

An Investigation on the Nature of Definitions in Aesthetics

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Definitions are still a central part of the aesthetics, but the increasing number of definitions in the field of aesthetics have led to an environment that is more chaotic and unrecognizable more than ever. Thus, in this paper, I will first try to answer why we did become fixated on producing such definitions and then I'll show if my reasoning holds, we don't have to define art to engage with the artworks. Eventually I'll argue, if that our need to define art comes from a wish to categorize and organize the artworks, and considering the fact that we fail to do that, then we need to refocus on the artworks themselves in order to give them back the central position that they deserve. Then I am going to suggest, to do that we have to follow a scientific approach in which we primarily consider the elements that are present in the artwork or can be implied through them so that we can form categories that the definitions promised to us.

I've never come across any article on the subject of art whose authors justified the reason why they decided to give a definition, or for that matter I've never thought about it myself, trying to explain why that particular definition came into existence. Definitions seemed obvious enough or were thought as axioms which cannot be inquired further. Nevertheless, a question posed by Gallie made me think otherwise; in his attempt to understand the nature of art criticism, he sees the emergence of a definition as inevitable and he tries to follow the reasoning of a few critics who gives a definition of art in their writings by saying that unless they possess a '*concept of art*', how could they talk about art; about what it is and what it is not? (1956, p. 10). Although this was only one of the explanations about why aestheticians choose to define art, it seemed one of the leading reasons because it was the same reason why we would define anything. So, the main argument to give a definition of art was that if we don't possess a '*concept of the thing*', then we cannot talk about that thing intelligibly. This is the first point that I want to contest because it seems that our reasoning to give definitions based on this reasoning seems problematic.

If we interpret the main argument for giving definitions in order to grasp it in detail, we can divide it into its premises and it can be stated as following:

- a. If you do not know how to limit the thing you are involved in, i.e., if you do not possess a concept of what you're interacting with, then you lack knowledge.
- b. Limiting a thing is possible through a definition.
- c. A lack of knowledge on the nature of the thing, which one is interacting, implies ignorance and incapability.
- d. Consequently, any attempt to involve in any subject must start with a concise definition of the subject for the reason that the involvement might be intelligible.

This is a general argument for why we need to define things, and it would be true for most cases; for example, if I want to play chess then it is a requisite to learn how each piece moves, i.e., how they are defined in that particular system. In a closed system such as a game of chess, I need precise definitions of the elements involved and also the definition of the rules of the game itself so that I would be able to produce something intelligible. However, to assume that it is always necessary to define what one is involved in is an extremity because then we take the human mind as a programmed machine that cannot function with undefined elements, which is obviously not true. What I try to contrast here is that I need to have the concept of chess in order to be a player of chess, that is a necessity; however, I do not need to know what is art to appreciate or to discuss it. Thus, I am justified to demand definitions and limitations in one and not necessarily in the other. In fact, according to Kristeller the definitions in the field of '*aesthetics*' are only produced after the 18th century (1951, p. 497), so there have been people who had achieved to talk about art without definitions. That doesn't mean aesthetics didn't exist until the 18th century, but it means the influence of the proper definitions has grown enormously. In other words, aestheticians started to discuss art based on the definitions they suggested instead of the specific artworks they had in mind. For example, Formalists might examine several paintings and come to think that they all have some common elements that distinguish them as artworks; the colours are applied in a meaningful way, specific techniques are used etc. But at the end, they expect artworks to transform themselves into the words as definitions, so when a rival definition attacks Formalists, let's say Emotionalists, they directly attack to that definition as lacking. Emotionalists might say that the definition that Formalists suggested lack the essential theme of art, that is the emotion, and which particular reason led the formalists to give that written account which they give is never investigated, what matters becomes the lack of a specific word that the rival theory highly esteems. So, the definitions first failed to contain artworks as they wished to do, and caused further confusion.

At this stage, it is pointless also to go through the reasons why or where the attempts to define art went wrong, but it is obvious that if my reasoning regarding why we produce those definitions is correct, then we need to stop giving definitions and return to the artworks without the aid of the definitions as we had already done in the pre-definitions period. The idea that we do not need definitions, finds itself an advocate most recently in the article of Lopes who claims that already established definitions become insufficient in the face of contemporary artworks, which he says that it has come to that with every new artwork, we need a new definition (2008, pp. 121-22). But even before that, there were people who stand against the definitions, which one of the most notable names is Morris Weitz. Weitz claimed that art is what he calls an “open concept” which means the artworks are not static and inanimate objects that can be contained (1956, p. 32). So, Weitz attacks the idea of a definition on the front that the set of criteria they suggest will become obsolete quickly, thus we should accept the art as an open concept. There can be found many other accounts of rejecting the definitions in the field of art, but it seems the reasons given for such rejections seem to be mainly based on the insufficiency of these definitions to contain the art works, while I’ve tried to criticize the idea by showing that they are unnecessary because the reason that causes to them exist is taken out of context. If I go back to those premises which I laid down as the main argument for giving definitions; (a) is clearly false because we might not have a complete and perfect understanding of the thing, we are interacting but that does not necessarily imply a lack of knowledge. Also (b) is not necessarily true because although limiting a subject might be achieved through a definition, it is not a necessary step in having the knowledge of that subject. Consequently, it is clear that we do not need definitions to engage with the artworks, but we still need to ask ourselves for what purpose the definitions are designed to serve so that we could see whether there is any need that is not satisfied in the absence of the definitions. I already said, one of the purposes of definitions was to place works of creative expression into the categories of ‘art’ and ‘not-art’. Eventually, definitions are utilized to compare art works, in other words to place them into categories of ‘good art’ or ‘bad art’. So, the definitions appear as an aid in the categorization and comparison. Nevertheless, every definition brings with itself a different set of criteria than before, so it leads to the emergence of many sub-categories of the categories mentioned.

What we need to do right now is to go back where we started, in which our thinking is directed towards the thing that engages with us. Engagement as a word especially emphasizes a neutrality in the relation between art works and the spectators because it sounds like that we could only participate in the art work we’re engaging as long as the art work also engages with us. Engagement thus is an agreement, so the

future of aesthetics lies in the fact that we recognize this relation of equality and then choose to engage in the art works by considering their existence not as something we would grant to them but as something we readily accept without any further inquiry. But when we attempt to define art, we try to bring our definitions and conceptions to an art work that is already existing and has a claim of being an artwork, then we miss the essence, which is the artwork itself, for the sake of tailoring the artwork into the definitions we create; thus, we introduce irrelevant categories into the field of art, which are themselves foreign to the art work. So, I argue that if the sincere wish of the aestheticians who attempted to define the art is to categorize the art works so that it would make sense to us, then what we need to do at first is to change our perception of the way that we do categorizing.

If we have agreed that the artworks are dynamic and open systems, then we could also agree that any set of criteria we produced, would not last for eternity. Also, I assume that we have agreed on definitions are born out of a desire to understand artworks through the categorization of them, so what I want to do at the final part of this paper is to suggest that we should do this categorizing scientifically; that means we should approach the art work in an observant sense. I think that the art history shows us the way how to do this; some movements in paintings such as cubism, impressionism and mannerism, etc. are the epitomes of scientific approach in the field of art because they group together some limited number of examples so that we can work them in detail and discuss them within the limits of those categories. In the same manner, architecture can be labelled as baroque, gothic or modern. But, styles in painting or labels in architecture constitute only one aspect of categorizations taking its source directly from the essence of the artwork, the resemblances in the artworks are inevitable thus we can create many different categories. For example, one can form a category in music called '*melancholy*' based on the sombre composition and poignant rhythms or in literature there can be a category of fantasy novel with a strong female leads. The examples could be applied to different fields and multiplied in different ways, but what they have in common is the fact that their primary consideration is what is open to anyone and the resemblances among them. Consequently, by focusing on the artwork and on the accounts that centralize the art work, we can still categorize them, we can still compare them or judge one group as better than the other. It appears to me that what we only lose is the work of decoding the words when we made that discussion through the abstract definitions.

I think the account I laid out can be criticized in several ways, and to clarify my point further I'll attempt to answer some probable objections. The first objection might be that the styles or categories that lead to different movements in the field of art are

themselves disputed as much as the definitions of the art. Also, subjective and personalized methods of categorizing applied to the artworks might complicate or disrupt the function of categorizing, which was to help us understand the artworks in a more unified way. This objection is again voiced in the writings of Morris Weitz, as he already did for the concept of art, he understands style also as an “*open concept*”. In his book, *The Opening Mind*, he takes one example from painting, the style of *mannerism*, and after discussing it in detail he concludes that even in this tiny part on the field of painting there are many disagreements regarding where the mannerism first appeared, when it appeared or which elements make the painting a mannerist painting (1977, pp. 130-39). It is true that even the most widely accepted categories are not well-defined in themselves, but they have some particular characteristics that we can't mistake them for another movement. For example, I don't think anyone would mistake a Cubist painting for a Mannerist one, and that implies the suggested category succeeds in differing one from another, and thus maintains its function. Also, there can be many categories as long as the source of them is the art work itself, so in the case of mannerism there might appear sub-categories that further divides the dispute in order to solve it. At the end, it seems that since all the differences comes from the observable elements, they can be resolved through a discussion. Moreover, there need not be a single and absolute category that is unanimously accepted, but diversity is welcomed because at the end they all stem from the observable elements of the art work that is open to anyone unlike the abstract definitions. So, the second objection would be that what we reached at the end of categorizing through the scientific approach, resembles very much what we reached through our attempts to define the art, how does this novel approach help us?

I think that with a quasi-scientific examination of the artworks, we never lose sight of the essence of the artwork; that means contrary to the abstract definitions, we at least have the advantage of knowing what we refer to. But more important than that, the categories based on the artwork itself do not exclude each other; one could accept many categories in different fields of art and that wouldn't be contradictory, while it is very hard to think the same for the definitions of art. Consequently, there would be no problem in accepting two different categories simultaneously such as; a subjectively created category, like colour orange in the paintings, and a more general category such as bronze Greek sculptures in sculpture. Yet, it is hard to imagine an Emotionalist would agree with an Institutionalists regarding what they should call art. Finally, last objection to such an approach of categorization might be that even though such categorization can be made and utilized to a larger scale, it does not really say anything about the art work itself; it understands art works in a simplistic manner and

shadows the deeper meaning of the art. To that objection I'd say, for those who look to the artworks with the purpose of finding a meaning in them, a category of 'meaning' can be created with the condition that it is based on a literal part of the artwork. To illustrate that, I can create a category of meaning called 'Spanish Civil War' and include in that category Picasso's Guernica or any other Civil War memorial sculpture in the Spain for that matter, and I think that it would say about the artwork more than an abstract theory applied to that artwork. Many other examples can be given, such as one can create a category of meaning called 'racial justice' and include in it the artworks which suit to that category. Although, these might seem only stating the obvious, they still might equip us with the knowledge we need in order to lead us to that deeper meaning.

Definitions, at the end, are reference points, they are concepts of our cumulative knowledge of the artworks and how we interpret them. In every attempt to engage with an artwork, we in fact make use of some reference points to compare and evaluate it, definitions are only a generalized way of doing this. Nevertheless, it seems that we forget which precedes the other, do the definitions comes first or artworks? I claimed that we are wrongly led to believe that our engagement with the art works should be generalized as definitions, and these definitions should guide us in our following encounters with the artworks. So, at first, I said not only we failed to define art and the artworks, but our reasoning to form definitions were based on false premises. Then, I tried to find the reasons why we used the definitions and what purpose they served, which I concluded they were intended to be a systematic attempt to bring order to the vast field of art works through categorization. Subsequently, I suggested that if the intention is to make sense of the art through categorization, we could approach to the art works scientifically as an art historian would do, but in a more encompassing way. I suggested we could even form our own categorization as long as the elements and evidences are directly observable from the artworks. I think such an attitude would establish the importance of the artwork again and help us put a distance between ourselves and the chaos caused by the abundance of the definitions.

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