On the Meanings and Implications of Joseph Margolis' Definition of Art

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Abstract | This paper develops an inquiry into the meanings and implications of Joseph Margolis' definition of artworks as physically embodied and culturally emergent entities. It starts from the pars destruens of his theory, by comparing two different texts criticizing Morris Weitz' denial of the possibility to define art. While in an early essay Margolis is ready to accept a constructivistic conception of necessary and sufficient conditions, six decades later he seems to have dropped the attempt to maintain a deflationary version of enabling conditions in view of a more coherent form of contingentism and pluralism. Secondly, the paper focuses on the "generic" character of Margolis' definition, namely its being too inclusive, insofar as it fits any kind of cultural entity. The author suggests that the first implication of Margolis' "generic" definition is the idea of continuity between artworks and the things and events of the cultural world. A second implication is that according to Margolis differences between artworks and other things can only be traced a posteriori, by looking at collective practices and at habitual uses of the term. Finally, the author argues that Margolis' radically historicist and contextualized approach to the arts should be integrated through a coherent historicizing and contextualizing of the very issue of the definition of art. A similar step could have strengthened his transition to a more inclusive philosophy of culture and philosophical anthropology.

Keywords | Joseph Margolis; Definition of Art; Morris Weitz; Continuity; Contingentism; Pluralism

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As is well known, Joseph Margolis' definition of artworks as physically embodied and culturally emergent entities has been very influential within the analytical philosophy of art, where his view on the definition of art and his use of the conceptual pair type-token still remain a subject of intense debate (see Rohrbaugh 2003). Less known is his criticism of Morris Weitz' argument against the definition of art (Weitz 1956), which is unanimously considered to be the seminal work giving rise to the debate within the analytical philosophy of art (Davies 2006, Carroll 2000, D'Angelo 2008). The editors of the present issue of the *East Asian Journal of Philosophy* should therefore be praised for having recovered Margolis' 1958 essay, which was published a few years after Weitz' paper and almost twenty years before Margolis himself published his answer to the question of the definition of art in (Margolis 1974). This is not the only occasion on which he discussed Weitz' argument against the definition of art, because he returned to the subject more than 60 years later (Margolis 2010), as I have already noted elsewhere (Dreon 2019). The formulation of a similar, albeit not identical, criticism strengthens the claim of a basic continuity in Joseph Margolis' thought, notwithstanding some important changes. The most notable is his transition to philosophical anthropology and a philosophy of culture that was deeply inspired by pragmatism and was able to combine radical historicism with a form of non-reductive naturalism (Margolis 2008 and Margolis 2017).[1]

In section 1, I will compare the two writings in which Joseph Margolis attacks Morris Weitz' denial of the possibility of providing a definition of art by drawing on Ludwig Wittgenstein's reflections on the grammar of the word "game" in his *Philosophical Investigations* (Wittgenstein 1963). My aim is to emphasize the main continuity in Margolis' thought – essentially revolving around his strongly anti-essentialist stance – as well as some differences between the two formulations of criticism. Indeed, it must be recalled that the two texts in question are more than 60 years apart and that in the intervening period a series of capital events occurred in philosophy. Arthur Danto published his groundbreaking paper *The Artworld* in 1964 (Danto 1964) and further developed his thesis in the following years (Danto 1981); Margolis himself formulated his definition of art in 1974 (Margolis 1974) and later advanced the claim for philosophical anthropology as the most comprehensive field to understand the emergence of culture and the arts within the human world, denouncing the inadequacies of an autonomous philosophy of art or aesthetics (Margolis 2008, xii).

Section 2 will tackle the problem of how to interpret Margolis' definition itself, given his statements in support of a plurality of definitions, the extensibility

[1] For a continuistic reading of Margolis' philosophy, see Pryba (2021) and Dreon-Ragazzi (2022).

and/or correctability of each definition to suit the context, and finally the claim about each definition's radically historical, non-teleologically oriented character. A potential objection is that Margolis' definition of artworks fits any cultural artifact, human beings included, according to Joe Margolis himself; consequently, this definition could be considered too inclusive and not specific enough to distinguish artworks from other cultural artifacts. My suggestion is that one should read Margolis' definition as involving the denial of *a priori* enabling conditions for defining art, such as those laid out by Danto (1992).

Finally, in section 3 I will argue that Margolis' radically historicist and contextualized approach to the arts requires us to historicize the very issue of the definition of art. Joe Margolis did not abandon his answer to the definition problem, but his later philosophy can be understood as involving a shift from the question "what is art?" to the question "what are the contributions of culture and the arts to the emergence of human beings?" This shift is quite reasonable and I personally endorse it. However, I believe that it should be integrated through a coherent historicizing and contextualizing of the very issue of the definition of art. Joe Margolis argued for a radical historicizing of any definition of art, involving the denial of linear, teleologically oriented readings of art history, as happened in the case of Greenberg and Danto (Margolis 1999). Nonetheless, I also wish to argue – from a sympathetic perspective, with the aim of integrating Margolis' view – that a further step should be taken, namely an explicit problematization of the very arising of the problem: when did the question about the definition of art arise? In what historical circumstance, cultural context, and form of life did 'Art' – as a singular term written with a capital letter – become a problem to be tackled and solved philosophically? This is a point that John Dewey (1981, 1989) clearly noted, as did Hans-Georg Gadamer (2004), Paul Oskar Kristeller (1951, 1952), and – many decades later – Larry Shiner (2003). Probably, Joe Margolis did not focus as much as he could have done on the reasons why the question had only arisen in a specific cultural-historical context because he had to adopt the terms through which the issue had been posed within the analytical philosophy of art, where it was largely taken for granted.

Let me add a personal note at the end of this introduction: contributing to this issue devoted to Joe Margolis' aesthetics is a way for me to pay homage to his brilliant mind as well as to remember him and his sincere generosity, always laced with a bit of irony.

1 Morris Weitz' Shortcomings (According to Joe Margolis)

Many years before formulating his thesis on works of art as physically embodied and culturally emergent entities, Joseph Margolis harshly criticized Weitz' denial of the possibility to provide a definition of art on the grounds of his application of Wittgenstein's reflections on the meanings and uses of the word "game" to the case of "art". Morris Weitz famously claimed that no definition of art was possible for logical reasons, namely because the concept of art is an open one, while only closed concepts, such as those of mathematics and logic, can be defined by enlisting the necessary and sufficient conditions that a specific item must satisfy in order to be a member of the class (Weitz 1956). Art is an open concept because artistic creativity entails that the concept can or must be continuously re-defined, by including new properties and excluding previously posited ones. Margolis' main objection against Weitz' argument in 1958 is that it takes empirical difficulties for logical reasons and ultimately confuses "logical and merely practical reasons" (Margolis 1958, 90); to a certain extent, Margolis extends this criticism to Wittgenstein himself (Margolis 1958, 92). However – and this is a crucial point – the criticism is not formulated from the point of view of a supporter of a rigid dichotomy between the empirical level and the logical one. What Margolis is claiming is that there is no alternative way to close concepts except by stipulation, unless one assumes that there are essential, unchangeable forms of things and that these can be intuitively grasped. Conversely, he observes, there are open concepts even in mathematics and in logic, i.e. there are cases in which some concepts must be extended in order to welcome new cases. Margolis suggests that once one assumes, say, a constructivistic and deflationary view of closed concepts, one should admit that even family resemblances can be closed for certain reasons and in specific contexts of use or remain open, depending on the circumstances. The very difference between concepts and family resemblances should be disambiguated, Margolis argues, by doing away with the idea that the former cannot involve necessary and sufficient conditions: family resemblances are implicitly assumed in common use and are not explicitly deliberated; nonetheless, they perfectly do their job in the specific contexts in which they are used – as emphasized by Wittgenstein – either in an open or in a closed way – according to Margolis' corrective integration. Instead of a binary opposition between closed concepts and family resemblances, according to Margolis, we should assume a range of possibilities: closed concepts and open concepts, as well as open and closed family resemblances. Finally, this time, Margolis seems to claim that there are no reasons why one should deny the possibility to come up with a concept of art involving necessary and sufficient conditions of use, i.e. a concept that is closed through some kind of explicit stipulation. The

reader can already perceive here Margolis' inclination toward a non-binary logic, his acknowledgment of a constructivist dimension in meaning, and his strong rejection of any form of essentialism – even an unwitting one, as in Weitz' case.

In a text published more than sixty years later, Margolis returns to this topic by strengthening his contingentistic and pluralistic view of the definition of art, while abandoning the polemic against Wittgenstein, as well as his previous insistence on the possibility of providing art definitions in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions. In the period between these two texts, a series of significant events occurred. Most importantly for our current purposes, in the Seventies Margolis formulated a definition of artworks as physically embedded and culturally emergent entities that, while positing some necessary conditions for something to be an artwork, did not set these conditions as sufficient, on the grounds that they are shared by all cultural entities – including human beings, as Margolis himself explicitly states.[2]

By contrast, Arthur Danto had largely pursued his search for an essentialist definition of art from a traditional, "Platonist" (in Margolis' words) perspective in conflict with his own followers, especially Dickie: Danto (1992) pointed out the possibility, or even need, to identify the *a priori* conditions enabling something to be a work of art. Hence, Margolis' previous attempt to interpret closed concepts in deflationary terms – that is, to present even essential definitions as referring to "a special purpose" (Margolis 2010) – might seem weak from the point of view of Danto's transcendental stance.

Margolis (2010) argues that Wittgenstein's stance in the *Philosophical Investigations* did not rule out any possibility of defining art in general. On the contrary, according to Margolis, the Austrian thinker acknowledged a wide variety of contextual definitions, while strictly making sure not to generalize or systematically extend any one of them. In a few words, Wittgenstein's legacy should have consisted in tolerance toward the considerable informality and vagueness characterizing our ordinary ways of dealing with concepts, rather than in the effort to censor any definitional attempt because all of them fail to be clear and distinct. Margolis says that Weitz and the whole debate on the definition of art misunderstood Wittgenstein; and what he is referring to is their assumption that either a definition is possible in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions, independently from specific purposes, or we have to reject any definition game. It is this simple dualistic alternative that Margolis wants to criticize as unfaithful to Wittgenstein's spirit. According to Margolis, while illustrating the different uses of the word "game", the Austrian philosopher was endorsing a different idea of language that was basi-

[2] On Margolis' early works in the aesthetic field, see Pryba (2021).

cally tolerant toward more or less informal or vague definitions as well as toward the often only approximately envisaged contexts of use. Wittgenstein was fighting against the ideology according to which language is ideally perfect, as "favoured by Frege, Russel, Wittgenstein himself (in the *Tractatus*)" (Margolis 2010, 8).

Consequently, the lesson aestheticians should have learned from Wittgenstein is not to simply abandon the aim of defining art. One can search for a definition of art – indeed, sometimes ordinary discourses already involve one – whose boundaries are more or less precise depending on the specific purpose we are pursuing. Margolis' explicit preference for a kind of "robust relativism" (Margolis 1976),[3] involving a wider, more complex series of possibilities than simply "false" and "not false", leads him to interpret Wittgenstein as favouring a tolerant, pluralistic, and practice-specific use of linguistic definitions with reference to the variety of artistic games that humans share. The point is that we cannot neglect the connections that our definition has with a specific context and a particular aim we are pursuing – even when the particular situation we are dealing with is represented by the philosophical venture of defining art, as I will claim in the final section of this paper.[4]

To conclude this comparison, in the new millennium Margolis no longer insisted on a deflationary – explicitly stipulated or constructivist – version of a closed definition, one that is grounded in necessary and sufficient conditions, although it is formulated for a specific purpose. He preferred to support an interpretation of Wittgenstein's legacy that sees it as favoring a more tolerant, pluralistic view of already given definitions of art and artworks, insofar as an interpretation of this sort could better serve a coherent form of contingentism.

2 Continuity and Radical Contingentism

How should Margolis' definition itself be interpreted, given his declared tolerance toward a plurality of definitions, his emphasis on the revisability of each definition to fit the needs of a given context, and his radically historicist stance?

Before answering this question, at least a few brief words are needed to explain the meanings of the two components of Margolis' definition, although this is not the primary goal of the paper.

The first part of the definition regards the physical embodiment characterizing works of art. A work of art is always physically embodied, although the degree of

[3] On Margolis' relativism see Margolis (1976); on the specific connection between "cultural realism" and Margolis' "robust relativism", see Baldini (2011).

[4] I have drawn and adapted the last two paragraphs of this section from Dreon (2019), with the editors' permissions.

embodiment can vary significantly: from stone and marble to the sounds of music and poetry, or actors' gestures on stage. As Margolis explains in his 1974 essay, this condition fulfills two interconnected functions: on the one hand, the notion of embodiment establishes that a work of art is a real thing, part of the real world; on the other hand, it individuates an artwork and identifies its extension, to put it in the analytical vocabulary that Margolis used in those years. However, it may be helpful to spell out the criticism involved in Margolis' emphasis on embodiment: an artwork is not a changeless form that finds concrete expression in a material occurrence; it is not a Platonic idea or type, whose earthly counterpart is contingent or at least attributed *a posteriori*. Instead, an artwork is constituted by the real materials, energies, and activities it is effectively made of, insofar as these are part of specific cultural practices and of a specific form of life. So, even the word "type" in Margolis' definition of an artwork as the "token of a type" (Margolis 1977) must be understood as an "abstract particular" having no life apart from the token of which it is made, and having a history: it emerges at some point, changes through the web of habits and uses it is a part of, and comes to an end when the resources of which it is made – either the materials or cultural practices – are lost in one way or another (Dreon-Ragazzi 2022).

The other side of the coin, cultural emergence, has already been introduced. It is only within a cultural context or through specific cultural practices[5] that already existing materials are reorganized and become meaningful or Intentional. In other words, this occurs without the intervention of extra-empirical resources, such as invariant forms constituting an alleged realm of Art, as Schopenhauer thought, or an *a priori* space of reasons, as claimed by Danto (1992). Already existing materials become Intentional, in Margolis' words, that is they become meaningful through collective practices and not in a solipsistic way or by means of intentionality considered as a quality of thought *per se* (Steiner 2020); they become interpretable and determinable in a variety of ways, within the constraints of the collective practices that are shared in a specific lifeworld (Margolis 1999).

Now, this definition raises some questions that are in need of an answer, as recognized by Joe Margolis himself (Margolis 1999). One of the main problems, I believe, concerns the use of the word "entity", considering that many artworks consist of events and performances, rather than entities (Wolterstorff 1980). Given Margolis' closeness to the pragmatists, he could have relied on their relational ontology (James 1976; Tiercelin 2019; Ryder 2020) in order to argue that works of art are not only physically embodied and cultural emergent entities, but also phys-

[5] Margolis also uses expressions borrowed from other traditions and other authors, such as form of life, *Lebenswelt*, and *sittliche Ethos*.

ically embodied and cultural emergent events, situations, relations, or gestures (Maddalena 2015), without ceasing to affirm their reality. Famously, the claim that relations and entities are both real is one of William James' main contributions to the development of a radical form of empiricism, as opposed to classical empiricism (James 1976). I think Margolis would have been open to this integration and partial correction of his definition. He overtly acknowledged that definitions can and should be modified or extended to fit the context – or to accommodate a more inclusive set, in this case.

However, in what follows I wish to focus on the "generic" characterization of Margolis' formulation, as stated by the philosopher himself (Margolis 1999). The point is that this definition is broad and fits any cultural artifact – even human beings, if they are understood as "natural artifacts" (Margolis 2017). Consequently, the definition could be considered too inclusive and not specific enough to distinguish artworks from other cultural artifacts. How are we to deal with this issue?

Of course, it must be noted that Margolis placed less and less emphasis on the definition of art over the years. His transition to philosophical anthropology involved a shift from the question "what is art?" to a different one, namely: "what is the role of artistic and cultural practices in the making of the humans?" (Margolis 2008; Dreon 2019). However, he never rejected his previous work on the definition of art; rather, he reframed it within the broader background of a philosophy of culture. He explicitly affirmed that there was a basic continuity between his exploration of what it is to be a cultural entity and his previous reflections (Margolis 1999, 68). So, what is the significance of Margolis' definition of artworks, given its generic traits? First of all, I believe that, according to this definition, artworks are continuous with other cultural entities and "utterances" – human gestures, verbal communications, symbols, monuments, etc. – and cannot be isolated by placing them in a separate bracket such as "the artworld", if not for practical purposes. Margolis ends the introduction to his essay *What, After All, is a Work of Art?* by saying that "language" and "thought" are abstractions derived from the lives and behaviors of enculturated subjects. Hence, it is completely misleading to speak of "language" or "thought" as something autonomous that only at a later stage is spoken or worked out, either privately or in a community (Margolis 1999, 71). I think that Margolis leaves it up to the reader to complete the simile: "art" is an abstraction derived from human lives and behaviors and it is misleading to consider art and artworks independently from the broadly cultural practices surrounding them and the interchanges occurring between them and their world. Incidentally, this conclusion sounds Deweyan (Dewey 1989), although – curiously enough – Margolis never referred to Dewey when speaking of art (as far as I know).

Secondly, I believe that the significance of his definition can better be under-

stood by comparing it with Arthur Danto's essentialist, aprioristic approach to the issue. This approach is very clear in *The Artworld Revisited*, where Danto stiffens the extra-empirical character of his claims in order to preserve the distance between his own theory and George Dickie's "sociologized" work (Danto 1992, 38). Even if Danto is willing to recognize that the attribution of the state of being a candidate for appreciation is deeply connected with social prestige and is *de facto* attributed by art experts, he strongly stresses the fact that this is not part of the philosophical work he believes should be performed. According to him, when searching for a definition of art itself, the philosopher of art must focus on the "system of reasons" (Danto 1992, 39) that can justify – in the aprioristic sense of Kant's "Rechfertingung", I will add – the difference between an artwork and an ordinary object that could be perceptibly identical to it. Enabling conditions are necessary and sufficient insofar as they are given previously or, better, on a different level from empirical, contingent reasons, and circumstances. In a nutshell, theory for Danto evidently comes before practice, circumscribing its perimeters and legitimacy.

Margolis' definition of works of art as culturally emergent involves precisely a denial of this double level: to see if a Brillo box or a Madonna is an artwork rather than a commercial product or a cult object, one has to look at the practices through which humans engage with it. Both the former and the latter are Intentional artifacts in Margolis' sense and one can only draw a distinction between these objects, if necessary, by looking at the broader cultural and radically historical interchanges occurring by means of them. This is a point where, I would argue, Margolis comes closer to Wittgenstein's legacy: do not say that "a work of art must be so and so", but "look at what humans do with artworks, when and how they use the word, which are the meanings they habitually attribute to it". To conclude this section through an insightful quotation from Margolis himself:

> We must begin with the socially entrenched practices of the various inquiries we habitually pursue, shorn (if possible) of the pretensions of the invariantist philosophies (Margolis 1999, 87).

There are no *a priori* enabling conditions for establishing what is art and what is not art. This fact does not leave the interpreter in a "seeming vacuum": he has to take into account the consensual practices that, although not resting on prior rules are "internalized by mastering [...] the language and practices of our native culture" (Margolis 1999, 87).

3 Calling the Question Itself into Question: Some Concluding Remarks

In the previous sections, I considered the criticism of Weitz' denial of the possibility to define art, which constituted the negative complement of Margolis' definition of artworks as physically embodied and culturally emergent entities. I did so by comparing two different texts on the issue: the early essay translated and published in the current issue of this journal and a more recent paper, published in 2010. While in the early essay Margolis is willing to endorse a constructivistic conception of necessary and sufficient conditions, six decades later he seems to have dropped the attempt to maintain a deflationary version of enabling conditions in favor of a more coherent contingentism and pluralism.

In the second section, I focused mainly on the "generic" character of Margolis' definition, namely its being too inclusive, because it fits any kind of cultural entity – including the human being – and consequently one could object that the definition cannot work as a criterion for distinguishing artworks from other cultural objects. I have argued that the first implication of Margolis' "generic" definition is the thesis of a continuity between artworks and the things and events of the cultural world, which according to him ultimately means the human world as a whole. A second implication is that, for Margolis, the differences between artworks and other things can only be traced *a posteriori*, by looking at the collective practices and habitual uses surrounding the term "artworks". There is no separate space for *a priori* reasons, justifying such distinctions in principle.

I now wish to conclude my argument by providing some final thoughts on Margolis' radically historicist claim. I will focus on an aspect that is missing in his philosophy and which might further justify his transition from the definition problem to the anthropological issue, centered on the question of the role of culture and the arts in the emergence of human beings. As hinted above, I believe that this shift should be integrated through a coherent historicizing and contextualizing of the very issue of the definition of art. I believe that Margolis' move toward a philosophy of culture would have found a better justification if he had set the question of the arising of the definition problem in a specific historical and cultural context: when did the question of defining art arise? In what cultural context did it become significant to introduce the very concept of an "artworld", distinct and autonomous from the ordinary world? In what circumstances did it become important to be able to differentiate between artworks and ordinary objects on the basis of some principle?

Before dealing with questions of this kind, it must be acknowledged that Joe Margolis did an important job in emphasizing that a radical historicizing of defi-

nitions of art involves the denial of any linear, teleologically oriented reading of art history, such as those provided by Greenberg and Danto (Margolis 1999). In his essay on *The History of Art after the End of the History of Art* (in Margolis 1999), Margolis showed that, notwithstanding his criticism of modernism as a false narrative, Arthur Danto shared Clement Greenberg's idea of art history as a fixed sequence of periods running toward a final goal. Both these philosophers offer a teleological narrative, pointing either to the final concentration of each art on its own medium (Greenberg 1993) or to the enfranchisement of art by means of philosophy, which is to say to the opening up of all artistic possibilities, once the previously linear sequence has been completed (Danto 1997).

According to Margolis, Danto fails to consider that even "the conviction of having eclipsed all possible 'periods in some master narrative of arts'" could itself be "a characteristic mark of our own contemporary period within the same narrative" (Margolis 1999, 17). Danto's mistake is twofold: firstly, he ignores that his own point of view – namely, his thesis that the periods of art history have come to an end – could simply constitute a further period in the sequence. Secondly, he fails to consider that even the idea of the alleged end of art history is historically situated and not a view of history from the outside. The point, for Margolis, is that "fixedly periodized or essentialized history is not really history at all but a punctuated span of time within a frozen, changeless space – a teleologized evolution posing as history" (Margolis 1999, 16).

Radical historicism entails recognizing that there is no interpretation, categorization, or periodization of history outside history itself. This does not mean denying the validity and appropriateness of periodization, but it does mean explicitly admitting: (1) that the work of the art historian or art theorist is historically situated; (2) that periodization and interpretation fulfill specific purposes and fit particular contexts; (3) that there can be more than one periodization and/or interpretation of art history, each serving specific goals and responding to the constraints of a practical context; and, finally, (4) that the objectivity of a certain interpretation is "a function of consensual life" (Margolis 1999, 93).

So what is still lacking in Margolis' radical historical approach to the definition of art? In a nutshell, an answer can be provided by quoting a passage from Hans-Georg Gadamer that is deeply influenced, I think, by one of Margolis' philosophical heroes, Hegel (purged of his metaphysical tendencies):

> At any rate, it cannot be doubted that the great ages in the history of art were those in which people without any aesthetic consciousness and without our concept of "art" surrounded themselves with creations whose function in religious or secular life could be under-

> stood by everyone and which gave no one solely aesthetic pleasure. (Gadamer 1975, 70)

Could we ask for a definition of art when dealing with these artistic objects and practices of the past without forcing the contexts in which they emerged? The embarrassment that someone like Danto feels when confronted with a situation of this sort is evident from his famous exclusion of cave paintings from the world of art, based on the fact that the people who produced them lacked an artistic theory that could make an artworld possible.[6]

Of course, Margolis did not ignore that the issue of the definition of art became a pressing one in the analytical philosophy of art because of the long series of disruptive works and events characterizing artistic developments in the 20th century. Indeed, he emphasized that Duchamp's ready-mades were definitely more challenging than Brillo Boxes (Margolis 2010). The question of the difference between a work of art and a snow plough became pressing when the products of refined art could no longer be immediately recognized as such, and neither the imitation nor the creation of new forms and objects could help people perceive them as works of art. However, it should be noted that the philosophical issue of the definition of art arose out of the specifically European cultural background of the Eighteenth century, which was characterized by a unitary concept of Art, used both as an umbrella term covering a wide variety of diverse artistic practices (Kristeller 1951, 1952) and as a honorific term, insofar it became opposed to craftsmanship in the same cultural context (Shiner 2003). The question of the definition of art should thus be situated within the process of progressive "differentiation of the aesthetic", whose fundamental categories were laid out by the new discipline of aesthetics between the Eighteenth and the Nineteenth centuries (Gadamer 1975). As is widely known, ancient and medieval literature includes a variety of treatises dealing with poetry, tragedy, painting, and other specific fields, but there is no evidence of any writings devoted to art in general. Within philosophy we find nothing comparable to what we call aesthetics today until the mid-Eighteenth century: philosophers dealt with the beautiful in strict connection with the true and the good, rather than treating it as a separate subject matter. Philosophical reflections on poetry and painting, as well as on mimesis, are frequent; however, it is not until the Eighteenth century that aesthetics emerges as a distinct discipline and not until the Nineteenth century that we find a metaphysic of art such as the one provided by Schopenhauer and the young Nietzsche. Although Kristeller's interpretation of Batteaux's role in the establishment of a unitary concept of art has been disputed (Porter 2009),

[6] "It would, I should think, never have occurred to the painters of Lascaux that they were producing *art* on those walls. Not unless there were Neolithic aestheticians" (Danto 1964, 581).

as Joe Margolis noted (Margolis 2010), it has been ascertained that ancient Greek culture, as well as the Latin world, did not have a concept of Art equivalent to the current one. The use of the unitary and honorific word "Art" seems to have developed through the introduction of the term "Beaux Arts" or "Fine Arts", which is to say that is derives from a restriction of "art", which is still considered a broad term in Kant's *Critique of Judgement*. Here, "schöne Kunst" (beautiful art) is a subset of "ästhetische Kunst" (aesthetic art), which is in turn a subset of art – together with "angenehme Kunst" (pleasant art) – distinguished from "mechanische Kunst" (mechanic art), which is not concerned with pleasure (Kant 2000, §44). Art in general, for Kant, is defined negatively, by opposition to production by nature. The contrast with science and craftsmanship appears immediately afterward in Kant's text and can be considered the marker of a modern sensibility, although the restriction of the term is still in progress (Kant 2000, §43).

Moreover, as Dewey already emphasized in *Experience and Nature*, both the Greek term *téchne* and the Latin word *ars* had different meanings, expressing a capacity, ability, competence, or expertise in doing something through some tools – these terms were applied to carpentry, navigation, and politics, as well as to painting and sculpting (Dewey 1981). The crucial point is that both words were used in strict connection with more or less ordinary activities and even the so-called "mimetic arts" were perceived as existing in continuity with other human activities.

Along much the same lines, anthropologists of art and culture (Boas 1911; Geertz 1973; Jackson 1996; Gell 1998) teach us that the kind of artistic autonomy we find almost obvious – e.g. the idea that an artwork must be judged primarily on the basis of artistic rather than moral criteria and even our perception of the work of a genius as something foreign to the professional world and the market – is not obvious at all for other cultures, both past and present.

All this does not mean that the question of the definition of art is not a genuine one or cannot find any answer. Definitions are possible and needed in many practical situations, but they are inherently historical: they become meaningful and useful in specific cultural contexts, but may become obsolete if they no longer fit the situation or agree with current sensibility. In many contexts, artistic practices are so closely intertwined with other activities – religious, political, and social, as in the case of psalms, national anthems, and rock music festivals – that applying a definition of art in the proper sense (whatever this means) seems like a bit of a strain and applying an essential, i.e. non-historical, definition seems wrong. More specifically, acknowledging the need to historicize and contextualize the question itself would help bring into focus the view of art as something essentially autonomous through which the issue of its definition arose – consequently, it would

highlight the analytical philosophy of art's indebtedness to classical aesthetics.

Finally, circumscribing the question of the definition of art to a cultural context reinforces the opportunity to move from a self-referential conception of aesthetics (which the young Margolis regarded as limiting and then explicitly rejected) to a philosophy of culture and a philosophical anthropology capable of setting artistic practices within the framework of behaviors, linguistic games, and the naturally cultural experience of the world characterizing human beings.

In other words, recognizing the cultural-historical limits of the emergence of the need to define art could have strengthened Margolis' argument in favor of a "non-compartmentalized" approach – to echo Dewey's expression – to the arts.

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