

How Art Can Be Thought A Handbook for Change

[CHAPTER 1](#)[**HOW ART CAN BE THOUGHT**](#)

While the rest of the glossary follows later, in alphabetical order, it seems only fitting to acknowledge and examine early the elephant on the page:

A typical popular definition of “art” may read something like this:

Something that is created with imagination and skill and that is beautiful or that expresses important ideas or feelings.¹

The definition leaves too many questions unanswered, not to mention that it doesn’t apply to much of contemporary art.

To break it down into its component parts:

Something

[Anything? Does it have to be a *thing*, that is, be an object with material form? This would exclude performance, conceptual, or digital work. If it is a video or film, clearly the “art” is more than the materiality of the videotape or the film reel, which is the apparatus for the art, and which can be accessed only through other viewing devices such as projectors—and I am not dismissing experimental film and video that emphasize the material properties of the medium.]

that is created

[What does it mean to create? Presumably it means more than “fabricate” or “build,” since these can be performed by assistants, including highly skilled ones.]

with imagination

[In “created with imagination” is the object the manifestation of, a product of, or a translation from imagination? How do viewers measure the degree of imagination? How much is imagination tied to ideas of “newness,” of conceiving something that didn’t preexist? Is artwork necessarily linked to the new? How do we evaluate parody, appropriation, collage, assemblage, the readymade, the restaging, and the critical, which are not dependent on newness or even on imagination in any conventional sense? Imagination suggests an interior source, whereas art might proceed from external, mechanical, mathematical, linguistic, social, or interactive processes.]

and skill

[If the work is *skillfully* made by an assistant, do we still attribute skill to the artist? Does the application of skill elevate the artisan to the artist? If the work is a readymade, is skill attributed to the manufacturer? Is skill simply a learned and well-practiced method? Is skill defined only as physical rather than mental abilities? Is “badly made” work not art? Does intervention performance require skills?]

and that is beautiful

[Who decides what’s beautiful, with what criteria and measures? Is beauty absolute, or relative? Is there a spectrum from beauty to ugliness, and is the ugly no longer art? Are some artworks more beautiful than others?]

or that expresses

[What does it mean to express? Presumably not like breast milk?² Or perhaps that is exactly the meaning we want, a bodily *humor* that leaks out into the world?]

important

[Who judges, and what is or isn’t important? According to what criteria and what timeline? Does importance change over time?]

ideas

[Any ideas? Are some better than others? How do we track what the ideas are when we look at an object or event?]

or

[Why not *and* rather than *or*, ideas *and* feelings? Is there a hierarchy between the two?]

feelings

[Were these experienced by the artist before or while making the work? Are these to be experienced by the viewer? How do we know if these same feelings are experienced by different viewers? How do feelings change over time or after repeated viewing? How do feelings change according to the setting and conditions in which the work is experienced? Is there a required intensity of feeling? Does it matter if the feeling is fleeting or enduring? Do *any* feelings count? Rage, hatred, anger, disgust ...? If work appeals only to the intellect, with no apparent response of feelings, does it make it not-art?].

One could continue, ad nauseam, with such questions. The point is that for the most part we don't really know what we're talking about *because* such definitions of art produce so many variables and unanswered questions. If discussions of art proceed from only these kinds of definitions, we would operate only on the *presumption* that we know what we are experiencing, what we are talking about, and the *presumption* that others have the same incommunicable experiences and understandings.

For a moment, let's consider other attempted definitions:

- Art is nature as seen through a temperament.—Camille Corot
- Art is either plagiarism or revolution.—Paul Gauguin

- Art does not reproduce what is visible; it makes things visible.—Paul Klee
- Art is vice. You don't marry it legitimately. You rape it.—Edgar Degas
- [Art is] ... a man's timid attempt to repeat the miracle that the simplest peasant girl is capable of at any time, that of magically producing life out of nothing.—Oskar Kokoschka
- It is self-evident that nothing concerning art is self-evident.—Theodore Adorno
- You cannot define electricity. The same can be said of art. It is a kind of inner current in a human being, or something which needs no definition.—Marcel Duchamp
- Art is probably the only thing that doesn't need a reason to exist.—Lawrence Weiner
- To see something as art requires something the eye cannot decry [*sic*]—an atmosphere of artistic theory, a knowledge of [the] history of art: an artworld.—Arthur C. Danto
- A work of art in the classificatory sense is (1) an artifact (2) a set of the aspects of which has had conferred upon it the status of candidate for appreciation by some person or persons acting on behalf of a certain social institution (the artworld).—George Dickie
- The point of art is not the exposure of the truth but the creation of public situations for reimagining reality.—Nikos Papastergiadis
- The role of artworks is no longer to form imaginary and utopian realities, but to actually be ways of living and models of action within the existing real, whatever the scale chosen by the artist.—Nicholas Bourriaud
- Once we accept the simple fact that the work of art is produced by a human being who has been socialized by family, school, religion, and the media, then it can take its place in the larger range of

human production and be seen as a reciprocating device in the social mechanism, caught up and determining the dynamics of change itself.—Albert Boime³

In these desperately inadequate attempts (all written by men, mostly Euro American), some common themes emerge:

1. Art as indefinable
2. Art as mediated nature
3. Art as unmediated expression of the (male) artist's interiority, a process sometimes equated to a woman giving birth (not far behind this is the conviction that since women can/should give birth, they can't/shouldn't make art)
4. Art as masculine enterprise and conquest
5. Art as cultural, social practice.

The first theme maintains that art is perennially mysterious and enigmatic, that its affects cannot be quantified or put into words. This mystery is a necessary prerequisite for (en)forcing the separation of art from the realms of political, social, and cultural practices. Art's ostensible separation from economics is paradoxically what gives it economic value. Thus removed, and made autonomous, art is conceived as the product of isolation, genius, even divinity.

The second and third themes are archaic but still operative in less gendered form, and will be addressed throughout the book.

The fourth theme (overlapping with those previous), that art is a masculine enterprise (with craft as its feminine counterpart), remains both overtly and covertly resilient. This is comparable to the similarly resilient proposition of art as a racialized *European* enterprise, with everything else as artifacts of ritual or of the “natural.” Degas’s jarring quote to the effect that art is rape is hardly an isolated example, and speaks to art as a dominating practice. Art history is lousy with artworks and careers built on (sometimes highly aestheticized) violence depicted or enacted upon the female body as metaphor for the (male) artist’s interiority, and his musings on religion, politics, and the nation. Beyond muse, the female body may be the *instrument* of production (see, for example, the “living brushes” of Yves Klein’s *Anthropometries* of 1960).

One of the problems any potential discussion of art faces is when participants hold to only the four first themes, or in holding to them to some degree, find themselves conflicted in how or even *whether* to discuss art.

It is the fifth theme, art as a cultural, social practice, that enables art to be brought into language and to be investigated and discussed. This forms the core of this book, that art comprises forms of knowledge of being *in/with* the world, which I distinguish from knowledge *about* the world. I’m not trying to make a case for art as objectively verifiable *information* about the world; for that we might better look to the sciences, although it is worth recalling Aimé Césaire: “Poetic knowledge is born in the great silence of scientific knowledge.”⁴ While Césaire is speaking to the disciplinary project of European rationalization, aka the enlightenment, I’m pointing more narrowly to art providing different kinds of knowledge, *within* science’s gaps of how to be *in* and *with* the world. My use is similar to how Kobena Mercer references art as manifestations of “aesthetic intelligence embodied in actual works of art as objects of experience.”⁵

While art is coded knowledge, generated and interpreted through learned and historicized disciplines and media, an artwork is a manifested “object of experience,” of being in/with the world from the very particular perspective of an artist’s historicized, embodied, located, enculturated subjectivity. Viewers engage this complex of perspectives with their own similarly complex subjectivities. [[#Authenticity](#)]



Contemporary art is expansive enough that artists can work across m/any disciplines, including law, anthropology, dance, tourism, cartography, nanotechnology, bioengineering, and so on. Not only do artists play out the assertion that anyone can be an artist, but they put into practice that artists can be anyone. An important consideration across any medium and discipline is how art “comes into being.” This can occur through a multiplicity of manifestations, practices, and functions: individuals and groups constantly amass data through multiple means, including experience, surveillance, research, investigation, imagination, and memory. We store, decipher, categorize, translate, reconfigure, speculate, forecast, endure, replay, act upon, and are acted upon by these through complex bodily, emotional, intellectual, material, social, political, technological, and virtual systems. Any of these activities, in any combination, and the gestures and forms they produce might be what we inadequately call “art.”

This is another way to say that art is anything and everything. This provides rich potential, but it doesn’t really help as a definition. Slightly less expansive (and without judging which are “better”), are a number of working possibilities: artworks are design elements and spatial enhancements, affective encounters, sensory and ethical triggers that can be both activating and placating, transformation devices, identity and communal markers, cultural values and ritual practices, archives of the contemporary and of the historical, provisional

meaning systems and social interventions, entertainment and touristic attractions, luxury goods and status markers, stock options and liquid assets, tax breaks and trade goods, and histories of imagination, thinking and making; objects and acts that help us create and allot meaning, that define us to ourselves, that define us in opposition to others; vessels and conveyances that paradoxically direct us toward the uncontained and uncontainable; and practices that we believe (and hope) can aid us toward understanding and insight, that connect us to each other, to transcendent experiences, and to “higher powers.”

Only some of these possibilities might be widely considered as art, and others are popularly rejected. They are all social practices, with political and material consequences, processes that are always in flux, impermanent functions even as they are invested with the semblance of permanence, always being tested and adjusted, always responsive to codependent factors and forces. The designation “art” itself is a political naming, with choices made by artists, galleries, and viewers (or producers, distributors, and consumers) based on vested interests. Those interests need investigation for us to understand why and how certain forms of art are recognized and valued over others.

These beginning considerations of what art does are still too expansive for everyday use, but they begin to allow for a discussion of what specifics we may mean when we talk about “art.”

Here is one commonly encountered response, especially from students: “Art is whatever I say it is.” Invoking professorial authority, I could counter, “No, whatever *I* say it is.” This idea of “whatever” is alluring precisely because it mirrors the claim to autonomy that is one of modernism’s foundational mythologies. Autonomy of the artist, autonomy of art, the artist as originator, as (de)terminator—Austrian accent optional. This individual “right” to self-definition and self-determination is a defining, almost national characteristic of America, and of

the global capitalist economy. However, while the artist can make a case for why it is art, it is accepted *as* art only when there is a collective agreement that it is. To begin to think through the individualist stance, we can take another starting point for defining art:

Proposal and/or action and/or object, plus discourse.

“Proposal and/or action and/or object” refers to the prior “whatever I say it is.” But it is the more collective and historicized “discourse” (with marketing as an increasingly prevalent component) that determines whether it becomes art or not.

Art is identified and defined through discursive and theoretical models, and not by simply encountering it. For example, if a dominant theoretical model defines art as primarily a mimetic practice, then abstraction will be considered only as inept (childish and/or primitive and/or the result of insanity), or as a hoax. A theoretical understanding of art has to (and did) shift from art imitating reality to art creating its own reality through new forms and new ways of looking. [[#Theory](#)] We can trace similar shifts:

- Art depicting realities beyond the tangible and reason-regulated (Surrealism)
- Art depicting interior realities (Expressionism)
- Art creating new realities through already existing forms (collage and readymades)
- Subsequent shifts have brought into question our grasp of and access to reality through questions of mediation and collective participation (institutional critique and social practices)

- Other shifts (postmodernist, feminist, postcolonial, queer) have brought into question those subjectivities (whether of artists, critics, patrons, or viewers) that have historically laid claim to describing and projecting their particular experienced reality as universal truth.

In other words, theory as a tool for examining and imagining our experience in/with the world needs to continuously adapt as the world itself changes and is changed. This is not to suggest a causal relationship that theory leads the way and that art follows. Art itself functions theoretically (through and beyond its own materiality), and has theoretical and material effects on other art, with further effects through its interpretation and translation into verbal language (much of what we identify as art industries is formed around these functions).

“Whatever I say it is,” then, is paradoxically a stance that is itself collectively enabled.



Returning to the earlier equation about what art is, or does (*proposal and/or action and/or object, plus discourse*), we would need to account for a priori experience and information, the grounding discourses from which the artistic proposal or action derives, and the discourses and practices that direct the viewer and viewing. Thus:

Discourse, proposal and/or action and/or object, plus discourse.

We can push further this temporality by suggesting that an artwork is in process of becoming (and I include gesture within this). In the equation, replacing “proposal” with “process” removes the narrative sequence between “proposal” and “action” and suggests that the process constitutes the work rather than it being only a

consequence of a preceding thought or action. Process locates the work as performance by an embodied subject or a group of subjects, regardless of medium. Process emphasizes “becoming,” and the potential for ongoing meaning-in-the-making; therefore:

Discourse, plus process and/or object, plus discourse.

While it sounds obvious, it's important to keep in mind that art is not a “natural” phenomenon but is produced by socialized individuals who are located through histories and cultural geographies—one might say that art is produced *through* socialized individuals. Art is activated by similarly socialized viewers and participants. The viewer is a vital agent in the work's becoming, since the viewer produces meaning from myriad sources *before*, *during*, and *after* their encounter with the work. The work never arrives at nor is delivered a final meaning but is always in this process of (potential) becoming, in similar ways that the viewer herself is. How each viewer participates in this process of becoming is subject to a complex of discourses, but it is also an opportunity for activating the viewer's own criticality and agency; hence:

Discourse, process and/or object, plus discourse, *plus viewer*.

Since discourse, object, and viewer are already part of the process of the artwork's becoming, we might “simplify” art to:

Process.

This simplification, by itself and without its components, won't be of much use in casual conversation, but it will help to address many of the mythologies surrounding art. The complex of relations within process enable

us to think about what constitutes art and—perhaps a more useful set of questions—about how art comes into being and how it functions. It might be necessary to refrain from fully encompassing definitions (but not from discussions), since art—by definition—might be that which resists definition. At least in contemporary terms, art is the experience yet to come, the meaning yet unformed, the activity always in process.



The shifts from what artworks *are* to what artworks *do*, and how they come into being (doing), have major repercussions on how contemporary viewers—or rather, interactors or enactors—engage with, assess, and continue to think and act upon these works.

Where and how we encounter artworks are crucial to how they are activated. The studio, the exhibition space, and the accompanying catalogue (and the museum and the monograph) become archives of artworks whose contextualized and context-specific displays profoundly affect and inf(lect) how we engage with individual works and their interrelations, aesthetically, temporally, materially, and socially. However, we are just as if not more likely to encounter artworks online, where the work might be removed from any initial artistic or curatorial framing, or be entirely recontextualized and dehistoricized.

Some “context-based” or “social practice” works can only be evaluated through the “effectiveness” of their social engagement. For critical purposes, evaluative criteria applied to these works can be applied to works that are “object-based,” and vice versa. Similarly, we might apply criteria of “time-based” works to “still” works, and vice versa. Through such demands placed upon criticism by expanded criteria and different sets of questions, we are able to assess the continuing roles, relevancies, and effects of any evaluative criteria, of artworks and art practices. Can we track genealogies of different operative criteria? Which ones are shared between current

participants or viewers? In what circumstances do criteria and their hierarchy change? Are there some criteria that we are more willing to change or be flexible about than others? What are the consequences of the criteria that we use? The viewer, an *active* factor in this equation of where and how meaning is produced, is simultaneously brought under critical interrogation.



Some questions about what art does can be approached through semiotics or linguistics—that is, as systems of signifiers and practices with some similarities to language, even though artworks might never fully resolve into signification. That in/ability to fully cohere into what we may think of as linguistic systems where meaning can be identified and communicated is what might be art’s defining characteristic, an inability that can be a refusal, a rejection, as well as an *ability*. Art’s particular trait might be the excess that cannot be brought entirely into meaning, whose functions and affects cannot be fully quantified or qualified, that function beyond translation into speech. Indeed, when we *can* qualify and quantify art, when we think we can fully account for it through speech, our tendency is to dismiss it as propaganda, as didactic, as information, as not-art. However, not attempting to examine, question, account for, celebrate, and extend the possibilities of art through speech is to remain in the realm of the authoritative, the conventional, and the superficial.

Art’s excessiveness encroaches upon our bodies and experience, and can lead into and away from ourselves and to other experiences. While that excess cannot be fully accounted for by linguistic theory, linguistics nevertheless offers one of the most (currently) useful tools to pry open and articulate what happens in the encounter between art and viewer. We may, for example, apply lessons from the equation that Ferdinand de Saussure makes between *langue* and *parole*.⁶ Briefly, *langue* refers to the written form of any given language, its

history, its grammatical structure ... the collective history, form, and culture that the speaker of that language inherits, acquires, and is taught, and through which that speaker is formed. *Parole* refers more to individual speech, and to the particular lived and present forms that speaker gives (crafts) to that language (*langue*), through intonation, inflection, context, and so on, and through which language (*langue*) is furthered.

This model applied to art and artists allows that artists are trained and otherwise acquire various artistic histories, socializations, and practices—the history and culture through which their work and they themselves are formed (*langue*). Artists will inflect and apply those histories and cultures in particular and individualized ways to remake them in the present, which extends and redirects those histories and cultures toward other future forms (*parole*).



What constitutes art and how we define, or at least account for, it has important cultural, economic, civilizational, and identitarian consequences. Authoritarian regimes understand and fully implement this, commissioning works to the glory of the state and the figurehead of the dictator, as well as eliminating—as political subversion—artistic freedoms and dissent (which come to represent both individual and collective rights).

Less dramatic, though played out over a longer time scale that is no less restrictive, is the global hegemony of Euro American art, with other art forms seen as lesser, imitative, or designated as not-art. One sees this almost casually schematized in art survey books or in art museums that have implemented categories of contemporary, modernist, and primitive or tribal art. In New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art, for example, one encounters artworks within the Oceania section by contemporary, named individuals (e.g., Wanyi

Abwiyeti, a member of the Mariwai Village Artists Workshop). These contemporary works are displayed under the guise of “tribal” art and amid other artworks from earlier time periods. Here, work from the present era is displayed as not having progressed from the collective and ritualistically functional premodern and is therefore considered as Not-Art in the Western sense. Even a simplified idea of the contemporary, as that which exists and functions in the period in which “we” *now* live, is not an idea that is universally applied. It is tied instead to the notions of “developed” and “developing” that are applied to nations and to artists from those nations: some have “arrived,” and others have yet to arrive. Those who are “still arriving” are therefore not ascribed with the *individual* imagination, intelligence, visualization, feelings, skills, enterprise, and agency otherwise attributed to Euro American artists.

While exhibitions and museums continue to make these kinds of separations, efforts to “integrate” artworks are equally fraught, as evidenced by the continuing controversies over exhibitions such as the New York MoMA exhibition “*Primitivism*” in *Twentieth-Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern* (1984) or the Pompidou Center’s *Magiciens de la terre* (1989).⁷ The curatorial ploy of staging “affinities” risks dehistoricizing works by removing them from their formative particularities in order to assimilate them into “universalist” discourses. This assimilation through discourses of affect and transcendence not only rewrites the artworks but also reinscribes the viewer as an ahistorical, culturally unbound, colonizing, and cannibalizing subject for whom the “global” exhibition constitutes a tasting menu. A more recent example is the Menil Collection’s exhibition *Affecting Presence and the Pursuit of Delicious Experiences* (2015). I will quote its exhibition intention at some length, since it elaborates two common contemporary methods of engaging with art—first, prioritizing the agency of the viewer, and second, that of the artwork:

Affecting Presence gathers a diverse selection of objects ... to experiment with two complementary ways of understanding experiences of art. One stresses the primacy of the viewer; the other the commanding agency of the work of art. The works on view range from ancient sculptures and functional objects from Europe, Africa, North America, and the Pacific to Euro-American paintings and works on paper from the recent past—all of which exemplify the reduction of form or the absence of representation.

The exhibition highlights abstraction as an artistic means used across time, place, and culture to make present the ineffable forces that shape human experiences. 20th-century abstractions ... are presented alongside a variety of abstract forms from earlier eras, showcasing the rich history of this aesthetic practice. The exhibition explores the convergence of a viewer's individual pursuit of transcendent experiences in art with each object's power and "affecting presence."⁸

The exhibition seeks to offer only the "neutrality" of authentic, transcendent experience, which operates across "time, place and culture." It appeals to viewers' freedoms and the artworks' aesthetic agency—both untainted by intellectual, critical, or historicizing interference. These underlying fantasies of unconstrained mobility for some and tightly regimented constraint for others are hallmarks of empire, in both its earlier colonial and current capitalist forms. [[#Movement](#); [#Universal/ism](#)]

Rather than accepting the above, operations of viewing and the viewer herself are necessarily subject to examination. The linguistic models of *langue* and *parole* can apply to the histories, cultures, and individualized inflections (through personal experience, including the intellectual and emotional) of each viewer and their complex act of viewing. How we experience the artwork, what it (potentially) means to us, and how it comes into meaning occur through negotiations of these complex *intersections* that call for equally complex

articulations rather than the self-comforting variations of transcendence and “I know what I like.” I emphasize intersections so as not to prioritize any particular aspects of this engagement of viewing art, whether the bodily or emotional (how it makes me feel), the intellectual (over any physical response), the individual (over the historical, cultural), or the historical and cultural (over the individual).

The provisional accounting above is only the beginning of any discussion of *how* art is, and *how* it does what it does. More complex questions about time, duration, location, site, mobility, language, curatorial framing, and so on are still unaccounted for. Necessarily incomplete, we at least have some points from which to proceed.

