

WHAT IS ART? A READING LIST

ASA CURRICULUM DIVERSIFICATION GRANT PROJECT
BY SIMON FOKT

The aim of this reading list is to support teaching and promote equality and decolonisation in the context of modern analytic philosophy class. Using it serves two purposes:

1. Deconstructing the stereotype of philosophers as white males, and thus preventing the development of implicit biases and stereotype threat in students.
2. Developing sensitivity to biases present in both art and philosophy and thus preventing the development of, and counteracting the existing explicit and implicit ethnocentrism and sexism.

These aims determine the scope of the list. It focuses on areas which are normally discussed in analytic philosophy classes, and does not look for topics or authors who write outside of the analytic tradition (with the exception of some art historical and other texts which were particularly relevant). This is a conscious choice following a pragmatic thought: while it is desirable to expand our curricula to include such topics and authors in a long run, at present it seems likely that most lecturers will prefer to introduce changes gradually. Including works which are firmly rooted in the analytic tradition, but are either written by authors from under-represented groups or explicitly address the issues of ethnocentrism and gender bias, seems like a worthwhile and achievable goal. Further, it might better serve the first of the above aims: deconstructing the white male stereotype does not require showing that authors from under-represented groups are good at doing some other (feminist, Eastern, etc.) kind of philosophy – it requires showing that they are good at doing precisely that which white male philosophers are good at.

The list is divided in four distinct units which work well in conjunction, but can be separated and introduced to existing modules. Alternatively, specific texts can be pulled out of the list and used in pre-existing modules, or reorganized to create a different module structure. The texts are marked as introductory readings well suited for undergraduate teaching, specialised readings more appropriate for senior and Masters classes, and further readings which will likely work best in supplementing core texts. The last unit is less central to the topic of art classification, but can provide an interesting addition to classes looking to address more controversial topics and can be used in more specialised modules.

All entries are accompanied by short biographies. Following research presented by Katharine Jenkins and Jennifer Saul at the [Aesthetics and Race conference, Leeds 2015](#), I recommend including them in the syllabi and potentially supplementing them with mentions of the authors' racial background (self-identifications can be found in the [UPDirectory](#)). Doing so can make equality issues salient to the students while avoiding the suspicion a more explicit reference to gender and race could evoke.

The greatest challenge in compiling this list has been finding texts written by non-White authors, as very few of them wrote on the topic of classification in the analytic tradition. I recognise this limitation and hope that this and similar resources will inspire more excellent research from such authors.

CONTENTS

UNIT 1: Definitions of art	4
Catharine Abell, 'Art: What It Is and Why It Matters'	5
Dominic Mclver Lopes, <i>Beyond Art</i> , Introduction and chap. 2 & 3	6
Cynthia Freeland, <i>But Is It Art?</i> , chap. 2, 3 & 5	7
Ruth Saw, 'What Is a "Work of Art"?'	8
Peg Zeglin Brand, 'Glaring Omissions in Traditional Theories of Art'	9
Ajume H. Wingo, 'The Many-Layered Aesthetics of African Art'	10
Paul Crowther, 'Cultural Exclusion, Normativity, and the Definition of Art'	11
Larry Shiner, <i>The Invention of Art: A Cultural History</i>	12
Marcia Muelder Eaton, 'A Sustainable Definition of "Art"'	13
NEW Simon Fokt, 'The cultural definition of art'	14
Marcia Muelder Eaton, 'Art, Artifacts, and Intentions'	15
Patricia H Werhane, 'Evaluating the Classificatory Process'	16
Susanne Langer, <i>Feeling and Form; a Theory of Art</i>	17
Ayn Rand, <i>The Romantic Manifesto</i>	18
NEW Matthew Pelowski, et al. "But is it really art? The classification of images as "Art"/"Not Art" and correlation with appraisal and viewer interpersonal differences'	19
Unit 2: Do we need a definition of art?	20
Dominic Mclver Lopes, 'Nobody Needs a Theory of Art'	21
Carolyn Korsmeyer, <i>Gender and Aesthetics</i>	22
Dominic Mclver Lopes, <i>Beyond Art</i>	23
Lauren Tillinghast, 'Essence and Anti-Essentialism about Art'	24
Ellen Dissanayake, 'Doing Without the Ideology of Art'	25
Ruth Lorand, 'Classifications and the Philosophical Understanding of Art'	26
NEW Yuriko Saito, <i>Aesthetics of the Familiar: Everyday Life and World-Making</i> , chap. 1	27

Unit 3: Non-Western art	28
NEW Nikiru Ngzewu, 'African Art in Deep Time: De-race-ing Aesthetics and De-racializing Visual Art'	29
NEW Stephen Davies, et al. 'How Do Cross-Cultural Studies Impact Upon the Conventional Definition of Art?'	31
Dominic McIver Lopes, 'Art Without "Art"'	32
Larry Shiner, "'Primitive Fakes," "Tourist Art," and the Ideology of Authenticity'	33
Stephen Davies, 'Non-Western Art and Art's Definition'	34
Denis Dutton, "'But They Don't Have Our Concept of Art"'	35
H. Gene Blocker, 'Is Primitive Art Art?'	36
Ajume H Wingo, 'African Art and the Aesthetics of Hiding and Revealing'	37
Daniel Wilson, 'The Japanese Tea Ceremony and Pancultural Definitions of Art'	38
Annelies Monseré, 'Non-Western Art and the Concept of Art: Can Cluster Theories of Art Account for the Universality of Art?'	39
Julius Moravcsik, 'Why Philosophy of Art in Cross-Cultural Perspective?'	40
Sidney Littlefield Kasfir, 'African Art and Authenticity: A Text with a Shadow'	41
Unit 4: The borderlines of art: pornography	42
Petra van Brabant and Jesse Prinz, 'Why Do Porn Films Suck?'	43
Stephanie Patridge, 'Exclusivism and Evaluation: Art, Erotica and Pornography'	44
NEW A. W. Eaton, "'A Lady on the Street but a Freak in the Bed": On the Distinction Between Erotic Art and Pornography'	45
Mari Mikkola, 'Pornography, Art and Porno-Art'	46
Anna Arrowsmith, 'My Pornographic Development'	47
Mimi Vasilaki, 'Why Some Pornography May Be Art'	48
Linda Williams, 'A Provoking Agent: The Pornography and Performande Art of Annie Sprinkle'	49
Acknowledgments	50

This unit focuses on traditional and relational definitions. A major point of criticism of traditional definitions is that they only apply to very specific types of art and make no space for innovation. This means that they exclude works which do not conform to the selected essential properties which, incidentally, are characteristic mainly of works created by and for white men. This criticism to a large extent applies also to relational definitions which are not easily applicable to works outside the modern Western context.

This unit can be presented at two separate teaching sessions, one devoted to traditional, and the other to relational definitions. The selected texts encourage discussions on the following topics:

- What sort of challenges does the classification project face?
- Is the classificatory meaning of 'art' different from the honorific meaning? Should it be?
- Does the history and cultural background in which art and the modern concept of art developed, impact definitions of art?
- Are the existing definitions of art well suited to account for all art in its diversity, including works created outside the mainstream dominated by white male authors and critics?

CATHARINE ABELL, 'ART: WHAT IT IS AND WHY IT MATTERS', *PHILOSOPHY AND PHENOMENOLOGICAL RESEARCH*, 85 (2012), 671–91 (SEC. 1–3).

Non-male author

OVERVIEW

Content: A short overview of major modern definitions and introduction of a form of institutionalism

Difficulty: Intermediate to advanced

Use: Sections 1-3: introductory reading
Sections 4-7: specialised reading for classes focusing on institutional definitions

CONTENT

The first three sections of this paper offer a very useful overview of modern definitions of art. Most major types of definitions are introduced and explained in a succinct way, followed by a discussion of selected objections they face. First, Abell introduces functionalism and discusses its problems with extensional adequacy. Second, procedural theories including Dickie's institutional and Levinson's historical definitions are discussed, and criticized for their circularity and inability to account for art's value. Next, Abell considers two mixed theories, formulated by Robert Stecker and David Davies. She shows how they can overcome the difficulties discussed above, but run into their own problems. Finally, Berys Gaut's cluster account is introduced and criticized for its circularity and difficulties in determining all sufficiency conditions for being an artwork. In the remainder of the paper Abell focuses on developing her own version of the institutional theory.

RECOMMENDED USE

This text can provide the students with an overview of modern definitions of art. Theories are presented in a clear, succinct way, with their main features, strengths and weaknesses identified. The selection of objections discussed, however, is not representative – rather it serves the aim of developing Abell's own definition. But this need not be a problem: it might be useful to ask the students to read about and reflect on the definitions before class, and challenge them with objections during the lecture.

The later sections of the text are excellent, but address much more complex issues and are significantly less accessible for undergraduate students. They might be used in Masters level teaching or as advanced further reading on the institutional definition.

AUTHOR INFORMATION

Dr Catharine Abell is a Senior Lecturer in Philosophy at the University of Manchester. In her research she combines philosophy of art and the philosophy of language. She concentrates on issues concerning the nature of depiction, expression and fiction, and on what it is for something to be an artwork, a style or a genre.

OVERVIEW

Content: The context of and the challenges faced by definitions of art

Difficulty: Easy to Intermediate

Use: Introductory reading with a useful overview

CONTENT

Lopes presents an interesting overview of the context in which various theories of art have been developed. In the Introduction he looks at the reasons why philosophers have thought that the question ‘what is art?’ is at all worth asking and considers the importance of hard cases. Chapter 2 sketches the history of the concept of art and the attempts to define it, presenting the work of Paul Kristeller and Larry Shiner. It moves to focus on the Avant-Garde and some of the works which constitute hard cases for theories of art, to then introduce Weitz’s open concept argument and its influence on the development of relational definitions. Chapter 3 presents a taxonomy of definitions, dividing them into essential and relational, conjunctive and disjunctive, and introduces a selection of criteria on which one could judge how successful a theory is.

RECOMMENDED USE

This selection of chapters can be very useful as an introduction to art classification. Instead of focusing on any particular definition, Lopes asks what sort of challenges the classificatory project faces and what sort of conditions would a definition have to satisfy to be successful. This is likely to prove quite stimulating, especially considering the focus on hard cases: students often enjoy puzzling over what we should do with controversial works, and are likely to have conflicting intuitions which can lead to a good discussion.

Depending on the purpose of the class, it might be useful to use this text only after more descriptive information about existing definitions has been introduced. Lopes assumes basic knowledge on part of his readers and constructs his narrative around hard cases which challenge particular definitions without always explaining those definitions. While the text is thought provoking regardless, some prior knowledge can help place it better.

It will be useful to inform the students that this text is a part of a larger whole in which Lopes develops his buck-passing theory. This will explain the occasional references and Lopes’ tendency to group all other theories under a common name: ‘buck-stopping’.

To reduce the length of the text it is easiest to leave out Chapter 3.

AUTHOR INFORMATION

Dominic Lopes is a Distinguished University Scholar and Professor at the University of British Columbia. His research focusses on pictorial representation and perception; the aesthetic and epistemic value of pictures, including scientific images; theories of art and its value; the ontology of art; computer art and new art forms; and aesthetic value, wherever it may be found.

CYNTHIA FREELAND, *BUT IS IT ART?* (OXFORD: OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2001), CHAP. 2, 3 & 5.

Non-male author

OVERVIEW

Content: General overview of traditional definitions, cultural diversity, and feminist issues

Difficulty: Easy

Use: Introductory reading, contains a useful overview

CONTENT

Chapter 2 offers a very accessible introduction to traditional definitions of art, including the imitation, beauty and expression theories, ending on Danto and the *Brillo Box*. The text does not focus on the details of particular theories; instead, it is arranged in a useful historical narrative which presents them in their contexts, showing the types of art they were inspired by (see especially the section on the gardens of Versailles).

Chapter 3 moves on to discuss non-Western art, asking whether art can break barriers between cultures. Once again, Freeland is more interested in showing the variety of art forms in various cultures and indicating the issues related to it, than in discussing particular problems in detail.

Chapter 5 discusses issues related to women's position in the artworld and the status of the 'feminine arts.' Freeland presents the story of Guerilla Girls, reconstructs Linda Nochlin's 'Why have there been no great women artists?', looks critically at various written histories of art which include virtually no female artists, and ends asking whether gender of the artist should have any impact on art classification and appreciation.

RECOMMENDED USE

But is it art? can serve as a good basic introduction to art theory. It relates to several of the topics covered by this list and is written in a light, narrative style. It is best used in introductory teaching, as a background reading, or as a pre-read for higher level courses where it should be followed by more focused and specialised texts.

Chapter 3 ties well with the 3rd Unit of this list, and particularly with [Shiner's "Primitive Fakes," "Tourist Art," and the Ideology of Authenticity'](#). Chapter 5 is best followed by [Brand's 'Glaring Omissions in Traditional Theories of Art'](#).

AUTHOR INFORMATION

Cynthia Freeland is a Professor and Chair of Philosophy at the University of Houston. She is a specialist in Ancient Greek Philosophy, Ethics, and Aesthetics. Her recent publications included *But Is It Art?*, a philosophical examination of contemporary art; *Feminist Interpretations of Aristotle, an anthology*; and *The Naked and the Undead: Evil and the Appeal of Horror*. She has served as Director of Women's Studies.

OVERVIEW

Content: Discussion of the evaluative and classificatory uses of 'art'

Difficulty: Easy

Use: Introductory reading

CONTENT

This article explores the distinction between the classificatory and honorific ways to use the phrase 'work of art'. The former is a preliminary sense: it implies that a work is worthy of serious critical appraisal. 'The qualities that interest aestheticians *vis-à-vis* critics constitute a *sine qua non* for works of art; objects lacking these qualities are not worth critical attention' (22). This suggests that the properties which are relevant for art classification are not (or at least largely not) relevant to appraisal. Saw further argues that the qualities which are subject of appraisal can change over time and the same work can be valued for different reasons in different contexts. She then proposes a disjunctive way of classifying art involving institutional and ostensive elements, and discusses its applications to performative arts and to crafts.

RECOMMENDED USE

The text is written in an approachable and somewhat digressive narrative, which makes it a pleasant read, but might require the lecturer to provide the students with some reading guidance. The classificatory account proposed by Saw is rather general – discussing it might be instructive in helping the students understand what sort of conditions are likely to be successful in a definition.

The claim which can inspire most class discussion concerns the distinction between the qualities of works which make them art in the classificatory sense, from the qualities which are subject of appraisal. Some theories, e.g. functionalism, would hold that these qualities are in fact the same. It might also be useful to discuss this text in the context of [Werhane's 'Evaluating the Classificatory Process'](#). Other interesting points include the question of whether objects can stop being works of art, or go 'in and out of fashion'. Following this, it might be worth discussing the context-relativity implied by Saw who claims that objects can be legitimately evaluated differently at different times.

AUTHOR INFORMATION

Ruth Saw was a Professor at Birkbeck College, University of London. Her research interests were in metaphysics and aesthetics, and her books include *Aesthetics: an introduction*, *The Vindication of Metaphysics* and *Leibniz*. She was president of the Aristotelian Society and founder and president of the British Society for Aesthetics.

PEG ZEGLIN BRAND, 'GLARING OMISSIONS IN TRADITIONAL THEORIES OF ART', IN *THEORIES OF ART TODAY*, ED. BY NOEL CARROLL (LONDON: THE UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN PRESS, 2000).

Non-male author; content focusing on problems of gender and race

SUMMARY

Content: Feminist critique of the definition project

Difficulty: Intermediate to advanced

Use: Introductory reading with a useful overview

CONTENT

Brand challenges contemporary aesthetics for being 'content to remain tied to the conception of a patriarchal artworld conceivably begun in ancient Greece that included only male artists' (179). Histories of art routinely ignore works of pre-Greek matriarchal cultures and works created by female artists throughout the history of Western art, and theories of art which strive to include everything that features in mainstream histories make no attempt to include the works which are not part of the canon. After pointing out these historical omissions, Brand moves on to discuss some of the feminist theories which look at the reasons behind the absence of women in mainstream art history and aesthetics. Theories of art which were constructed in this patriarchal context were likely to abstract and universalise, ignoring the possibility of contextual and pluralist approaches. Brand proceeds to expose the specific dimensions in which the bias which is implicit in particular modern theories makes them suspicious, and finishes with a guidance on constructing a definition which would not be similarly biased.

RECOMMENDED USE

This text offers an overview of the feminist critique of the classificatory project. It assumes some basic knowledge and is best used after the main modern theories of art have been introduced. The problems it raises are almost never mentioned elsewhere, which only supports the thesis that much of aesthetics rests on unacknowledged bias (one exception is *Korsmeyer's Gender and Aesthetics*). The pointed critique and clearly stated suggestions for constructing unbiased theories, make it excellent at inspiring a critical discussion on the subject of universalism and discrimination in both art practice and theory. It is useful to use this text alongside *Crowther's 'Cultural Exclusion, Normativity, and the Definition of Art'* – together, they can draw attention to exclusionism with respect to both gender and race.

Perhaps more importantly, the argument offered and the long lists of female artists and art theorists which support it, can have an empowering and validating role to many female students. To take further advantage of this excellent opportunity to support female students, it might be useful to find works by some of the authors mentioned in the text, and display and discuss them in class.

AUTHOR INFORMATION

Peg Zeglin Brand is an Emerita Associate Professor of Indiana University. She is a pioneer in the fields of feminist aesthetics and ethics, organiser of Women and Gender Studies conferences and colloquia, and the advisor for the Alliance for Gender Awareness. Her books include *Beauty Matters* and *Beauty Revisited*. She was nominated for a 2010 Torchbearer Award.

AJUME H. WINGO, 'THE MANY-LAYERED AESTHETICS OF AFRICAN ART', IN *A COMPANION TO AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY*, ED. BY KWASI WIREDU (MALDEN, MA: BLACKWELL PUBLISHING).

Non-white author, content focused on cultural diversity

SUMMARY

Content: A description of some African art traditions and attitudes to art

Difficulty: Easy

Use: Useful overview; Introductory reading

CONTENT

Wingo contrasts the traditional Western approaches to art classification with some African traditions in which what gives art its status is the social context in which it is situated, the community that art creates. He reviews some of the ways in which art is approached in those cultures, focusing on its functional, everyday character and sensual nature. Art is not meant for disinterested intellectual contemplation, but for sense experience, and should have the capacity to really move its audience.

Similarly, the forms of African art are often different, including mask and costume making and dance. Wingo offers an overview of ways in which such works can be embedded in other cultural practices, and discusses how they are commonly perceived and approached.

RECOMMENDED USE

This text is particularly valuable as a description of a set of art-related beliefs and practices which are different from those commonly accepted in the modern Western artworld. As a vivid first-hand account, it is particularly good at drawing attention to those differences.

It can be interesting to compare Wingo's approach with some traditional and modern Western definitions of art to check whether the objects and practices he describes would qualify as art on those definitions. For example, it seems that their function and the procedures involved in their production and appreciation are quite different to what such definitions require. This can inspire interesting discussions on the universality of the classification project.

It might be fruitful to use this article alongside texts which explicitly try to develop definitions which do account for diverse art of other cultures, such as [Eaton's 'A Sustainable Definition of "Art"'](#) or [Dutton's "'But They Don't Have Our Concept of Art'"](#).

AUTHOR INFORMATION

Ajume Wingo is an Associate of the W.E.B. Du Bois Institute at Harvard. His research focuses on liberal democratic philosophy and politics, Civic Education, African Politics, African Art, and Aesthetics. His books include *Veil Politics in Liberal Democratic States*.

PAUL CROWTHER, 'CULTURAL EXCLUSION, NORMATIVITY, AND THE DEFINITION OF ART', *THE JOURNAL OF AESTHETICS AND ART CRITICISM*, 61 (2003), 121–31.

Content focusing on historical diversity and criticising universalism

OVERVIEW

Content: A critique of Western-centric elements in theories and an outline of a non-exclusionist definition

Difficulty: Intermediate

Use: Sections I-II: introductory reading; Sections III-IV: specialised reading

CONTENT

Crowther begins by criticising formalist and institutional definitions of art for their tacit exclusionism. Formalism professes to include art from all cultural contexts, but is exposed as doing so only on contingent Western criteria: it defines art 'around a few narrow phenomena aspects that a few Western observers find intuitively stimulating' (123). Institutionalists focus on the relations of works to the artworld, which means that the status of art can be bestowed onto any artefact with any cultural background irrespective of its properties, and this designation validated by the artworld. But since artworld members have no distinct artistic criteria for judging the correctness of designations, all their validation expresses are the 'preferences and fads of that distinctively Western [...] society' (124). Effectively, institutionalists redefine thousands of years of art making worldwide to fit the modern Western preferences.

In sections III and IV, Crowther offers an outline of a non-exclusionist definition which focuses on artefactual imaging. It is organised around two normative axes, one focusing on the transcultural and transhistorical value of works, the other on the distinctions of creative merit between works – a comparative historical horizon.

RECOMMENDED USE

Sections I and II of the text are most useful in teaching. The critique of formalism and institutionalism can inspire the students to consider the culturally embedded character of the classification project and the fact that many of the existing definitions take a very particular set of works to be central cases of art. It is useful to use this text alongside [Brand's 'Glaring Omissions in Traditional Theories of Art'](#) – together, they can draw attention to exclusionism with respect to both gender and race.

Sections III and IV are less immediately useful in undergraduate teaching which is likely to focus on the main definitions and the problems they face. It might be useful to recommend them as further reading, or use them in Masters level teaching. If used, those sections can add to the meta-theoretical considerations explored by [Lopes's *Beyond Art*](#) and [Eaton's 'A Sustainable Definition of "Art"'](#).

Crowther's interpretation of Dickie's theory might be worth discussing (124). Dickie could be happy to admit that artists cannot fail to create art if they want to do so, and that no acceptance by the artworld is needed to validate artistic designation (lack of acceptance would at most mean that the artist would lose face, see Dickie 1974: 50).

AUTHOR INFORMATION

Paul Crowther is a Professor and Chair of Philosophy at the National University of Ireland, Galway. He specialises in the fields of aesthetics, metaphysics, and visual culture. He has written nine books in the field of History of Art and Philosophy.

LARRY SHINER, *THE INVENTION OF ART: A CULTURAL HISTORY* (CHICAGO: THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO PRESS, 2001), CHAP. 5–7.

Content focusing on historical diversity and criticising universalism

OVERVIEW

Content: The history of the development of the modern concept of art in the 18th century.

Difficulty: Easy

Use: Further reading

CONTENT

This section of the book focuses on the history of the division between art and craft in the 18th century, showing how the theoretical work involved in defining art followed the social changes in art production and reception. Shiner looks at both the history of the idea of art as a unified phenomenon, and the social implications it carried: the emergence of art institutions, new art public, and the role and status of artists. In particular, he shows how the establishment of the modern system of the arts depended on the social, economic and ideological climate of the time, thus exposing its contingent nature often embedded in problematic ideologies and social attitudes. This includes a valuable discussion of divisions created on the basis of class, race and gender.

RECOMMENDED USE

This text is very useful in showing the often problematic contingencies behind the establishment of the modern art practice and, consequently, the attempts to define art. Looking at how the historical development of the concept traced power relations within and between societies, should help the students become more sensitive to those relations and their influence on art theory, and notice the assumptions behind the modern classificatory attempts. This can inspire a discussion on the aims of the project of art classification at large, and ways in which we can ensure that the definitions we defend are neutral with respect to class, race and gender. [Brand's 'Glaring Omissions in Traditional Theories of Art'](#) can help supplement the history with an analysis of its influence on existing definitions.

The selection recommended here is quite long, comprising 72 pages. However, a fourth of those pages are pictures and the whole is written in an easy, narrative style which makes this text very accessible and engaging. Should the selection need to be shortened, it is best to use chapter 5 and add sections on pages 115-123 ('The fate of the artisan' and 'The gender of genius'), 136-140 ('The art public and the problem of taste') and 146-151 ('Kant and Shiller sum up the aesthetic').

AUTHOR INFORMATION

Larry Shiner is an Emeritus Professor at the University of Illinois, Springfield. His research interests include philosophy and history of art, later French philosophy, especially the work of Paul Ricoeur and Michel Foucault. His books include *The Invention of Art: A Cultural History*, *Secret Mirror: Literary Form and History in Tocqueville's "Recollections"*, and *The Secularization of History*.

MARCIA MUELDER EATON, 'A SUSTAINABLE DEFINITION OF "ART"', IN *THEORIES OF ART TODAY*, ED. BY NOEL CARROLL (LONDON: THE UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN PRESS, 2000).

Non-male author; addresses issues related to cultural diversity

SUMMARY

Content: A critique of Western-centric elements in theories of art and a modification of Eaton's definition.

Difficulty: Easy to Intermediate

Use: Specialised or further reading

CONTENT

Eaton begins with some remarks on the practical need for classification of art and proceeds to present and improve her definition. Her focus is not on specific properties of artworks, but on the fact that they possess properties which within a given culture are considered worth attending to. The modifications made to the theory follow a realisation of Western-centric bias embedded in the original formulation, and the discussion explicitly aims to work towards a definition which acknowledges the cultural differences in art production and appreciation. Eaton moves on to discuss Danto's and Cohen's claims that art cannot be defined and points out some Western-centric aspects of their arguments. The paper ends with an overview of what it is for art and its definition to be sustainable.

RECOMMENDED USE

The main value of this article in the context of curriculum diversification lies in its awareness of the Western-centric bias in the previous formulation of Eaton's definition. This is explicitly addressed in the article and efforts are made to account for the cultural variations in attitudes to and classification of art. This can offer a powerful motivation for the students to seek similar biases in other definitions and ask whether they entail a preferential treatment of Western art.

Being able to account for the cultural differences in art, together with the requirement for a definition to account for sustainability, are two new theory selection criteria worth discussing in class. Eaton also claims that a successful theory of art should provide some grounds for an evaluative account. All this makes it interesting to discuss this work alongside [Abell's 'Art: What It Is and Why It Matters'](#) and [Lopes's *Beyond Art*](#).

Finally, Eaton expresses her own confusion in approaching and determining the status of modern art, some of which will likely seem very familiar to students. This can inspire a discussion on whether it is indeed true that anything goes in modern art.

AUTHOR INFORMATION

Marcia M. Eaton is an Emerita Professor at the University of Minnesota. She specialises in philosophy of literary language, literary interpretation, aesthetics, visual arts and landscape assessment. Her books include *Aesthetics and the Good Life* and *Basic Issues in Aesthetics*.

SIMON FOKT, 'THE CULTURAL DEFINITION OF ART', *METAPHILOSOPHY* 48.4 (2017), 404-429.

Addresses issues related to cultural diversity

SUMMARY

Content: An attempt to create a culture-relative definition of art

Difficulty: Intermediate

Use: Specialised reading

CONTENT

Most modern definitions of art fail to successfully address the issue of the ever-changing nature of art, and rarely even attempt to provide an account that would be valid in more than just the modern Western context. This article develops a new theory that preserves the advantages of its predecessors, solves or avoids their problems, and has a scope wide enough to account for art of different times and cultures. It argues that an object is art in a given context iff some person(s) culturally competent in this context have afforded it the status of a candidate for appreciation for reasons considered good in this context. This weakly institutional view is supplemented by auxiliary definitions explaining the notions of cultural contexts, competence, and good reasons for affording the status. The relativisation to contexts brings increased explanatory power and scope, and the ability to account for the diversity of art.

RECOMMENDED USE

Similarly to Marcia Muelder Eaton, 'A Sustainable Definition of "Art"', in *Theories of Art Today*, ed. by Noel Carroll (London: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2000).', this article presents an attempt to construct a definition which would escape the charge of Western-centrism. As such, it is useful to teach alongside texts which criticise various definitions for their lack of cultural diversity, e.g. Paul Crowther, 'Cultural Exclusion, Normativity, and the Definition of Art', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 61 (2003), 121–31., or Daniel Wilson, 'The Japanese Tea Ceremony and Pancultural Definitions of Art', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 76.1 (2018), 33–44..

It will be useful to discuss whether the cultural definition succeeds in doing away with some of the main objections raised against Dickie's institutional theory, particularly the charges of circularity, reliance on the vague notions of 'conferral' or 'presentation', as well as the 'artworld'.

The main point of interest could be the claim that works should be classified relative to a culture, and some works which are art in one culture might not be art in another. This might offer an opportunity to inquire further into the notion of cultural relativism, inspire a wider discussion of whether it is possible to bring all art of different cultures under a single definition, and whether accepting cultural relativism is a price worth paying for it. This can serve as a useful introduction to the topics of the following Units: asking whether we need a definition of art at all, and if so, how it should account for the art of other cultures.

AUTHOR INFORMATION

Simon Fokt works at the University of Edinburgh, and his research interests include art classification, art and pornography, fiction, and the ethics of drug use and human enhancement. He is the manager of the Diversity Reading List, an online resource promoting decolonisation of curricula in philosophy, and the director of TELdesign Limited, a company specialising in online education design.

MARCIA MUELDER EATON, 'ART, ARTIFACTS, AND INTENTIONS', *AMERICAN PHILOSOPHICAL QUARTERLY*, 6 (1969), 165–69.

Non-male author

OVERVIEW

Content: Uses theory of literature to argue that artworks have to be artefacts

Difficulty: Intermediate

Use: Specialised reading

CONTENT

The paper is written in support of the claim that artworks have to be artefacts. In a series of thought experiments involving driftwood and poems typed by monkeys, Eaton argues that linguistic objects such as warnings or poems have to result from intentional actions. She supports this argument by distinguishing linguistic objects from linguistic actions. To understand an utterance, it is necessary to not only explicate the meaning of the words used, but also to interpret the linguistic action which resulted in it. Literary works require interpretation, and interpretation requires reference to the linguistic actions of the work's creator – their intentions. So literary works need to result from intentional actions, i.e. be artefacts. Similarly, artworks are objects of interpretation and thus must be artefacts.

RECOMMENDED USE

The artefactuality requirement is involved in various definitions of art and thus Eaton's paper can be used in many contexts. With its narrow topic and a lack of introduction to any particular definitions, in the context of undergraduate teaching it remains a rather specialised reading. It is best used as a further reading, or as a required reading in higher level modules which already introduced more general works on art classification.

The problem discussed in this paper can inspire interesting discussions: found art constitutes one of the 'difficult cases' for which definitions should account, and student intuitions on this matter will likely differ. It might be useful to look at it in the context of the discussion of hard cases in [Lopes's *Beyond Art*](#). Another interesting point of discussion can relate to the generalisability of Eaton's claims: do her conclusions with respect to literary works straightforwardly apply to the case of driftwood?

AUTHOR INFORMATION

Marcia M. Eaton is an Emerita Professor at the University of Minnesota. She specialises in philosophy of literary language, literary interpretation, aesthetics, visual arts and landscape assessment. Her books include *Aesthetics and the Good Life* and *Basic Issues in Aesthetics*.

PATRICIA H WERHANE, 'EVALUATING THE CLASSIFICATORY PROCESS', *THE JOURNAL OF AESTHETICS AND ART CRITICISM*, 37 (1979), 352–54.

Non-male author

OVERVIEW

Content: Challenges the distinction between the classificatory and evaluative uses of 'art'

Difficulty: Easy

Use: Further reading

CONTENT

In this short discussion paper, Werhane challenges the distinction between the classificatory and evaluative senses of 'art' defended by George Dickie. Many of the criteria which matter in the selective classificatory process are evaluative in nature, and thus even institutional classification of art depends on evaluation. This means that sometimes people whom institutionalists would interpret as using 'art' in the evaluative sense (e.g. in saying: 'this is not art!'), should rather be seen as using it in the classificatory sense, evaluating the classificatory process (e.g. meaning: 'the process which led to classifying this as art is wrong, because this should not be classified as art').

RECOMMENDED USE

Despite its focus on the institutional definitions of art, this paper can have a wider application to the general discussion on the possibility and appropriateness of separating the classificatory and evaluative uses of the concept 'art'. This makes it particularly well suited as a further reading in teaching on the proceduralist-functionalist debate (or, since it is very short, an extra required reading).

The discussion of reasons why some artefacts rather than others are selected by artworld members, can serve as a good inspiration for discussion. Some of those reasons seem very arbitrary and will likely inspire conflicting intuitions.

AUTHOR INFORMATION

Patricia H Werhane is an Emerita Professor and Senior Fellow at the University of Virginia. A prolific author whose works include *Moral Imagination and Management Decision-Making* and *Organization Ethics for Health Care*, she is an acclaimed authority on employee rights in the workplace, one of the leading scholars on Adam Smith and founder and former editor-in-chief of *Business Ethics Quarterly*.

SUSANNE LANGER, *FEELING AND FORM; A THEORY OF ART* (CHARLES SCRIBNER'S SONS, 1953).

Non-male author

OVERVIEW

Content: Offers a definition of art focusing on forms symbolic of human feeling

Difficulty: Intermediate to advanced

Use: Further or specialised reading

CONTENT

Langer offers a theory of art according to which artworks are purely perceptible forms which embody some sort of feeling. Objects are art if they have 'significant form' which is understood as a form symbolic of human feeling or clearly expressing our internal lives. A discussion of different types of symbols and ways to symbolise follows to explain how art can symbolise feeling.

The book discusses different arts, where they create different 'primary illusions', e.g. 'virtual time' is characteristic of music, while 'virtual space' – of visual arts. Thus arts are alike in that they all create forms symbolic of human feeling, but differ in what kind of illusions they create.

RECOMMENDED USE

Langer is likely the most well-known female author of a major theory of art, and thus teaching her work can be particularly valuable in the context of curriculum diversification. However, her theory is also quite disjoint from the majority of the modern discussion on art classification, and thus including it can be a mixed blessing. It is also quite difficult to pick a specific section of her book which could be used on its own. Unless an entire lecture can be devoted to her work, introducing Langer can turn out problematic, as it is difficult to place her in a narrative which looks at modern analytic definitions.

The most interesting discussion points of this book will likely relate to the understanding of what is a symbol and what it means to symbolise human feeling.

AUTHOR INFORMATION

Susanne Langer was a Professor at the Connecticut College. She specialised in philosophy of mind and of art. She was one of the first popularly and professionally recognised female philosophers and the first American woman to succeed in an academic career in philosophy. Her most famous work is the 1942 book, *Philosophy in a New Key*.

OVERVIEW

Content: Presents an original definition of art

Difficulty: Intermediate

Use: Specialised or further reading

CONTENT

Rand develops a theory according to which ‘art is a selective re-creation of reality according to an artist’s metaphysical value-judgments’ (45). As humans require abstraction to acquire knowledge, they require symbols and art as means by which they can make abstractions perceptually and conceptually available. The ultimate function of art is to make available fundamental values in life.

RECOMMENDED USE

Rand’s definition has seen little attention from analytic philosophers and the attention it received was rarely positive. It is definitely very problematic – it effectively excludes much of avant-garde art and likely all of architecture. Teaching it might thus be quite challenging. However, her text is included on this list for the same reasons why Plato’s or Kant’s works are typically included in aesthetics syllabi: despite the fact that virtually everything they said has been challenged, we can still learn from them.

Rand’s text can be inspiring in two ways. Firstly, it can encourage a discussion on the status of the avant-garde and most abstract art forms – some students will likely share the sentiment that many such works are not art. Second, Rand’s definition has clear normative undertones: it is not only about what art is, but about what art is for and what its purpose should be. It might be instructive to use her text to inspire a discussion on whether we should expect definitions of art to cover these points.

AUTHOR INFORMATION

Ayn Rand was a Russian-American philosopher and writer. She developed a philosophical system she called Objectivism. She is most famous for her two best-selling novels, *The Fountainhead* and *Atlas Shrugged*.

MATTHEW PELOWSKI, GERNOT GERGER, YASMINE CHETOUANI, PATRICK S. MARKEY, AND HELMUT LEDER. "BUT IS IT REALLY ART? THE CLASSIFICATION OF IMAGES AS "ART"/"NOT ART" AND CORRELATION WITH APPRAISAL AND VIEWER INTERPERSONAL DIFFERENCES." *FRONTIERS IN PSYCHOLOGY* 8 (2017), 1729.

Multiple, diverse authors

OVERVIEW

Content: An empirical study into art classification

Difficulty: Advanced

Use: Specialised or further reading

CONTENT

[...] In this paper, we consider the spontaneous classification of digital reproductions as art or not art. Participants viewed a range of image types-Abstract, Hyperrealistic, Poorly Executed paintings, Readymade sculptures, as well as Renaissance and Baroque paintings. They classified these as "art" or "not art" using both binary and analog scales, and also assessed for liking. Almost universally, individuals did not find all items within a class to be "art," nor did all participants agree on the arthood status for any one item. Art classification in turn showed a significant positive correlation with liking. Whether an object was classified as art moreover correlated with specific personality variables, tastes, and decision strategies. The impact of these findings is discussed for selection/assessment of participants and for better understanding the basis of findings in past and future empirical art research.

RECOMMENDED USE

The focus on theory often means we detach ourselves from everyday perceptions of art by non-experts. This study points to several issues worth discussing: (1) people disagree on whether specific pieces are art; (2) lay classifications differ wildly from expert or theory-driven ones; (3) people routinely mix the classificatory and evaluative meanings of 'art'; (4) adopt a range of categorical or hedonic reasons to classify it; and (5) their classification is correlated with their evaluation. These can inspire a discussion about the difference between art classification and art identification, being mistaken in a classification and how theories should deal with such mistakes, and more broadly about the validity or superiority of expert opinions and the role of theory in classifying art.

The authors stress the correlation between classifying a piece as art and liking it. While the text is very focused on mainstream Western art, this finding can inspire a wider reflection on the self-perpetuating nature of the canon and the force of exclusion of both non-Western and non-canonical works: are our existing classifications preventing us from appropriately attending to works which are not classified as art by our implicit or explicit theories, which in turn prevents us from re-evaluating our theories to include some of those works?

Note: the paper is technical and focuses on a methodological point of adequate design for studies involving showing art to participants. Recommending specific sections might be preferable for less specialised classes.

AUTHOR INFORMATION

The authors are based at the Department of Basic Psychological Research and Research Methods, Faculty of Psychology, University of Vienna.

UNIT 2: DO WE NEED A DEFINITION OF ART?

This unit covers the criticism of the definitional project, including the classic anti-essentialist arguments inspired by Weitz, and more contemporary views. The selected texts encourage discussions on the following topics:

- What do we need a definition of art for? Can those aims be achieved without a definition?
- Is the definitional project itself misguided? Can the diverse nature of art be brought under one concept at all?
- Should we aim to produce a definition, given that it will likely lead us to generalisations which will exclude works and practices of non-Western cultures?

SUMMARY

Content: A short review and criticism of modern definitions and an introduction of the buck passing theory

Difficulty: Intermediate

Use: Introductory reading

CONTENT

Lopes begins by reviewing the history of the concept 'art' and showing that the initial theoretical attempts of the 18th Century were to define the arts, not 'art'. Only with the dawn of the 20th Century and the Great Avantgarde did the project of defining 'art' gain its current shape.

Section I ends with a short description of Weitz's anti-essentialism, followed by a review of some of the modern definitions, focusing on the distinction between functionalism and proceduralism. Various criteria for theory choice are mentioned and reviewed, and in the end it seems that the choice between the two kinds of definitions is largely arbitrary, following the weight particular aestheticians intuitively ascribe to specific criteria. Lopes suggests that this methodological impasse should be abandoned for a different approach: a buck-passing theory of the arts. Defining particular arts is easier than defining art, Lopes claims, and once it is determined whether a given object is in one of the arts, the question: 'but is it art?' loses its urgency. In the last section several objections are reviewed and answered.

RECOMMENDED USE

This text offers a good introduction to contemporary sceptical attitudes towards the classificatory project. The current debate is presented as likely unresolvable and the choice of a theory as largely a matter of opinion. Lopes makes a good case for his title: why should we care about a defining art?

The text is full of controversial points and hooks for class discussion. First, it would be worth asking how exactly does the history of art theory matter for the modern definition project? Secondly, it might be useful to discuss whether the choice between the functional and procedural definitions really is only a matter of methodological preference, and how does this claim relate to other types of definitions? Finally, the answers to the objections presented in the last section all invite further discussion.

This text is largely similar to Chapter 1 of [Lopes' *Beyond Art*](#), but offers a broader context for the buck-passing theory. In teaching, it might be useful to choose this text if no other general introductions to scepticism about definition are selected, as it stands better on its own.

AUTHOR INFORMATION

Dominic Lopes is a Distinguished University Scholar and Professor at the University of British Columbia. His research focusses on pictorial representation and perception; the aesthetic and epistemic value of pictures, including scientific images; theories of art and its value; the ontology of art; computer art and new art forms; and aesthetic value, wherever it may be found.

CAROLYN KORSMEYER, *GENDER AND AESTHETICS* (LONDON: PSYCHOLOGY PRESS, 2004), CHAP. 5.

Non-male author, content focused on gender issues

OVERVIEW

Content: Traces the contributions of feminist art to challenging biases present in art theory and practice

Difficulty: Intermediate

Use: Introductory reading, contains a useful overview

CONTENT

The chapter begins with a review of problematic cases of modern art and popular sceptical attitudes towards the possibility of definition. Korsmeyer discusses the modern breakdown of the boundaries between art and craft, and between 'high' and 'popular' culture, and the role feminist art played in those changes.

She then moves to review some of the major traditional and modern definitions of art, focusing on providing historical context for their rise and popularity, and exposing their gendered character. Those definitions are challenged by a number of modern artworks, notably by female artists who create forms and works which don't fit the boundaries tracked by the predominantly male artworld.

RECOMMENDED USE

There are two main reasons to use this text. First, it offers an interesting review of art theories from a feminist perspective, noting the gendered character of existing definitions. It may be good to teach it alongside [Brand's 'Glaring Omissions in Traditional Theories of Art'](#) to best bring out these issues.

Secondly, it inspires the question: given the problematic exclusionary character of art history and theory, would it not be better if we did not have a definition of art which we can use to exclude? The value of the feminist art discussed in the chapter lies largely in its ability to expose the biases present in the artworld and expressed in theories of art. Thus the fact that artists tend to create works which challenge existing theories might be in fact desirable.

AUTHOR INFORMATION

Carolyn Korsmeyer is a Professor at the University at Buffalo. Her chief research areas are aesthetics and emotion theory. She recently completed a study of disgust as an aesthetic response entitled *Savoring Disgust: The Foul and the Fair in Aesthetics*. Her book *Making Sense of Taste: Food and Philosophy* explores the neglected gustatory sense of taste and its claims for aesthetic status. She also works in the area of feminist philosophy, and her latest book on this subject is *Gender in Aesthetics: An Introduction*.

SUMMARY

Content: Introduces the buck-passing theory of art

Difficulty: Easy to Intermediate

Use: Specialised or further reading

CONTENT

In this chapter, Lopes develops his buck-passing theory of art which is meant to avoid the fatal difficulties faced by all definitions. This is achieved by ‘passing the buck’: defining art as a collection of particular arts.

x is a work of art = x is a work of K , where K is an art.

Thus Lopes bypasses the, according to him unanswerable, question: ‘what makes x an artwork?’, and focuses on: ‘what makes x a K ’ and ‘what makes K an art.’ He then moves to identify the challenges his theory will face and suggests ways in which it can be preferable to any definitions.

RECOMMENDED USE

The chapter presents a sketch of the view which is developed throughout the book. However, it is valuable in the context of this unit, as it contains an example of a theory which offers to answer all interesting questions about art without involving a definition. The chapter is thought provoking and controversial (perhaps because it is merely a sketch), and can inspire an interesting class discussion. In order to lead the class discussion and answer likely questions, the tutor should also read the rest of the book, or at least chapters 6 and 8.

The text is largely similar to Lopes' ‘[Nobody Needs a Theory of Art](#)’ – it offers a shorter and more focused introduction to the buck-passing theory. In teaching, it might be preferable to choose this text if some other reading which covers issues in anti-essentialism is already used and introduces scepticism towards the classificatory project.

The text is written in an accessible way and invokes a number of interesting examples which can be displayed or discussed in in class. It is best read after texts which present modern definitions of art, since knowing them will be useful in understanding the contrast between them and the buck-passing view.

AUTHOR INFORMATION

Dominic Lopes is a Distinguished University Scholar and Professor at the University of British Columbia. His research focusses on pictorial representation and perception; the aesthetic and epistemic value of pictures, including scientific images; theories of art and its value; the ontology of art; computer art and new art forms; and aesthetic value, wherever it may be found.

LAUREN TILLINGHAST, 'ESSENCE AND ANTI-ESSENTIALISM ABOUT ART', *THE BRITISH JOURNAL OF AESTHETICS*, 44 (2004), 167–83.

Non-male author

OVERVIEW

Content: Clarifies what can be meant by 'essence' of art and argues for a form of anti-essentialism

Difficulty: Advanced

Use: Specialised reading

CONTENT

Tillinghast begins by clarifying what is meant by essence and linking it with conditions for the application of a concept. She argues that a number of anti-essentialist arguments were based on a misunderstanding of what sort of properties can play the role of essential conditions in a definition and what should be understood under 'essential condition'. This is supported by the notion of *essentially describable kinds* and a distinction between necessary and essential conditions: F is a necessary condition for K if 'x is not F' implies that 'x is not K'; it is an essential condition if 'x is not F' implies that 'x is a defective K'.

A discussion of a possible condition follows: in a good-guaranteeing sense, x is art if x is good over and above being good of its kind. Tillinghast considers the advantages and problems of the good-guaranteeing sense of art and argues that it is about art in this sense that anti-essentialism is plausible.

RECOMMENDED USE

This text offers a detailed analysis of anti-essentialist claims. It is quite complex and long, which makes it much more suited for Masters level teaching. For use in undergraduate classes, I recommend limiting it to the first two sections which focus on the problems of anti-essentialism. Those problems will likely be the most interesting discussion point for seminars. It will also be useful to talk about the good-guaranteeing sense of art: what is its importance and how do claims made in its context relate to existing definitions of art?

The text often refers to Dickie and can be discussed with relation to the institutional theory. It also considers how one can establish that works produced within different cultures are art and can be related to works on non-Western art.

AUTHOR INFORMATION

Lauren Tillinghast is an Adjunct Instructor at the New York University. Her work focuses on ethics and aesthetics. She offers philosophical counselling and consulting services in New York City.

ELLEN DISSANAYAKE, 'DOING WITHOUT THE IDEOLOGY OF ART', *NEW LITERARY HISTORY*, 42 (2011), 71–79.

Non-male author

OVERVIEW

Content: Art should be seen as a behaviour rather than a category, it needs not definition but ethology

Difficulty: Intermediate

Use: Specialised reading

CONTENT

The paper comments on Steven Connor's 'Doing Without Art'. Dissenayake suggests that most people already do perfectly well without Art or theories of Art. They are naturally engaged in various artistic and creative activities, but this does not require them to have be able to precisely define or reliably identify Art. In fact, there is no need for an ideology of art which should instead be replaced with an ethology of art: a genetic explanation of why most people engage with the arts.

Dissenayake argues that we should stop treating Art as a category in need of a definition, and start looking at it as a behaviour, something people do. The behaviour in question concerns making things special, or artifying them, and is 'not such a Big Deal' (74). It can further be explained in evolutionary way as behaviour which somehow benefits its practitioners. Since 'making special' can be done in many ways, there likely is no single, essential feature of all art, nor is there a need to look for one and capture it in a definition.

RECOMMENDED USE

Despite being a reply to another text, this paper can be very useful in teaching. Dissenayake makes her points clear and brief, and uses the opportunity to present the main elements of her evolutionary theory. This makes this paper not only an interesting voice in the scepticism about the definition of art debate, but also an excellent introduction to her wider work.

The main question worth discussing in class is: should we replace definitions of art with an ethology of art? This can be related to [Shiner's *The Invention of Art: A Cultural History*](#) which provides evidence that in the past people created great art without the concept of it, and that both the practice and the concept of art evolved over time. Would adopting an evolutionary theory make a definition obsolete?

It might also be worth asking whether Dissenayake is right to claim that even the assumption that a theory of art is needed at all is elitist.

AUTHOR INFORMATION

Ellen Dissanayake is an independent scholar and an Honorary Doctor of Humane Letters at the Maryland Institute College of Art. Her work focuses on evolutionary aesthetics and approaching philosophical aesthetics through evolutionary ethology. Her books include *Art and Intimacy: How the Arts Began*, *Homo Aestheticus: Where Art Comes From and Why*, and *What Is Art For?*

RUTH LORAND, 'CLASSIFICATIONS AND THE PHILOSOPHICAL UNDERSTANDING OF ART', *JOURNAL OF AESTHETIC EDUCATION*, 36 (2002), 78–96.

Non-male author

OVERVIEW

Content: Finding art's essence is possible and a valuable project, but it is obscured by mere classifications

Difficulty: Intermediate

Use: Specialised reading

CONTENT

Lorand argues against Kivy and others who claim that philosophising about various forms of art needs no theory of art, and suggests that it's time to resume the inquiry into the nature of art. In fact, any satisfactory theorising about any specific issues (such as characteristics of an art form) must be 'linked to a higher, more general level that functions as its source for basic suppositions and definitions' (79, such as a theory of art).

Lorand then discusses some reasons why one might renounce the classificatory project, including Weitz's open concept argument. She introduces a distinction between classificatory definitions and the philosophical question. The former depend on the norms, traditions and beliefs present within a given context, and has been the focus of most theories of art. But it only distracts us from the more worthwhile philosophical question about the (elusive) essence of art.

A discussion of the distinction between the classificatory and evaluative uses of 'art' follows, with Kant, Mothersill and Dickie at its focus. It leads Lorand to arguing for a 'Platonic' approach, one focusing on uncovering art's essence, without the distraction of classification which can merely uncover 'current social trends' (93).

RECOMMENDED USE

This text can be useful in three ways. Firstly, it introduces and discusses some anti-essentialist arguments. Secondly, it draws attention to some common characteristics of different definitions – their focus on necessary and sufficient conditions. Finally, it claims that looking for the essence of art is possible and more important from mere classification. All of these can inspire interesting discussions, though it will be worth pointing out that Lorand's arguments are more controversial than she makes them seem.

This text can be contrasted with [Lopes' 'Nobody Needs a Theory of Art' or *Beyond Art*](#), as his view is precisely that no theory of art is needed for theorising about the arts. The distinction between classificatory and philosophical questions could be discussed with reference to [Langer's *Feeling and Form*](#) and [Rand's *The Romantic Manifesto*](#), as they are arguably more concerned with uncovering the essence of art than with producing necessary and sufficient conditions.

AUTHOR INFORMATION

Ruth Lorand is a Professor at the University of Haifa. Her research interests are in history of philosophy, Kant, aesthetics (art and beauty), hermeneutics, and problems of order and disorder. Her books include *Aesthetic Order-- A Philosophy of Order, Beauty and Art* and the edited volume *Television: Aesthetic reflections*.

YURIKO SAITO, *AESTHETICS OF THE FAMILIAR: EVERYDAY LIFE AND WORLD-MAKING* (OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2017), CHAP. 1

Non-male, non-white author

OVERVIEW

Content: Argues against the drive to defamiliarise the familiar

Difficulty: Easy

Use: Further reading

CONTENT

The book explores the place of aesthetics in ordinary, everyday contexts. Of the three parts of the book (Concepts, Cases, Consequences), the first will be of most interest in the present context. It engages with the current debates in everyday aesthetics, examining the concepts of 'everyday' and 'aesthetics', and engaging with the common drive to defamiliarize the familiar, aimed at making what is mundane stand out, turning the ordinary into something extraordinary. Saito argues against such an approach, as 'to experience and appreciate the everyday as something standing out is to negate the very everydayness that needs to be captured and appreciated' (p. 21). Instead, she argues, we should pay 'mindful attention' to and take aesthetic interest in the ordinary and the familiar, as ordinary and familiar. An analysis of the boring and the monotonous follows, showing that such experiences are not character-less. Instead, they have their own, dull character which can have an aesthetic dimension.

RECOMMENDED USE

Saito's text is not a direct argument against the need for a theory of art. However, it poses questions which are very relevant in this context. What is there to be gained by 'artifying' things, and thus making them special? Does the fact that we treat some objects we labelled 'art' as aesthetically special, not prevent us from seeing the aesthetic qualities of things we have not so labelled?

These questions might be of further import when introducing texts from the next section, focusing on the art of other cultures. The West has put a great deal of stress on the art vs non-art distinction, but this distinction might not exist or be different in other cultures. Saito's text can be a good prompt for a discussion on whether the Western attempts to categorise art with the underlying assumption that treating something as art makes it more worthwhile and less mundane, can have a detrimental effect on the Westerners' ability to appreciate works created in other cultures, particularly if in those cultures similar distinctions (or the drive towards them) are less pronounced.

AUTHOR INFORMATION

Professor Yuriko Saito joined the Rhode Island School of Design in 1981 and was the head of the Special Studies department from 1989-1992. Her work on everyday aesthetics led to the publication of two books (*Everyday Aesthetics* and *Aesthetics of the Familiar*), and her other interests include environmental aesthetics and Japanese aesthetics..

UNIT 3: NON-WESTERN ART

This unit looks at the discussion related to the status of works created outside of the Western tradition. The topic is particularly attractive in the context of curriculum diversification, as it links directly to issues of race and power relations between cultures and people of different racial backgrounds.

Note that some authors included on this list use the term 'primitive art' with varying degrees of awareness of its problematic character. It is important to be sensitive to this in teaching and it might be useful to draw the students' attention to this from the very start.

The selected texts will encourage discussion on the following topics:

- Are western approaches to art of different cultures racialised and biased?
- Do the definitions of art we have essentially leave out a whole range of art created outside of the Western tradition? What can be done to include such art?
- Is the whole project of defining art and including non-Western art Western-centric? Does it amount to cultural appropriation or imposition of our concepts onto cultures which do not have and likely do not need them?

NIKIRU NGZEWU, 'AFRICAN ART IN DEEP TIME: DE-RACE-ING AESTHETICS AND DE-RACIALIZING VISUAL ART', THE JOURNAL OF AESTHETICS AND ART CRITICISM 77:4 (2019), 367–378.

Non-white, non-male author, content focusing on cultural diversity

SUMMARY

Content: Exposes and discusses the racialised character of Western approach to African art

Difficulty: Easy

Use: Introductory reading

CONTENT

In two essays in the ART/Artifact(1988) exhibition catalog, white American museum curator Susan Vogel and white American philosopher Arthur Danto pronounce that Africans do not distinguish between art and nonart. Although seemingly objective empirical statements, their assertions about Africa and its art are racially based ruminations of a white supremacist worldview. I argue that in theorizing within the category of race they produced racialized aesthetics that commit the Eurocentric fallacy of upholding systemic racist objectives. I argue that (1) their assertions fail to be about African art, but about hegemony and power; (2) as the longest enduring artistic activity of humanity, African art is an important check to racialized aesthetics; (3) art is produced outside the category of race and from a critically conscious awareness of the world; and (4) art bespeaks creativity and presupposes the artistic and moral values of a culture in the manipulation and transformation of physical reality.

RECOMMENDED USE

Written in an engaging way, this paper invites the reader to re-evaluate some common assumptions about art from different cultures. Exposing the prevalent Western approach to African art as racialised, it can be a great tool in making students understand both the structural-societal, as well as own biases in approaching other cultures.

Ngzewu defends a powerful thesis: that 'the West's conception of art and creativity presupposes white racial hegemony.' She exposes the way in which Western art is tacitly assumed to be a yardstick against which all is measured, and the Westerners have become the 'purveyors of knowledge' who apply this yardstick to decide whether works of other cultures are art, all without any need to consult the creators of those works, or to revise own concept of art. As such, the paper can be very empowering to some students, while also being very uncomfortable to others – teaching it might require some skill in leading the discussion in a constructive way.

The import of Ngzewu's argument is that while racism and white domination rest on the assumption of cognitive and moral superiority of white people, the approach to African art she criticises serves to reinforce this assumption. This can inspire further class discussion on the importance and value of aesthetics.

Best used before assigning other texts on non-Western art, which should all be read in light of Ngzewu's criticism.

AUTHOR INFORMATION

Professor Nkiru Nzewu is the current chair of Africana Studies Department at State University of New York at Binghamton. Her areas of expertise are: African aesthetics, multicultural studies in art, hip-hop, and African

feminism. She was the manager of Onira Arts Africa gallery in Ottawa, and a producer for a popular radio program, *Voice of Nigeria*, as well as the Emmy award winning Smithsonian documentary, *Nigerian Art - Kindred Spirits*.

STEPHEN DAVIES, SAMER AKKACH, MEILIN CHINN, ENRICO FONGARO, JULIE NAGAM, AND JOHN POWELL, 'HOW DO CROSS-CULTURAL STUDIES IMPACT UPON THE CONVENTIONAL DEFINITION OF ART?' *JOURNAL OF WORLD PHILOSOPHIES* 3.1 (2018), 93-122.

Multiple, diverse authors, content focusing on cultural diversity

SUMMARY

Content: A symposium debate on cross-cultural approaches to art

Difficulty: Intermediate

Use: Specialised reading

CONTENT

While Stephen Davies argues that a debate on cross-cultural aesthetics is possible if we adopt an attitude of mutual respect and forbearance, his fellow symposiasts shed light upon different aspects which merit a closer scrutiny in such a dialogue. Samer Akkach warns that an inclusivistic embrace of difference runs the risk of collapsing the very difference one sought to understand. Julie Nagam underscores that local knowledge carriers and/or the medium should be involved in such a cross-cultural exploration. Enrico Fongaro searches for a way of experiencing cross-cultural art such that it can lead to a transformative experience. Relatedly, Meilin Chinn uses the analogy of friendship to explore the edifying dimension of experiencing an art form. Lastly, John Powell studies whether Dickie's Institutional Theory can be meaningfully used to identify works of art in Western and non-Western traditions.

RECOMMENDED USE

The most interesting in the present context is the selection of texts by Davies, Akkach, and Chinn, with a part of Davies' reply in the end. These present an interesting tension, with Akkach and (somewhat less overtly) Chinn, criticising Davies for adopting a Western-centric attitude to studying and conceptualising art of other cultures. It can be useful to consider this in the context of Nikiru Ngzewu, 'African Art in Deep Time: De-race-ing Aesthetics and De-racializing Visual Art', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 77:4 (2019), 367–378., asking to what extent the present discussion is similar to her criticism of Vogel and Danto. Given that Davies is offering a reply to the criticisms, this could offer an opportunity for a debate-style class design.

The texts, and especially Davies' reply, invite a further reflection: can one ever understand, conceptualise, or analyse the products (art?) of another culture, without doing so using the conceptual frameworks of one's own culture in ways that are problematic? If yes, how could this be done? If not, should we just never attempt it? What role do power structures and imbalances play in such attempts?

AUTHOR INFORMATION

Professor Stephen Davies (Auckland) is the former president of the American Society for Aesthetics; his interests include: art classification, philosophy of music, and literary interpretation. Professor Samer Akkach (Adelaide) works in architectural history and theory, and intellectual history of Islam. He is the founding director of the Centre for Asian and Middle Eastern Architecture (CAMEA). Dr Meilin Chinn (Santa Clara) specializes in Chinese philosophy and aesthetics, and has written extensively on philosophy of music.

DOMINIC MCIVER LOPES, 'ART WITHOUT "ART"', *THE BRITISH JOURNAL OF AESTHETICS* 47 (2007), 1–15.

Non-white author, content focusing on cultural diversity

SUMMARY

Content: Reviews sceptical arguments and argues against the concept dependence thesis.

Difficulty: Easy

Use: Introductory reading

CONTENT

Lopes begins by reviewing some (often quite problematic) reasons why one can be sceptical as to whether the products of various non-Western cultures are art. Turning to philosophical arguments, he states that the main way in which the claim that a given culture has no art is supported, is through a Concept Dependence thesis: a culture can have art only if its members have a concept of art. A review of several arguments follows, focusing mainly on discussing views presented by Stephen Davies and Dennis Dutton.

From section IV onwards Lopes confronts the Concept Dependence thesis, starting from reviewing two arguments in its support: one from art institutions, the other from artistic intentions. A discussion follows, leading to a development of a counterargument: members of a culture can produce art despite lacking the concept if they produce it incidentally. It seems that incidental art is not only possible, but even quite likely. The paper ends with a careful examination of the implications of disjoining art from "art".

RECOMMENDED USE

Lopes' light and approachable writing style makes this paper very well suited for undergraduate teaching. It is an excellent study in philosophical method: the structure of all arguments is very clear, the challenged premises are individuated and the requirements for challenging them are spelled out in detail.

One major advantage of the text is the way in which it exposes the Western-centric biases present in our views on non-Western art. Various problematic historical and current attitudes are mentioned and discussed, including the division between the West and the rest, paternalism, etc. The discussion of the Concept Dependence thesis relates to institutional and intentional definitions of art – it might be useful to stress that and encourage the students to think more about what commitments regarding what can be art do various definitions carry.

The paper contains a reply to Davies' 'Non-Western Art and Art's Definition' and quotes heavily from Shiner's "'Primitive Fakes," "Tourist Art," and the Ideology of Authenticity' and Dutton's "'But They Don't Have Our Concept of Art'". It might be useful to use these papers together, or perhaps set Lopes' text as required and the others as further readings.

AUTHOR INFORMATION

Dominic Lopes is a Distinguished University Scholar and Professor at the University of British Columbia. His research focusses on pictorial representation and perception; the aesthetic and epistemic value of pictures, including scientific images; theories of art and its value; the ontology of art; computer art and new art forms; and aesthetic value, wherever it may be found.

LARRY SHINER, “PRIMITIVE FAKES,” “TOURIST ART,” AND THE IDEOLOGY OF AUTHENTICITY’, *JOURNAL OF AESTHETICS AND ART CRITICISM*, 52 (1994), 225–34.

Content criticising universalism and Western-centrism

OVERVIEW

Content: Exposes a paradox in treatment of ‘primitive art’ and discusses the artworld’s double standards.

Difficulty: Easy

Use: Introductory reading

CONTENT

A number of disagreements about the status of non-Western art result from mixing up ‘two levels of meaning for terms like “art,” “artist,” and “aesthetic”’ (225), one related to craft and artisanship, the other to the Western understanding of Fine Art with its elevated status, individualism and disinterested appreciation. In ascribing status, Westerners typically disregard the conceptual boundaries present within a given culture and redraw them to fit their concept of Art, or preserve those boundaries but treat everything within them as artisanship.

A discussion of ‘primitive fakes’ follows: it is common to treat as ‘authentic primitive artworks’ those objects which have been created with no intention to create Art in the Western sense (e.g. to be objects of aesthetic appreciation), while considering those which have been created with precisely that intention to be ‘fakes’. A colonialist ideology permeates this practice. It assumes a notion of an unchanging traditional society, a mythical ‘world of the unspoiled, pre-contact “natives” who live in another time’ (229), and a dubious view of artists as bound to express the ‘spirit of their people’ only through ‘traditional’ means. This leads to double standards: Western artists who modify their practice under the influence of the works from other cultures are celebrated for their openness and creativity, while ‘traditional’ artists who do the same are shunned for being inauthentic. The paper ends with a criticism of Danto’s artefact and Art distinction on grounds of its positive ethnocentrism.

RECOMMENDED USE

This is an excellent introduction to the problems of classifying non-Western art. It identifies ethnocentric attitudes and practices and explains why they are problematic. This should inspire students to re-evaluate some implicitly accepted practices and beliefs. It would be useful to discuss other examples of ethnocentrism implicit in the Western artworld at tutorials. Note that Shiner draws heavily from a longer work by [Kasfir](#) – in classes where there is time for more extended treatment of this subject, Kasfir’s text might be preferable to Shiner’s.

The topic of ‘fakes’ and ‘authentic primitive art’ can be used to discuss the status of non-Western art. How would the problematic artworld practices engage various definitions? How should we classify the ‘authentic’ works, given that they are most prized for not having an intended aesthetic function, not being created within or for an art institution, not being intended to be art, or like past art? And conversely, how should we classify ‘tourist art’?

AUTHOR INFORMATION

Larry Shiner is an Emeritus Professor at the University of Illinois, Springfield. His research interests include philosophy and history of art, later French philosophy, especially the work of Paul Ricoeur and Michel Foucault. His books include *The Invention of Art: A Cultural History*, *Secret Mirror: Literary Form and History in Tocqueville’s “Recollections”*, and *The Secularization of History*.

STEPHEN DAVIES, 'NON-WESTERN ART AND ART'S DEFINITION', IN *THEORIES OF ART TODAY*, ED. BY NOËL CARROLL (LONDON: UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN PRESS, 2000), 199–216.

Content focusing on cultural diversity

OVERVIEW

Content: Rejects views denying art to other cultures; proceduralism can't account for non-Western art

Difficulty: Intermediate to advanced

Use: Introductory reading

CONTENT

Davies reviews and rejects arguments which suggest that there is no non-Western art because some non-Western societies lack the art and craft distinction, or lack the concept 'art', or are unconscious of their culture. This is followed by a detailed discussion of the challenges that non-Western art poses to institutional accounts, and a suggestion that an aesthetic theory would be better at capturing our ability to recognise and appreciate the art of other cultures.

But while aesthetic theories might be better at capturing how people identify art of other cultures, this does not mean that one should accept an aesthetic definition of art. Concern with aesthetic properties of works is at most historically necessary, e.g. while cultures likely start with aesthetic art, they are free to change their practices. Davies then asks whether Dickie's and Levinson's definitions can accommodate non-Western art. He argues that the lack of art institutions in some societies might make institutionalism inadequate in explaining the presence of art in those societies, and the recursive character of historicism makes it unable to explain why cultures which are historically disjoint from ours have art.

RECOMMENDED USE

This text is much more analytic and focused on the question of definition than others in this section. It offers little in terms of evaluation of the ethnocentric attitudes present in the artworld. For this reason, it might be best used in conjunction with other texts which do offer a more evaluative approach, e.g. [Blocker's 'Is Primitive Art Art?'](#) or more nuanced descriptions, e.g. [Wingo's 'African Art and the Aesthetics of Hiding and Revealing'](#).

It is, however, most relevant to the problem of art classification itself, as it directly assesses specific definitions against their ability to account for non-Western art. Thus despite being harder to read than some of the other positions on this list, it can serve as a very good introduction to the topic in classes focused more on classification itself than on cross-cultural comparisons. In particular, it can be very useful to discuss this text after a detailed introduction to procedural definitions.

AUTHOR INFORMATION

Stephen Davies is a Distinguished Professor at the University of Auckland. His work focuses on philosophy of music, art classification, but also political philosophy. His books include *Definitions of Art*, *Themes in the Philosophy of Music* and *The Artful Species: Aesthetics, Art, and Evolution*.

DENIS DUTTON, “BUT THEY DON’T HAVE OUR CONCEPT OF ART”, IN *THEORIES OF ART TODAY*, ED. BY NOËL CARROLL (LONDON: UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN PRESS, 2000), PP. 217–38.

Content focusing on cultural diversity and criticising universalism

OVERVIEW

Content: Argues against the view that there are many concepts of ‘art’ and develops a disjunctive definition

Difficulty: Easy

Use: Introductory reading

CONTENT

Dutton begins by challenging common assumptions regarding non-Western art, criticising the ‘widespread tendency to try to exaggerate cultural difference far beyond reality, to try make a foreign art form seem more alien than it actually is’ (220). He discusses some of the biases and mistakes made in approaching art of other cultures, and discourages from judging it against Western high art while forgetting about other, potentially more relevant comparisons to past or contemporary Western religious and folk art.

From section IV onwards, Dutton looks in detail at the extent of differences between Western and non-Western art and concepts of ‘art’, and on the significance of those differences. He argues that it is rarely the case that other cultures have a concept of ‘art’ which is different in any meaningful sense; instead they simply do art in their own, specific way, or don’t do art at all. This is because ‘art is not a technical concept confined to one culture [but] a vast assemblage of related practices [...] which can be connected [...] between all known human societies’ (229). This inspires Dutton to formulate a disjunctive definition on which objects from any culture can be art if they satisfy at least some of the universal criteria he identifies.

RECOMMENDED USE

This text can be used as an example of a definition which attempts to avoid the biases and universalism of most other theories. Dutton formulates a view which explicitly refrains from treating the Western canon as the central cases of art, and aims to take works created in other cultures as simply different, not ‘primitive’ or ‘less developed.’

It is also useful to read Dutton for his criticism of universalising and biased approaches to non-Western art. This can serve as an excellent starting point for a discussion on the paternalistic and imperialist attitudes exhibited by both anthropologists and philosophers of art. Importantly, it can be useful to discuss Dutton’s own view from this perspective, and look at some of the works he criticises, e.g. [Kasfir's ‘African Art and Authenticity: A Text with a Shadow’](#), to discuss the validity of his criticisms.

AUTHOR INFORMATION

Denis Dutton was a Professor at the University of Canterbury in Christchurch, New Zealand. His work focused on issues in creativity, evolutionary aesthetics, and authenticity, and his books include *The Forger's art: forgery and the philosophy of art* and *The Art Instinct*. He co-founded and edited popular websites such as Arts & Letters Daily, ClimateDebateDaily.com, and cybereditions.com.

H. GENE BLOCKER, 'IS PRIMITIVE ART ART?', *JOURNAL OF AESTHETIC EDUCATION*, 25 (1991), 87–97.

Content focusing on cultural diversity and criticising ethnocentrism

OVERVIEW

Content: The status of non-Western art should be determined based on a multicultural analysis

Difficulty: Intermediate

Use: Introductory reading

CONTENT

The text begins with some reflections on multicultural education and the best ways to include the study of other cultures in the curriculum, including the study of their art. A criticism of the notion 'primitive art' and its ethnocentric character follows, moving to a discussion of translation problems in describing a different culture which becomes the main theme of the paper.

Calling works of a different culture 'art' in the Western sense implies that they are subject to similar beliefs, attitudes and cultural conventions that art is to Westerners. But they might not be, and thus even if the Westerners will treat them as art, they might not have been created as art. This is not the same as to say that the members of a different culture have a different concept of 'art' – rather, they have some other concepts of their own which might not be easily translated into the Western conceptual framework. Ultimately, to establish whether the products of a different culture are art, one has to combine the conceptual work in determining under what conditions the concept 'art' is applied, and the empirical work in establishing whether the conditions obtain and whether the members of this culture share our concept of 'art'.

RECOMMENDED USE

From the beginning, Blocker addresses the issue of multiculturalism – his meta-reflections can help the students understand the importance and justification behind curriculum diversification project. The discussion of trans-cultural communication and translation difficulties can further make students aware of the problems inherent in classifying and interpreting the works of another culture.

It might be interesting to discuss this text with a more explicit reference to definitions of art. Blocker seem to assume a kind of institutional definition when speaking of how art fits cultural institutions, but a more aesthetic or essentialist view when talking about how 'primitive art' is identified. This links it well with [Davies' 'Non-Western Art and Art's Definition'](#) with which it can be taught.

AUTHOR INFORMATION

Gene Blocker was a Professor at the Ohio University and a traveller awarded with visiting positions in China, Sierra Leone, Nigeria, Hong Kong, and Japan. His work focused on aesthetics and applied philosophy, and his books include *Metaphysics and Absurdity*, *World Philosophy: An East-West Comparative Introduction to Philosophy* and *Japanese Philosophy*.

AJUME H WINGO, 'AFRICAN ART AND THE AESTHETICS OF HIDING AND REVEALING', *BRITISH JOURNAL OF AESTHETICS*, 38 (1998), 251–64.

Non-white author, content focused on cultural diversity

SUMMARY

Content: Identifies distinctive features of African art and offers detailed descriptions of art practices

Difficulty: Easy to intermediate

Use: Introductory reading

CONTENT

This text focuses on identifying distinctive features of African art. First, African art is virtually always functional and although it can be enjoyed intrinsically, it is rarely created for its own sake. It is a part of the social and political structure and cannot be understood without an understanding of this structure. The function of such art is to 'veil social functions': communicate that there exist secrets available to those initiated without communicating those secrets to everyone.

Wingo further focuses on masks and dance as examples of African art which are experienced in specific, culturally embedded ways. He offers detailed descriptions and a theoretical analysis of various artistic and cultural practices, showing the uniqueness of the experiences they afford and arguing that they cannot be experienced or understood without a prior immersion in the culture they are part of.

RECOMMENDED USE

The primary value of this text lies in the detailed first-hand account and a theoretical analysis of particular non-Western art practices. Most of the other, more theoretical articles in this section talk about non-Western art in a very abstract way. But surely understanding the differences between arts of different cultures requires a grasp of what the art of those cultures is like. Wingo's text offers a valuable insight into one such cultural context and his text can be very useful when taught alongside more theoretical articles.

The first paragraphs describe the experience of seeing a decorated African mask presented in a Western museum where it is taken out of its context. The experience is different for Western audience members and for Wingo who understands the context in which the work has been created. Highlighting this difference might be a good starting point for a seminar and an inspiration for a discussion on the differences between the arts of various cultures and the ways art is perceived in various cultures.

The text offers a detailed account of how exactly African artworks can be experienced and what are their relations to the beliefs about physical and spiritual world. Such detail can inspire a more nuanced understanding of such art, and inform and interesting discussion on how it can be best captured in a definition.

AUTHOR INFORMATION

Ajume Wingo is an Associate of the W.E.B. Du Bois Institute at Harvard. His research focuses on liberal democratic philosophy and politics, Civic Education, African Politics, African Art, and Aesthetics. His books include *Veil Politics in Liberal Democratic States*.

DANIEL WILSON, 'THE JAPANESE TEA CEREMONY AND PANCULTURAL DEFINITIONS OF ART', *JOURNAL OF AESTHETICS AND ART CRITICISM*, 76.1 (2018), 33–44.

Content focused on cultural diversity

SUMMARY

Content: Discusses the Japanese tea ceremony in the context of pancultural definitions of art

Difficulty: Easy

Use: Specialised reading

CONTENT

Dominic McIver Lopes and Yuriko Saito claim that the Japanese tea ceremony, or *chadō*, is a non-Western art form. Stephen Davies also defends that claim. In this article, I utilize the tea ceremony as a test case for pancultural definitions of art that claim to be inclusive of non-Western cultures without relying on Western ethnocentrism to justify their status as artworks. I argue that Davies's (2015) hybrid definition is not justified in assuming a homogenous art tradition and/or a unified conception of artistic practices in a non-Western culture. Moreover, the cladistic structure of his definition fails to accommodate the spontaneous instantiation of new art traditions. Additionally, Jerrold Levinson's Intentional-Historical definition cannot satisfactorily accommodate *chadō*. First, the nonart origins that were formative for the regard that is required for appreciation of the tea ceremony mean that the relational interpretation of the definition fails. Second, Rikyū's tea ceremony does not count as art incidentally, as it is not a form of mimesis nor does the Japanese wabi aesthetic that is central to *chadō* have a precursor in known Western art. Third, if *chadō* does satisfy Levinson's extended theory, it comes at the cost of embracing Western ethnocentrism.

RECOMMENDED USE

This text offers another close-up analysis of a non-Western art practice. It offers a useful overview of the history and ontology of the Japanese tea ceremony, which helps set the stage for class discussion and ensures that the students have some familiarity with the practice.

Wilson's discussion of the specific definitions of art can be treated as a way to set the stage for further class debate or even project work. How do other theories of art fare in accommodating *chadō*? If other definitions were discussed before, students could be divided into groups, each considering a specific definition.

The article can inspire further reflection on the ethnocentrism of our definitions, i.e. the fact that while they might be able to account for the artworks of other cultures, they can often only do so by referencing their similarity to or other relevant relations with Western art.

AUTHOR INFORMATION

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ANNELIES MONSERÉ, 'NON-WESTERN ART AND THE CONCEPT OF ART: CAN CLUSTER THEORIES OF ART ACCOUNT FOR THE UNIVERSALITY OF ART?', *ESTETIKA* 2012, 148–65.

Non-male author, content focusing on cultural diversity

SUMMARY

Content: Argues that cluster theories cannot account for non-Western art

Difficulty: Intermediate

Use: Specialised or further reading

CONTENT

Monseré distinguishes between the unified concept of art and various conceptions of it which can be historically or culturally diverse. She reviews parts of the debate about the status of non-Western art, arguing that a successful theory should clarify the transcultural concept of art. In particular, 'the concept of art cannot be illuminated by pointing at culture- and time-specific criteria for arthood' (154).

Cluster theories seem in a good position to account for art's diversity, since they allow that objects can be art for different reasons. However, the criteria selected for the cluster can be shown to be largely focused on the Western perceptions of art and are based around paradigmatic Western artworks. Further, the theories don't seem to acknowledge that not every criterion is valid in every context, or that there can be multiple context-dependant instantiations of every criterion.

RECOMMENDED USE

Due to the focused character of this paper it is best used as a further reading, or a core reading in courses focusing on cluster theories or non-Western art. The reconstruction of the cluster accounts offered in the paper is detailed, but could be supplemented by a more general introduction.

The first part of this text offers an interesting discussion of the requirements which a successful theory of art should meet: it should be able to account for the cultural diversity of art. This can be a good way to tie the topic of theory selection criteria discussed in Unit 1 (see e.g. [Eaton's 'A Sustainable Definition of "Art"'](#) and [Lopes's *Beyond Art*](#)).

The critique of cluster accounts offered in the second part of the paper focuses on their Western-centric character. It can be useful to discuss whether they could be modified in ways which would allow them to stand against Monseré's criticism, or whether it is in fact at all possible to formulate a definition which will be flexible enough to account for arts of all cultures, yet general enough to capture 'art' as a unified concept.

AUTHOR INFORMATION

Annelies Monseré is a postdoc at the University of Gent. Her work focuses on definitions of art and the role of intuitions in philosophy of art.

JULIUS MORAVCSIK, 'WHY PHILOSOPHY OF ART IN CROSS-CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE?', *THE JOURNAL OF AESTHETICS AND ART CRITICISM*, 51 (1993), 425–35.

Content focusing on cultural diversity and criticising universalism

OVERVIEW

Content: Discusses the need for and the ways to adopt a cross-cultural approach to theorising about art

Difficulty: Advanced

Use: Specialised or further reading

CONTENT

Moravcsik argues that the study of 'art' and the study of art are not identical, and that 'philosophy of art should be kept distinct from semantic investigations of "art." Art should be viewed without preconceived analytic definitions in cross-cultural perspectives' (430). He asks whether the differences and changes in the semantics and theories surrounding 'art' mirror differences and changes in art practices and argues that 'developments in the arts do not correspond normally to developments and changes in the meaning of "art" [and] philosophy of art can flourish with or without such genera as art or art appreciation' (428). Moravcsik then moves to discuss the cultural differences in both conceptual and practical approaches to art. He shows how they impact the way in which we should theorise about art, adopting a more global approach in place of the common Western-centric perspective.

RECOMMENDED USE

Using this text can serve as an excellent way to expose the Western universalism present in art classification and inspire a discussion on this topic. It shows that theories often unreflectively approach other cultures, their products and practices, with a Western measure and judge them according to Western criteria. The nuanced character of this critique can help the students develop their critical thinking skills – far from simply condemning all classificatory approaches, Moravcsik offers a detailed analysis which avoids throwing the baby out with the bathwater.

The second main strength of this text lies in identifying the specific reasons why a theory of art can be useful and conversely, showing where (sometimes despite appearances) it is not. This means that the text builds on the topics discussed in [Unit 2: Do we need a definition of art?](#)

This text is written in a clear, but specialised way, and as such will likely be challenging for undergraduate students. It is more appropriate for Masters level teaching, though offering appropriate commentary and reading guidance can make it more approachable to younger students.

AUTHOR INFORMATION

Julius Moravcsik was a Professor at Stanford University. His work focused on ancient Greek philosophy, but also aesthetics, philosophy of language, metaphysics, and ethics. His books include *Thought and Language*, *Plato and Platonism*, and *Meaning, Creativity, and the Partial Inscrutability of the Human Mind*.

SIDNEY LITTLEFIELD KASFIR, 'AFRICAN ART AND AUTHENTICITY: A TEXT WITH A SHADOW', *AFRICAN ARTS*, 25 (1992), 41-53 + 96–97.

Non-male author, content focusing on cultural diversity

OVERVIEW

Content: An extended analysis of the power relations involved in classifying African art

Difficulty: Intermediate

Use: Further reading

CONTENT

This text discusses the attitudes of Western audiences towards African art. It discusses the roots and the consequences of the divide between the West and the Rest which exists in the artworld. In particular, it focuses on the question: who gets to determine which of the works created within African cultures are art? In practice, this has mostly been Western collectors whose judgements are informed by a biased view of African cultures.

Kasfir proceeds to look in detail at various relations between Western art collectors and African cultures, exposing ways in which the classification of works as art, as authentic or traditional, is biased and largely arbitrary. It seems that there are many cases in which, from the perspective of their creators, objects treated by Westerners as art, are not art, and vice versa (note the extended discussion of the status of 'tourist art').

RECOMMENDED USE

This paper offers a more detailed treatment of the subject covered in [Shiner's "Primitive Fakes," "Tourist Art," and the Ideology of Authenticity](#). Kasfir's text is longer and focused more on anthropological and art historical than philosophical issues, so might be better suited as further reading in classes which don't aim to spend too much time on non-Western art, but would make for a better core reading in more focused modules.

The text offers a wide range of factual data which can serve as evidence for students who might approach the issue of colonialism in the artworld with scepticism. The sheer number and variety of examples used should convince anyone that the problem exists.

It can be very interesting to discuss the biases or fictions concerning African art in class, alongside the consequences of those biases: denying agency to authors, denying history to cultures, etc. It could be useful to talk about this in the context of procedural definitions: should we be suspicious about the procedures which lend art its status, if they are an expression of colonial attitudes, or are arbitrary?

AUTHOR INFORMATION

Sidney Kasfir is a Professor Emerita at the University of London. Her research focuses on Idoma masquerade and sacred kingship (Nigeria); Samburu blacksmiths (Kenya); contemporary urban and tourist art (Kenya, Uganda); and museum representation (USA, Uganda, Zimbabwe, South Africa). She edited several volumes on African art and is the author of *African Art and the Colonial Encounter: Inventing a Global Commodity*, and *Contemporary African Art*.

There are a number of practices and objects which seem to share a great deal with art, but are not typically considered art: video games, classic cars, dog shows. Are they and should they be art? This unit will address this question on the example of pornography. This choice is motivated by the immediate relevance of pornography to the issues of gender and equality, and the fact that pornography has been a topic of a lively recent debate which included authors from diverse backgrounds.

It is important to note that the following selection is not fully representative of the debate, in particular it includes no texts which defend the exclusivist thesis that pornography cannot be art. This is because nearly all works which do, have been written by white men. Susan Sontag, who can be read to hold this view, offered only scattered remarks never organised into a single text which could be easily used in teaching.

The aim of this module is to provoke three kinds of discussion:

- Can pornography be art? If yes, what sort of pornography can be art and why?
- Should we treat pornography as art? Even if it would technically qualify, should we refrain from classifying it as such to prevent it from gaining undeserved social approval which the status of art could lend it?
- Could denying art status to some pornographic works, especially those identified as feminist pornography, itself constitute a form of discrimination?

PETRA VAN BRABANT AND JESSE PRINZ, 'WHY DO PORN FILMS SUCK?', IN *ART AND PORNOGRAPHY: PHILOSOPHICAL ESSAYS*, ED. BY HANS MAES AND JERROLD LEVINSON (OXFORD: OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2012).

Non-male co-author, content challenging male-gaze centred mainstream views

OVERVIEW

Content: Argues that pornography can potentially be great art, but most of it isn't for contingent reasons

Difficulty: Easy

Use: Introductory reading

CONTENT

The authors present 'the paradox of porn': pornography seems to score very highly on various evaluative criteria which make art good (e.g. ability to elicit strong emotions), and has features similar to great art (e.g. 'Brechtian' acting, idealisation of the human body), yet is rarely considered art. They proceed to discuss some arguments for the exclusivist thesis, suggesting that they 'reflect a limited knowledge of or experience with pornography' (168). A review of various types of non-mainstream porn leads them to claim that the division between pornography and art is a false dichotomy.

Section 3 revisits the paradox, offering an analysis of various reasons which could lead to so little porn being (considered) art. After rejecting most of the common arguments, the authors suggest that a great majority of porn is not art for purely contingent reasons: very few pornographers even try to pursue that possibility. But pornography has the potential to be great art, and section 4 explores the ways in which it could.

RECOMMENDED USE

This text is a fairly easy and a very entertaining read, and is presented in a form of an intriguing and unexpected paradox. This makes it an excellent introductory reading which can really interest students in the subject.

It also paints a very varied and diverse picture of pornography, reaching far beyond the mainstream images most often discussed in the literature, and likely best known to students. This can be used to start a discussion on the function of different types of pornography and can be usefully linked with texts which discuss alternative pornography in more detail (e.g. [Williams' 'A Provoking Agent'](#) or [Arrowsmith's 'My Pornographic Development'](#)), or with texts which suggest that there are differences in how various types of pornography should be approached (e.g. [Patridge's 'Exclusivism and Evaluation: Art, Erotica and Pornography'](#)).

AUTHOR INFORMATION

Petra Van Brabant is a Docent at St Lucas School of Arts Antwerp, where she teaches semiotics, art theory, and cultural criticism. Her research focuses on art & society, and art & pornography.

Jesse Prinz is a Distinguished Professor at the City University of New York. He works primarily in the philosophy of psychology and ethics and has authored several books and over 100 articles, addressing such topics as emotion, moral psychology, aesthetics and consciousness.

STEPHANIE PATRIDGE, 'EXCLUSIVISM AND EVALUATION: ART, EROTICA AND PORNOGRAPHY', IN *PORNOGRAPHIC ART AND THE AESTHETICS OF PORNOGRAPHY*, ED. BY HANS MAES (LONDON: PALGRAVE MACMILLAN, 2013).

Non-male author, feminist content

OVERVIEW

Content: Introduction to the exclusivist debate and a discussion of the moral status of pornography

Difficulty: Easy

Use: Introductory reading with a useful overview

CONTENT

Patridge discusses and rejects some of the main arguments for the exclusivist thesis that no pornography can be art: Levinson's, Mag Uidhir's, and one based on Rea's definition of pornography. In doing so, she offers a useful overview of some other arguments already used against those authors. This leads her to conclude that at least some pornography can be art.

A normative question follows: *should* we treat pornography as art? Given the high cultural status of art, and the often unethical nature of pornography, doing so might lead us to promoting unethical attitudes. She finds such treatment too unselective: at least some pornography isn't morally problematic (and some of it can actually be morally laudable), while much of art, including erotic art, definitely is.

But consumption of pornography cannot be taken out of our paternalistic and sexist cultural context. As most pornography is inegalitarian and expresses (and possibly promotes) harmful attitudes towards women, enjoying it constitutes a moral flaw. This is true even if the consumer is never inspired to actually harm women – in those cases enjoyment of pornography constitutes moral obliviousness, a 'failure of sensitivity and solidarity with the victims of such imagery' (54) similar to taking enjoyment in racist jokes.

RECOMMENDED USE

This text offers a good and brief overview of the main points in the art and pornography debate. This makes it a good 'one-stop-shop' for classes which do not wish to look at it more closely. Alternatively, it can be used as an introduction to the topic and followed by some more specific papers.

What makes this text unique on this list, is its involvement with the normative question and discussion of moral issues related to pornography. This will likely prove to be a very interesting point for class discussions. It can further play an important role in challenging some mainstream views about inegalitarian pornography (e.g. that it is not harmful, or that watching it is not unethical), and validating the experience of many female students.

AUTHOR INFORMATION

Stephanie Patridge is an Associate Professor at the Otterbein University. She works on philosophy of art and aesthetics, ethical theory, moral psychology, applied ethics, and race theory.

A. W. EATON, “‘A LADY ON THE STREET BUT A FREAK IN THE BED’: ON THE DISTINCTION BETWEEN EROTIC ART AND PORNOGRAPHY,” *THE BRITISH JOURNAL OF AESTHETICS* 58.4 (2018), 469-488.

Non-male author, feminist content

OVERVIEW

Content: Argues that the art/pornography divide is motivated by class privilege

Difficulty: Easy

Use: Introductory reading with a useful overview

CONTENT

How, if at all, are we to distinguish between the works that we call ‘art’ and those that we call ‘pornography’? This question gets a grip because from classical Greek vases and the frescoes of Pompeii to Renaissance mythological painting and sculpture to Modernist prints, the European artistic tradition is chock-full of art that looks a lot like pornography. In this paper I propose a way of thinking about the distinction that is grounded in art historical considerations regarding the function of erotic images in 16th-century Italy. This exploration suggests that the root of the erotic art/pornography distinction was—at least in this context—class: in particular, the need for a special category of unsanctioned illicit images arose at the very time when print culture was beginning to threaten elite privilege. What made an erotic representation exceed the boundaries of acceptability, I suggest, was not its extreme libidinosity but, rather, its widespread availability and, thereby, its threat to one of the mechanisms of sustaining class privilege.

RECOMMENDED USE

Eaton argues that what really matters in the distinction between pornography and erotic art, has little to do with artistic or aesthetic features, value, or function. Instead, the distinction follows social power structures along the class line: the privileged reserve art status (and positive value) to works available only in an exclusive ‘private iconic circuit’ but are otherwise no different from those available in the ‘public iconic circuit’ and labelled pornography (and evaluated negatively). Eaton likens the distinction to that between two kinds of prostitute: a ‘courtesan’ and a ‘whore’, suggesting that in both cases the distinctions originate in class divisions and serve to reinforce them.

The paper has implications reaching far beyond the pornography debate. Could similar power relations not impact art classification elsewhere? It might be useful to discuss this in the context of Larry Shiner, *The Invention of Art: A Cultural History* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2001), chap. 5–7. where the historical processes leading to the establishment of the modern Western system of the arts are analysed, including examples such as the exclusion of weaving as it became a female-dominated profession. Reaching even further, this can be applied to attitudes to art of other cultures, with (post)colonial power relations impacting on the way works are classified.

Finally, Eaton’s text can serve as a sceptical argument against the classificatory project altogether: could all our attempts to distinguish art from non-art be just expressions of discrimination along various lines of privilege?

AUTHOR INFORMATION

Anne Eaton is an Associate Professor at the University of Illinois at Chicago. She works on topics in feminism, aesthetics and philosophy of art, value theory, and Italian Renaissance painting.

MARI MIKKOLA, 'PORNOGRAPHY, ART AND PORNO-ART', IN *PORNOGRAPHIC ART AND THE AESTHETICS OF PORNOGRAPHY*, ED. BY HANS MAES (LONDON: PALGRAVE MACMILLAN, 2013).

Non-male author

OVERVIEW

Content: Argues against exclusivism, analyses pornography as an artefactual kind, introduces porno-art

Difficulty: Intermediate

Use: Introductory reading

CONTENT

Mikkola discusses exclusivist arguments which suggest that pornography cannot be art because the two have incompatible functions – in particular, pornography is essentially about sexual arousal which makes artistic appreciation impossible. She argues that 'there is no central thing that pornography "is about"' (28), and thus even if sexual arousal and art were incompatible, there can be at least some pornography which is not about arousal, and thus can be art. Pornography can, for example, use sexual arousal as a means to an end, or be a feminist manifesto using ethical pornographic images to fight against mainstream porn industry.

Pornographic works can be very diverse and can have various aims and functions. Mikkola suggests following Amie Thomasson's work on artefactual kinds in understanding what makes something a pornographic work. On this view, *being pornography* is not related to an object's function. Instead, it follows relevant intentions of the creators and an existing substantive concept of pornography shared by other pornographers. The article ends with a proposal to introduce another category of porno-art to group works which don't fit the classes of art and pornography.

RECOMMENDED USE

This text can be used to introduce parts of the debate on art and pornography. The criticism it offers is interesting particularly because it focuses on non-mainstream and feminist pornography, and because it introduces a more nuanced analysis of what can be the aims of pornographers. This can give rise to an interesting discussion on previous work on this subject: it now seems that some authors might have constructed their arguments based on a biased view of pornography, e.g. one which equates 'pornography' with 'mainstream pornography typically created for the male gaze', effectively marginalising the experiences and views of women and sexual minorities.

The text might further serve a validating role for female students who might be interested to read about the existence and value of feminist pornography. Further, Mikkola's use of Amie Thomasson's work on artefactual kinds can serve as a good excuse to promote Thomasson's work in class.

AUTHOR INFORMATION

Mari Mikkola is a Professor at the Humbolt University in Berlin. Her work focuses on analytical feminist philosophy (especially gender as a social child, pornography), social philosophy, and metaphysics (in particular social ontology and social structure). She is a chairperson of the German Society for Women in Philosophy.

ANNA ARROWSMITH, 'MY PORNOGRAPHIC DEVELOPMENT', IN *PORNOGRAPHIC ART AND THE AESTHETICS OF PORNOGRAPHY*, ED. BY HANS MAES (LONDON: PALGRAVE MACMILLAN, 2013).

Non-male author, feminist content

OVERVIEW

Content: Presents Arrowsmith's work, challenges exclusivism and analyses porn's 'poor production values'

Difficulty: Easy

Use: Introductory reading

CONTENT

Arrowsmith presents her work as a pornographer. She offers examples of feminist and alternative pornography that seem quite different from the mainstream which became the focus of most definitions, and discusses the non-explicit potential and performative character of porn. She argues that the question of whether porn is art is 'not very illuminating [and] those that raise this issue know little about art or pornography' (293). The simple answer is: some is, some isn't.

The text offers some interesting analyses of the simplistic character and poor performance and production values of porn which led many to question its artistic and aesthetic value. All of those are presented not as artistic shortcomings, but as features of the genre, deliberate devices which are in fact very effective in achieving pornography's aim: arousal.

RECOMMENDED USE

This text is valuable as much for its content as for its author. It would come to no surprise in an aesthetics class to read a text authored by an artist, but giving voice to a woman associated with the sex industry can be challenging. Simply including her work on a philosophy reading list can play a significant role in acknowledging that valuable voices can come from all backgrounds.

The content itself is equally inspiring. Arrowsmith's work challenges many exclusivist arguments and suggests that they are constructed on the basis of very limited acquaintance with their subject – pornography. It shows that the discussion on this topic should aim to treat the phenomenon in all its complexity and avoid the biases which reduce it to what is aimed for the male gaze. This can inspire an interesting discussion on the existing accounts of pornography, and challenge many of the students' own prejudices.

It is best to use this text together with papers presenting exclusivist arguments, or with works summarising such papers, such as [Patridge, 'Exclusivism and Evaluation: Art, Erotica and Pornography'](#). It also offers specific examples illustrating the claims expressed by [van Brabant and Prinz in 'Why Do Porn Films Suck?'](#)

AUTHOR INFORMATION

Anna Arrowsmith is a porn director. She has been directing pornographic films since graduating from Central Saint Martins College of Arts and Design, London, in 1998. She has made over 250 scenes to date through her company Easy on the Eye Productions and has won numerous awards. She campaigns about women's rights and the rights of people in the sex industries.

MIMI VASILAKI, 'WHY SOME PORNOGRAPHY MAY BE ART', *PHILOSOPHY AND LITERATURE*, 34 (2010), 228–33.

Non-male author

OVERVIEW

Content: A reply to Mag Uidhir's exclusivist argument

Difficulty: Intermediate

Use: Further reading

CONTENT

This short article is a reply to Christy Mag Uidhir's exclusivist argument for the impossibility of pornographic art. Vasilaki agrees that some art can be constituted by, but not identical with pornography, but argues that at least in some cases the latter is also perfectly possible. She brings up a number of examples which seem to confirm this view and challenges Mag Uidhir's manner-inspecificity claim. In the second section, Vasilaki argues that Mag Uidhir's argument is invalid, as it doesn't take into account the possibility of the multi-functionality of pornography.

RECOMMENDED USE

This text offers a successful reply to one of the arguments for the exclusivism thesis. As the text has a very narrow focus, it is best used as a further reading. Alternatively, it can be used as an addition to some other, more general introduction to the art and pornography debate, as it is rather short, offers a good reconstruction of Mag Uidhir's original argument, and a very successful reply.

The clarity of the argument and a specific focus make this text quite accessible to undergraduates. It can serve as a good inspiration for a discussion on the validity and soundness of this and other exclusivist arguments.

AUTHOR INFORMATION

Information could not be obtained due to unavailability of contact details.

LINDA WILLIAMS, 'A PROVOKING AGENT: THE PORNOGRAPHY AND PERFORMANDE ART OF ANNIE SPRINKLE', *SOCIAL TEXT*, 1993, 117–33.

Non-male author, content focusing on feminism

OVERVIEW

Content: An analysis of works which can be characterised as pornographic art

Difficulty: Intermediate

Use: Further reading

CONTENT

Williams approaches the exclusivist thesis that pornography can't be art through an analysis of a specific case: Annie Sprinkle, a self-proclaimed 'artist and whore.' The aim of the paper is twofold: on the one hand, it offers an extended discussion of a specific candidate for the status of a porn-artist; on the other, it shows how pornographic art can be a medium which furthers the feminist aims and ideals.

The text offers an interesting discussion with the anti-pornography views expressed by some feminists, supported by a detailed analysis of some of Annie Sprinkle's pornographic films which show that pornography need not be objectifying, de-humanising, or essentially misogynistic. At the same time, Williams shows that, contrary to many complaints expressed by those who deny it the status of art, porn need not be formulaic, involves a great deal of performance, and can express meanings which are both complex and significant.

RECOMMENDED USE

The focus of this text is not on philosophical arguments, but on theoretical analysis of particular artworks. As such, in philosophy classes it is best used as a further reading. However, it can serve as a particularly good source of examples to provide the philosophical debate with some grounding. Works which pretend to the name of pornographic art are likely to be largely unknown to the students, and the philosophers who argue for or against the possibility of pornographic art offer a limited number of examples of what pornographic art could actually be like. Williams' text can fill this gap and offer a good overview of what sort of thing are they actually debating.

It will likely work well when used alongside [van Brabant and Prinz's 'Why Do Porn Films Suck?'](#) to exemplify their claim: Sprinkle's works arguably do have properties that can make them good art partially *because* they are pornography.

The text might further serve a validating role to some female students, either through its focus on sex-positive attitudes, or through showing how pornography need not be something all feminists should hate.

AUTHOR INFORMATION

Linda Williams is an Emerita Professor at UC Berkeley. Her research focuses on film theory, surrealist cinema, spectatorship and pornography. Her books include *Figures of Desire*, *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure and the Frenzy of the Visible*, *Playing the Race Card: Melodramas of Black and White, from Uncle Tom to O.J. Simpson*, and *On The Wire*.

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