In almost every major city, one can find an art museum: the hub of culture, elegance, and, recently, confusion. Often times, one feels overwhelmed with awe when stumbling through the various exhibits that display the splendor of masterful painters and sculptors; however, there is always section of a museum that seems to bring the viewer's awe to a halt: contemporary art—a section best described as eclectic, that is, containing many ideas displayed in odd and unique ways. The artworks displayed here are often the most creative, but most confusing pieces of art in the museum; they seemingly laugh at the previous exhibits of skill and disrespect the name of art which they are assigned to be. Some, Mike for example, are angered with these artworks and insist that they are not art since they lack the beauty displayed by other, more skillful paintings and sculptures. Others, Sarah for example, consider these artworks more deeply and do not dismiss them so quickly. By viewing these contemporary artworks like Sarah did, deeply and openly, we come to a common question: how do we define art? Through unconventional and unique ideas, these artworks challenge our preexisting notions about how we, society, define art. Even though society may be lured by the definitions of art made before the contemporary period, due to the beauty of those creations, we must consider these recent, odd, and unique artworks as art, for they will be the guide in explaining how we define it.

To start to answer the question of how we define art, we must explain why ordinary objects are not considered art. This explanation can be related to a point which Mike brought up: the difference between the fire extinguisher, an ordinary object, and the art in the exhibit. In the middle of his frustration about how contemporary art is not art, he points toward the fire extinguisher and asks, sarcastically, if that is part of the exhibit or just meant to put out fires. The question may seem to have an obvious answer, but upon further inspection, it leads to an important distinction: a painting, an artwork, is made for art while the fire extinguisher, an artifact, is not made for art. The creator of the fire extinguisher did not intend for the fire
extinguisher to be admired for its visual qualities and to be considered as a work of art, such are the qualities of an artwork; however, the fire extinguisher was designed to put out fires. When one views a fire extinguisher, one only thinks of the usefulness of it in the situation of a fire. But when one views an artwork, one only thinks of the visual qualities of the work or art. An object made by man, an artifact, does not bear any artistic significance if it was not made to be. The purpose of the object is a key part in how we define art. Art museums are not full of hair dryers, washing machines, or steering wheels, all of which have a functional purpose; art museums are full of paintings, sculptures, and other visually stimulating objects, all of which have a non functional purpose. Our society uses objects that have functional purpose, while it admires those that have a non functional purpose. That is not to say that all art has no functional purpose, but its main purpose is to be viewed as a work of art would be viewed. The distinction between an artwork and an artifact may seem to be obvious, but when viewing objects that are not aesthetically pleasing—beautiful—the distinction starts to blur.

During Mark’s frustration, he questions whether or not art should be beautiful, that is to say, can only beautiful objects can be art. Mark doesn’t think that the pile of sticks should be considered art; however, it must be since it is in the art exhibit. As Sarah describes, the sticks in the were deliberately placed in their position, thus, suggesting that they are art. It seems that they are hinting at a definition of art that is beyond external beauty and appearance but at a definition of art that is focused on inner beauty, of thought. For example, the endlessly looping video of a person sitting in a chair may not seem to be beautiful or aesthetically pleasing, but if we take a deeper look inside, we can find inner beauty. The person could be a symbol of society and how we are constantly moving, or the person could represent the artist and how the artist feels that his life is never ending and constantly repeating, or the chair could be symbolic of religion and man’s constant departure and return to it. Whatever the video represents is not important; moreover, what is important is that the video is an artwork of more than appearances, but of something meaningful: like Sarah says, not all art has to be beautiful. Society’s need to be stimulated is the driving force behind contemporary art. If all art was beautiful, then art museums would be no more than “walkthrough prisons:” places where one is disengaged from thought rather than invited to explore. However, since all art is not beautiful, society is drawn towards museums to think about art and question its existence.
Through society’s questions, beauty is redefined as the ability to make one question. Beauty is “in the eye of the beholder” since everyone draws different questions from an artwork.

Take Marchel Duchamp’s *Fountain*, for example, and consider its “beauty.” The *Fountain* is nothing more than a urinal placed upon a podium, but when we view it through subjective lenses, we see the questions it invites: what is art? is art beautiful? is art profound? If one were to view art objectively, without considering a deeper meaning, than he would miss the whole purpose of art. Art’s purpose is to engage us intellectually. That is why society can choose to accept the most outlandish art like the *Fountain* because it engages us intellectually. Mike is frustrated with contemporary art because he is not able to understand what art is doing for us. If Mike were to be more like Sarah and to ponder art’s significance, he would realize the true beauty of art. Magritte’s *Treachery of Images* is a prime example of this definition of art. In his painting, there is a pipe with the words (in French) that read, “This is not a pipe.” Magritte’s artwork is inviting to look past its physical qualities and search for a deeper meaning: to redefine what a painting is. A painting can’t be solely an object, but an idea, thought, or emotion. Art has a way of transcending the eye and penetrating the mind.

However, for some people, art can’t penetrate the mind. It is halted by a stubborn will afraid of new ideas. These people may say that since everyone interprets art differently, art can’t have a rigid definition. Even though there point is valid, society’s definition of art is general and broad intentionally so as to not stifle creativity. If art had a rigid definition, then artists would struggle finding ways to express their ideas and thoughts. Thousands of artworks would be lost forever in the mind if art had a rigid definition. Therefore, society’s definition of art is broad to intentionally allow room for all artwork. These opponents of this idea would go on further to say that the broad definition of art would allow for ordinary objects to be constituted as art. They would see the line between artworks and artifacts as blurry; however, they have forgotten about importance of the artwork’s intention. The first step in society’s definition of art is to include the creator’s intent so the line is clearly drawn. Finally, the opponents of the idea would ask how Sol LeWitt’s art, the art that Mike and Sarah saw in the contemporary art exhibit, is included in society’s definition of art. Surely it can’t be art since the creator is not clearly established? Afterall, LeWitt didn't paint any of the artworks, his students did. These opponents must realize that all of the artworks were the LeWitt’s idea. Since art evokes questioning and thought from the viewer, then it must come from the thought
of the creator. The artwork acts as a medium to transfer these thoughts, even though the viewer can choose to reject the creator’s thoughts and substitute their own. The idea came from LeWitt; therefore, he is the creator. The opponents of Society’s definition of art may still try to refute it, but ultimately, there is an underlying quality that unites all art: the ability to provoke thought.

Mike’s confusion is an ironic example of how thought-provoking art can be. Since Mike is questioning what art is, he is clearly demonstrating art’s purpose of invoking thought. Even though Mike may not be enjoying his confusion now, it will eventually make him a more thoughtful person. His observations about the nature of art will lead him to further question things around him. This is why society is drawn towards art. We enjoy the ideas that art exposes us to because they will transform us into more reflective society. By including art that pushes the seemingly rigid boundaries of art, our intellect is sharpened as if it were a knife on a whetstone. We define art as objects created for the intent of provoking thought so that we will grow as a society.
Art has been a subject of wonder for man ever since the times of the ancient Greeks. The beauty of artwork captivated some and inspired others. However, the most complicated issue of art today is not whether or not it should be accepted, but rather the definition of art. Since the term ‘art’ is very diverse, we will be including all the mediums that seem to fall under its influence and use them for the argument. These mediums include what you would normally find in an art classroom (painting, drawing, sculpture, graphic design etc.) as well as the written word, music, theatre, and fashion.

When Sarah first tries to defend her stance that the works presented at the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art (Mass MOCA) are truly art, she says that “It's in the museum, which means someone decided it should be here. So it must be art”. Her line of thinking corresponds to that of institutional theories of art, which state that art is defined by a professional institution. The trouble is that there is more than one institution in the art world. Let’s say that the Mougins Museum of Classical Art (MMCA) says that all the art in the Mass MOCA is not art at all because what is presented at Mass MOCA goes against their definition of art. If Mass MOCA publicly disagrees with their statement, then which institution is telling the truth? Noël Carroll, who wrote “Art, Practice, and Narrative” in The Art Circle by George Dickie, argued that if an institution were able to define the true definition of art, then it is not the institution itself that is deciding whether a creative piece should be considered artwork. It is, instead, the criteria they follow that give art its true definition (Adajian). Since there are multiple differing institutions, each with their own different idea of what art really is, how are we to know which one is correct? We cannot know for sure. To begin our definition of artwork, we need to analyze the function of art in our society.

Most people would agree that art sends an ‘unexpressed message’ or meaning to the audience that is viewing it. But is meaning something created by the artist then given to the audience, or is it something created in the minds of the audience? To answer this, let’s discuss
the real world example of when Kevin Nguyen and TJ Khayatan infiltrated the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and placed glasses on the floor, in the attempt to see the reactions of the Museum’s visitors (Mele). To their astonishment, many of the art critics and art enthusiasts stopped by their arrangement and pondered on the exact meaning of what they are looking at (Mele). Kevin and TJ did not attempt to attribute any meaning to the glasses whatsoever, but the visitors to the museum started to make connections to the glasses and some deeper meaning that was not present. The experience that the visitors had was similar to the multiple experiences they had viewing other artwork. This insight gives the true definition of art a strong foundation, as art is something that transmits meaning to a viewer or audience. The insight mentioned is similar to the ideas of Aristotle and Hume, who argued that the audience’s reaction towards a piece defines whether it is true artwork or not (Slater). It also parallels with the statement given by the literary critic, I. A. Richards, who said, “Art is all subjective,” and with R. G. Collingwood’s definition that all art is a matter of self-expression (Slater).

The definition presented is not yet complete, however, as there is still some instances where this definition is not compatible. For instance, in a dictionary, the definition of the word ‘friendship’ would give you meaning on what the word actually means. In this case, it is a relationship between friends. It does its job of giving meaning to the viewer, but almost everyone would agree that the literal definition of friendship is not art. The difference between the definition of friendship, and a representation of friendship in a work of art, is that in the end, the audience ends up with a deeper understanding of friendship than what they could’ve gotten by reading its literal meaning. Consider the book *Charlotte’s Web* by E. B. White. In the book, Wilbur and Charlotte both pursue a complicated friendship, despite being completely different animals. Someone reading might get the idea that anyone can be friends, despite being physically or mentally different. This new addition to the meaning of friendship is not in the literal definition, but instead adds new information to the viewer. If we look at all other mediums of what we consider to be artwork (painting, music, novel, theatre, etc.), we notice that all of those mediums do not add a new literal definition of the meaning the viewer comprehends. The book *Charlotte’s Web* does not add a new literal meaning of friendship, for example. Rather, it adds new information that builds upon the literal definition, which in turn increases our understanding of the perceived meaning.
To answer Mike’s question, on whether the fire extinguisher is art or not, he must first consider if the fire extinguisher allows him to interpret a meaning that is not directly present. Second, he has to consider whether or not he receives a deeper understanding on his perceived meaning. If he follows the criteria given and comes up with answers to both of them, then he can successfully say that the fire extinguisher is a work of art. If not, then there are two other categories that the extinguisher could fall under: non-artwork and bad artwork.

If Mike does not find any meaning from the fire extinguisher on the wall, then he does not need to progress any further. Since all artwork makes the viewer perceive some sort of meaning, and Mike cannot find any, then the fire extinguisher can be labeled as non-artwork. But what if Mike interpreted meaning from the fire extinguisher, but it failed to progress into deeper understanding? We can then say that Mike interpreted bad artwork. If, for example, Mike interpreted beauty from the fire extinguisher on the wall, but did not come up with any understanding on the meaning he perceived, then the fire extinguisher failed at becoming artwork. But, it also is not non-artwork, as he did perceive a meaning by viewing the said fire extinguisher. It seems as though the fire extinguisher then falls in between the two categories of artwork and non-artwork. What category is that? Imagine a diseased apple with brown spots all over it and is not perfectly round. This diseased apple goes against the definition of a normal apple, which is a round, usually red, yellow, or green fruit. However, it is still an apple because it mostly fits into the definition of an apple. It would then get the term of “bad apple.” Likewise, the fire extinguisher does not match the current definition of art as I have just given, but it does share similar qualities with that of true artwork. The fire extinguisher will then receive the moniker of bad artwork. Most other pieces of creativity that we receive meaning from but does not evolve into deeper understanding also seem to fall under this category.

While Mike’s problems are solved, critics may argue that my definition fails to take into account the ‘artistic push’ that most pieces of artwork claim to have. For example, if a painting was made for the intention of being sold to a customer, then it would not be considered artwork, as the maker of the said painting was not making artwork but instead a consumer commodity. This claim, however, becomes unfounded when we take into consideration the perspective of the viewer. If the artist, previously mentioned, made two paintings, one for a public art gallery, and the other to be sold to individuals, and they both look exactly the same, then there is no reason to say on the basis of appearance one over the other should be
considered true artwork. If you happen to switch the paintings without any suspicion, the onlookers would be giving their opposite opinion towards the artwork; one that was said to have been non-artwork is now given the title of true artwork and vice versa. The only thing that affects whether or not the artwork is genuine in the example is the audience’s opinion and consensus. And since subjectivity is important in the identity of art, it would therefore be important to incorporate it in the definition of true artwork.

With the information above, we now know that artwork must convey a meaning to an audience, and the audience must in turn gain a profound understanding of the meaning they have perceived. The best path for Sarah is to say that if she believes that what she is viewing in the museum is artwork, then it is considered artwork in her point of view. Mike could take the opposite path, and say that he did not experience art in the museum. Both sides can exist independent of each other without the need of a contradiction. With this in mind, Sarah and Mike can take a more educated approach to the field of artwork and better appreciate the intricate studies put into the artists’ creations.

Works Cited


From July 19 to November 30, 1937, Adolf Ziegler swept the German art world. His campaign was not to promote new mediums, but to reinstate the old. On behalf of the Nazi party, Ziegler filled the German Institute of Archaeology with "degenerate art." And from outside the hall, Adolf Hitler proposed a program of revanchism. He declared "merciless war" on art: works of "blood and soil" would be promoted and all else purged.

Today we tut at Ziegler, but we should shudder. Programs of artistic objectivity promote Ziegler's thought; art requires a flexible definition to avoid absolutism. Mike needs an answer that encompasses creativity's vastness, but his question is ill-posed. Artistic experience leaps beyond object. The property of "artisticness" resides in the relation between viewers' tastes and works' qualities and controls experience. But unfortunately, decoding subjectivity is challenging and reconciling artistic systems impossible.

To attack art through art object alone is reductionist. A wider lens reveals that art involves experience. To investigate it, we must consider the relation between viewer and object, tastes and qualities. Consider the following illustrative case:

Case 1. Suppose a group mills outsider a bar next to the ocean. They're bored. To kill time, a member proposes a wager: pointing to a ball, he asks if it will float. His friends place bets. Some say yes, some no. But their bets are guesses; it's futile to predict buoyancy on dry land.

The bar's patrons guess less gravely than philosophers, but by investigating relations through lone objects, both blunder. There's only one way to see if the ball floats: put it in water. And there's only one way to see if an object is art: mount it in public. An unseen Rodin is as ambiguous as an untested ball. We don't know if it is art any more than if the ball is buoyant.
The critical experience comes with viewers. An object is not inherently artistic. If it were, it would be reasonable to suppose that value would vary with enumerable qualities – color, form, or line, for example. But an unsigned Picasso fetches less than his famous *Les Demoiselles D'Avignon*. Its nature isn’t inferior; it simply lacks qualities integral to the artistic experience of some. Art buyers prize prestige. Without it, their artistic experience deteriorates.

Viewers value art based on individual preferences, not objective aspects. As their opinions ricochet off a painting or sculpture, patrons discover artistic experience's determinant. This quality is "artisticness" – an impression cast from the relation between the tastes of the patron and facets of the piece. This phenomenon disappears in a void, so the object itself is of no interest. Its objective aspects alone cannot constitute artistic experience. Only in relation does “artisticness” emerge.

But untangling the genealogy of “artisticness” offers scant reward. Reasonable disagreement exists on the qualities that lend "artisticness" to a relation between viewer and object -- it is subjective. In some cases, as with Ziegler and the Nazis, even its existence faces scrutiny. Examine the following case:

Case 2. Suppose that after the ball is thrown and money exchanged, the bar goers remain bored. This is ripe for another bet: why didn't the ball sink? The men squint and discern many causes. Perhaps it's hollow. Perhaps it's cursed. A blind man maintains that the ball didn't float at all; he heard it sink. But again, they conjecture. From the shore it's impossible to decode the ball-water interaction.

Generalizing "artisticness" without knowledge of each individual mind and piece of art is like squinting into the ocean. From the shore, the townsfolk cannot see the buoyant interplay of water and ball. From their salons, philosophers cannot compute the individuality integral to the artistic relationship. Kant and Wittgenstein are no more likely to resolve their disagreement than our townsfolk.

"Artisticness" rests on the intersection of viewer and object: each viewer's tastes and each work's qualities are inextricable. We cannot define "artisticness" without justified true beliefs applicable to every artistic experience. On the viewer's end, this knowledge is elusive. To justify a belief about another mind requires either access or logical certainty. But, as
Thomas Nagel argues, we can never view another mind unclouded by our own. And logical certainty only exists in a logical system. Given the subjectivity of "artisticness," assuming such a closed system would contradict. If humans met art on mathematical terms, experience would be irrelevant and object analysis sufficient. Each type of object would produce predictable results. Our artistic experiences wouldn't be so varied: dada and rococo could not coexist.

The object's end is problematic as well. Humans see "artisticness" everywhere, from the Empire State Building to inscribed gospels. To measure the object's contribution to "artisticness," requires justified true beliefs about all objects of artistic experience. Certainly, no justification could hold and no truth could be verified across such diversity. So "artisticness" cannot be defined from afar.

Investigating a single instance is equally futile. Even deconstructing a specific art object and set of tastes, the relation eludes us. "Artisticness" is a quality of experience. Experience cannot be mounted under a microscope or sterilized. This case demonstrates this:

Case 3. Desperate to resolve their bet, the bar goers grab a dinghy and putt out to the ball. They retrieve it, taking along a cup of seawater. Back on the pier, the men dissect the ball and test the water. They find the ball rubbery and the water salty; but observation cannot explain their interaction.

Direct comparison of tastes and qualities will not unlock "artisticness." The townsfolk could torture their ball. They could weigh it, smell it, and taste it, without understanding how it floats on water. They could torment their water. They could evaporate it, mix it, and swim in it without grasping how it supports the ball. An accounting of the particular preferences and qualities of art and viewer will do no more. The relation hides from assault.

If "artisticness" was a property of objects alone, the town's method might succeed. But "artisticness" applies to relations between object and subject, not objects themselves. It emerges from the properties of artistic relation, not of its constituents. Scrutinizing the components of the relation reaches no closer to "between." "Artisticness" lies separate from the viewer or the art.

Besides, artistic relations may be poly-adic. In many contexts, such as theatre, performance art, or sculpture, multiple art objects contribute to the relation. In Andy
Goldsworthy’s work, for instance, nature is a medium. Every tree, rock, or shrub is entangled in the experience. Probing the stones of his signature cairns will not elucidate their poly-adic relation with viewer and landscape. “Artisticness” is a quality of that relation; extracting it from single objects is inconceivable.

Many argue that art’s nature lies between artist and object, not object and viewer. Kant defines art as “a kind of representation that is purposive in itself and, though without an end, nevertheless promotes the cultivation of the mental powers for sociable communication” (Kant, sec. 44). His denial of purpose assumes an end: creativity. According to Kant, the significance of art springs from the artist’s unencumbered expression. The audience goes unmentioned, except as a target.

These definitions fail in practice. Suppose that an object appears without prompt. Are its aesthetic qualities still evocative? Can it still spark artistic experience if it matches viewer tastes? Self-evidently, the answer is yes. Although intent may constitute “artisticness” for some, it is not universal. Consider nature. William Wordsworth’s poems testify to artistic experience gleaned without intent. And although Wordsworth was a Christian, non-belief does not preclude artistic ecstasy. Any skeptic can interface with nature and find “artisticness” through its beauties.

So Mike should be careful what he wishes for. Rigid definitions of art objects desert logic, promoting absolutism in their inaccuracy. Real artistic experience lives in the relation between viewer and object and feasts on “artisticness.” “Artisticness” is ephemeral; outside observation cannot generalize it. Although it defies definition, any object in whose relation “artisticness” thrives is art. If Mike’s sticks, shapes, and videos stimulate someone’s sensibilities, they are art. Even the fire-extinguisher could be too. For in “artisticness,” there is diversity: a fluidity Mike needs to subvert Ziegler’s intellectual tyranny.

Bibliography