

FAMILY RESEMBLANCES, RELATIONALISM, AND THE MEANING OF 'ART'

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Peter Kivy has maintained that the Wittgensteinian account of 'art' 'is not a going concern' and that 'the traditional task of defining the work of art is back in fashion, with a vengeance'. This is true, in large part, because of the turn towards relational definitions of 'art' taken by philosophers in the 1960s; a move that is widely believed to have countered the Wittgensteinian charge that 'art' is an open concept and which gave rise to a 'New Wave' in aesthetic theorizing. So successful has this New Wave been that today the philosophy of art is awash with relational definitions, which are increasingly characterized by their technical sophistication and logical complexity. The aim of this essay is to oppose this trend; to demonstrate that relationalist definitions cannot avoid the problems which provided the impetus for the Wittgensteinian view and to show that the New Wavers cannot explain why anyone would *want* the definitions which they are offering, irrespective of their success or failure. I will also explore, in detail, the uses, as well as the limitations, of the Wittgensteinian approach to the concept of art.

I

NO ONE working in the philosophy of art can have failed to notice the vigorous resumption of the traditional project of defining 'art' after a brief Wittgenstein-inspired hiatus in the middle of the last century. (By the 'traditional project of defining art', I mean the practice of compiling lists of characteristics, which all and only artworks are alleged to have; of identifying the necessary and sufficient conditions which must be met, if something is to fall within the extension of 'art'.) One sees parallels in the philosophy of language, which has experienced a revival of traditional-style theories of meaning, also after a Wittgenstein-inspired lull. Quine, whose grip on analytic philosophy today is much tighter than Wittgenstein's, did not so much extinguish the traditional semantic project as naturalize it, by which I mean that his work has ensured that the theory of meaning will continue to be pursued, but almost exclusively along direct-reference, extensionalist, or deflationist lines.

Undoubtedly, the resurrection of these traditional philosophical projects, in spite of what had at least *seemed* to be a devastating critique, has had something to do with their perceived merits, but one has to wonder whether Wittgensteinianism was doomed from the start, for the somewhat less meritorious reason that it was seen as being dismissive of the very business of philosophy. Wittgenstein, famously, believed that philosophical problems should ‘entirely disappear’, once one has performed the kind of analysis modelled in the *Investigations*,¹ and philosophers, understandably, have not been very keen on embracing a conception of their discipline which suggests that it—and they—ought not to exist.

With respect to defining ‘art’, the two sides have dug in: anti-theorists on one side, theorists on the other, with the theorists having the upper-hand. The current crop of ingenious, traditional-style definitions, conceived by an impressive array of philosophers in the field, stands out against what has become a rather repetitive Wittgensteinian refrain. (I call them ‘traditional-style definitions’, because there are some crucial differences between the definitions being offered today and those developed prior to the Wittgensteinian interruption.) As Peter Kivy has described the current situation, ‘The Wittgensteinian move in the philosophy of art was never a popular one, and at the present time is not a going concern. The traditional task of defining the work of art is back in fashion, with a vengeance’.² But, before we are overly impressed by the rise of this phoenix from the ashes, we should remember that the various philosophical studies of the arts do not present us with a uniform situation. If we turn our attention to the philosophy of criticism, for example, we will find that it is not the theorists but the anti-theorists who are ascendant, drawing strength, as they do, from the critiques of the traditional conception of critical reasoning advanced by Arnold Isenberg, Stuart Hampshire, Margaret MacDonald, and Frank Sibley, which have enjoyed canonical status for the last half-century.³

My contention, here, is that the theorists are wrong about the definitional project. Specifically, they are wrong about whether a definition of ‘art’ is possible and about the *purpose* that any analysis of the word, short of a definition, should serve. As is the case with most philosophical disputes, however, the

¹ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (1953), §133.

² Peter Kivy, *Philosophies of Arts: An Essay in Differences* (New York: Cambridge U.P., 1997), p. 35.

³ Anita Silvers has argued that analytic aesthetics has consistently rejected the idea that critical reasons function as traditional justifications for critical judgements. See her ‘Letting the Sunshine In: Has Analysis Made Aesthetics Clear?’ (1987) reprinted in John W. Bender and H. Gene Blocker (eds), *Contemporary Philosophy of Art: Readings in Analytic Aesthetics* (Upper Saddle-River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1993), pp. 10–34.

rights and wrongs here are not so clearly demarcated. The anti-theorists may be right in their estimation that a definition of 'art' is both impossible and unnecessary, but their own account of the purpose served by an analysis of 'art', short of a definition, though true as far as it goes, is incomplete.

II

The first important conflict between anti-theorists and theorists, on the subject of defining 'art', was over the question of what *kind* of a concept 'art' is. The anti-theorists, with Wittgenstein as their primary inspiration, argued that 'art' is an *open concept*; that it cannot be defined, in the traditional way, because there always remains the possibility that new objects will emerge on the scene, for which an act of judgement will be required to determine whether they count as artworks or not. At most, artworks bear some number of *family-resemblances* to one another, and the point at which judgement enters the picture is precisely the point at which we ask whether an object sufficiently resembles already established artworks to be counted as a member of the family. In this, anti-theorists have simply extended the analysis that Wittgenstein had already applied to concepts like 'game' to the concept of art, motivated by what looks like a common and intractable heterogeneity within their extensions. 'If we actually look and see what it is that we call "art", we will... find no common properties—only strands of similarities', Morris Weitz, the most influential of the anti-theorists wrote.

Knowing what art is is not apprehending some manifest or latent essence but being able to recognize, describe, and explain those things we call 'art' in virtue of these similarities.... New conditions... have constantly arisen and will undoubtedly arise; new art forms, new movements will emerge, which will demand decisions... as to 'whether the concept should be extended or not.'⁴

The theorists countered that the Wittgensteinian analysis is only compelling if one defines 'art' in terms of exhibited characteristics. Of course, this *was*, in fact, how 'art' always had been defined, whether in terms of representational qualities, beauty, significant form, and so on, but the theorists, led by Maurice Mandelbaum, argued that if one considers art's *relational* properties—its place in certain kinds of institutions or practices, for example—a definition that is at least traditional in *style*—that is, which gives necessary and sufficient conditions for something's being art—but which, at the same, time allows for the 'expansive, adventurous character of art', as Weitz has argued any viable

⁴ Morris Weitz, 'The Role of Theory in Aesthetics' (1956), reprinted in Bender and Blocker (eds), *Contemporary Philosophy of Art*, pp. 195–196.

account must,⁵ might very well be forthcoming.⁶ To say, as Terry Diffey and George Dickie have said, that what makes something art is its having a certain kind of standing, within the context of the artworld, or to maintain, as Arthur Danto has maintained, that artworks are distinguished from ‘mere real things’ by being interpretable, is to define ‘art’, in the traditional sense, but is also to leave open the possibility of virtually infinite variations in the exhibited characteristics that artworks might have; in the *form* that art might take.⁷ Thus, one of the chief advertisements for relationalist definitions of ‘art’ has been that they offer the semantic precision and logical rigour that comes when one’s terms are formally defined, while also providing the flexibility characteristic of family-resemblance concepts. Danto, Diffey, and Dickie, whose theories were the first to reflect this newfound insight, represent the vanguard of this ‘relationalist turn’ in the philosophy of art, which I will call the ‘New Wave’.⁸

This New Wave is currently dominant and has drawn much of its inspiration from Mandelbaum’s seemingly ingenious sidestepping of the open-endedness problem, but it is not at all clear that the relationalism which it champions suffices as a solution to that problem. What we are worried about, remember, is the essentially heterogeneous, oftentimes unpredictable character of art history. Art has a complex past, present, and future, and an examination of its past and present suggests that we may have no idea what direction it will take in the future.⁹ This uncertainty has typically been comprehended in terms

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 196.

⁶ Maurice Mandelbaum, ‘Family Resemblances and Generalizations Concerning the Arts’, *American Philosophical Quarterly*, vol. 2 (1965), pp. 219–228.

⁷ Terry Diffey, ‘The Republic of Art’ (1969) and ‘The Institutional Theory of Art’ (1984), reprinted in *The Republic of Art and Other Essays* (New York: Peter Lang, 1991), pp. 39–51 and 63–70; George Dickie, *Art and the Aesthetic: An Institutional Analysis* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell U.P., 1974) and *The Art Circle* (New York: Haven, 1984); Arthur Danto, ‘The Artworld’, *Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 61 (1964), pp. 571–84 and *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace: A Philosophy of Art* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard U.P., 1981).

⁸ Robert Stecker wonders aloud whether Danto is in the business of offering definitions at all (see Robert Stecker, *Artworks: Definition, Meaning, Value* [University Park, PA: Penn State U.P., 1997], p. 45), but I take statements like this—‘As an essentialist in philosophy, I am committed to the view that . . . there are conditions necessary and sufficient for something to be an artwork regardless of time and place’—to be conclusive. Also see Arthur Danto, *After the End of Art: Contemporary Art and the Pale of History* (Princeton: Princeton U.P., 1997), p. 95.

⁹ Danto believes that art history had a clear direction once: a millennia-long cycle, in which one artistic movement succeeded another and the beginning of the end of which started in the late nineteenth century, with a rapid series of artistic ‘erasures’, which took us from full-blown representation to the stripped-down aesthetics of abstract expressionism and minimalism, and which culminated with postmodernism, at which point art history ‘was no longer possible in terms of a progressive historical narrative’. Arthur Danto, *Beyond the Brillo Box: The Visual Arts in Post-Historical Perspective* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1992), pp. 4–5 and 7–9.

of art's exhibited properties—*What will paintings and sculptures look like in the future? What will music sound like thirty years from now?*—but I see no reason why it should not also apply, with equal force, to art's relationships to human institutions and practices. Indeed, this is the overwhelming response of my undergraduates, when I teach the relationalist counter-argument to Wittgenstein: surely, they say, the relationships that artworks bear to human institutions and practices have been as varied as have been art's exhibited characteristics.

If we are talking about relations to institutions, for example, prior to the emergence of today's artworld, art was created within the context of the church, the landed aristocracy, the crown, and the merchant classes, but these institutions had nothing to do with conveying 'status', as the institutionalist understands it. It is worth noting, in fact, that the idea that 'art' might indicate a status only arose once the question 'Is it art?' became pressing, a point made by Marx Wartofsky, who observed that 'in a tradition unflustered by identity crises, the question "is it art?" wouldn't even arise. . . . The question arises because artists. . . find themselves forced into insurgency as a condition of. . . creativity.'¹⁰ Consequently, institutionalism is 'not a theory of art in general, but a theory about the question of status in contemporary art'.¹¹

The point is that we cannot predict what kinds of relationships artworks will have to human institutions or practices in the near and distant future, which means that relationalism cannot be the solution to the open-endedness problem, for we have no reason to think that a concept of art that is built on relational properties will be any less open (and thus, any more definable, in the traditional sense) than one that focuses on art's exhibited characteristics.

Of course, the relationalist can argue that it is our *current* institutional or other settings or practices which determine what counts as art, not just now, but then, but this move strikes me not only as incapable of meeting the challenge at hand, but as having a number of undesirable, even bizarre, consequences. For one thing, it is unresponsive to the point made about the future: if relationalists admit that prior to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the things that we now call 'art' were conceived, financed, received, and interpreted in the context of non-artworldly (or radically different kinds of artworldly) settings, understandings, and practices, then how can they be sure that this will not be true again, at some future time, in which case the definitions being offered today are in as much danger of becoming dated as their perceptualist predecessors? For another—and an example of a bizarre consequence—consider that this reading of relationalism turns each and every one of those artworks that was created prior to the advent of the modern

¹⁰ Marx Wartofsky, 'Art, Artworlds, and Ideology', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, vol. 38, no. 3 (1980), pp. 245–246.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 247.

institutions of art, art history, and art criticism into what is effectively a *ready-made*, by splitting apart the circumstances in which it was created from those in which it became art. Thus, a Kouros statue or Byzantine icon, like the bed used by Rauschenberg or the urinal employed by Duchamp, is conceived of as a found-object; as something which was created in a non-artistic context, for non-artistic purposes, and which became art only later, after its having had acquired an artistic status, meaning, or role, each of which is conceived of in distinctly modern terms.

It is not really the openness of art history, *per se*, that recommends the move to relationalism, but rather a particular art historical development, which was a consequence of that openness: namely, the arrival on the scene of artworks which (in relevant senses) were perceptually indistinguishable from things that are not art. I am speaking, of course, of the readymades and of certain works within the Pop Art canon, such as Andy Warhol's *Brillo Box*, which figured so prominently in the thinking of those philosophers responsible for the New Wave. What these artworks demonstrated is that there is nothing that art looks like, sounds like, and so on, so defining 'art' in terms of the perceptible features of artworks is a loser from the start. If ordinary items such as urinals, snow-shovels, and Brillo boxes can be artworks, then what distinguishes those that are art from their perceptually identical counterparts, which are not art, cannot be any of their exhibited features, but must instead be some non-perceptible, relational quality or other. (That they might be distinguishable by way of imperceptible, microstructural features, such as chemical composition, is hardly credible.) For those who would believe that this 'indiscernibility problem' applies only to the art of the avant-garde, Danto argues that hypothetical indiscernibles can be contrived for any artwork one cares to consider, even the works of classical antiquity or the Old Masters. Indeed, this is precisely the point of his accidental *Polish Rider* case,¹² namely to show that while it might *seem* as if traditional works of art are defined by their perceptible characteristics, in fact, they are not; indeed, that they *could not* be, because one could always imagine a perceptually indistinguishable counterpart, which is not art, standing alongside it.

The readymades and those works of Pop Art, which played a philosophically similar role to that played by the readymades, were also alleged to represent a catastrophic development for those advocating a family-resemblance semantics for 'art', for that account traditionally had relied as much on the idea that the key characteristics of artworks are perceptible as the traditional definitions it was designed to supplant. The idea, remember, is that against the backdrop of a number of established cases of artworks, one decides whether

¹² Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, pp. 31–32.

to extend the concept of 'art' to new cases, on the basis of whether they sufficiently resemble the established ones. But if the established instances of art now include ordinary household items and commercial products, then how can the Wittgensteinian resist applying the word 'art' to *every* Brillo box, urinal, snow shovel, bed, and so on?

I do not think that making sense of perceptual indiscernibility need be a problem for those advocating a family-resemblance semantics for 'art', for there is no reason why one must focus on exhibited characteristics as the relevant basis of resemblance. To assume that one must is to put too much stock in the specific word, 'resemblance', and not enough in the significance of the relation it denotes. The core ideas of a family-resemblance semantics are: (i) that the class membership of new cases cannot be determined mechanically (that is, by holding them up against a checklist), but must be *decided*; and (ii) that the decision as to whether they belong to one class or another is based on whether they are sufficiently *similar* to the already established members of the class in question. Physical resemblance, of course, is *one* form of similarity, but the readymades and other indiscernibles would seem to suggest that in the case of artworks, it is the *wrong* form of similarity; that it is art's relations to human institutions or human practices that are going to constitute the relevant grounds of similarity, upon which to determine whether new cases belong to the extension of 'art' or not. Precisely *which* forms of similarity are relevant will depend upon one's assessment of the chief relational characteristics of artworks (by 'chief', I mean those relational characteristics that are distinctive of the current class of established artworks), but all of the characteristics that have been proposed by the New Wave admit of perfectly cogent conceptions of similarity and thus, could, in principle, serve as the relevant grounds upon which to judge family-resemblances.

The Wittgensteinian may not be able to make such judgments on the basis of a simple inspection of the perceptible features of an object, but there is no reason why he must. Unlike traditional theories of meaning—a class to which all of the theories comprising the New Wave belong—Wittgensteinian analysis makes no pretence at providing a theory of reference, but simply offers a description of how, in specific situations, 'local' judgements are made as to whether specific terms refer or not. The prospect of unpredictability, open-endedness, and even referential indeterminacy is consequently not a problem for the Wittgensteinian. He can accept the possibility that even with all the available information in hand, whether or not a term refers to a specific object or activity may remain a matter of contention. For traditional theories of meaning and reference, according to which words refer by way of enumerable criteria, this sort of referential indeterminacy poses a substantial, perhaps even a deal-breaking problem. The whole reason for having a theory of reference, after all, is to standardize the process of referring, but if independent

judgements have to be made in every instance, because of the ever-present spectre of indiscernibility, the usefulness of such a theory becomes unobvious. Contrary to the prevailing view, then, it would appear—at least thus far—that it is the Wittgensteinian, anti-theoretical view, not the New Wave philosophy, which is in the dialectically stronger position.

III

Given this last point, it is appropriate that we turn, now, to the second great dispute that has separated the Wittgensteinians from their opponents, namely, the *purpose* in seeking a definition—or short of a definition, an analysis—of ‘art’. Many of today’s New Wavers believe, in the tradition of their pre-Wittgensteinian forebears, that a definition is needed for purposes of both semantic- and speaker-reference: most pressingly, we need a definition of ‘art’ to help us recognize works of art, in the epistemologically challenging environment of postmodernity. ‘It must assert conditions, jointly necessary and sufficient, for an item to be an artwork’, Robert Stecker, one of the leading contemporary New Wavers, writes. ‘This implies that it will tell us what is the extension of “art”.’¹³ This is particularly important, Stecker explains, because the readymades and Pop Art have ‘stripped works of the marks by which items have customarily been recognized as art’,¹⁴ a problem for which his definition is clearly intended to serve as a solution. It would seem clear, then, that he believes that having a correct definition of ‘art’ in hand is essential to our being competent users of the word, a competence which he construes narrowly as the ability to recognize and refer to artworks. (That Stecker reverses himself later, writing, almost as an aside, that ‘no one thinks that we need a definition before such recognition [of artworks] is possible’,¹⁵ only demonstrates the extent to which he is inclined to conflate semantic- and speaker-reference and is confused about the purpose that a definition of ‘art’ should serve.) In a similar vein, Danto has recently described the question of definition as having become ‘urgent’ in the wake of the readymades and Pop Art,¹⁶ the implication being, once again, that these avant-garde artistic movements have created a problem—that of our being able to correctly identify artworks—which his definition is intended to solve.

But, by conceiving of the value of having a definition of ‘art’ in terms of its providing the ground on which linguistic competence with respect to the word rests, and by construing linguistic competence, narrowly, as the ability

¹³ Stecker, *Artworks: Definition, Meaning, Value*, p. 14.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

¹⁶ Arthur Danto, *The Abuse of Beauty: Aesthetics and the Concept of Art* (Peru, IL: Open Court, 2003), p. 22.

to recognize and refer to artworks, the New Wavers have set themselves up for a deadly line of criticism, the source of which is Hilary Putnam's groundbreaking analysis of the semantics of natural kind terms. Specifically: (i) The New Wavers cannot come up with a definition that both fixes the extension of 'art' and determines what counts as linguistic competence, with respect to the word, in the narrow sense of being able to successfully identify and refer to artworks; (ii) the definitions that the New Wavers do, in fact, come up with clearly can play no other role than to fix the extension of the word 'art' (if they can even do that, which we have seen there is good reason to doubt); (iii) this task—that is, fixing the extension of 'art'—when considered in light of the nature of the subject, is of little significance, and leaves the definitional project without a compelling *raison d'être*.

Putnam's idea, recall, is that in the case of natural kind terms like 'aluminum', 'lemon', 'gold', or 'water', what a typical person mentally represents or 'grasps' in understanding or 'acquiring' them are *stereotypes*: descriptions of the chief characteristics of paradigmatic members of the class of things in question.¹⁷ Notice, however, that such stereotypes cannot possibly constitute the definitions or meanings of such words, in the traditional sense, for they will fail to pick out all and only the objects belonging to their respective extensions: that is, they will leave out non-typical members (albino tigers, red lemons, and so on), while at the same time including non-members, which superficially resemble the paradigmatic cases (fool's gold, laminate that is perceptually indistinguishable from real wood, and so on). The trouble, Putnam says, is that anything that *would* correctly pick out all and only the objects in the extensions of these words—i.e., a comprehensive micro-structural profile—would also be an implausible candidate for what a person grasps, in understanding or acquiring them (most people know neither molecular biology nor advanced chemistry). It is for this reason that he pries apart and treats as separate two parts of the semantic structure of words, which Frege treated as one: (i) that which one grasps when understanding a word, and (ii) that which determines a word's extension.¹⁸

I would maintain that a similar treatment is required in the case of 'art'. Assuming, for the sake of argument, that some version of a relationalist definition of 'art' *could* overcome the open-endedness problem and fix the word's extension, it seems obvious that such a definition would have to be crafted at such a level of technical sophistication that it could not possibly be what an

¹⁷ Hilary Putnam, 'Is Semantics Possible?' (1970), reprinted in *Mind, Language, and Reality: Philosophical Papers*, vol. 2 (New York: Cambridge U.P., 1975), p. 148; 'The Meaning of "Meaning"' (1975), reprinted in *Mind, Language, and Reality*, vol. 2, pp. 247–252.

¹⁸ Putnam, 'The Meaning of "Meaning"', p. 246.

ordinary speaker grasps, when acquiring or otherwise understanding or correctly using the word 'art'. (That the definitions offered by today's New Wave suffer from precisely this kind of excessive technical sophistication will be demonstrated in the next section.) As is the case with words such as 'water' and 'aluminium', it is much more plausible to say that what one mentally represents, in the case of 'art', is a stereotype, based on the chief characteristics of established artworks, as they are conceived in one's own time and place. In family-resemblance terms: in grasping or acquiring the word 'art', one mentally represents the chief characteristics of what one takes to be the relevant resemblance-base for the word 'art'.¹⁹ This is complicated by the fact that two people, in the same time and place, by virtue of background, education, taste, or other relevant factors, may focus on different established cases and thus have different stereotypes in mind: when a layman thinks of art, for example, he will probably have in mind a representative of a traditional or otherwise well-recognized art form—say, a painting from the Italian Renaissance or from the Impressionist period—while a person who is more invested in the art scene may think of something contemporary, perhaps, even, something from the fringes of the avant-garde. But, regardless, on a family-resemblance account, what one person grasps will be linked to what others grasp, by way of relevant similarities between their respective mental representations, either direct or indirect, and thus, taken collectively, a community's mental representations will pick out, roughly, the set of artworks, *as it is presently constituted*, an idea that is akin to Putnam's conception of a division of linguistic labour, spread across the speaking community, in determining a word's extension.²⁰

But now the question looms as to why anyone would want a traditional-style definition of 'art', as opposed to a more modest form of semantic analysis, like that offered by the Wittgensteinian. For the New Wavers, a definition of 'art' is 'more pressing now than ever', because of the ubiquitous spectre of indiscernibility—*so many strange things passing for art nowadays, no one can possibly*

¹⁹ Many will argue that all of this talk about 'mentally representing' stereotypes would have been an anathema to Wittgenstein, but I see no reason why we cannot accept some of Wittgenstein's linguistic 'performativism', while rejecting, wholesale, the behaviourism that is commonly ascribed to him. Indeed, some have argued that Wittgenstein's is as much an anti-behaviourist philosophy as it is an anti-referentialist one, as evinced by the fact that it rejects the idea of topic-neutrality—the idea that we might identify behaviour, in language that has been purged of the intentional idiom—common to reductionism and eliminativism of both the physicalist and behaviourist varieties. As Peter Hacker has put the matter: '[I]t is the behaviour of a human being that constitutes the logical criteria for saying of him that he is perceiving or feeling something, thinking or recollecting, joyful or sad. Such behaviour is not mere bodily movements, but smiles and scowls, a tender or angry voice. . . . Human behaviour is not a mere physical phenomenon like the . . . movements of an industrial robot' (P. M. S. Hacker, *Wittgenstein* [New York: Routledge, 1999], p. 45).

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 227–229.

tell *what's what without a theory*—but any definition which the New Wavers might come up with, which might actually succeed in fixing the extension of 'art', will not be one that can credibly define competence with respect to the word. Furthermore, what *can* plausibly be said to be grasped by an ordinary speaker, when acquiring or otherwise understanding or correctly using the word 'art'—i.e., some stereotype or other—will not only fail to fix the word's extension and thus, could not constitute its meaning or definition, in any traditional sense, but will not even suffice to ensure that a person will be successful in identifying artworks in any specific referential context. Remember that on the traditional view of meaning and reference, the meaning of a word is supposed to serve as a kind of prior instruction, which upon having grasped it, directs one's eyes, fingers, and so on to the correct referent. But given that relational properties like 'having been granted a certain status' or 'meaning P' are not perceptible or otherwise independently identifiable by the untutored person, then the only way that one can succeed in the act of referring is to be told for which objects the relevant relations hold, which is tantamount to being told which objects are the artworks.

Now that the paradigmatic cases of artworks include ordinary household items and commercial products, it is impossible to see how speaker-reference could ever be a purely mechanical affair, a simple matter of comparing a set of characteristics to a criterion. So many things resemble artworks now that the exercise of judgement must lie at the heart of every successful referential speech act.²¹

IV

It is to their credit—not to mention our benefit—that the philosophers who belong to the vanguard of the New Wave, most notably, Danto and Diffey, have provided us with accounts that serve a substantial, positive aim, beyond the narrow ones of fixing the extension of 'art' and facilitating speaker-reference. Danto's masterful attempt to define 'art' in *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* has given us deep insight into the relationship between individual works of art, art history, and criticism; into the distinctive kinds of

²¹ Peter Lamarque has suggested that a definition like Dickie's can aid me in determining that the bar of soap in my bathroom is not an artwork. I don't see how. After all, imagine that I have just completed a move. Is it not possible that the contents of my moving truck were mixed up with the contents of a truck bringing items to the local 'Readymade' exhibition, which includes *Soap*, a heretofore unknown work of Robert Rauschenberg? Of course, if I am given proof that this mix-up has not occurred, then I can be assured that I am not washing my underarms with a priceless work of art, but notice that I have not, then, succeeded in identifying an artwork (or non-artwork), by way of having the definition in mind, but by being told, in essence, that my bar of soap is not Rauschenberg's.

interpretive schemata to which art gives rise and the role that individual psychology, history, and other aspects of context play in art's creation and interpretation. Diffey, in an arc of inspired and learned essays, has taught us a great deal about the sociology of art and about the unique logic of institutional enfranchisement. Taken as a whole, their accounts have greatly advanced our understanding of art as a human practice and have succeeded in placing the philosophy of art alongside art history and art criticism, as part of an ongoing, multi-disciplinary effort to comprehend this quintessentially human phenomenon.

The same cannot be said for the definitions coming out of today's New Wave. Whether we look to Levinson, who says that art is 'a thing... that has been seriously intended for regard-as-a-work-of-art; regard that in any way pre-existing artworks are or were correctly regarded',²² James Carney, who has written that 'W is an artwork if and only if it is of the same kind and is construed as standing in a specified relation to past artworks, and where the "originating samples"... are indexically designated',²³ or Stecker, who maintains that (take a deep breath)

[a]n item is a work of art at time *t*, where *t* is a time no earlier than the time at which the item is made, if and only if... it is in one of the central art forms at *t* and is made with the intention of fulfilling a function art has at *t* or... it is an artefact that achieves excellence in fulfilling such a function, whether or not it is in a central art form and whether or not it was intended to fulfil such a function,²⁴

we find ourselves confronted with definitions that are suitable *for no other purpose* than fixing the extension of 'art'. (I pick on these three philosophers, because they are representative of the contemporary New Wave.) Their complexity and technical sophistication ensures that they cannot serve as the graspable content of the word 'art,' and beyond the question of linguistic understanding, they clearly do not provide us with any significant information about art, such that we can be said to understand it better, *as a phenomenon* (something that we *can* say about the theories of Danto and Diffey), for not only do the new definitions shun stereotypes, they scrupulously avoid *any* mention of *any* substantial properties of artworks whatsoever. The point is not that the contemporary New Wave's theories are literally empty, in the sense

²² Jerrold Levinson, 'Refining Art Historically', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, vol. 47 (1989), p. 21.

²³ James Carney, 'The Style Theory of Art', *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly*, vol. 72 (1991), p. 273.

²⁴ Stecker, *Artworks: Definition, Meaning, Value*, p. 50.

of being tautological (they are obviously not, inasmuch as they are susceptible to substantive criticism), but rather that they are useless, in that they serve no tangible purpose. They are little more than clever logical devices, employed in a single-minded effort to surmount the open-endedness problem; to fix 'art's extension in the semantic ether.

Nothing wrong with that, you might think. After all, the question of what determines a word's extension has been one of the chief obsessions of the philosophy of language. But, how important a question is this, really, and especially with respect to the word 'art'? I would suspect that once its narrowness is exposed—once it becomes clear that we are not even talking about the somewhat more tangible question of how *speakers* succeed in referring to artworks, but about the utterly *intangible* question of semantic-reference—it will seem of marginal importance, even to philosophers, with the exception, perhaps, of those invested in the development of a compositional semantics for natural languages, a project the worthiness of which, itself, has looked increasingly doubtful, over several decades of sustained philosophic attack.²⁵ Certainly, it is unlikely to capture the imaginations of those for whom the question of 'art's analysis ought to be the most significant: the men and women in and around the arts, whether they be artists, art historians, critics, or the educated laymen, who comprise the artistic audience.

It is worth noting that today's leading New Wavers seem as often confused about the ultimate point of an analysis of 'art' as they are wrong about it. Levinson, for example, begins his definitive essay on the subject by announcing that he is going to provide substantial understanding into the 'artness of an art work'; to tell us 'what ties together Dickens's *Oliver Twist*, Tallis's *Spem in alium*, Flavin's *Pink and Gold* . . .', and so on.²⁶ But, just two pages later, he admits that in fact, his definition only tells us 'what it is for an object to be art at a given time'.²⁷ As for giving us any sense of the 'artness' of an artwork—of the *substance* of what it is to be a work of art—beyond that which we may have acquired already, in our experiences of individual artworks, all that we have learned, by the end of Levinson's article, is that artworks are things that are intended to be regarded in the same way that previous artworks have been regarded,²⁸ something that, I trust it will be agreed, can hardly be called an epiphany.

²⁵ One of the strongest critiques of the idea that natural languages require—or have—a compositional semantics is Steven Schiffer's *Remnants of Meaning* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989), esp. chs. 7 and 8

²⁶ Levinson, 'Defining Art Historically', p. 232.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 234.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 242.

Stecker is equally confused about what compelling purpose the definitional project is supposed to serve. As already mentioned, in the beginning of *Artworks*, he says that a definition is urgently needed, in the wake of the avant-garde and particularly of the readymades and Pop Art, which have 'progressively stripped works of the marks by which items have customarily been recognized as art', but as we have also noted, just forty pages later, in defending his definition against the charge of circularity (in order to understand what 'art' means, on Stecker's view, you already need to know what 'artistic function' and 'artistic forms' mean), Stecker says that 'no one thinks that we need a definition before such recognition [of artworks] is possible'. Of course, this is exactly what he *should* say, since it would be absurd to suggest that what ordinary speakers grasp, when using the word 'art', is a definition as baroque in its technicality as Stecker's, but it leaves us, again, without a compelling *raison d'être* for the exercise. Is there some *other* valuable purpose that is served by being told, as Stecker tells us, that artworks are things which fulfil functions that artworks previously have fulfilled? It is hard to see what it might be, since, once again, we are being told something that is obvious.

I could imagine a definition *like* Stecker's contributing to a greater understanding of the arts and art history *if* it included a substantial account of artistic functions and their evolution over the course of history. Indeed, I have tried to do something like this, in a very small way, in my own work.²⁹ But unlike Danto's theory, which does not merely tell us that artworks mean something, but goes into enormous detail as to the conditions under which artworks can mean something and into the history of the kinds of things that artworks have meant, we learn nothing significant about artistic functions from Stecker, whose discussion of the subject is concerned solely with the problem of distinguishing artistic functions from 'accidental' ones, the solution for which involves no reflection on the history of actual artistic functions, but relies, instead, on the addition of an even more intricate layer of logical apparatus to his definition.³⁰ We are left once more, then, with a definition of 'art' that cannot aid the speaker in his art-related discourse and which leaves him no more enlightened with respect to the subject than he was before; with an analysis of 'art' that has no discernible purpose other than to fix the extension of the word in logical space.

Finally, let us consider James Carney, who in 'The Style Theory of Art', claims that he is offering a definition of 'art', but who adds, a few pages later, that it might be an open concept after all.³¹ What should we make of this abrupt about-face? We soon find out that it is to be resolved by way of a

²⁹ See my 'Normative Criticism and the Objective Value of Artworks', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, vol. 60, no. 2 (Spring 2002), pp. 157–159.

³⁰ Stecker, *Artworks: Definition, Meaning, Value*, pp. 54–57.

³¹ Carney, 'The Style Theory of Art', p. 281.

delicate parsing of the word 'definition'. If by 'definition' one means a *nominal* definition, Carney tells us, then the analysis of 'art' will yield an open-ended disjunction of characteristics, but, as he explains, this is entirely consistent with there being an *essential* definition of 'art'. For those of us who are, perhaps, a bit foggy on the benefit of having an essential definition of 'art' over and above a nominal one—the value in having a definition of 'art' that is nothing more than a clever logical device, when one already has a substantive analysis of it—Carney offers little help. He does *not* believe that his definition will render people more capable of identifying works of art or of using and responding to proper uses of the word than they previously have been (Carney says that 'most individuals in a community that use the word "artwork" need not have the identifying knowledge'³²) and so it is fair to ask what good it is to anyone to know that

W is an artwork if and only if it is of the same kind as the W's to which 'artwork' has been applied, where 'same kind' is construed as standing in a specified relation to past artworks, and where the 'originating samples,' Ur Art, are indexically designated?³³

Carney never explains, but if we exclude the possibility that such knowledge plays a positive role in improving linguistic performance or in contributing to an increased understanding of art, as a phenomenon, then semantic-reference would seem to be the only answer.

One final word on today's New Wave. Stecker, Levinson, and other contemporary New Wavers have insisted that they have refuted the common charge that definitions like theirs are circular. Stecker assures us, for example, that even though he defines 'art' in terms of 'artistic functions' and 'artistic forms', the circularity that results is only an illusion:

[W]hile we cannot say what art forms and art functions are for every t, we can, in principle, say what they are for any given past or present t. For such a specified time, we can replace the words 'function of art' and 'art form' with a disjunction of functions and forms. Such a recast definition will not even have the appearance of circularity.³⁴

Levinson's 'refutation' of the charge of circularity is nearly identical. To define 'art' as something, the intention behind which is that it should be regarded in a way in which previous works of art have been regarded, is not 'strictly

³² *Ibid.*, p. 273.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 273.

³⁴ Stecker, *Artworks: Definition, Meaning, Value*, p. 51.

speaking' circular, Levinson tells us, because 'one doesn't have to know what "art work at t" means... ; one only has to grant that there is a set of things which are art works prior to t—*whatever* they are and *whatever* that (viz. "art work") might mean.'³⁵ (Carney, who devotes just one paragraph to the circularity-problem, says that Levinson's solution is good enough for him.³⁶)

In both cases, we are being asked to believe that because the tasks of identifying works of art and defining 'art' are independent of one another—that is because we do not need to have a definition in hand in order to be able to identify things as artworks—defining 'art' in terms of art and art-related notions is not circular. Maybe this is true. Nonetheless, the reply, in its fixation on the letter of the objection, misses its spirit. The fact that a person can itemize artistic functions or list objects that previously have been artistically regarded strikes me as irrelevant, since he does not understand the basis of their grouping. He knows *what* things comprise the list, but has no idea *why*, so what he has is nothing more than an unanalysed pairing: the word 'art' on one side of the mental ledger and a group of objects or functions on the other. Perhaps there is no formal circularity involved in defining 'art' in terms of 'artistic function', 'artistic form', or 'the intention to be artistically regarded', but so what? We have learned nothing about art, artistic functions, artistic forms, or artistic regard that we did not already know or could not have learned, even while remaining ignorant of the definition in question.

V

In my opening remarks, I observed that the rights and wrongs, with respect to the definitional project in aesthetics, are not so easily demarcated. Since our discussion, thus far, has been limited to the faults of the theorists and, especially, of the current New Wave, it is important, in closing, that we identify, clearly, the chief shortcoming of the classic anti-theoretical position on the subject. Although Wittgensteinian treatments of the concept of art have tended to avoid the worst mistake committed by the theorists—that is the false notion that there is a definition of 'art', which provides the graspable content of the word, while also determining its extension and facilitating speaker-reference—they have been only marginally better in their accounts of the value of an analysis of 'art'; accounts that have tended to focus exclusively on the practical manifestations of understanding—on *performance*—to the utter exclusion of what we might call, with Aristotle, the contemplative dimension. Of course, this is only an art-specific instance of the common complaint that

³⁵ Levinson, 'Defining Art Historically', p. 240 (emphases in the original).

³⁶ Carney, 'The Style Theory of Art', p. 286.

Wittgenstein's philosophy unduly neglects inner experience, at the price of an impoverished, unconvincing picture of human nature and life.

One can easily see the role that knowledge of the family-resemblance base of a word plays in practice. To have a set of paradigmatic instances of art, to entertain a number of stereotypical descriptions of artworks, and to be able to make connections to other objects, on the basis of varying types and degrees of similarity to one's base samples, is constitutive of one's capacity to engage in *acceptable* public discourse on the arts, irrespective of the fact that none of these stereotypes suffices to identify the entire range of actual and possible artworks. (Indeed, this is precisely what Putnam had in mind, when he said that despite the fact that 'orange-furred creature with stripes' in no way suffices to determine the extension of 'tiger', a person cannot be said to have acquired the word, without knowing such stereotypical things about tigers, for otherwise his public uses of the word will not 'pass muster'.³⁷) But, as plausible as this conception of the use of a substantive analysis of 'art' is, I would argue that it is also incomplete; that there is an equal if not greater value in the non-practical role of such an analysis. It is here that we come to the contemplative dimension of understanding—to its impact on what, just a paragraph ago, I called 'inner experience'—and on this, Wittgensteinians have had little to contribute, for their entire philosophical orientation has traditionally been directed towards the denial of its relevance and, even, of its very existence.

If we meditate on the family-resemblance base of 'art'—that is, on central cases and traditional characterizations—we will quickly notice two things: (i) there is a strong, long-standing tradition of thinking of art as an essentially *gratuitous* activity (meant in the descriptive, not the evaluative sense); and (ii) that there is an equally strong, long-standing, and related tradition of thinking that art produces a distinctive class of experiences—of beauty and of significant form, most prominently—which have the common property of being ends in themselves or at least, of being suitably self-sufficient, such that whatever practical implications they may have are, at best, indirect and many times removed. Philosophers of art, inspired by Kant's account of the experience of free beauty, which requires 'free play' of the understanding over the sensory manifold (that is contemplating sensory experience, without conceptualizing it), conceived of art as consisting of those things that give rise to a sense of beauty; one which has no connection to their specific natures or functions and uses or to the dimensions of value that arise, with respect to those functions and uses. Clive Bell, perhaps the most famous of these Kant-inspired theorists, argued that the distinctive experience that we have of artworks is of pure form, which is fundamentally disinterested—that is which refers to nothing

³⁷ Putnam, 'The Meaning of "Meaning"', pp. 247–252.

outside of itself—and that the value of this experience is essentially self-contained, that is, not instrumental.³⁸

Of course, ‘art’ cannot be adequately defined on such a basis, as Bell thought it could. Nor can art’s value be exhaustively construed in terms of aesthetic experience, as Bell would have had it. But once we put this sort of overreaching aside, we must admit that it is impossible to ignore this dimension of art’s meaning and value. Certainly, if we are talking about the concept of *fine* art, as it has been understood, since the emergence of the modern system of the arts, it would be absurd to deny that at its core is the idea that there is a purely contemplative dimension to our experience of artworks; that one of our primary interests in art is in the states of mind and, especially, the distinctive pleasures that are engendered by its contemplation. Now, if we think of the philosophical analysis of ‘art’, in the way that I have suggested we should, then to treat the value of this form of analysis as deriving solely from the degree to which it enhances linguistic performance is to take a position that is incongruous with the very nature of the thing that we are trying to understand. To take the performativist position that understanding what ‘art’ means is nothing more than being able to engage in competent public performance with the word and with the other words in its family, is to take us to a point at which, as Iris Murdoch said of performativist accounts of moral decision, ‘people may begin to protest and cry out and say that something has been taken from them’.³⁹ Surely, they would be right, for no less than in our experience of individual works of art, there is an essential component of our historical, critical, and philosophical investigations of the arts that is concerned not with any practical purpose that might be served by understanding them better, but with the sublime pleasure that is constitutive of that understanding; a pleasure that is surpassed only by that which arises from one’s understanding of self and of the other human souls, whom one loves. The exploration of this dimension of artistic understanding—of this distinctive form of sublimity—is deserving of a detailed phenomenology, but *that* project will have to wait until another time and place.⁴⁰

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³⁸ Clive Bell, *Art* (New York: Frederick A. Stokes, Co., 1913), pp. 16–17, 24, 28–29, 44–46.

³⁹ Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good* (New York: Routledge, 1971), p. 13.

⁴⁰ I would like to thank Ian Ground, of the Centre for Lifelong Learning, David Shein, of Bard College, and the students enrolled in my upper-division aesthetics course, at Missouri State University, Fall 2005, in conversation with whom many of the ideas explored in this essay were developed. I would also like to thank Peter Lamarque and an anonymous referee for their help at the ‘post-production’ stage of the essay’s development.