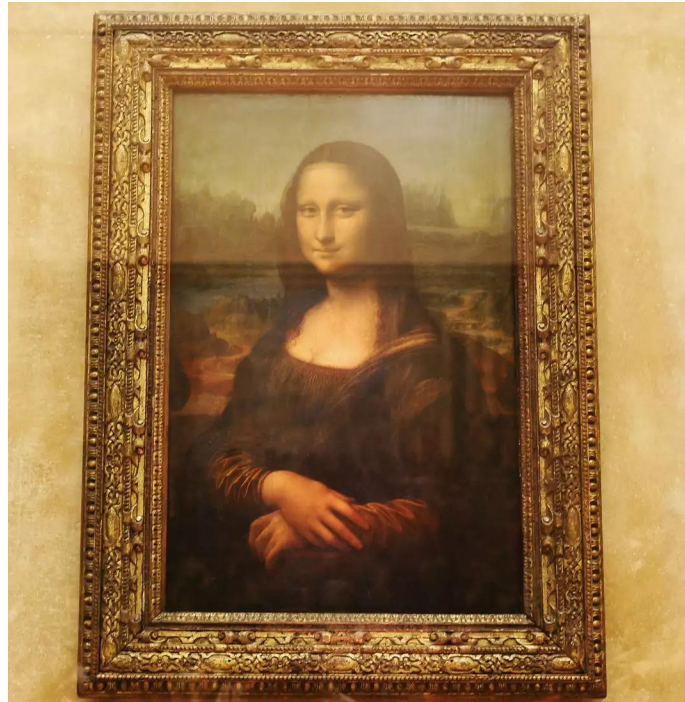


Submitted for the 2023 Tony Chadwick Prize

***Can art be defined by a set of necessary and sufficient conditions?***

It seems philosophy has failed to provide an adequate definition for the word 'art'. The value, or even possibility, of such a definition has remained in question throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Adajian, 2022), whether as a consequence of philosophical developments (such as Wittgenstein's family resemblance concept) or due to the introduction of modern works in the art world that do not conform to conceptions previously held. For example, conditions such as 'a painting'; 'a demonstration of virtuosic skill'; 'acceptance from the institution' that succeed in defining, say, Leonardo's *Mona Lisa* fall short when applied to a relatively modern piece such as Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain*.



Leonardo da Vinci - *Mona Lisa* (c.1503-1519)

Credit: Pascal Le Segretain / Getty Images



Marcel Duchamp - *Fountain* (1917)

Credit: Alamy

Whilst there have been many previous attempts to provide definitions and/or theories of art, the wide range of arguments, such as the institutional and historical theories, cannot be covered here. The purpose of this essay is to briefly set forth the claim made by Morris Weitz's open concept argument, wherein he concludes that a definition of art is not possible. I will then use this position as a foil to argue that a definition for the word 'art' which comprises a set of necessary and sufficient conditions can indeed be found.

It should be noted that this essay is not attempting to comment upon what a language-user in everyday society may be attempting to communicate when they use the word 'art'. The word itself can, of course, be used informally to mean many different things; 'this meal is a work of art!'; 'they have... artistic tendencies'; 'the mind of an artist'; 'the art of deception' etc. Instead, focus is given to the necessary and sufficient conditions required for the delineation of the word itself in a literal sense, rather than on a socio-linguistic discussion regarding whether a person in a particular society is correct or accurate in their application of such a word in casual conversation. Indeed, perhaps failure to make such a distinction between the informal usage of a word at a particular time and its formal, functional delineation is the cause of much of the disagreement around what art is.

In his 1956 article *The Role of Theory in Aesthetics*, Morris Weitz puts forward an argument that attempts to put an end to the search for a philosophical definition of (that is, the search for necessary and sufficient conditions

required for the application of) the word 'art'. Building on Wittgenstein's outline of family resemblance in *Philosophical Investigations*, Weitz argues that the word 'art' represents an open concept. His argument is as follows: a concept is closed if necessary and sufficient conditions for its application can be stated. But, 'if we actually look and see what we call 'art', we will also find no common properties' (p. 30-31). Therefore, the concept of 'art' is open and cannot be assigned a determinate set of necessary and sufficient conditions. Weitz accepts that one can choose to close the concept for 'special purposes', but insists that to close the concept as a whole is 'ludicrous since it forecloses on the very conditions of creativity in the arts' (p.32). One could criticise Weitz here by pointing out that these 'creative conditions' are no different to the common properties that he has already asserted are impossible. Regardless, Weitz dismisses any attempt at defining art by default, not because particular conditions for the concept of art have been incorrectly chosen but rather by maintaining that 'their basic inadequacies reside instead in a fundamental misconception of art' (p.27).

However, by proposing a set of conditions that, it will be argued, succeed in defining art, this essay rejects Weitz's conclusion, and thus aims to remedy the difficulty encountered in doing so not by denying that a definition can be found, but instead by rectifying any previous attempts to arrive at necessary and sufficient conditions for a definition. Quite simply, Weitz did not look hard enough!

Here is an attempt to provide a definition of art by outlining six conditions that are necessary and sufficient:

something is art if and only if

*it is [1] created by a person, [2] is consciously presented [5] within a culture, [4] is to be perceived via the sensory faculties of a person and [6] has the primary purpose of [3] instantiating aesthetic quality.*

Let us unpack this definition. Each number included above represents the order in which each part of the definition will be isolated and examined.

### **[1] It is created by a person**

Irrespective of how convincing the above definition is in its entirety, a much simpler argument can be made that the one common property of everything that has ever been called art is that of being created by a person. Care has been taken to use 'person' rather than 'human' so as to allow for the possibility of conscious, non-human entities that fit the criteria of person-hood (within, say, a hypothetical culture of extra-terrestrial beings) creating their own art. By making the case for this condition alone, one can rebut Weitz's claim that art shares no common property.

## **[2] It is consciously presented**

A crucial part of the definition is this psychological element. It is not enough to simply create, say, a visual pattern of shapes, colours and lines of varying levels of harmony. It is the conscious choice to present such a thing that would be needed to qualify use of the word 'art'. If somebody were to casually doodle some pleasant patterns on a piece of paper whilst talking on the phone, their creation would not be art; a further step to *present* what had been created would need to be taken. This could perhaps be represented by the act of framing a drawing, for instance. However, this conscious intention need not necessarily be represented by a visual change on the work; it may be purely psychological and invisible.

## **[3] The instantiation of aesthetic quality**

It is important to make the distinction between that which is, perhaps superficially, described as ugly, and that which is un-aesthetic. Much in the same way a human individual can be considered beautiful irrespective of the way their visual features conform to ideals of 'beauty', an artwork can still instantiate aesthetic quality without conforming to a particular societal conception of, say, perfection or harmony. Thus, Edvard Munch's *The Scream* can still instantiate aesthetic beauty (perhaps in its ability to connect to a painful human emotion), even if it is described as 'ugly' by a viewer. Here,

'ugly' is referring to the lack of a particular sense of visual harmony and/or geometric perfection, rather than an absence of aesthetic quality. So such a criticism would not strip a work of its status as art when applying this new definition. Indeed, it might be that it has aesthetic properties due to the creative act of simply presenting something unfamiliar into a new context (Adajian, T. 2022).



Edvard Munch - *The Scream* (1893)

Credit: Oslo Nasjonalgalleriet

#### **[4] It is perceived via the sensory faculties of a person**

Here a distinction is made between aesthetic quality that is perceived via the senses and that which has been observed via some other non-sensory faculty, such as the abstract understanding of an elegant mathematical equation.

Even if we accept that, as many mathematicians will claim, a particular mathematical proof instantiates some kind of beauty, it is an aesthetic quality that is not perceived via the senses; this perception is not from, say, my visual perception of the black ink of my pen on paper as I write out the mathematical equation. Rather, this beauty is perceived via the abstract realm. One's sensory perception has no effect on the quality of the abstract beauty and thus what is being observed is not art. Interestingly, this condition regarding sensory perception implies that art could be perceived via smell, taste and touch, in addition to sight and hearing. This raises the question of whether it could ever be possible to create art that is perceived via these senses<sup>1</sup>.

#### **[5] Within a culture**

The world 'culture' includes that which many institutional theorists may call the 'artworld' (Adajian, T. 2022). However, culture represents more than merely the institutions of art; it is the context within which the creation is

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<sup>1</sup> If we consider such things as perfume (smell), certain cookery (taste) and relaxing spa treatments (touch), perhaps we can begin to conceive of a way in which actual art could be perceived these senses also.



consciously presented. That is not to say the art must be displayed in a gallery or even seen by many people; rather, it is perceived by those who belong in a culture, and thus such observations are in relation to other observations made within that same culture. A painting created by an individual in a cave which is never seen by anybody else would thus not be considered art. This condition is the final step, if you will: something is created, then it is presented, and then finally what is presented is perceived by a culture, the audience of the artwork, be that millions of people in a gallery or somebody's family in a living room.

#### **[6] Its primary purpose being the instantiation of aesthetic quality**

This condition distinguishes between art and those other things that do meet the criteria above: cars, buildings, furniture, propaganda, advertising etc. A car with a unique creative design, extravagant colours and high aesthetic value is not art; this is simply because its primary purpose is nonetheless to be a transport vehicle. This sixth condition is, again, psychological, in that the genuine intention of the creator determines whether the condition is met. A song devised by a music industry mogul to brainwash listeners into purchasing a particular brand of drink would not be art, because, despite the song perhaps possessing the properties mentioned above, its primary purpose above all else is not to instantiate aesthetic quality. Controversially, this condition suggests that architecture does not qualify as art. After all, the

primary purpose of any architectural feat is functional; even the most beautiful cathedral will be considered a failure if it does not serve its primary purpose as a building.

To demonstrate the usefulness of these proposed necessary and sufficient conditions, let us consider four examples of situations where difficulty may arise in determining what is and is not art.

### **Example 1:**

A sunset view brings about a sense of beauty and awe to those perceiving it, certainly an aesthetic quality. But it is not created by a person, and so we can conclude that it is not art<sup>2</sup>. What if a person decides to take a photo of the sunset and, having developed the photo, puts it in a frame and displays it in their family home? By using the definition provided above, one could conclude that this is art. By taking a photo of this aesthetic natural phenomenon, this person is responsible for the creation of an image which differs from the natural phenomena in its containment within visual boundaries (the border of the photo). To then develop the photo and frame it is to consciously present it. Being a photo, it is to be perceived via the senses (sight) and, in this instance, the primary purpose of this presentation is the instantiation of aesthetic quality, that is, to show the beauty of the sunset. (If the primary

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<sup>2</sup> For the purpose of this example, let us put aside the argument that the natural world we perceive has a creator-person e.g. God

purpose for the presentation of this photo was to instead, say, bring awareness to the pollution in the sky, this would not be art. The difference here is psychological and thus invisible.) Finally, by displaying the framed creation in their family home, it has been presented within a culture.

### **Example 2:**

***I hear a myriad of birdsong as I walk through a forest. I like what I hear and record it on my phone. When I arrive home, I listen back to the recording and pick out a particular sequence of sounds that stick out to me. I transcribe these sounds to sheet music, forming a melody. I then pick up a cello and play this melody I have written down. Six months later, I am performing this melody live on stage at the Royal Albert Hall to a sold-out audience as part of a musical event. Decades after that, a recording of this performance is used to accompany a video used for political propaganda.***

- ***I hear a myriad of birdsong as I walk through a forest.*** The birdsong being heard is not art. (Even if one insisted that birds are persons and thus birdsong is the sound of music created by a person, we could still maintain that it is not art because the primary purpose of the birdsong is based in survival [Catchpole. C. K, & Slater, P. J. 2008], not the instantiation of aesthetic quality.)

- ***I record it on my phone. When I arrive home, I listen back to the recording and pick out a particular sequence of sounds that stick out to me.*** Here the moment of creation begins.

- ***I transcribe these sounds to sheet music, forming a melody.*** The creation is complete.

- ***I then pick up a cello and play this melody I have written down.*** Here, the creation is being consciously presented, albeit to nobody.

- ***Six months later, I am performing this melody live on stage at the Royal Albert Hall to a sold-out audience as part of a musical event .***

Here we have something that is consciously presented within a culture, perceived via the senses and created by a person with the primary purpose of instantiating aesthetic quality; thus we have art.

- ***Decades after that, a recording of this performance is used to accompany a video of political propaganda.*** The intention is important here. Even though a genuine piece of art has been captured on a recording, we are not able to therefore describe the propaganda video as art, despite the inclusion of this music. The primary purpose of the video is not the instantiation of aesthetic quality and thus whilst the live recording in isolation

may be art, the propaganda piece as a whole, sound-tracked by the very same music, is not art.

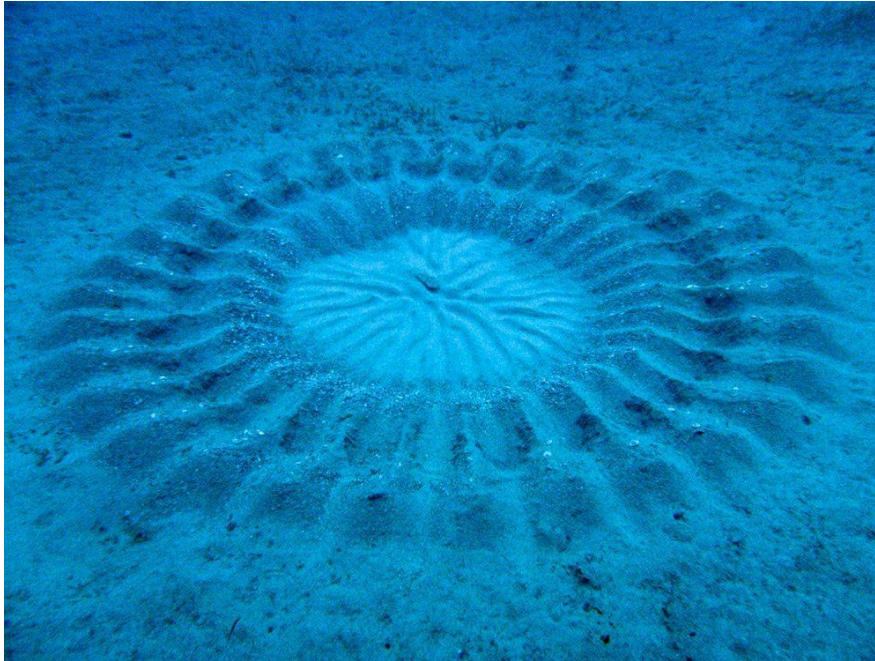
### **Example 3:**

A child at school absent-mindedly scribbles on a piece of paper before wandering off. According to the proposed definition, the piece of scribbled paper left lying there is not art because, amongst other factors, there is no conscious presentation involved in this creation. However, if the teacher was to walk past and, noticing this scribble left by the child, decides to frame the paper and hang it on the wall in the classroom, we now have a piece of art. However, here the teacher is the artist, not the child. The teacher possesses the conscious intention to present what the child did, even though it was not the teacher but the child who produced the scribbles.

### **Example 4:**

One may argue that if we encounter a work of 'art' produced by a non-person such as an animal, we have a counter-example for the definition. Take the case of the white-spotted puffer-fish, *Torquigener albomaculos*, which creates a geometric pattern in the sand in order to attract a mate. As tempting as it may be to consider such a natural marvel to be art, one must remind themselves that it merely *resembles* art, not due to any lack of aesthetic

beauty but rather because the primary purpose of the process embarked upon by the puffer-fish is not to instantiate aesthetic quality but to build a nest as part of a mating ritual (Mizuuchi, R., Kawase, H., Shin, H. *et al.* 2018). Thus it is not art and such a case does not succeed as a counter-example.



The nest of the white-spotted puffer-fish

Credit: Kimiaki Ito

Difficulties in providing a definition for the word art have led thinkers such as Morriz Weitz to conclude that doing so is impossible. In this essay I attempt to refute Weitz's conclusion by arguing that six necessary and sufficient conditions which determine whether something can be considered art do exist. To support my case, I offer four brief examples to demonstrate how this definition may allow one to pin-point exactly when something becomes or stops becoming art. Psychological intention within a culture plays an

important role in this definition, alongside distinctions between the sensory/abstract, the primary/non-primary purpose of instantiating aesthetic quality and persons/non-persons. Following a brief exposition of these conditions, I conclude that architecture would not qualify as art under this proposed definition. I also suggest that art that is perceived via smell, taste and touch may be possible. The effectiveness of this proposed definition in providing a case against Weitz's open concept argument depends on the extent to which one is convinced that the six conditions set forth successfully account for all art that has existed and all the art that is yet to exist.

Word count: 2799

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