

ALEX FOSTER

Why We Can't Answer the Question: "What Is Art?"

(Maybe Because it is Grammatically Incorrect)

Alex Foster

I was first asked, "What is Art?" in primary school. Though I was sure I knew what art was, I didn't know how to answer this question. My teacher waited proudly while we sat in silence, embarrassed that our ignorance had been exposed, and as far as I know, I would still be sitting cross-legged on that alphabet carpet today had no one answered. Luckily, my cousin Asher knew. He declared, "Art is the pictures of boobs that get into museums."

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That was art to primary schoolboys whose grandparents had taken them through the Art Institute. I've been asked to define art many times since then, and the "boob" answer is not even the most dissatisfying I've heard. In one sense, art is clearly defined: "art" is the spirit of creativity. It is a concept, culture, field of study, and form of experience, which is to creativity what science is to reason and what religion is to faith. But a satisfying definition for art as a collection of items, specified by the word "artwork," continues to elude us. The sheer quantity of different definitions that great thinkers have suggested (which this article will review) is a testament to our repeated failure—and a testament to the import we assign to this issue. Art classes begin by asking, "What is art?" for a reason; the way we define art shapes how we make it, study it, and enjoy it.

I've wondered whether any definition could satisfyingly describe how we use the word "art." What makes Banksy's prints street art, while most vandalizing of park walls is not? Or is all tagging art? When did the urinal that Duchamp called *Fountain* become art? Was

WHY WE CAN'T ANSWER THE QUESTION: "WHAT IS ART?"

1. Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, trans. J.A. Underwood (London: Penguin, 2008).

2. Jon Caramanica, "Behind Kanye's Mask," *New York Times*, June 11, 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/16/arts/music/kanye-west-talks-about-his-career-and-album-yeezus.html>.

it when he put it in a gallery? Did the postminimalist copper wires on my grandparents' walls become art when career artist Richard Tuttle folded them? Did I do the same when I folded my broken bicycle brake wires to fit into my trashcan? By God, I did the deed with passion and nostalgia. Is there an "aura" in a choral production (as German philosopher Walter Benjamin famously theorized) that is lost when you record the art and remove it from the auditorium?¹ If so, how could critics overlook the aura of Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining* when they witnessed the films' monumental debut, yet any student would insist that her own digital copy of the film is art? On what grounds do people tell me that my Kanye West poster doesn't belong with the posters of "artists" on my wall? Does an album become art when it's old even if the album doesn't change? Or does the distinction arise from the grandeur of the albums' inspirations? Pink Floyd's *Wish You Were Here* was inspired by insight into institutional oppression and by former band mate Syd Barrett's insanity; *Yeezus* was inspired by a lamp.² This makes me think, are lamps art? All of them—all products everywhere—have aesthetic considerations. Is Kanye's lamp different because of the extent to which its designer, Le Corbusier, privileges aesthetics? How did Kanye realize that this lamp was art? Should I be looking at more lamps?

If I wrote the dictionary, I would redefine the word "art" to make it a verb. It would describe an action performed by people observing paintings, sculptures, music, and other human-constructed objects. Think about the way we commonly use "art" now. We try to create a category of *objects* with our standard noun "art," but everything can be art, and even when the objects don't change, they always, in some situations, get demoted to non-art. For example, last year I worked as a research assistant to an economics professor specializing in art history. Soon after being hired, I excitedly went to the Art Institute to memorize the active eras of different painters, and left successful in that goal but completely unimpressed. I usually love art, but I think I was more impressed by Salvador Dalí's stupid hat when I saw it at the Castle of Púbol in Spain than I was by his paintings that day at the Art Institute. Throughout my time working in that RA job, I looked at Dalí paintings, which in other circumstances would give me shivers, and I felt nothing. At one point, I looked at the image on

ALEX FOSTER

an auction record for Dalí's *Moment de Transition* and only thought, "Wow, nine million dollars." People look up images of the painting and call it "art," but while I was in the mindset of economics, I looked at the exact same image and it was just a thumbnail for an auction item. Maybe it stopped being art because of a change in *my behavior*.

If graffiti, urinals, wire, lamps, songs, photos, and painting are "art" only to some people some times, I think our word "art" has less to do with intrinsic qualities that the objects could be said to share and more to do with the viewer (or listener, or audience member, or user, or other beholder). Whether or not something is "art" by our standards is not only contingent on how its viewer is viewing it at the moment, but is actually *defined* by how its viewer is viewing it at the moment. A special phenomenon does occur when I look at paintings and get shivers, but it's not that the painting is something phenomenal; it's that I'm *doing* something phenomenal. Therefore, I have moved to totally stop using the word "art" as a noun to describe objects. The word is useless in that sense. I propose that the essence of art associated with an object is an activity performed by the object's viewer. That activity, of appreciating all the feelings and thoughts that our body stimulates in us when we

I cannot honestly
say we had a merry
evening.



perceive a human-constructed object, ought to be what we identify with the word "art." Art would be a verb. An example sentence wouldn't be, "I go to museums to look at art," but rather, "I go to museums to art at paintings."

I don't think we have much to lose by scrapping the common word "art" as a noun, and repurposing the letters to form this new verb. Art, the way we commonly use the term, is not a stable class of objects. In math

WHY WE CAN'T ANSWER THE QUESTION: "WHAT IS ART?"

terms, we say a function is well-defined if it produces a unique output for any input. I think a well-defined noun should stably refer to a unique object or group of objects, which are identifiable by features that they possess and that other objects do not possess. For example, "wire" is *always* any metal formed into a long, slender, flexible rod; a wire might lose its "wire" status if it is physically cut into metal shards, but it won't lose its status on the whim of the observer the way it might lose its status as "art." People often use words differently because they disagree on whether the object in question actually possesses the necessary defining features. For example, someone looking at a straightened wire dead on from one end might not know that it is a long rod, and thus say it's not a wire. However, in that case, the mental concept of what a "wire" should be isn't under debate, and people can productively discuss whether the object does or doesn't have the features that it needs in order to be a wire. Rarely does a word elude definition so dramatically that people cannot even agree on what features are supposed to define the word. So I wonder, by what features could we define "art" as a noun if we were to try?

Luckily, people suggest definitions of art all the time, and it only takes a bit of thought and a lot of endurance to go through and evaluate them. I don't intend to evaluate whether they are correct; any definition can be correct by definition, so to speak. Rather, is the word "art" that each of these definitions produces useful to round up all the things we call art? If some definition for "art" as a noun can characterize the things that we call art, without also characterizing tons of things we don't call art, or omitting things that ought to be art, then "art" as a noun is a well-defined, useful word that shouldn't be scrapped. In this essay, I cannot go through every definition of art ever conceived, but I can, without cherry picking, address every definition I've encountered in my own discussions and reading, and I believe that most of you, readers, will find your favorites accounted for.

We can categorize art's existing definitions fairly well according to what feature each definition claims is the requisite feature in a piece of art:

ALEX FOSTER

1) *Imitative* — We might as well start where everyone else in first quarter Hum starts, with Socrates, who would have sympathized with my general impulse to re-examine art. In Plato's *Republic*, Socrates begins the very discussion of art which I will explore, with the remark, "We generally postulate a certain form or character—a single form or character always—for each plurality of things to which we give the same name." About those things we name "art", Socrates concludes, "Shall we say that all artists, starting with Homer, are imitators of images of goodness and the other things they create, without having any grasp of the truth?"³

Socrates was clearly quite critical, but some artists themselves have proudly embraced his portrayal of their work. When 17th century painter Nicolas Poussin was asked for a definition of painting, he suggested, "It is an imitation done with lines and colors on a surface, of everything which may be seen beneath the sun."⁴ I think most people today believe art is more than imitation. Sure, Poussin's landscapes are imitative, but abstract expressionist paintings and nearly all songs aren't. So this definition fails to characterize the collection of things that we call "art."

Note that this definition and the definitions that will follow can be imaginatively interpreted so that they capture everything we call art. For example, you could insist that abstract paintings are art because they imitate feelings, funk music imitates the churnings of the womb, and Kanye's lamp imitates the curves of the world, or something. But if we interpret the definitions that loosely, then basically we could say everything is art, and our word "art" is only



Nobody is
ever sea-
sick—on
land.

3. G.R.F Ferrari, ed. and Tom Griffith, trans. *The Republic* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

4. R.G. Saisselin, "Art is an Imitation of Nature," *The Bulletin of the Cleveland Museum of Art* 52 (1965): 34-44.

WHY WE CAN'T ANSWER THE QUESTION: "WHAT IS ART?"

as useful as the word "thing" to round up all the objects we call "art." That is to say, not useful at all.

2) *Insightful* — This definition asserts that art is any creation that provides insight into true things without literally depicting reality. Picasso provided a well-known verbalization of this definition: "We all know that art is not truth. Art is a lie that makes us realize the truth." Joining him, philosopher Arthur C. Danto, a Columbia professor and the art critic for *The Nation*, said in 1964 that Warhol's *Brillo Boxes*, a replica of real soap pad boxes, was art; not because it imitated soap pad boxes, but because it had meaning. It was indeed a lie of a soap pad box that told the truth about consumer culture.⁵

5. Ken Johnson, "Arthur C. Danto, a Philosopher of Art, Is Dead at 89," *New York Times*, October 27, 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/10/28/arts/design/arthur-c-danto-a-philosopher-of-art-is-dead-at-89.html>.

Whereas the Imitative Definition was so sharp that it cut out things that most of us confidently call art, this definition produces a word that's a bit too blunt for any good use. The essence of it captures a major feature in artwork: things we call art often have information that is not literally, explicitly expressed. But so many things meet this criterion. For example, a note from a friend after a dispute that says, "Wanna come over and watch *Rick and Morty*?" is written work that's meant to be interpreted for its abstract information (namely, "I'm not mad at you"), but you wouldn't call it art.

3) *Expressive* — This definition is similar to, parallel to, and probably compatible with the Insightful Definition, but it privileges the phenomenon of the *artist transmitting feelings over the viewer receiving ideas*. Poet Amy Lowell's said, "Art, true art, is the desire of a man to express himself," which I think captures art culture, but doesn't apply well to art pieces.

Art is not necessarily a product of the desire to express oneself. In my art market research, I came across many Warhol sketches (some of them inevitably mindless doodles) that had been uncovered and auctioned as art. We call things "art" without any idea of whether the creator intended to express something. We'll never know whether our ancient Egyptian pottery was made just to satisfy rulers (or, for that matter, whether some modern songs were produced just for the money), so an artist's intentions can't be the linchpin to a useful definition of "art".

ALEX FOSTER

4) *Beautiful* — Georgia O’Keefe said, “Filling a space in a beautiful way. That’s what art means to me.” This is actually similar to my own definition, only not as well formulated and not as complete, in my opinion. Consider that beauty is notoriously in the eye of the beholder. To say art is beautiful concedes that art is defined by the viewer’s reaction to the object. I think O’Keefe is anchoring “art” to a different unstable category: “beautiful.” If we don’t know what intrinsic traits make an object beautiful, my verb definition of “art” makes more sense because it anchors “art” to the viewer’s reaction, which we can describe. On top of that, the Beautiful Definition is incomplete, because recognition of “beauty,” per se, is not the only response we can have to the objects we call “art.” We might instead feel disgusted, scared, informed, excited.

5) *Skillful/Imaginative* — How concerned were you when I didn’t begin my “What is art?” essay with the classic introduction, “The Oxford English Dictionary defines art...”? Perhaps some of you have arrived at this paragraph after frantically flipping through the article looking for where I discuss the OED, since it would be too peculiar to read anything before the OED definition is presented. Welcome! The rest of you might have considered at this point that maybe I forgot about the OED entirely. Surprise! The OED defines art as

The expression or application of creative skill and imagination, typically in a visual form such as painting, drawing, or sculpture, producing works to be appreciated primarily for their beauty or emotional power. Also: such works themselves considered collectively.

The artist’s abilities are central to this definition, which formalizes the complaint of dads everywhere (“That’s not art. My four-year-old could do that!”). But indeed, four-year-olds create macaroni art, and adults make splatter paintings, so specialized



I can sit and look at it for hours.

WHY WE CAN'T ANSWER THE QUESTION: "WHAT IS ART?"

skill and imagination are not requisite traits in the objects we call "art."

6) *Celebrated* — A common, circular definition of art says that objects are art because they are celebrated (as art), or perhaps, celebrated as art specifically by art critics. Arthur C. Danto embraced this definition in addition to the Insightful Definition that I built from his ideas above. Danto knew that we call a whole host of entities insightful, yet not art, so he stipulated that, while the process by which art is identified should be the search for meaning, the process itself should be undertaken by experts, whom he called the "artworld."

This definition feels satisfying in its accuracy and concreteness, but dissatisfying in its exclusivity. I think the self-appointed supremacy of the artworld is exactly what turns so many people off from art in general. Danto's definition is, "I can't define it, but someone I've never met knows it when she sees it." This definition wouldn't make "art" the first title whose use is prescribed by experts (consider titles like, "Nobel laureate.") The fact is, though, that we don't defer to the artworld every time we call something "art." If a college student gets a painting hung up in her dorm, we don't wait for a critic or gallery owner to tell us what to call it. Danto's definition would better suit a term like "high art," which is a useful term for sure, but wouldn't be used in all the circumstances that we use the term "art."

7) *Other, miscellaneous buzzwords* — There are other buzzwords and phrases we use to discuss art, and I love them and think they are captivating and resplendent. One of my favorites is, "Art is the stored honey of the human soul, gathered on wings of misery and travail" (attributed to novelist Theodore Dreiser). Really great stuff. Just not the same as a functional definition for how we use the term "art."

All these people, smarter than me, have struggled to show that the noun "art" can be well-defined and useful. I do not claim I can

ALEX FOSTER

succeed where they failed. But I can do what I do best: give up where they kept trying. There is no definition for the noun “art” that we’ve all been using. “What is art?” is a trick question used to teach primary school students that they aren’t so smart. We can come up with a better word—a word that more accurately describes the world we see and lets us more accurately see the world we describe.

Therefore, we don’t lose much by giving up on “art” as a noun, and repurposing the letters to make a verb that describes the action we undertake when we appreciate the paintings, music, sculptures, architecture, film, writing, and everything else that we commonly call “art.” I still think there should be a word for the things we commonly call “art,” but it should not aim to define the objects themselves as much as the objects’ role in our “arting” activity. “Artwork” is a misnomer, since the designation isn’t bestowed through the pieces’ production. In French, works of art are referred to as “objects of art” (*objets d’art*). Besides the fact that “objets d’art” has a connotation in English for non-paintings, the phrase “objects of art” functions perfectly, and I’ve begun using it in my life to describe things at which I art. I feared that maybe this phrase has the same flaws as the original noun “art,” but an analogy reassured me:

- (a) **A painting** is to **a pancake** as
- (b) **my new word “to art”** is to **“to eat for breakfast”** as
- (c) **an artist** is to **a chef** as
- (d) **“objects of art”** is to **“my breakfast”** as
- (e) **the original word “art”** is (almost) to **“food”**

The phrases in (a) are well-defined stable categories of objects. The phrases in (b) are actions performed upon those objects. The phrases in (c) describe people who deliberately (as a career or hobby) create objects for use in the activity in (b). The phrases in (d) are titles for the role the objects play in the action. The phrases in (e) are titles allegedly based on intrinsic characteristics of the objects . (I could only write one article criticizing a word per quarter, but “food,” you’re next! Ha. Just kidding.) “Food” is not nearly as problematic of a word as “art” because, though its definition is fuzzy around the edges, I think it’s more useful. We can say food is any nutritious substance the likes of which people or animals eat or drink in order

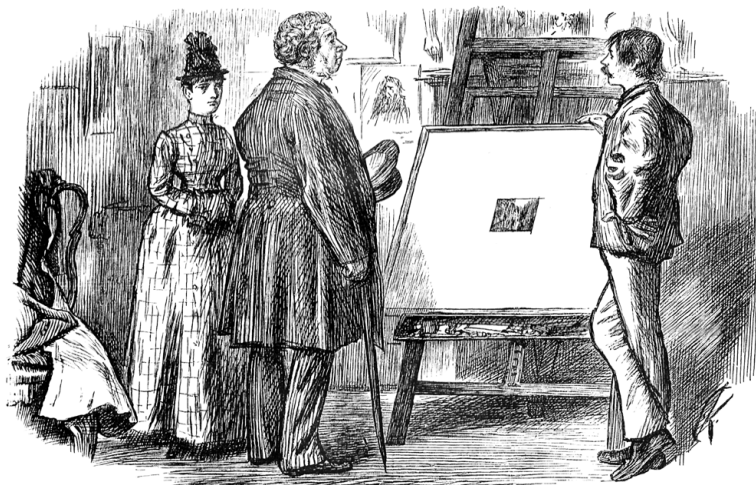
WHY WE CAN'T ANSWER THE QUESTION: "WHAT IS ART?"

to maintain life and growth, and I'd bet that 100% of the things I've ever instinctively called food suit that definition. The same could not be said for any definition we found for "art" as a noun.

In my limited tour lobbying for the use of "art" as a verb this week, I've faced many angry questions from my girlfriend and more aggressive apartment-mates. First, can I art at something that isn't physically present? Tough question. But one that needs to be asked. You could really define "to art" either way. My inclination is that you can art at the *Mona Lisa* at the Louvre, and you can art at a Google image of the *Mona Lisa* (with slightly more difficulty), so why not say you can art at a memory image of the *Mona Lisa* (though this is even more difficult)?

Next, if arting is an activity, how can you be good at it? When is it easy, and when is it difficult? Like any activity, some people are probably more talented than others at arting, but we all improve with constant practice. The goal is to become more perceptive to objects in the world and more perceptive to how we feel and think about those objects. Practice entails affirming the sensations we experience when we view objects, trying to understand those sensations, and pushing them further. People learn to art better with simple, less direct exercises, as well, such as meditating, experimenting with drugs, and reading Nietzsche. Beyond the general skill of arting, people develop skill at arting specific types of objects. You might be familiar with this effect in music, where familiarity with the instrumentation and common keys of a genre grant ease for listening to that genre's songs. In fact, most people

A considerable
amount of attention
to the subject



ALEX FOSTER

won't like a particular song or album until they become familiar with it (radio hits appeal on the first listen because often they reshuffle pop sounds that are already familiar). You need to acclimate to the rhythm of a piece to art at it. In recognition of that, people should, for example, force themselves to listen to Beethoven's *Egmont* those first few times, to exercise their specific *Egmont*-arting muscle. Arting is easier in some situations, and some objects of art are better for people than others. *The Mona Lisa* is special in that it lends itself particularly well to arting for many people. It doesn't impress everyone, but it deserves fame because of how many people have found themselves able to deeply art at it. And it helps that people see it in a museum surrounded by other arting patrons. We all have some arting rituals of our own. My editor says he likes going to the movie theater because there's a little ceremony in it and it helps him lose himself in the experience with the crowd. Arting is typically easier when it's in the context of a ritual.

Does arting need to be done deliberately? I wouldn't define arting such that you need to know you're arting in order to do it, but you need to know you're doing what arting is—that you're appreciating a human-constructed object.

Can an artist art at her own work? Sure.

Does the artist play any role in other people's arting? I'd say no—but not everyone agrees. One quite famous definition of art as an activity already exists. It comes from Leo Tolstoy in his 1897 book *What Is Art?* Tolstoy believed that art was an activity between two people – the artist and the viewer. He says:

Art is a human activity consisting in this, that one man consciously, by means of certain external signs, hands on to others feelings he has lived through, and that other people are infected by these feelings and also experience them....It is a means of union among men, joining them together in the same feelings.⁶

6. Leo Tolstoy, *What is Art?*, trans. Almyer Maude (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1960).

This applies to a certain kind of arting, but I would like to be able to say that I art at objects whose creators had no intention to connect

WHY WE CAN'T ANSWER THE QUESTION: "WHAT IS ART?"

with me. For example, I art at statues in the Oriental Institute that were meant to honor the Assyrian king Sargon II, but I don't feel reverence for the Assyrian king Sargon II. And the *Iliad* inspired in me despair for the horrors of war, but my classmates became excited by the glory of battle; is one of us (probably me) not arting at all because we disagree with Homer? No. There are many good reasons to believe that an artist is not the only authority on his work, so arting must be conducted exclusively within the mind of the viewer (who might or might not consider what she knows about the artist).

This is all pure semantics, but correcting our words has real effects on how we see the world and how we interact with it. "Art" as a noun has eroded the spirit of art in our culture. We're taught from primary school that some things are art, and when we see art we are supposed look for its beauty and meaning. This perspective implies that we can't be impressed in the same way by objects we don't call "art." Have you ever heard someone say, "I want to fill this wall with art"? How sad that they do not stop and appreciate the wall! Art is not a strict category of objects; everything that people make can be arted at a little bit at least. We could have arted at all the urinals we saw before Marcel Duchamp put one in a gallery, but because we all tried to fit objects into the non-existent categories that our misguided language provided, we passed up that chance to art. Let's stop making that mistake. We should pick up that CD or book that we cast away when we determined that—because it didn't immediately appeal to us—it was missing some intrinsic element of "art," which never existed in the first place. We can art at that thing if we try, and how sweet it will be when we experience new ideas and feelings in response to something we nearly dismissed!

Our word for "art" as a noun is worse than useless; it's damaging. From now on, all of us should use art as a verb, and seize agency over the action that it describes. Instead of wasting more energy trying to answer, "What is art?"—a centuries-old effort for which we have nothing to show—let's learn to answer, "How can we art better?"