

Margolis on Defining Art

James O. Young

University of Victoria*

ABSTRACT | Joseph Margolis' writings on definitions of art, which often take the form of a debate with Morris Weitz, are under-appreciated. Margolis agrees with Weitz that the concept of art is open in the sense that works can be admitted to the class of artworks when these works do not have all of the properties thought to be necessary and sufficient for membership in the class prior to the time of its admission. Margolis also agreed that we cannot go back to the old project of defining art by determining the real essence of art. Nevertheless, he does not abandon the project of defining art in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions. These conditions are not, however, read off the real essence of art. Traditionally, the process of defining art began by inspecting artworks to determine what makes them valuable. Margolis realised that the only way forward at this point is to decide what is valuable and then decide what is art. Margolis' approach has the consequence that definitions of art are what C. L. Stevenson (1938) called persuasive definitions.

KEYWORDS | Definitions of Art; Joseph Margolis; Morris Weitz; Aesthetics; Persuasive Definition

* Correspondence: James O. Young – Department of Philosophy, University of Victoria, P.O. Box 1700, STN CSC, Victoria, B.C., Canada, V8W 2Y2. Email: joy@uvic.ca



1 Introduction

Over the course of his long and distinguished career, Joseph Margolis returned time after time to questions about defining art. Often, his reflections on this subject took the form of a debate with Morris Weitz and his oft-cited essay, "The Role of Theory in Aesthetics" (1956). Following in what he believed to be the footsteps of Wittgenstein, Weitz held that the concept of art is an open concept, art has no essence, and the concept of art cannot be defined in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions shared by all works of art. Margolis agreed that the concept of art is open in the sense that works can be admitted to the class of artworks when these works do not have all of the properties thought to be necessary and sufficient for membership in the class prior to the time of its admission. Margolis also agreed that philosophers cannot go back to the old project of defining art by determining the real essence of art. Nevertheless, he does not abandon the project of defining art in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions. These conditions are not, however, read off the real essence of art. Traditionally, the process of defining art began by inspecting artworks to determine what makes them valuable. Margolis realised that the only way forward at this point is to decide what is valuable and then decide what is art. Margolis' approach has the consequence that definitions of art are what C. L. Stevenson (1938) called persuasive definitions. At this point in art history, definitions of art can only be persuasive definitions.

Margolis wrote about definitions of art for well over forty years and a commentator faces a challenge in trying to fit together in a coherent whole everything he says about defining art. This essay is an attempt to identify some themes that run through all of Margolis' work on defining art. The hope is to draw attention to ideas that Margolis has about the definition of art that are under-appreciated. (Under-appreciated they certainly are. For example, Margolis was given short shrift in Stephen Davies' landmark book on definitions of art (1994). Two of Margolis' important works on defining art (1958 and 1980) were not even cited by Davies. At the time of writing, Margolis (1958) has been cited 15 times according to Google Scholar. In contrast, Weitz (1956) has been cited more than 1300 times. This is not an accurate reflection of the relative importance of these works.) Margolis' ideas can assist philosophers in understanding where we are in the project of defining art and how we ought to think about defining art in view of developments in the arts over the course of the past century or two.

2 How a Problem Arose

At one time, defining art was a comparatively straight-forward enterprise. The phrase “fine art” had a well-established use in European thought. It referred to five canonical fine arts: poetry (that is, literature), painting, music, sculpture and dance. “Fine art” or, as it came to be known, “art” could simply be given a descriptive definition that captured the established use of the term.

In both antiquity and from the Renaissance until at least the eighteenth century, the fine arts were believed to be imitative arts (Young 2015). The project of defining art was made easier by the fact that there was widespread agreement about what made the fine arts valuable. The fine arts were believed to be the source of pleasure or some other intrinsically valuable experience and, very often, they were also believed to be sources of knowledge. This was, for example, the view of Batteux (2015) and Kant (2000). Others, for example Du Bos (2021), downplayed the capacity of the fine arts to provide knowledge and focused on art as a source of pleasure. Nevertheless, despite some differences, philosophers were in a position to offer a descriptive or, at worst, an explicative definition of art: art was the imitation of nature with a view to providing pleasure and, perhaps, knowledge as well. The imitation of nature and the provision of pleasure (and, perhaps, knowledge) were individually necessary and jointly sufficient conditions of something being a work of art.

Things began to change in the eighteenth century, slowly at first, and then quickly by the beginning of the twentieth century. While the eighteenth century had seen widespread agreement about what counted as art and even considerable agreement about what made works of art valuable, this was no longer true by the early years of the twentieth century. Bell (1914) denied that some things that imitate nature, and are sources of pleasure, are works of art. Famously, he denied that Frith’s *Paddington Station* (1862) is a work of art, though it clearly satisfied the old conditions. Other items that manifestly do not imitate nature or provide pleasure were accepted as works of art, most famously Duchamp’s *Fountain* (1914). As the century unfolded, works of conceptual art and performance art, such as Robert Barry’s *Inert Gas Series* (1969) and Chris Burden’s *Shoot* (1971) were widely accepted as artworks. (Barry released five noble gasses in to the atmosphere in five locations in California and Burden had himself shot in the arm with a .22-calibre rifle) Works that were in no obvious sense beautiful or a source of pleasure or knowledge became accepted as works of art.

Weitz was among the first philosophers to reflect on the philosophical implications of the fact that items were constantly being added to the class of artworks when they lack properties that had previously been thought to be necessary or

sufficient for membership in the class of artworks. On the basis of this fact, he concludes that art cannot be defined in terms of necessary and sufficient properties. He writes that “the very expansive, adventurous character of art, its ever-present changes and novel creations, makes it logically impossible to ensure any set of defining properties” (Weitz 1958, 32). Instead, the concept of art is to be understood in terms of family resemblances.

In making this proposal, Weitz draws on Wittgenstein’s (1958) discussion of open concepts. Wittgenstein’s famous example of an open concept is the concept of a game. Everyone has a concept of a game, but no one has specified necessary and sufficient properties that something must have in order to be a game. Instead, everyone operates on the basis of “a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing” (Wittgenstein 1958, §66). Wittgenstein calls these similarities family resemblances. Similarly, when one correctly says of a work that it is a work of art, the work shares bundles of properties with other works that are correctly described as works of art: there “are no necessary and sufficient conditions but there are strands of similarity conditions” (Weitz 1956, 33). When a concept is open, “a situation can be imagined or secured which would call for some sort of decision on our part to extend the use of the concept to cover this, or to close the concept and invent a new one to deal with the new case and its new property” (Weitz 1956, 31).

Margolis’ agrees with some of what Weitz says. He agrees that the concept of art is now open in the sense that the class of artworks (and the subclasses or genres of artworks) can be expanded at any time to include works that do not have properties hitherto considered necessary or sufficient for membership in the class of artworks. Margolis allows, using Weitz’ examples, that Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse*, Don Passos’ *U.S.A.* and Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake* are novels, even though they lack properties that were thought to be necessary and sufficient for membership in the class of novels prior to their admission into the class.

Margolis also agrees with Weitz that when presented with a new candidate for membership in the class of artworks “some sort of *decision*” (Weitz 1956, 31) is required. Margolis also agrees that the word “*decision*,” italicized by Weitz in the passage just quoted, is the key to understanding how novel works become part of the class of artworks. He writes that “It is our practical dissatisfaction with any empirical definition of this sort that urges us to revise it, to make a ‘*decision*’ (as Weitz would put it)” (1958, 91). The problem facing philosophers of art is now apparent: how do we make a decision about whether or not something is a work of art? The debate between Weitz and Margolis comes down to the question of how this decision is made. In other words, to borrow a phrase from Danto (1964), the debate comes down to a question about how works become enfranchised as

works of art.

Traditionally, philosophers thought questions about whether something is a work of art can only be answered by determining the essence of art and crafting a definition that captures this essence, that is, states necessary and sufficient conditions for membership in the class of artworks. Questions about whether something is a work of art can then be answered by reference to the definition. If something satisfies the definition, then it is a work of art. If it does not, then it is not an artwork. Weitz thinks that art has no essence and, consequently, he believes that this project is misguided. He believes that decisions about whether something is art can only be arbitrary. Margolis presents a third account of how the question is to be answered. His account has something in common with the traditional approach and something in common with Weitz' views. Questions about whether something is art cannot be decided by first determining the real essence of art and establishing a definition of art. Margolis agrees with Weitz that the open nature of the concept of art rules out this approach to art. Instead, Margolis believes that a decision has to be made about what is to be valued in art (or some genre of art). The decision about what is to be valued establishes what Margolis calls a nominal essence. Anything that has this nominal essence, that is, satisfies some specified necessary and sufficient conditions, counts as a work of art.

3 Some Sort of Decision

One possible way to make the decision about whether to enfranchise some novel work of art is simply to decide arbitrarily whether or not to accept that it is art. Often, Weitz seems happy to embrace this position. Margolis certainly believed that Weitz is committed to saying that decisions about whether or not something is an artwork are arbitrary.

There is a simple reason, not noted by either Weitz or Margolis, why Weitz is committed to saying that novel works are arbitrarily stipulated to be works of art. According to Weitz, the only basis for saying that something is a work of art is that the work in question is similar to works already included in the class of artworks. The trouble is that everything is similar to everything else in some respects. In fact, everything is similar to everything else in an infinite number of respects. If similarity to an existing member of the class of artworks is the only basis for saying that something is a work of art, it follows that any work has as good a claim as any other work to be included in the class of artworks as any other work.

Margolis believes that this is an unsatisfactory position. The trouble with this position is that it looks as though anything at all can be a work of art but that is

a conclusion that we want to avoid. If we were forced to accept this conclusion, the concept of art would be useless. Margolis asks, "Is courtship a game? Is love a game? Is life a game? There seems to be a stipulative element required even here to give discipline to usage; else we run the risk of linguistic anarchy" (Margolis 1958, 94). Similarly, we might ask whether carpentry produces works of art or whether dog grooming does. These practices certainly have features in common with painting and poetry. Nevertheless, we want to exclude works of dog grooming from the class of artworks. If dog grooming produces works of art, then the concept has been stretched to the breaking point. It seems that we have a reason to resist the view that decisions about whether something is a work of art are arbitrary.

At one point, Weitz makes an effort to avoid the conclusion that decisions about whether something is a work of art are completely arbitrary. He recommends that, in making such decisions, we take aesthetic theories "as serious and argued-for recommendations to concentrate on certain criteria of excellence in art" (Weitz 1956, 35). These criteria ought, presumably, to guide decisions about whether to classify something as an artwork. (Of course, many works only marginally satisfy these criteria and still count as works of art.) This, as we shall see, is roughly Margolis' answer to the question of how to decide whether something is a work of art. It is, however, not an option that Weitz can adopt. As soon as he introduces talk of criteria of excellence in art, he reintroduces conditions that works must satisfy in order to count as works of art and he undermines his own position.

4 Closing the Concept of Art

Unlike Weitz, and like philosophers prior to Weitz, Margolis is in a position to talk about what makes art valuable when defining art and is quite happy to do so. On his view, the key to defining art is selecting desirable features that artworks can share. These features, Margolis recognizes, have been different at different times in the history of art and may even, as we shall see, be different at a single time.

The first point to make is that Margolis believes that nothing that Wittgenstein says about open concepts rules out the possibility of defining art in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions. Margolis charges that "Weitz has completely misunderstood Wittgenstein's distinction [between open concepts and others] and... he has somehow managed to mislead the entire labor of analytic aesthetics thereby" (2010, 218). Wittgenstein never says that concepts, such as the concept of a game, cannot be closed. The concept of a game can be closed by an arbitrary decision about what counts as a game. When it comes to boundaries on a concept, Wittgen-

stein says, “You can *draw* one” (1958, §68). Wittgenstein is mainly concerned with showing that a concept, such as the concept of a game, need not be closed in order to be useful. He does not say that concepts cannot be closed. In particular, nothing he says rules out closing the concept of art.

Wittgenstein not only allows that any concept can be closed. He also grants that we may have a good reason to close a concept: “we can draw a boundary – for a special purpose” (1958, §69). Weitz overlooks this aspect of Wittgenstein’s views and seems to believe that the concept of art ought never to be closed. In contrast, Margolis believes that, for philosophical “special purposes,” it may be useful to define art or some sub-category of art, such as literature or tragedy, in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions and, in this way, draw a boundary.

The next point to make is that Margolis’ position on defining art needs to be understood against the background of his wider philosophical commitments. In his writings on philosophy of art, Margolis makes no reference to his more basic philosophical commitments, but he wrote extensively on relativism (for example, Margolis 1991) and pragmatism (for example, Margolis 1986). His fundamental philosophical commitments shape his thinking about philosophy of art. As a relativist, Margolis believes that it is true that something is a work of art only relative to some background theory. Moreover, as a relativist, he is not concerned with real essences. Real essences of things are objective and independent of any theories and Margolis does not think any such things exist. Consequently, he thinks that Weitz is wrong in believing that any definition of art must capture the “real essence of art” (Margolis 1980, 887). As a pragmatist, Margolis believes that true beliefs about what art is are the useful beliefs about what art is. Pragmatists are, like relativists, disinclined to concern themselves with discovering real essences such as the real essence of art. They instead worry about what is a useful way to think about art. As a relativist and pragmatist, Margolis seeks to establish what he calls the nominal essence of art.

According to Margolis, a definition of art tells us the nominal essence of art. He writes that it

is entirely possible for example that definitions yield (what may be called) nominal essences – formulations in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions linked to our theories and our systematic efforts to explain phenomena – without at all claiming to be discoveries of the real essence of things. Furthermore, *if* there are no real essences, it is obviously preposterous to construe definitions as directed solely or even characteristically toward formulating the real essences of things. (Margolis 1980, 81)

A nominal essence, unlike a real essence, is not objective, not something that an object possesses independently of how anyone thinks of it. Rather, Margolis believes, it is the product of theories. As a result, his view contrasts with the traditional view that our theories of art ought to conform to the real essence of art. Rather, theories of art create the nominal essence of art.

Margolis believes that there is a sense in which a realist definition of art is possible. He would say that a definition is realist “if it claimed to address the ‘nature’ of anything that could be found in the world.” However, Margolis almost immediately adds that “a ‘real’ definition need not be exceptionless, essentialist, cast in necessary and sufficient terms, free of vagueness, ‘exhaustive and exclusive’ while ranging over ‘all’ cases” (2010, 220). While Margolis does not believe that art has an essence that is completely objective, he does believe that art can have a kind of real essence.

As a relativist and a pragmatist, Margolis is free to accept different, competing definitions on different occasions. After all, two definitions can both be useful, albeit for different reasons. For example, he says that, when it comes to definitions of Greek tragedy, he sees no “reason why one must choose, disjunctively, between Aristotle and Nietzsche... The accounts of both are ‘realist’ and ‘essentialist’ yet profoundly provisional” (Margolis 2010, 221). Here, to call the definitions realist and essentialist seems to mean that they can provide insight into Greek tragedy and assist us in understanding why Greek tragedy is valuable. On one occasion adopting Aristotle’s definition can be useful. On another occasion, Nietzsche’s definition may be more useful. In contrast with Weitz, Margolis would insist that classifying something as a work of tragedy (or work of art) serve some useful purpose.

When it comes to the definition of art, Margolis believes, reference to theories about art and reference to what makes art valuable, are necessary. Weitz can only refer to these theories on pain of inconsistency. Margolis writes that “the definition of art is to some extent a reasoned proposal designed to accord closely with theories favored on independent grounds. The relative objectivity of a definition of art, then, depends on its accommodation of standard cases viewed within a reasonably defended larger theory” (1980, 77). In this case the theory enfranchises all works that have a certain sort of value. Again, the contrast with Weitz is that Weitz is committed to the view that works are individually enfranchised and the enfranchisement is arbitrary, that is, it does not require the works to have any particular value.

Margolis rejects a commonly-adopted desideratum of a satisfactory definition of art. Stephen Davies states this desideratum, in a passage quoted by Margolis, when he writes that “a definition must be exhaustive of all art and exclusive of all

that is not art” including art of little or no value (Davies 2006, 44). Margolis calls this “a rather serious mistake” (2010, 219). *Au fond*, it is the same mistake that Weitz made in thinking that anything can arbitrarily be accepted as art and then a definition of art must be crafted on which it is classified as a work of art.

When Margolis came to provide his definition of art it was disappointingly vanilla. He states that “*A work of art is an artifact considered with respect to its design*” (1980, 89). Margolis analyses the concept of design in terms of “purposiveness we find in the systematic ordering of brush strokes, dance steps, musical phrases, sentences, or the like” (1980, 90). In short, Margolis’ conception of art is that of a mid-twentieth century formalist *à la* Beardsley. Margolis’ conventional view about which theory of art ought to be adopted, and his views about the consequent nominal essence of art, can, however, be separated from his bold proposal about how philosophers ought to think what it is to define art.

5 Persuasive Definitions of Art

Reflection on the debate between Weitz and Margolis leads to the conclusion that many definitions of art are persuasive definitions. Talk about the concept of a persuasive definition is not much heard in contemporary philosophy, but in the middle of the last century, during the heyday of analytic philosophy, it was found in every philosopher’s philosophical toolkit. The concept is usefully revived in this context because it helps us to understand what philosophers often do these days when they develop a definition of art. Only persuasive definitions could produce a situation in which works radically different from what had been accepted as art in, say, the eighteenth century, can today count as works of art.

The concept of a persuasive definition was introduced by C. L. Stevenson. He described a persuasive definition as

one which gives a new conceptual meaning to a familiar word without substantively changing its emotive meaning, and which is used with the conscious or unconscious purpose of changing, by this means, the direction of people’s interests. (1938, 331)

Thus described, a persuasive definition has three important features. First, it changes the “conceptual meaning” of a word. Here, the conceptual meaning of a word is just meaning in its ordinary philosophical sense. It is, to use Frege’s (1970) terminology, the sense of a word. Of course, philosophers have a variety of theories of conceptual meaning or sense, but the sense of a word is usually distinguished from its connotations. As a result of a change of conceptual meaning, the denotation of a word is changed. This brings us to the second part of a

persuasive definition. In addition to a sense, a word will often have an emotional meaning or, as it is sometimes called, connotation. A connotation in this context is the emotional penumbra that surrounds some words. The word “art” for example, often has a connotation as well as a sense. To describe something as art is to suggest that it is valuable or praiseworthy. In a persuasive definition, the emotional penumbra of a word is constant. Third, a persuasive definition has a purpose: it is designed to direct attention towards objects which might not otherwise attract attention.

Stevenson illustrates persuasive definition by imagining a society in which the conceptual meaning or sense of the word “cultured” is “widely read and acquainted with the arts” (1938, 331). In this society, the word “cultured” also has a positive emotional meaning or connotation. In particular, it has a positive connotation and cultured people are regarded as, say, sophisticated, praiseworthy and open-minded. Stevenson imagines that, in this society, someone comes along and proposes that “cultured” does not mean widely read and acquainted with the arts. After all, he says, reading books and going to museums are merely mechanical processes and should not earn the praise that is accorded to cultured individuals. Instead, this person proposes, the “real meaning of ‘culture,’ is *imaginative sensitivity*” (1938, 331). The word had never before been used in this sense. As Weitz would say, a decision is simply made to use the word in this way. The goal of the person making this decision is to get “people to stop using the laudatory term [‘culture’] to refer to reading and the arts, and to use it, instead, to mean *imaginative sensitivity*” (1938, 332).

Stevenson observes that a persuasive definition is “not a matter of ‘merely arbitrary’ definition...nor is any persuasive definition ‘merely arbitrary,’ if this phrase is taken to imply ‘suitably decided by the flip of a coin’” (1938, 334). A persuasive definition is not merely arbitrary but it is stipulative. It is chosen, not at random, but with the goal of directing attention to something selected by the person offering the persuasive definition. In a memorable phrase, Stevenson wrote that “To choose a definition is to plead a cause” (1944, 210).

As soon as the concept of art became an open concept, definitions of art could only be persuasive definitions. The conceptual definition of “art” has kept changing, but the emotional definition has remained fixed. As we have seen, in the eighteenth century, “art” meant something like “an imitation of nature that does not serve an immediate practical end but which is valued as a source of pleasure (and perhaps knowledge).” That was the conceptual meaning of art. In addition to this descriptive account of the meaning of art, there was an evaluative sense of the word “art.” Du Bos, for example, writes that only for the sake of brevity does he avoid using “the word ‘illustrious’ or some other suitable epithet” to refer to

artists (2021, 95). Obviously, the descriptive meaning of “art” has changed dramatically since the eighteenth century, but the evaluative sense of the word has remained stable. The fact that the evaluative meaning of art has remained stable while the conceptual meaning has changed makes contemporary definitions of art persuasive definitions.

Weitz was well aware of the distinction between conceptual meaning and emotional meaning. Weitz distinguishes between the descriptive and the evaluative uses of the word “art.” He believes that when philosophers define art they are concerned with the descriptive sense of the word and they are simply establishing the extension of the word “art.” In its evaluative sense, the word “art” “praises” (1956, 34). The evaluative sense of “art,” he adds, does not establish the basis of praise: “‘This is a work of art,’ used evaluatively, serves to praise and not to affirm the reason why it is said” (1956, 34). In contrast, another way to think about Margolis’ views about definitions of art is that he thinks the evaluative sense of “art” ought to be linked to the descriptive use of the word. Weitz did not recognize that, when a decision is made to change what counts as a work of art, and the emotional meaning of “art” is transferred to new types of objects, the result is a persuasive definition.

Beardsley is one of Margolis’ contemporaries who recognised that art has an evaluative or, as Beardsley calls it, an emotive meaning. He took the next step and recognized that when a definition of art results in the transfer of the emotive meaning of art to objects to which it had not previously been applied, the result is a persuasive definition. Beardsley wrote that “When ‘emotive meaning’ came into view, with all its devious consequences, the term ‘work of art’ seemed to provide a fine example of ‘persuasive definition’” (1961, 175). Beardsley drew the conclusion that philosophers ought to abandon the project of defining art and instead focus on defining the aesthetic. Many philosophers have not, however, followed his advice and continued efforts to define art.

T.J. Diffey is another example of one of Margolis’ contemporaries who explicitly accepts that defining art is a matter of providing a persuasive definition. He observes that “to say that something is a work of art is to imply that it is a thing of interest and worth” and he refers to this as the “emotive meaning” of “work of art” (1969, 148). The term “work of art” he says “has a revisable denotation” (1969, 149). The emotive meaning remains the same when the denotation of “art” is revised. In other words, we are dealing with persuasive definition.

An examination of the history of definitions of art indicates just how common persuasive definitions are. Consider, for example, Clive Bell. In 1914, when Bell wrote *Art*, Frith’s *Paddington Station* was, in both the descriptive and the evaluative senses of the word, art. The typical Persian bowl, in contrast, was art in neither

sense. It would have been relegated to the realm of the decorative arts and excluded from the category of fine art. Bell develops a theory of what makes a work of art valuable: it has significant form. This then both excludes Frith's painting and includes Persian bowls. Frith's painting no longer has the emotive meaning associated with the word "art" but Persian bowls acquire this emotive meaning. Arthur Danto (1964) developed his theories about art specifically to enfranchise Warhol's *Brillo Boxes* (1964). That is, he wanted to transfer to *Brillo Boxes* the emotional meaning of art.

Of course, philosophers do not admit that they are developing persuasive definitions of art. They represent themselves as presenting a conceptual definition of art. Nevertheless, they are engaged in persuasive definition.

Dominic Lopes (2014) is an example of a recent philosopher who has offered a persuasive definition of art while claiming to offer a conceptual definition. Lopes sometimes slips up and says the quiet part out loud, admitting that defining art is all about getting people to think highly of certain classes of objects. This has been the way, Lopes believes, from the very beginning of talk about art in the early modern period. He writes that

Kristeller identifies some of the factors that, over the centuries, may have driven the innovation, and a brief survey conveys a picture of the culminating event in the eighteenth century. Attention from the humanists gave poetry "honor and glamor" and a place in their new curriculum. Having gradually gained prestige in Italy from the fourteenth century onwards, painting, sculpture, and architecture came to be classified together as the *arti del disegno*. (Lopes 2014, 26)

Notice that, according to this story, identifying some art as a fine art is all about assigning it honour, glamor and prestige. This is persuasive definition in its most unabashed form.

Lopes' calls his definition of art the buck passing theory of art. He makes no attempt to define art beyond holding that to say that a work is a work of art is to say that it is a work of some K, where K is an art. The individual arts, painting, music, literature, and so on can then, one hopes, be easily defined and we get a definition of art for free. According to Lopes, "An advantage of the buck passing theory of art is that it frees us to consider theories of the aesthetic independently of theories of art" (2014, 164) and in a later work Lopes (2018) develops just such a theory of the aesthetic. The evaluation of makeup, craft beer and Imari porcelain is, on his view, as much an aesthetic activity as appreciation of Mozart or Shakespeare. While Lopes may not have a theory of art that drives his theory of the aesthetic, his theory of the aesthetic, as usual, drives his definition of art. Lopes is a woke

aesthete and wants a definition of art that does not privilege so-called high fine arts of (Western) music and easel painting over arts such as Imari porcelain or hip hop music. His account of the aesthetic ensures just such a result. Like other persuasive definitions, then, his definition art, a byproduct of his theory of the aesthetic, is designed to focus attention on works that are usually excluded from the class of artworks. In Lopes' case, these are works not recognized in the Western artistic canon.

The intellectual heirs of Weitz are advocates of institutional theories of art. Dickie is an example of such a philosopher. He states that "For something to be a work of art it must have had this status conferred upon it, and this status is conferred by the judgement of the public" (1974, 147). The public need not have a basis for conferring art status, that is, transferring the emotional meaning of art to some new objects. Dickie does say that to call something a work of art is to imply that it is a thing of interest or worth. He does not say that the public can only confer art status on things that are actually interesting and worthy. Apparently he believes, like Weitz, that something that just needs to catch the eye of some member of the artworld and then it can be arbitrarily enfranchised.

Persuasive definitions have had some bad press. Richard Robinson wrote that a persuasive definition is "at best a mistake and at worst a lie, because it consists in getting someone to alter his valuations under the false impression that he is not altering his valuations but correcting his knowledge of the facts" (1954, 170). In the realm of the arts, however, the fact that the class of artworks is open, in the sense identified by Weitz and Margolis, leaves philosophers with little option but to offer persuasive definitions. Defining art was once, in the eighteenth century, a matter of determining the valuable features of artworks and then defining art with reference to these features. Now, defining art is a matter of deciding what is valuable and then defining art. The days of offering a descriptive definition of art are long gone. Now defining art is all about persuading audiences to transfer to works a status that they did not previously enjoy. The choices available to philosophers are (a) to arbitrarily alter the conceptual meaning of art and transfer the emotive meaning of art to some new objects, even if for no good reason or (b) to alter the conceptual meaning of art and transfer the emotive meaning of art to some new objects on the grounds that they have valuable features. The first option is Weitz' while the second is that of Margolis.

Margolis can be seen as recommending that philosophers offer persuasive definitions of art. The "special purpose" that philosophers have for closing the concept of art is almost always drawing attention to works that, they believe, are deserving of recognition as works of art. They can draw attention to the works in question in one of two ways. They can arbitrarily decide that a given work is a

work of art, in the manner of Weitz, or they can, in the manner of Margolis, adopt a theory of art that enfranchises as artworks whole classes of works on the grounds that they are worthy of attention. Margolis' way to make decisions is preferable since it only enfranchises works which are valuable for some reason.

6 Conclusion

Margolis accepts that the concept of art is open, but unlike Weitz and some other philosophers, he does not want to allow that something is a work of art when it has little or no value. Definitions of art are now persuasive definitions, but Margolis would encourage philosophers to offer only definitions of art that draw attention to objects that deserve to be accorded the emotive meaning of art.

Obviously, a range of (persuasive) definitions of art have been presented. Moreover, as we have seen, as a relativist, Margolis accepts that a variety of definitions can be useful. At the same time, he believes that, in time, philosophers may converge on a definition of art. In his final published reflections on definitions of art, Margolis writes that

the philosophical definition of art (in all its informal diversity) provides a memorable sense of a kind of “open-ended convergence” on the concept, deliberately fitted to a set of important, strategic, relatively systematic, claims about the arts writ large, meant...to test the relative strength and adequacy...of all contending alternatives conceptions in *that* context of reference that we signal as relevant to the arguments we provisionally invite. (2010, 222)

This passage is a bit of a mouthful, but it suggests that we may hope that philosophical inquiry will converge on a definition of art. (Margolis' talk of convergence in this context probably contains an echo of the pragmatist Charles Saunders Peirce, and his belief that the ideal point where inquiry converges is the truth.) This definition, Margolis tells us, needs to be based on important and strategic claims about the arts. In particular, it needs to be based on what the arts have, historically, been able to provide that is of most value. On the basis of important and strategic claims about the arts, philosophers may one day converge on the conclusion that it was a mistake to admit certain objects into the class of artworks. On the basis of these claims, philosophers may decide that Kurosawa's *Ran* (1985) and Shakespeare's *King Lear* (1606) do not belong in the same category as *Shoot* or a flower arrangement.

Maybe one day – that day is unlikely to be any time soon – some theory of art will become universally, or virtually universally, adopted. At that point, member-

ship in the class of artworks will be as uncontroversial as it was in the eighteenth century and a descriptive definition of art will once again be possible. This will be a description in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions and the concept of art will be closed once again. In the meantime, the best that anyone can do is offer a persuasive definition of art that encourages audience members to focus on works that are valuable in certain sorts of ways. This is what Margolis encourages us to do. The alternative is to arbitrarily enfranchise objects as works of art. This is what Weitz leaves us to do. Margolis' proposal seems like a much better option for people who are interested in encouraging the production of valuable works of art.

References

- Batteux, Charles. 2015. *The Fine Arts Reduced to a Single Principle*. Translated by James O. Young. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Beardsley, Monroe C. 1961. "The Definitions of the Arts." *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 20 (2): 175–187.
- Bell, Clive. 1914. *Art*. London: Chatto / Windus.
- Danto, Arthur. 1964. "The Artworld." *Journal of Philosophy* 61 (19): 571–584.
- Davies, Stephen. 1994. *Definitions of Art*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- . 2006. *The Philosophy of Art*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Dickie, George. 1974. *Art and Aesthetics: An Institutional Analysis*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Diffey, T. J. 1969. "The Republic of Art." *British Journal of Aesthetics* 9 (2): 145–156.
- Du Bos, Jean-Baptiste. 2021. *Critical Reflections on Poetry and Painting*. Trans. James O. Young and Margaret Cameron. Leiden: Brill.
- Frege, Gottlob. 1970. *Translations from the Philosophical Writings of Gottlob Frege*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Kant, Immanuel. 2000. *Critique of the power of judgement*. Trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews. Cambridge University Press.

James O. Young

- Lopes, Dominic McIver. 2014. *Beyond Art*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- . 2018. *Being for Beauty: Aesthetics Agency and Value*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Margolis, Joseph. 1958. "Mr. Weitz and the Definition of Art." *Philosophical Studies* 9 (5/6): 88–95.
- . 1980. *Art and Philosophy*. Brighton: Harvester.
- . 1986. *Pragmatism Without Foundations*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- . 1991. *The Truth about Relativism*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- . 2010. "The Importance of Being Earnest about the Definition and Metaphysics of Art." *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 68 (3): 213–223.
- Robinson, Richard. 1954. *Definition*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Stevenson, C. L. 1938. "Persuasive Definitions." *Mind* 47:331–350.
- . 1944. *Ethics and Language*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Weitz, Morris. 1956. "The Role of Theory in Aesthetics." *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 15 (1): 27–35.
- Wittgenstein, Ludwig. 1958. *Philosophical Investigations*. 2nd ed. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Young, James O. 2015. "The Ancient and Modern System of the Arts." *British Journal of Aesthetics* 55 (1): 1–17.