

The Concept of “Art” – revisited

Text: [Stefan Oehm](#) | Section: [Aesthetics & Art Theor](#)

Abstract: What do we talk about when we talk about art? It's a question that few people ask themselves when they talk about art. They bubble without a definition or explanation of how the word art and the term “art” are constituted, established, transformed. In the following, Stefan Oehm attempts to formulate a solution with reference to Rudi Keller's concept of language change and H.P. Grice's action-theoretical model.

1

Nobody, so it seems, has any difficulty dealing with the notion of “art”. Not even those people who couldn't care less about art. So, evidently everyone knows what is meant when it is being talked about. And also knows that all and anything can be art, at the latest since Marcel Duchamp came up with his ready-mades – the bottle rack, the fountain or the bicycle wheel – whereby in his case, contrary to this conceptual liberalisation, here was a case of delimitation: the use of the concept of “art” is reduced increasingly to the realm of fine art. Which nonetheless prevents no one from asking whether then this or that is art. Some say it's a question of taste – and there is no accounting for taste. Others, those whose professional lives revolve around art, give their honest utmost to come up with a serious answer. Some attempt to develop criteria intended to identify art, in a quest to tell real art apart from not-art or bad art. Others even try to extrapolate a definition of art from such criteria. And whoever believes that this is possible is also probably not a stranger to the idea that such a thing as *art per se* actually exists. That – as the essentialists among philosophers of art and art critics, such as Clive Bell, Harold Osborne or Monroe C. Beardsley, maintain – there are indeed attributes common to *all* works of art, and that, so they hope, these will reveal the answer to the core aesthetic question of *What is art?* Yet increasingly one gets the awkward feeling that while everyone who's talking about art uses the same word – *art* – they are by no means always talking about the same thing. Yes, even that each person talking about art might perhaps utter the same word – *art* – but is certainly not always referring to the same notion of “art”. What is it that more and more gives us this awkward feeling? There is a sheer unfathomable ocean of eminently eloquent treatises on art. And since the early 1950s, we have even had a body of linguistic analytic aesthetics in the tradition of Ludwig Wittgenstein, evident in the work of Morris Weitz, Paul Ziff and William E. Kennick, who in relation to the controversy surrounding the definability of art and works of art discuss the usage of the concept of “art”. This issue has been heatedly debated within art philosophy and is, effectively, still being contested today. But, as far as I can see, we still lack any systematic account of this contentious problem.

The fact that there are numerous different concepts of “art” is not in dispute. Similarly undisputed is the fact that the concept of “art” is constantly changing. Yet in most cases both facts are merely *ascertained*. And both are only, if at all, rudimentarily *explained*. This is especially strange since a systematic explanation would tell us a lot about how a concept of “art” arises, how it establishes itself, how we arrive at different concepts of “art”, in which ways these various concepts differ from one another and how they change over time. Acquiring knowledge about these matters might enable one to arrive at a more precise usage of the word *art*. The way the word is employed in everyday conversation is perhaps

without further consequence since its insouciant, unreflected use poses no problems. In scientific discourse, however, it is not merely desirable, but indeed indispensable to pursue qualified differentiation. As yet, this has happened only in an elementary fashion, as well as unsystematically. At present we are faced with conceptual chaos. Everyone participating in art discourse persists in using the word *art*, but does so irrespective of its multitude usages, in an undifferentiated fashion and every which way on all conceivable levels. A state of chaos which in the filter bubble of art discourse is nonetheless often skilfully masked by the remarkable eloquence of all participants.



Bruce Nauman: *Human/Need/Desire* (1983). Photo: Ed Schipul ([Flickr](#)).

2

To ensure that the concept of “art” is not misleading but well-founded in its accepted, unquestioned usage, at least within the technical vocabulary of professional discourse, several fundamental factors concerning the use of language need to be taken into account when considering this problematic area. In my view, the following should be highlighted:[\[1\]](#)

1. That there are not only different usages of the word *art* on the horizontal level (see §4: i.e. level A³ [related to a work of art], but also on the vertical axis (see §4: i.e. the levels A^{K.3} [work of art], A^{K.4} [oeuvre], B^{K.1} [style], B^{K.2} [music], B^{K.3} [art per se].
2. How the path from singular usage of the word *art* leads to its established and conventional usage, whereby the word’s usage (and hence also its interpretation) can then be systematically *explained*.
3. That only this path will lead to the various established usages of the word *art* on all levels/axes (see #1).

4. That in this manner one can systematically differentiate between the respective singular usages adopted by individuals and the respective established usages adopted by a community (whether they belong, for example, to the art world, or whether, in a broader framework, they belong to the entire speech community).
5. That each of these usages of the word *art* not only represents a corresponding meaning of the word *art* (the micro level of individual use: *parole*) but also generates a concept of “art” (the macro level of institutions: *langue*).
6. That each generated concept of “art” in turn conforms to (at least) one specific conceptual category.
7. How the process for establishing and modifying the respective usage of the word *art* (in other words its meanings) is accomplished on the various levels and in the concepts of “art” they have spawned.
8. That this process of establishing and modifying is not a unique occurrence within the speech community but one that is being accomplished permanently and in parallel within different social groups of any speech community and other speech communities.
9. What constitutes the structural parameters.
10. How it transpires that a work is called *art* or, respectively, a *work of art*.
11. What a systematic conceptual differentiation between the various states of aggregation of what is called *art* a *work of art* might look like.

3

An adequate explanation for the establishment of meaning has to take acting individuals as its point of departure. The question of how meaning can be established is directly connected to the question of how the understanding of this same meaning is established. It has to be shown what it means when a singular utterance is “understood” by someone else and how in the course of “social crystallisation”^[2] the singular meaning of a speaker can be converted into conventional meaning via established meaning. I will attempt to explain this process with reference to the action-theoretical model propounded by the British linguistic professor H.P. Grice:

A. I intend you to recognize that with my utterance I am proposing *a*.

B. I intend you to recognize my intention (A.).

C. I intend you to recognize what I am proposing with my utterance *a* in the act of you recognizing my intention (B.).

In order to ensure smooth communication the respective meaning needs to be established to which all participants in the dialogue can make reference. As I will subsequently seek to show on the basis of the concept of semantic change put forward by the Düsseldorf linguist Rudi Keller, this process for establishing the meaning of a word, in other words its usage, is a process guided by an invisible hand.^[3] The established meaning of an expression is thus a phenomenon of the third kind, neither a product of nature nor artificially created. Its establishment, like its change, is the result of human actions but not the outcome of a human plan. This is an unplanned and collective causal consequence of a multitude of individual actions which partially, at least, serve similar intentions.

4

Just as in language there is a micro level (*parole*) and a macro level (*langue*), there is in art likewise the micro level of the individual creation of art and the macro level of social institutions. Here, on the micro level four different usages of the word *art* can be distinguished, which I would like to denote with the symbol (A^K):

$A^{K.1}$: art as related to a subjective emotional state (“He lives his art”).

$A^{K.2}$: art as related to the actual process of creating art (“Painting is art”).

$A^{K.3}$: art as related to the concrete work (“That is art!”).

$A^{K.4}$: art as related to the entire oeuvre of an artist (“His art extends to numerous genres”).

In addition, on the macro level three different usages of the word *art* can be denoted with the symbol (B^K):

$B^{K.1}$: art as an episodic event within a specific supra-individual social institution (such as musical styles like jazz, rap, classical music...; or different media in fine art like performance, painting, photography ... [“Photography is the art form that appeals most to me”]).

$B^{K.2}$: art as a specific supra-individual social institution (artistic genres such as music, fine art, theatre ...; on this level of usage the concept of “art” is often limited to fine art, even in specialist and academic discourse [“The museum presents art of the nineteenth century”]).

$B^{K.3}$: art as a non-specific supra-individual social institution (*Art* – even on this level the term is used solely as an uncountable “mass noun”. In other words, the concept cannot be used in a plural form – if I talk about *the arts* I am referring, for example, to the concept’s usage as defined in $B^{K.2}$ [“Art is fundamental to the human condition”]).

Each of the various usages of the word *art* in turn engenders its own specific concept of “art” which likewise corresponds to a specific conceptual category (as described in Wittgenstein’s *Concepts with blurred edges*: these are to be understood as concepts that possess neither clear boundaries nor consistent criteria denoting what is included in the category and what is not [such as the concept of “house”]). What in logical terms needs to be distinguished from these established usages of the word *art* is the process of ascription, in other words the actual act of attributing something as *art*. The most frequently encountered case of ascription is probably that of designating a single work as *art* ($A^{K.3}$). But

an ascription of this kind can equally concern an artist's oeuvre ($A^{K.4}$), a style or a medium ($B^{K.1}$), or even a genre ($B^{K.2}$).

In structural terms, by being based on the singular usage of acting individuals, an ascription can also initiate the establishment of a new or modified usage of the word *art*. If an acting individual constantly ascribes something as *art* this can acquire a certain regularity which in some circumstances might then be endorsed by other people. The collective, unintended and unplanned result of such individual ascriptions and endorsements might be that at a particular point in time x a certain group y jointly designates a certain work z (but equally too: an oeuvre, a style, a medium or a genre) as *art*. But this is by no means to say that the members of this society will also all concur on the usage of the work *art*.



Can a roaring stag be art?

One consequence of this argument is that neither does it behoove prominent representatives of the social group of *art experts* to define the usage of the word *art* in the areas of its use, nor is it in their remit to bindingly determine which work at a point in time x should within a particular culture/society/speech group y be subsumed in the category of *works of art*. Both the linguistic designation and the ascription are instead the result of a process guided by the unseen hand. In each case art is that which, according to general consensus within any speech community, is called *art* on all levels of its use.

Image above the article: Marcel Duchamp, *Fountain* (1917). Photo: FHKE ([Flickr](#)).

[1] It might be considered a shortcoming of this article that it does not address the distinction between normative and descriptive concepts of art. The reason for this is due simply to the purpose of this study.

The text is concerned primarily with systematically demonstrating the fundamental structures in the use of the word *art*.

[2] “Among all the individuals that are linked together by speech, some sort of average will be set up: all will reproduce – not exactly of course, but approximately – the same signs united with the same concepts.” Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, New York, 1959, p. 15.

[3] Rudi Keller, *On Language Change: The invisible Hand in Language*, trans. by Brigitte Nerlich, London/New York, 1994. The concept of the invisible hand was first coined by the Scottish philosopher and economist Adam Smith in his 1776 work *The Wealth of Nations* (Book IV, chap. II, paragraph IX).

Tags

1. concept of “art”
2. Invisible hand
3. Rudi Keller
4. Stefan Oehm
5. the word "art"