do ideological explanations not *reduce* these things we value to nasty, boring talk about class and money? How can this be right? And especially, how can it be a satisfactory explanation of the importance of the category of art?

The answer to this objection is again implicit in what I have already said. The list I have just given is a list of reasons why human beings (including me) prize various arts and various sorts of experiences. I have maintained throughout this article that most of these arts and experiences are of great antiquity and are widely distributed throughout cultures. It is not the persistence and nature of *these particular arts* and of *these sorts of experiences* to which the moderate ideological thesis is addressed, nor is it addressed to the general human tendency to prize the things on that list in *all* areas of human life. Rather, it proposes to explain the existence and character of the general modern category of art. Therefore, even though the moderate ideological thesis is in some sense reductive (for it maintains that the division of art from non-art is not what it claims to be), its reductive claims do not automatically pass to the practice or experience of the particular arts. So the ideological thesis is not explaining anything away, and neither am I.

It might seem that I am cheating to respond in this way. After all, the objector might say, art is made up of arts, so whatever is true of art in general can only be true by being true of arts in particular. Now to put the matter *this* way is to commit the fallacy of division. Art is a category, a

way of organizing some arts, institutions, practices, and so on. What pertains to the category of art, in particular the reason for its including some arts and not others, certainly *need* not pertain to the arts that make it up.

Still, a category *can* share features with its members. Is that the case here? Are the supposed ideological features of the field of art, with its governing concepts of the artwork, the artist, and aesthetic appreciation, shared by the particular arts that it comprises? The answer, I think, is “partly yes, partly no.” On the one hand, those three categories certainly show up (now) in all the particular arts. Furthermore, all of the authors whom I have cited, indeed any I know of who discuss the ideology of art, emphasize the way in which ideology works through taste. Taste is not only operative in, but also central to, the practice and reception of all the arts. So it cannot be said that ideology is only at work in the discourse about such supercategories as art, the aesthetic, and the artist and not within the particular arts. But the question here is not whether ideological function is a relevant consideration in discussing particular arts. No doubt it is, along with quite a few other considerations, which must be sensibly weighed according to the nature of the case at hand. This is no reason to think that a moderate ideological thesis must explain away our attraction to the qualities and experiences on that list. They are found scattered throughout human life, not only in what we now call the arts. Clearly many or perhaps *all* of them also go back to hunter-gatherer days, so that their origins and persistence *cannot* be explained by reference to more modern forms of social organization. Their connections with the material conditions of human life, which a critical philosopher insists are present, may be so ancient that they are best explained by evolutionary biology.

The claims of the moderate ideological thesis certainly need to be taken into account, then, when discussing both particular works of art and the practice and discourse of various particular arts. But that thesis cannot possibly explain everything that is going on within those arts in the reductive way just mentioned; its scope is just too limited for that. By contrast, the thesis is indeed reductive when it comes to the general notion of art, for it says that art (as a general field) is artificially and misleadingly distinguished from “everyday life” in ways that support and legitimate current forms of social organization. It is quite

possible to make that claim while not being a reductionist about our reasons for valuing paintings, poems, novels, symphonies, and so on.

VI. SOME CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

I have tried to show that certain claims about the historical origins of the modern idea of art and the ideological role it plays in modern and contemporary society should (if we believe them) lead us to conclude that attempts to define art are misdirected. It should be clear that these are also reasons for not trying to decide whether some new medium or some particular work is art, but rather to substitute more direct talk about its particular merits or weaknesses as compared with other works or media that may seem comparable in some way. Accepting these reasons would no doubt produce a shift in the way philosophers think about art; that has certainly been true in my own case. I believe one part of the shift would involve recognizing the degree to which the designation *art* is about status and how little else it tells us about the features of any particular work, practice, or artist.

If the conclusion of this article were accepted, it would no doubt reinforce the trend, already underway among aestheticians, to focus on careful study of various arts in their differences. I believe that would be a good thing. But nothing I have said speaks against studies of commonalities between different arts. On the contrary, this is an area that plainly rewards careful study, the more so when one does not begin by expecting all arts to conform to some generic notion of art, but rather focuses on what one finds. Furthermore, abandoning the definitional quest and recognizing the arbitrary character of the boundary between art and non-art might well widen the scope of philosophical aesthetics. Creativity, form, aesthetic achievement, and many of the other characteristics thought to distinguish art are found in many places. Aestheticians have recently been exploring fields outside the traditional scope of the arts, for example, in the area of style. This seems to me an excellent development, and one that could profitably increase. Yuriko Saito's fine book, *Everyday Aesthetics*, points to another avenue for fruitful exploration, namely, the aesthetic dimension of everyday life.²⁷ More attention might also be paid to the relation between art, money, style, and per-

sonal and social identity, and likewise there should be more careful study of the culture-shaping impact of commercial and advertising art.

Finally, I need to say that this article is not an attack on the modern system of the arts, nor a plea to return to an imagined golden age before art was divided. Such a plea would be pointless in any case, since such a return would be impossible. But I am not suggesting that it would even be desirable. Once one recognizes what is false about the modern system, the challenge is rather to go beyond it while preserving what is valuable in it.²⁸ That system, by its emphasis on individual creativity and "art for art's sake," has opened a space for works that would not otherwise have been made. The work of Kandinsky, Duchamp, Joyce, Schoenberg, Balanchine, and many others was only possible in that space. The modern system of the arts has now become more global than merely Western, and it would be a perverse reversal of cultural chauvinism to insist that its presence in India, China, Japan, Iran, the United Arab Emirates, various African countries, and many other places is nothing but the unfortunate enchantment of a Western glamour. There is something about it that has global appeal. Perhaps it is the strong value it places on individuality and individual expression. Those ideas, however, while closely related to the modern notion of art, are not enough to define a unique and unified field of art. They are more like an ideal dimension of contemporary life in general, which at least in my view needs to be prized at the same time that *its* ideological function is recognized and critiqued. The challenge of doing both of those things at the same time faces us in the arts no less and no more significantly than in the rest of our lives. Conceiving of the arts as autonomous does not help us rise to that challenge.²⁹

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1. For arguments on the recent origins of fine art, see Paul Oskar Kristeller, "The Modern System of the Arts," in Kristeller, *Renaissance Thought and the Arts* (Princeton University Press, 1990), pp. 163–227; Larry Shiner, *The*

Invention of Art: A Cultural History (Chicago University Press, 2001); Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Harvard University Press, 1984) and *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature* (Columbia University Press, 1993); Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990); and Paul Mattick, *Art in Its Time: Theories and Practices of Modern Aesthetics* (London: Routledge, 2003).

2. These authors do not speak with one voice, but a majority of them are in substantial agreement on each of the points I have mentioned here. To avoid repeatedly listing their names, where differences among them do not affect the argument I sometimes refer to them as “Kristeller et al.”

3. For a recent challenge to Kristeller’s thesis, see James I. Porter, “Is Art Modern? Kristeller’s ‘Modern System of the Arts’ Reconsidered,” *The British Journal of Aesthetics* 49 (2009): 1–24. Shiner’s response to Porter, “Continuity and Discontinuity in the Concept of Art,” along with Porter’s “Reply to Shiner,” appear in *The British Journal of Aesthetics* 49 (2009): 159–169 and 171–181. I believe Shiner has the best of this interchange, but I do not argue that case here.

4. Ellen Dissanayake, *Homo Aestheticus: Where Art Comes From and Why* (University of Washington Press, 1992), pp. 39–64. Dissanayake takes “making special” to be “the core of art.”

5. See Richard L. Anderson, *Calliope’s Sisters: A Comparative Study of Philosophies of Art* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1990), pp. 157–173.

6. Shiner himself has moved away from the term ‘system’ in response both to frequent misunderstandings of what he and Kristeller mean by it and to the “fractured pluralism” of contemporary arts. I retain it in this article to reflect the interrelation of the various notions, practices, and institutions that make up our various artworlds and the common themes that run through those worlds. The use of ‘system’ here does not imply anything like the rigorous structure that a logician or a natural scientist would study, but is akin to its use in speaking of a social, economic, or political system.

7. Shiner, *The Invention of Art*, p. 80.

8. Shiner, *The Invention of Art*, pp. 130–151.

9. Shiner (*The Invention of Art*, pp. 143–144) reproduces an entirely serious (though to my eyes hilarious) set of drawings by Daniel Chodowiecki from the *Goettingen Pocket Calendar* of 1780, from which its middle-class readers might learn the difference between natural and affected responses to nature and to the arts. In the first set of drawings, a couple in one panel stands gravely contemplating the beauty of a landscape; in the other they gesticulate with wild (and affected) abandon in the presence of the same natural beauty. In the second set, two men display similarly differentiated responses to a sculpture. Lessons in the aesthetic attitude: absorbed from the outside in!

10. “Happy accidents,” saying more than you knew, and “open-textured” works are no exceptions to the fact that the arts that produce these things are intentional activities.

11. For examples, see Paul Barlow, “Review of Shiner, *The Invention of Art* and MacDonald,” “Exploring Media Discourse,” in *Journal of Visual Culture in Britain* 5 (2003): 105–115, esp. p. 107. Arthur Danto might also be thought to hold a more sophisticated version of this Hegelian belief.

12. Kendall Walton, “Aesthetics—What? Why? and Wherefore?” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 65 (2007): 152–156.

13. Dissanayake, *Homo Aestheticus*, pp. 39–64.

14. Walton, “Aesthetics—What? Why? and Wherefore?” p. 148.

15. The theme of ideology is less prominent in Shiner than in the other three authors. All the same, he very carefully traces the connections between social and economic developments and the origins of fine art and (without using the term ‘ideology’) continues to pay attention to these connections throughout the course of the cultural history he provides in *The Invention of Art*.

16. Mattick, *Art in Its Time*, p. 2.

17. That is not to say that the misdirection is always deliberate, or even recognized, by those who benefit from the ideology.

18. Mattick, *Art in Its Time*, p. 3.

19. My case would be easier to prove if I assumed art to be pure ideology, since the key terms in a purely ideological field do not actually refer to anything and do their entire work by appearing to refer to things that do not in fact exist, thereby distracting attention from what is really going on. But in my view, this description would badly misrepresent the field of art, and none of the writers to whom I am appealing holds to it. The historical antiquity and cultural cross-pollination of the particular arts that comprise that field pretty clearly imply that *they* do not merely function to support modern forms of social organization! Some of the disputes among writers on the ideology of art (for example, between Eagleton and Mattick) have to do with the degree to which art may break free from its ideological function.

20. Indeed, art can be used to *stand up against* ideology, as has often happened recently under oppressive regimes. Underground literature in the former Soviet Union and ceramic arts in Soviet-era Eastern Europe provide examples, as do paintings like *Guernica* and recent mainstream movies like *Syriana*. See Judith Schwartz, *Confrontational Ceramics* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008) for some examples, including the Polish ceramicist Czeslaw Podlesny.

21. Mattick, *Art in Its Time*, p. 133.

22. See Shiner, *The Invention of Art*, pp. 79–99. The term ‘polite’ was commonly used in the eighteenth century in a sense close to that of its Greek root to describe those suited to be citizens (*polites*, voting members of the *polis*), that is, middle-class and aristocratic persons with education, property, taste, and good judgment.

23. Bourdieu, *Distinction*, pp. 41ff. For acute reflections on this theme in North American popular culture, see Carl Wilson, *Let’s Talk about Love: A Journey to the End of Taste* (New York: Continuum, 2007).

24. The correlation of taste with class does not prove the ideological thesis. For that, I believe it would also be necessary to establish some causal connections, showing that the ideology functions to mask, validate, and preserve the power and privileges embedded in the class structure; and perhaps even more than this would be required. It is no part of my intention to make that case in this article. For rigorous theorizing about it, see Pierre Bourdieu’s works, especially *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge University Press, 1977) and (with Jean-Claude Passeron) *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture*, trans. Richard Nice (London: Sage, 1977).

25. See Denis Dutton, "A Naturalist Definition of Art," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 64 (2006): 367–377; Dutton, "But They Don't Have Our Concept of Art," in *Theories of Art Today*, ed. Noël Carroll (University of Wisconsin Press, 2004), pp. 217–238; Stephen Davies, "Non-Western Art and Art's Definition," in *Theories of Art Today*, pp. 199–216; Davies, "First Art and Art's Definition," *Southern Journal of Philosophy* 35 (1997): 19–34, at p. 30; Dissanayake, *Homo Aestheticus*; Anderson, *Calliope's Sisters*; and Robert Stecker, *Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art: An Introduction* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2005).

26. See Davies, "First Art and Art's Definition."

27. Yuriko Saito, *Everyday Aesthetics* (Oxford University Press, 2007).

28. Here I am in complete agreement with Shiner, who makes this point at the end of *The Invention of Art*.

29. For further development of this idea, see David Clowney, "A Third System of the Arts?" *Contemporary Aesthetics* 6 (2008), online at <http://www.contempaesthetics.org/newvolume/pages/article.php?articleID=519>.

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