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„Art“ - a suggested Definition

(cf. the html-version: <.../art-definitionEnglish.html>; in German: <.../kunstdefinition.html>)

(The [web-links](#) refer to the addresses <www.claustiedemann.de/> <www.sport-geschichte.de/> and <www.kulturwiss.info/>; the documents to be found in the respective directory <.../tiedemann/documents/>.)

Art is a cultural field of activity in which people, on the basis of their talents, abilities, and skills, make a serious effort to express their feelings and thoughts through either a work they have created themselves or through a performance. If the expression consists in a work (object, structure) which, after its completion, can be perceived by other people, this field of activity is called „fine (or visual) art“; if the expression consists in a performance, i.e. if it is bound to the physical presence of the artist, it is called „performing art“.

German: **Kunst ist ein kulturelles Tätigkeitsfeld, in dem Menschen sich aufgrund ihrer Begabungen, Fähigkeiten und Fertigkeiten ernsthaft bemühen, ihre Gefühle und Gedanken durch ein selbst geschaffenes Werk oder durch eine Handlung auszudrücken.** Besteht der Ausdruck in einem Werk (Gegenstand, Gebilde), das nach seiner Vollendung auch andere Menschen sinnlich wahrnehmen können, wird dieses Tätigkeitsfeld "bildende" Kunst genannt; besteht der Ausdruck in einer Handlung, ist er also an die leibliche Präsenz des Künstlers gebunden, wird es "darstellende" Kunst genannt.

French: **L'art est un domaine d'activité culturelle, dans lequel les gens, en vertu de leurs talents, capacités et compétences, font un effort sérieux pour exprimer leurs sentiments et leurs pensées par une œuvre ou une action qu'ils ont créée eux-mêmes.** Si l'expression consiste en un œuvre (objet) qui, une fois achevée, peut également être perçue sensuellement par d'autres personnes, ce domaine d'activité est appelé "art visuel (beaux arts)"; si l'expression consiste en une action liée à la présence physique de l'artiste, ce domaine d'activité est appelé "art d'interprétation".

This **definition of art** is a proposal first put on the internet in May 2005 (and since then slightly modified several times), which, as far as I know, has not yet been put up for discussion in this manner. I am preparing a more detailed examination of the literature. I published an essay on "Sport and Art" in September 2007 at the XII. International CESH Congress in Lorient (France) as a "keynote".¹ And I gave a lecture on "Works of Fine Arts as Sources for Sport-Historical Research" in 2016.²

¹ <.../VortragLorient2007Englisch.pdf> (English) and <.../VortragLorient2007Deutsch.pdf> (German)

² <.../VortragLudwigsburg2016.pdf> (English)

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In the following - after a preliminary remark on the terminological field of "art" - I first give reasons why and how I define "art", secondly I discuss the limits and benefits of my proposed definition, and thirdly I explain the elements of my definition; finally I add a short list of selected literature.

0. A preliminary remark on the terminological field of "art"

The field of meaning of "art" is not as broad as that of the German word "Kunst". As far as the terminological field of "Kunst" is concerned, I have written something in my German definition of „Kunst“³ that does not fit exactly to the English word "art", as far as I can judge this as a German author. Therefore, I will refrain from corresponding remarks at this place. Here my English speaking readers are challenged.

1. Defining „art“ - why and how?

It is difficult to define art. This becomes clear in many contributions to the problem of definition. Many authors of art studies (among others Ernst Gombrich) even assume that a definition of "art" is not at all meaningful, useful. Some authors (including Christian Demand) consider the intellectual effort to define "art" to be meaningful, even necessary, but do not offer their own definition of "art".

In principle, every scientist must have as clear a concept as possible of the central objects of his/her science. The idea that a physicist does not have a precise concept of physics, a lawyer does not have a precise concept of law, etc., will probably seem strange to everyone. But exactly this is declared normal or even normative by many art scientists.

Well, first of all I am not an art scholar, but rather a sports scientist, but on the one hand I regard myself more generally as a scholar of culture and society, and on the other hand I encounter a similar situation in sport science: there, too, is the same lack of a clear term for the central object of this science as well as the widespread opinion that "sport" cannot be defined and therefore needs not even be tried. I have tried to remedy this lack with my own proposal for a definition of "sport".⁴

When I dealt with the topic "Movement Culture and Sport in the Visual Arts", I noticed that the situation in art studies⁵ is very similar to that of sport-science: Here, too, the central concept of this science is so delimited that "art" can be understood to mean all kinds of things. Similar to sport-science, this way a complete arbitrariness and ambiguity in the art-scientific discourse arise.

Those who do not want to accept this development (or state of affairs) must face the ardu-

³ <.../kunstdefinition.html>

⁴ <.../sportdefinitionEnglish.html> and <.../DefinitionSportEnglish.pdf>

⁵ In Germany, this branch of science is called "art history", although it is not only about history!

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ous task of clarifying the concept of "art" (as the central object of art studies), determining its scope or limits, and that means defining "art"; and this (working-) definition must be published. This I do hereby hoping for a supportive resonance from all those who strive for clear concepts in cultural studies.

A **definition** is intended to determine, specify, delimit the meaning of a term. I want to clarify right at the outset: to understand a definition as a regulation or the like would be a misunderstanding. Every thinking person forms his/her individual opinion and uses words in his/her own meaning. However, this should not be exaggerated subjectively or constructivistically. We are social beings, designed for exchange and understanding with other people, in science anyway. But if we want to communicate with other people, who have their own, special use of words, we must be able to clarify our use of words, at least if asked.

Moreover, scientists must at least clarify their central concepts from the outset, without waiting for enquiries. If art scholars tell each other unasked what they understand by art, they only do what is necessary; if they fail to do so, it is a serious obstacle to understanding. In this sense, defining is a necessary prerequisite for the scientific exchange of knowledge and opinions.

Now, as is well known, definitions are not instruments that primarily should or even could change reality; rather, the main purpose of definitions is to make the found (objectively given) reality in them clear and distinct. "Primarily", "main" - with this wording I have already hinted that in all words, thus also (or even more so) in definitions, an idea of how reality *could be* is represented.

With my words (and thus also definitions) at the one hand I don't pursue only an objectivistic ideal (which is not attainable anyway). At the other hand I don't understand my usage of words as only subjectivistic or constructivistic. This means that I accept the priority indicated above, in which both are abolished: **definitions should bring reality as clearly and distinctly as possible to the concept and at the same time at least indicate in all subtlety how reality could be as well.**

There are several modes of definition: Real (or essential) definition, nominal definition, statement definition, ostentatious and operational definition. I propose - according to a philosophical tradition going back to Aristotle - a so-called **real definition**. It should define the essence of the object of a term by indicating the next term level (*genus proximum*) and the species-forming difference (*differentia specifica*). "Mistakes" can also be made with a real definition if, for example, it is too narrow or too wide, contains contradictions, is formulated unclearly, contains a negative phrasing or even the word to be defined itself.⁶

⁶ Cf. Regenbogen, Arnim; Uwe Meyer (Eds.) (2013): Wörterbuch der philosophischen Begriffe, founded by F. Kirchner and C. Michaëlis, continued by J. Hoffmeister, completely new ed. by A.R. und U.M. Hamburg: Felix Meiner 2013 (= Philosophische Bibliothek, vol. 500), keyword „Definition“.

If one wants to develop such a definition, as it is offered in most dictionaries and encyclopaedias, one must first think about to which category art belongs, which terms are located on the same level and which is the next higher category (term level). To assign the term apple to the category of fruit, for example, would go a step too far, because pome fruit is the next higher category.

For me, the next higher category for the term "art" is "activity field". *Art is one of many fields of activity.* I have already limited the abundance of activity fields somewhat by the adjective "cultural". I will explain the elements of my definition in more detail below.

In the second step, one must name the "**species-forming difference**", i.e. what distinguishes the (cultural) activity field art from other (cultural) activity fields. This should be formulated as concisely and clearly as possible, using words or terms that are as generally understandable as possible.

Some authors conclude from the fundamental necessity that the terms used here must themselves be redefined, that such a procedure is ultimately circular, which would be a serious violation of the rules of definition; therefore, such a procedure could or should not even be attempted. This objection is as puristic as it is unfruitful. In my opinion, it is both sufficient and necessary to accept the circularity that is in fact *logically conceivable* as a "blur" in order to gain a great benefit in conceptual clarity in practice.

It is clear that also **this definition is subjective**, the result of an (my) action and a (my) decision. **This subjectivity is ineluctable.** Others will act and decide differently. Of course, science consists of dealing with other subjects, their actions and decisions - with the offer to justify one's own actions and decisions in a comprehensible way and thus make them verifiable.

When art scholars (as well as many currently authoritative sport scientists) argue that "art" cannot be defined, they refuse to do what (art- and sport-) science is fundamentally about: communicating with clarified basic concepts; they thus remain in the unclear everyday language.

All elements of my definition of art are necessary, and only together are they sufficient. This means that an activity no longer belongs to the activity field "art", even if only one of the defining elements is not given. This is a mental figure that enables clear demarcation, and this is, after all, the literal sense of defining.

2. Limits and benefits of this definition of art

My proposed definition may differ from the everyday and colloquial "art" term. In view of the boundless arbitrariness of the everyday (and unfortunately also scientific) language use, to me it seems to be an advantage. Above all, the lack of distinction between "art" and "work of

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art" or their widespread equivocation is a major obstacle to the intellectual exchange in this cultural field that is important for many (if not all) people, who are somehow romping about there with interest, whether as observers or consumers, as amateur or even professional producers.

My proposal offers a very general linguistic label for the special character of "art". I hope, however, that I have grasped the essentials in these few words. The specific provisions of, for example, "gifts" and "abilities and skills" can and must be disputed - see also the explanations below!

The general and greatest benefit of such a clarification of terms arises for the art scholarly discourse: When art scientists know from each other what they each understand by "art", they can - especially when they have different conceptions! - talk to each other in clear awareness of their differing usage of the central concept of their science.

Questions of taste, liking or disapproval of works or performances of art cannot be meaningfully discussed or even argued about. These subjective judgments of taste are formed unconsciously and at lightning speed and they are largely beyond rational control. *De gustibus non est disputandum*. Here, there is no "right" or "wrong", at best an effort for retracing understanding. I have therefore completely left this field out of these considerations.

3. Explanation of the elements of my definition of "art"

In order to clarify for the hopefully beginning discussion of my proposal, I will briefly explain below the elements of my "art" definition:

"Field of activity": This is the next higher term, the *"genus proximum"*. The fact that the term "art" to be defined is referred to as a *field of activity* is intended to clarify that "art" is an abstract issue, not an object, state or the like. "Art" is also not a term for an activity, but a higher-level term for many activities. Activities such as stone cutting, painting or singing, dancing etc. can also be everyday activities; then they belong to the activity field everyday life. My categorical assignment of the term "art" to "field of activity" clearly separates this definition from widespread assignments of "art" to "activity" or even to "object".

Field of activity also means that people are active here, producing or performing something. The process from the first idea to the finished work or (skillfull) performance can take a long time, from discarding earlier designs over self-doubt to the willingness to present a work or performance to a (hopefully inclined) public.

The fact that the actors are human beings (e.g. not animals) seems to me to be self-evident, but probably has to be emphasised; it will hopefully be made even clearer by the following explanation of "cultural". For in everyday language, some animals are assigned activities such as singing, dancing etc., without in each case being clear that this is only meant meta-

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phorically. Canvases painted by primates were probably also considered by so-called experts to be works of human art - no wonder in view of very questionable principles and standards of evaluation for "modern" art, one could note a bit "gloating".

Jurists, who traditionally attach great importance to clarified concepts, have already in some cases had to deal with the question of what "**art**" is, of which **the German Grundgesetz**, article 5, paragraph 3, (only) **states that it is free**. Since the dispute was usually sparked off by "art" *works* (!), our highest judges have - in the absence of clear guidelines from art scholars - created and defined a concept of art in their jurisdiction that refers in particular to *works* as "art" (or not). **My activity-oriented, processual concept of art differs fundamentally from such object-related (concrete) concept of art.**

While according to an *object-related* concept of art in view of a work of art (according to the imprecise use of everyday language) one can ask "is this art?", with my *processual* concept of art in view of a work of art I ask "is this a work of art?", i.e. the result or product of human artistic activity.

By the way, the concept of art in the German Grundgesetz (Article 5, paragraph 3) seems to me to be *meant* - at least implicitly - with "field of activity" as a generic term when it says: "Art and science, research and teaching are free. ..." "Free" (from censorship or other state influence) are the *activity fields* listed in this context "art and science, research and teaching" - and to this extent also the *people* working in these activity fields. Their works - as *objects* - cannot meaningfully be assigned the attribute "free". To understand science, research and teaching as objects or works would certainly not occur to anyone - but why art?!

I have not found this categorical distinction in art studies. **The activity-oriented, processual assignment of the concept of art** proposed by me seems uncommon; to me it seems **fundamental and important**.

"cultural": On the basis of natural circumstances and conditions, which are also changed by people to an ever-increasing extent, people develop their ways of life socially / culturally. In the tribal history of homo, the ability for (self-) reflection is a decisive step towards the development of communication, language and free, playful thinking. Only after this step of development can one speak of "art" (and other cultural fields of activity such as "sport"). **Culture is the reflected, conscious shaping of one's own development, both at the level of the individual human being and at the level of the human species.**

"Talents." People are differently talented; they have - genetically conditioned as well as acquired through different developmental possibilities in childhood and youth (or even later) - different possibilities to act in different fields of activity, including the visual and performing arts. Especially in art, the partly very complex and thereby hardly reasonable und difficult to explain character of talents suggests thinking in terms of "genius" and "ingenious"; however, this characterises less the active artist than the strong impression his works or achievements

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make on others; furthermore, such thinking can devalue the importance of practise and diligence (*see the next explanation!*).

"abilities and skills": The differently gifted people develop their acting possibilities partly by themselves, but mainly under the guidance of teachers and masters. Abilities denote more complex possibilities of acting; skills are less complex, more craft-like possibilities of acting. Both can be achieved and increased through learning and practising, in the field of art mostly with the aim of great competence or mastery. Artists achieve this goal to a varying degree, to which outsiders (the public) (can) make judgements and often have different views.

"serious": Hereby I would like to suggest that the effort (*see next explanation!*) aims at the highest possible perfection. This element, too, is meant to be grading, stepping. A ("real") artist wants to be "taken seriously" because he or she has made "serious" efforts. However, there are also people who, out of hobbyism (in the best sense of the word as amateurs, dilettantes), bustle about in the field of art, but who, if they are honest, do not see themselves as "real" artists. The "public", too, probably always checks - at least inwardly - whether the respective work of art or artistic performance is really "meant seriously" - of course with individual results. Such an assessment is predominantly intuitive and thus difficult to access in a rational discourse.

"effort": By this is meant a "serious" (*see previous explanation!*) effort, not just mere will-iness. For some people (artists), this effort can reach the dimension of existential necessity, for which they are open for great personal sacrifices. The criterion for artists is certainly primarily *their own idea of what they want and are able to express and how* - depending on the objective circumstances and possibilities as well as their own abilities and skills plus something imponderable like "luck" or "*kairos*". A further criterion for the artists' constant striving for perfection and mastery is probably also their own comparing themselves with other artists and their works or performances, moreover probably also the processing of foreign reactions (of the public) to their works or performances.

The will to create or perform something is probably a fundamental prerequisite for the artist's activity, but it is not sufficient. The (serious) effort should lead to the best possible result. Serious and honest artists are their own harshest critics and, ideally, only secondarily aim for the applause of others after they themselves are completely satisfied with their work or performance. In reality, in the often not ideal case, artists may have to make compromises to earn their living: Success with the public creates opportunities for material gain.

Outsiders (the public) initially judge the artistic endeavor and its result (the work, the performance) purely emotionally: I like it or not, I am touched or not. This (ever individual) evaluation takes place unconsciously and mostly very quickly; it eludes rational explanation or mediation (this is expressed by the much quoted "*je ne sais quoi*": I don't know what or

why). I don't really know *why* something touches me emotionally, but I'm usually quickly sure *whether*, at least when I like or dislike something very much. This is not a topic to argue about in a meaningful way.

On this spontaneous emotional basis, a more intensive occupation with a work of art or an artistic performance can lead to a differentiated judgement of taste, which is to a certain extent also determined by knowledge and experience, and can certainly relativise the initially binary evaluation of emotions. This stage of judgement can be rationally conveyed and communicated; about such aspects of taste judgement, one can certainly argue with others since (aesthetic) knowledge and experience can be acquired and practised - and taught.

"Expressing feelings and thoughts": This is the defining element that distinguishes artistic activity from mere craftsmanship: In art it is not only about the production of a picture or object or a (skillfully) presented action, but beyond that and essentially about expressing something by the work or action, which - hopefully, but by no means necessarily - is appreciated and "understood" by other people.

What people want to express in art may be stimulated from the outside (by commission, promise of payment or similar), but in the ideal case it comes essentially from within themselves, from their personality to which they have developed in connection with their natural and especially socio-cultural environment: it is their feelings and/or thoughts, their fears or passions, their dreams or fantasies.

The artistic endeavour for expression is an emotional matter for the artist. It is therefore *useless to argue about this* as a public. You can only try to get an (own!) idea of what the artist might have wanted to express with empathy, intuition (*intueri*, *lat.* = *to look at something closely*). The approach to such an idea via an analysis of form, style and other elements of art theory may be helpful, but remains on the mediated, rationalised level.

Thus, **the most beautiful result of artistic expression** cannot be *understood*: **that we as the public are (can be) emotionally touched, moved by art works and performances.**

4. selected literature on the "art" term (I have put a more detailed list of literature on the internet; <.../LitKunst.pdf>)

- ARGAN, Giulio Carlo: Der Mensch, seine Kunst und Geschichte. Einleitung. In: Mary Hollingsworth: Belser Weltgeschichte der Kunst. (L'arte nella storia dell'uomo. Florenz: Giunti Gruppo Editoriale 2005) Transl. from Italian by C. Callori-Gehlsen; A. Schulz. Stuttgart: Belser 2005. pp. 5 - 9.
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 - SCHMÜCKER, Reinold: Der Streit um die Grundlagen der Kunstästhetik. Zu diesem Buch. In: R. Bluhm; R. Schmücker (Hrsg.): Kunst und Kunstbegriff. Der Streit um die Grundlagen der Ästhetik. (2002) 2., reviewed and corrected ed. Paderborn: mentis 2005. pp. 7 - 16.
 - THUILLIER, Jacques: Geschichte der Kunst. (Histoire de l'art. Paris: Editions Flammarion 2002) Transl. from French by C. Caesar et al. Paris: Editions Flammarion 2003.
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