

WHAT ART IS

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For Lydia Goehr

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P R E F A C E

It is widely accepted that Plato defined art as imitation, though whether this was a theory or merely an observation is difficult to say, since there was nothing else by way of art in Athens in his time. All that seems clear is that imitation in Plato meant pretty much what it means in English: looks like the real thing but isn't the real thing. But Plato was mainly negatively interested in art, since he was attempting to design an ideal society—a Republic!—and was eager to get rid of the artists on the grounds that art was of minimal practical use. In order to achieve this goal, he drew up a map of human knowledge, placing art at the lowest possible level—with reflections, shadows, dreams, and illusions. These Plato regarded as mere appearances, a category to which belonged the kinds of things an artist knew

how to make. Thus artists could draw a table, meaning that they knew how tables appear. But could they actually make a table? Not likely—but what good really was the appearance of a table? In fact, there was a conflict between art and philosophy, in that the writings of poets were used for teaching children how to behave. Plato felt that moral pedagogy should be left to philosophers, who used not imitations but reality in explaining the way things are.

In Book Ten of *The Republic*, Plato's character—Socrates—suggested that if you want to imitate, nothing could be better for that than a mirror, which will give you perfect reflections of whatever you aim the mirror at, and better than an artist can usually achieve. So let's get rid of the artists. The Greeks used texts like *The Iliad* pedagogically, to teach right conduct. But philosophers know the highest things, what Plato called ideas. Once the artists were out of the way, philosophers could teach and serve as rulers not susceptible to corruption.

In any case, no one can deny that art as practiced consisted in imitations or capturing appearances, to paraphrase modern art historians. How different from the present situation! "I am very interested in how one approaches that topic—What is Art," writes my friend the artist Tom Rose in a personal note. "The question that comes up in every class and in every context." It is as if imitation disappeared, and something else took its place. In the eighteenth century, when aesthetics was invented or discovered, the thought was that art contributed beauty, hence gave pleasure to those with taste. Beauty, pleasure, and taste were an attractive triad, taken seriously by Kant in the early pages of his masterpiece, *The Critique of Judgment*. After Kant—and Hume

before him—there were Hegel, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and John Dewey, each delivering marvelous but conflicting theses. And then there were the artists themselves, with paintings and sculptures to sell in galleries and art fairs and biennials. Small wonder the question of what is art came up “in every class and every context.” So—what is art? What we know from the cacophony of artistic argument is that there is too much art that is nonimitational for us to read Plato except for the sake of his views. This was a first step. It was Aristotle who carried it much further, by applying it to dramatic presentations—tragedies and comedies—which he argued were imitations of actions. Antigone was the model of a wife, Socrates was not quite the model of a husband, and so on.

My thought is that if some art is imitation and some art is not, neither term belongs to the *definition* of art as philosophically understood. A property is part of the definition only if it belongs to every work of art there is. With the advent of Modernism, art backed away from mirror images, or, better, photography set the standard of fidelity. Its advantage over mirror images is that it is able to preserve images, though of course photographic images are liable to fade.

There are degrees of fidelity in imitation, so Plato’s definition of art remained in place, with little to argue about until it stopped capturing the seeming essence of art. How could this have happened? Historically it happened with the advent of Modernism, so this book begins with certain revolutionary changes that took place in France, mainly in Paris. Plato had had an easy run, from the sixth century BC until AD 1905–7, with the so-called Fauves—Wild Beasts—and Cubism. In my view, to get a definition better than Plato’s you have to look to more recent artists, since they are

most likely to subtract from their theories properties that were earlier thought to be essential to art, like beauty. Marcel Duchamp found a way of eradicating beauty in 1915, and Andy Warhol discovered that a work of art could exactly resemble a real thing in 1964, though the great movements of the 1960s—Fluxus, Pop Art, Minimalism, and Conceptual Art—made art that was not exactly imitation. Oddly, sculpture and photography shifted the center of artistic self-awareness in the seventies. After that, everything was feasible. Anything went, leaving it uncertain whether a definition of art is any longer possible. Anything cannot be art.

The first and longest chapter may feel like art history, but it is not. It was basically decided by leading aestheticians that art was indefinable, since there is no overarching feature. At best, art is an open concept. My view is that it has to be a closed concept. There must be some overarching properties that explain why art in some form is universal.

It is true that art today is pluralistic. Pluralism was noticed by certain followers of Ludwig Wittgenstein. What makes art so powerful a force as it appears to be in song and story is due to what makes it art to begin with. There is really nothing like it when it comes to stirring the spirit.

I have tried, using Duchamp and Warhol to achieve my definition of art, to outline examples from the history of art to show that the definition always has been the same. Thus I use Jacques-Louis David, Piero della Francesca, and Michelangelo's great ceiling for the Sistine Chapel. If one believes that art is all of a piece, one needs to show that what makes it so is to be found throughout its history.

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CHAPTER ONE

WAKEFUL DREAMS

Early in the twentieth century, beginning in France, the visual arts were revolutionized. Up until that point, they—which, unless otherwise indicated, I shall simply designate *art*—had been dedicated to copying visual appearances in various media. As it turned out, that project had a progressive history, which began in Italy, in the time of Giotto and Cimabue, and culminated in the Victorian era, when visual artists were able to achieve an ideal mode of representation, which the Renaissance artist Leon Battista Alberti, in his *On Painting*, defined as follows: there should be no visual difference between looking at a painting or looking out a window at what the painting shows. Thus a successful portrait should be indiscernible from seeing the subject of the portrait looking at us through a window.

This was not possible at first. Giotto's paintings may have dazzled his contemporaries, but, to use an example from the art historian Ernst Gombrich's *Art and Illusion*, Giotto's pictures would be considered crude in comparison with the image of a bowl of cornflakes made with an airbrush by a commercial artist of today. Between the two representations lay a number of discoveries: perspective, chiaroscuro (the study of light and shadow), and physiognomy—the study of achieving naturalistic representations of human features expressing feelings appropriate to their situation. When Cindy Sherman visited an exhibition of the work of Nadar, the French photographer of the nineteenth century, showing actual people expressing different feelings, she said: they all look alike. Context often tells us what someone's feelings are: horror in a battle scene could express hilarity at the Folies Bergère.

There were limits to what art—composed of such genres as portraiture, landscape, still life, and historical painting (the latter of which, in royal academies, enjoyed the highest esteem)—could do to show movement. One could see *that* someone moved, but one could not actually see the person move. Photography, which was invented in the 1830s, was considered by one of its inventors, Englishman William Henry Fox Talbot, to be an art, as is implied by his expression “the Pencil of Nature,” as though nature portrayed itself by means of light, interacting with some photosensitive surface. Light was a far better artist than Fox Talbot, who liked to bring home pictures of what he saw. Using a bank of cameras with trip wires, Eadweard Muybridge, an Englishman

who lived in California, photographed a horse trotting in front of them, producing a series of stills that showed stages of its motion, settling the question of whether horses in motion ever touched ground with all four hooves at once. He published a book called *Animal Locomotion* that included similar photographs of moving animals, humans included. Because the camera could reveal things that were invisible to the unaided eye, it was deemed more true to nature than our visual system. And for this reason photography was regarded by many artists as showing how things would actually appear if our eyes were sharper than they are. But Muybridge's images, like what we often see in contact sheets, are frequently unrecognizable because the subject has not had the time it takes to compose his or her features into a familiar expression. It was only with the advent of the cinematographic camera, in which strips of film moved with mechanical regularity, that something like motion could be seen when the film was projected. Using that invention, the Lumière brothers made genuine moving pictures, which they screened in 1895. The new technology represented men and animals in movement, seen more or less the way the spectator would actually see it, without having to infer the motion. Needless to say, many may have found cloying the scenes that the Lumières shot, such as workers streaming out of the brothers' factory, which may have been why one of the Lumières concluded that moving pictures had no future. Of course, the advent of the narrative film proved the opposite.

In any case, the moving picture united with the literary arts, ultimately by means of sound. In adding sound to motion, mov-

ing pictures had two features that painting could not emulate, and thus the progress of visual art as the history of painting and sculpture came to a halt, leaving artists who hoped to take the progress of painting further with no place to go. It was the end of art as it was understood before 1895. But in fact painting entered a glorious phase when it was revolutionized a decade after the Lumières' moving picture show. For philosophers, Alberti's criterion ended its reign, which somewhat justifies the political overtones of "revolution."

Let us now move to a paradigm of a revolutionary painting—Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger* (O.J. version O), executed in 1907 but which remained in the artist's studio for the next twenty years. Today it is a very familiar work, but in 1907 it was as if art had begun all over again. It in no sense aimed at taking a further step toward fulfilling Alberti's criterion. People may well have said that it was not art, but that would usually mean that it did not belong to the history that Giotto opened up. That history had more or less excluded as art some of the greatest artistic practices—Chinese and Japanese painting were exceptions, though they did not exactly fit the historical progress. Their system of perspective, for example, seemed visually wrong. But Polynesian, African, and many more forms of art were beyond the pale and today can be seen in what are called "encyclopedia museums" like the Metropolitan Museum or the National Gallery in Washington. In Victorian times, works from these various other traditions were designated as "primitive," meaning their work corresponded to the level of very

early European work, like the Sienese primitives. The thought was that such work would be art in the sense of copying visual reality with exactitude, provided those creating the works were able to visualize doing it. In the nineteenth century, works from many of these traditions were displayed in museums of natural history, as in New York or Vienna or Berlin, and studied by anthropologists rather than art historians.

Still, it was art and, as such, has considerable importance for this book, which means to analyze the concept of art in a sense far wider than my initial use of the term. The huge differences between the art that belongs to what we might as well call Albertian history and most of the art that does not mean that the pursuit of visual truth is not part of the *definition* of art. Art may well be one of the great achievements of *Western* civilization, which means that it is the defining mark of the art that began in Italy and was furthered in Germany, France, the Netherlands, and elsewhere, including America. But it is not the mark of art *as such*. Only that which belongs to all of art belongs to art as Art. When they see work that puzzles them, people ask, “But is it art?” At this point I have to say that there is a difference between *being* art and knowing whether something *is* art. Ontology is the study of what it means to be something. But knowing whether something is art belongs to epistemology—the theory of knowledge—though in the study of art it is called connoisseurship. This book is intended mostly to contribute to the ontology of Art, capitalizing the term that it applies to widely—really to everything that members of the