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THE INTUITIVE CONCEPT OF ART

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Abstract.

A great deal of work in analytic philosophy of art is related to defining what counts as art. So far, cognitive approaches to art have almost entirely ignored this literature. In this paper I discuss the role of intuition in analytic philosophy of art, to show how an empirical research program on art could take advantage of existing work in analytic philosophy. I suggest that the first step of this research program should be to understand how people intuitively categorize something as art. Drawing on results from cognitive science and analytic philosophy, I show that the intuitive categorization of an artifact as art rests on the intentions attributed (frequently implicitly) to the creator of the artifact based both on its appearance and on background knowledge. I discuss how the issue of categorization is related to other empirical issues concerning our relationship to works of art, such as perception, appreciation, interpretation and evaluation.

I. Psychology, history and definitions

In a recent paper, Bullot and Reber (in press) complain of a deep mutual incomprehension between psychologists working on art and researchers in the humanities about the role of history. The former search for ahistorical factors that determine art appreciation, whereas the latter mainly investigate the historical context of production and appreciation of artworks, so that many researchers in each camp have concluded that the work of the other camp is irrelevant for them.

Another source of incomprehension—this time related mostly to analytic philosophy—is the role of definitions. An anonymous reviewer of an earlier version of this paper commented that as a psychologist, he does not see the point of definitions, since an object can be investigated without defining it (he gives the example of genetics, which made "progress for decades without actually having an airtight definition of what a gene was"). He says that this is only a

personal point of view, but this point of view is widely shared by cognitive scientists. This kind of idea has led many cognitive scientists to see the enormous body of work produced by philosophers on the definition of the concept of art as irrelevant to them. Basically, I agree that it is possible to make progress in the study of an object in cognitive science without clearly defining it. This does not imply, however, that philosophers' work on the definition of art is irrelevant for cognitive science.

In what follows, I will show that there are two kinds of analytic definition of art: descriptive and normative. Both are relevant for a cognitive approach to art, provided that the role played by people's intuitions in establishing the definition is made explicit. I will suggest that the first question that has to be addressed in framing a collaboration between analytic philosophy and cognitive science is what I will call the "characterization of the intuitive concept of art," i.e. understanding how people intuitively categorize something as art. I will provide some elements of an answer to this question, and then show how they establish a framework for more general collaboration between philosophy and cognitive science on the investigation of our relationship to artworks.

II. Two kinds of definitions

Many analytic definitions of art are normative, in the sense that they imply that most people are wrong when intuitively categorizing things as art. For instance, philosophers such as Bell (1915) and Collingwood (1938) claimed that if there is a conflict between their definition and people's intuitions, then people's intuitions are wrong. For instance, if most people intuitively think that X is an artwork, and if the proposed philosophical definition says that X is not an artwork, then X is not an artwork and people should revise the way they categorize things as art.

After the criticisms of Wittgensteinian philosophers (Kennick, 1958; Weitz, 1956), the search for a definition of art took a descriptive turn. Philosophers begin to search for a definition that respects people's intuitions (Carroll, 1993; Gaut, 2000; Levinson, 1979; Stecker, 1990). For these "descriptive philosophers," the main aim of a definition of art is to isolate the things and only the things that people intuitively categorize as art. In other words, contrary to normative definitions, if most people intuitively categorize X as an artwork, while the descriptive definition says that X is not an artwork (or vice versa), then the descriptive definition is wrong and must be revised to achieve a better fit with intuitions.

When the work of descriptive philosophers is framed in this way, its resemblance to the work of cognitive scientists interested in the concept of artifacts becomes striking. Basically, the

kind of question they ask is along these lines: when people have the intuition that something is an artifact of category C (the category 'chair,' for instance), what criteria determine this intuition (is it the shape, the present use, the intended use, etc.) (Bloom, 1996)? Given this resemblance in their aims, philosophy of art and cognitive science could combine synergetically in characterizing what could be called the "intuitive concept of art." The aim of this task would be to characterize the mechanisms that determine our intuitions when we have to decide whether or not something is an artwork.

This task must not be confused with two other clearly distinct tasks concerning the concept of art. The first task is a normative one, whose aim is to decide what we *should* call 'art.' The second could be called "the characterization of the reflexive concept of art." This last task would focus on the kind of answer that people offer when asked "What is art for you?" or when asked to provide justification for their intuitive categorization of something as art. Investigating intuitions and arguments are two distinct tasks which must not be confused, since intuitive categorization and the elaboration of justification may rely on completely distinct psychological mechanisms (Greene & Haidt, 2002; Hauser et al. 2007).

The characterization of the *intuitive* concept of art—which is the main focus of this paper—is based on the first, intuitive response that people provide when asked: "Is X an artwork?" The aim of this task is to identify and describe the characteristics of X that determine intuitive responses to this question. It does not involve attempting to determine the "right answer" to this question (if there is such a thing), which is a normative task. The kind of arguments that people elaborate when asked to justify their intuitive response (which are data for the characterization of the *reflective* concept of art) are also not relevant.

In their investigation of people's intuitions, the main difference between cognitive scientists working on the concepts of artifacts and descriptive philosophers is that the former test the intuitions of subjects and use statistical methods, whereas the latter use only their own intuitions. However, philosophers' intuitions may be expected to match the intuitions that are evidenced by an empirical approach at least to some extent, and can be taken at least as working hypotheses for the purposes of framing of an empirical approach. Moreover, to compare the merits of competing theories, philosophers have invented a range of thought experiments designed to put intuitions under pressure in order to uncover the key properties that produce a shift in intuitions from art to non-art or vice versa. These thought experiments could directly become the material for experiments in psychology. These experiments would test, first, to what extent the intuitions put forward by a given philosopher can be observed

statistically in the population and, secondly, what parameters in subjects' background knowledge have an impact on their intuitions.

Another – minor – difference between analytic philosophy and cognitive sciences is that, so far, the latter have only investigated concepts of artifacts, and not specifically the concept of art. Arguably, artworks are a special kind of artifact. As explained in the next section, the main difference between the intuitive categorization of artworks and that of simpler artifacts results from the fact that artworks do not have a single characteristic function, but instead a set of complex and entrenched functions.

III. Artworks: artifacts with multiple functions

Scott Atran's transcultural empirical research suggests that humans universally categorize living beings and artifacts using distinct cognitive systems (Atran, 1998; Atran & Sperber, 1991). The categorization of the former rests on the implicit presupposition that living beings have an intrinsic essence which determines their characteristic observable properties, whereas the latter are categorized in terms of functions and intentions (see (Boyer & Barrett, 2004) for a review).

Gelman and Bloom (2000) have shown that intended functions strongly influence people's intuitions about how to categorize an artifact. For instance, when subjects are presented with an artifact that is intended to fulfill a given function but that is being used at the time to fulfill a different function, subjects tend to express the intuition that the intended function is the artifact's "genuine function" and that this function determines its "true identity".

Other experiments suggest that, by the age of two years, a child who sees an agent using an artifact to achieve a certain goal stores an obligatory connection between the artifact and the goal in memory. In other words, the child will not use this artifact to achieve another goal and will not use another artifact to achieve this goal, even if the second artifact seems appropriate (Kelemen & Carey, 2007; Casler & Kelemen, 2005). Greif and collaborators have shown that the involvement of two different cognitive systems in the categorization of living beings determines the kind of questions that children ask. When told about unfamiliar artifacts, two-year-old children typically ask "What is it for?"— a question that never occurs for unfamiliar animals (Greif et al., 2006).

Preissler and Bloom (2008) have shown that when attributing intentions to the creator of an artifact, children draw on both its appearance and contextual knowledge about the process of production. For instance, they identify a drawing that looks like something intermediate between a spoon and a fork either as a spoon or as a fork depending on the time the draftsman

spends looking at each object during the production of the drawing. Bloom and collaborators have shown that the importance of agents' intentions follows a developmental pattern: the importance of the artifact's intended function, as opposed to contingent use, increases with maturation of theory of mind (Gutheil et al., 2004).

Taken together, these results suggest a simple scenario to describe the learning and intuitive use of artifact concepts: first, we learn the characteristic function (F) of a category of artifact by seeing people using these artifacts to fulfill F. Then, we assign an artifact to this category when we infer (from its appearance, what we know about its production, etc.) that it is intended to fulfill F.

The problem with artworks is that they do not have a single characteristic function. Of course, even very standard artifacts can be used to achieve a variety of goals (a knife, for instance, can be used to stabilize a wobbly table). Nevertheless, standard artifacts generally have one function which is more typical or standard than the others (the standard function of a knife is cutting). For artworks, this is not the case. Artworks variously have the function of bearing formal or expressive properties, imitating nature, inducing an aesthetic experience, bearing embodied meaning, inducing awe, being key elements of ceremonies, faithfully representing a certain reality, drawing attention to a social or ecological problem, stimulating thinking about art, criticizing its futility, ostensibly violating the rules tacitly employed by an artistic genre in order to revive its language; the list could go on and on. The history of art is so complex that present-day artworks can fulfill many different functions, none of which is more typical or standard than the others. Moreover, many artworks may fulfill many functions at once (Davies, 1991; Kaufman, 2002; Stecker, 1990). Given this difference with other types of artifacts, the general scenario for the learning and use of the intuitive concept of art is something like the following:

(1) An agent A grows up in an environment that includes a category of artifacts which the community categorizes as 'art.'

(2) These artifacts have the peculiarity – in the current Western environment at least – of being able to fulfill a variety of functions. Moreover, many of these artifacts can fulfill several functions at once.

(3) Growing up in such an environment, A progressively stores a set of functions in memory that can be fulfilled by the artifacts that she accepts as representative of the category of art based on the fact that people she trusts categorize these artifacts as art.

(4) When A later infers that an artifact is intended to fulfill one or more of these functions, she spontaneously categorizes it as art.

The above characterization, which I will label the 'intentional characterization,' can be formulated more synthetically:

Intentional characterization: an agent intuitively uses the concept of art to categorize an artifact if and only if she infers that this artifact has been intended to fulfill a function or set of functions which she has already accepted as a function or set of functions that can be fulfilled by artifacts that she considers as typical art.

The term "characterization" is used to avoid the term "definition," which could lead to misunderstanding. In fact, as explained above, the latter term is often used with a normative connotation, whereas there is no normative component in the intentional characterization. The only aim of the intentional characterization is to describe the most fundamental mechanism that determines our intuitions when we are asked: "Is this artifact an artwork?" The term "intentional" refers to the fact that the fundamental factor determining an artifact's categorization as art is the content of the intention attributed to its creator. Note, however, that the intentional characterization does not imply that we must infer that an artifact's creator has formed the explicit and reflective thought "I want to produce an artifact that fulfills [function F]" in order to categorize the artifact as art. The intentional characterization is a hypothesis about a psychological process. Thus, the concept of intention in the intentional characterization refers to all kinds of mental states that we can attribute to others. We of course *do* attribute conscious and reflective projects to others, but our cognitive system is endowed with mechanisms which allow us to attribute to others a much richer variety of mental states, including intuitions, emotions, character traits, intentions in action, etc. Thus, from a cognitive perspective, the notion of 'artist's intention' covers any mental state of the artist, conscious or not, whose content, whether propositional or not, has played a significant causal role in the production process of the work (Pignocchi, 2010; 2012).

As a first argument in favor of the intentional characterization, this account seems to be able to explain both the relative unity of the artifacts that we categorize as art and individual variations. The intentional characterization's accounting for unity rests on the hypothesis of a common core mechanism that determines all the occurrences of intuitive categorizations of something as art. Moreover, because of the institutional presentation of artworks in the modern environment, there exists a core set of artifacts that almost everyone considers to be

typical art and, probably, also a core set of functions that almost everyone thinks are fulfilled by these artifacts. Given the structure of the intentional characterization, this relative unity in the core set of functions that almost everyone considers to be typical of art implies a corresponding relative unity in the set of artifacts that people intuitively categorize as art.

Against this background of commonality, individual variations can have two sources. Firstly, the same artifact can be categorized as art by one person and as non-art by someone else if the two attribute different intentions to its creator (in the light of their background knowledge). Secondly, two individuals can differ in their intuitive categorization of an artifact as art even if they attribute the same intention to its creator, if they accept different artifacts as typical art and, more precisely, if their concept of typical art includes a different set of functions.

Interestingly enough, philosophers looking for a descriptive definition of the concept of art, using different methods, have also shown the importance of intention. Notably, Jerrold Levinson (1979), one of the most influential "descriptive philosophers," has arrived at an account very similar to the intentional characterization. According to Levinson's historico-intentional definition, 'X is an artwork if and only if X is an object which a person or persons ... non passingly intends for regard-as-a-work-of-art, i.e. regard in any way (or ways) in which prior artworks are or were correctly (or standardly) regarded' (Levinson, 1989).

Levinson's account, in contrast to the intentional characterization, is a standard definition of art. However, as explained above, Levinson's main criterion in evaluating his definition is its conformity to people's intuitions, i.e. whether the definition applies to all and only the things that people intuitively categorize as artworks. Thus, the aims of the intentional characterization and of Levinson's account are the same.

Levinson uses the expression 'intend for regard as,' instead of 'intend to fulfill a function or set of functions,' as I do for the intentional characterization. However, for Levinson the term 'regard' 'has a sense larger than merely *view*, or even *consideration*, encompassing more active modes such as *taking, treatment, approach, engagement with*, etc' (Levinson, 1979). This is basically what I mean by the term 'function.' Thus the two expressions 'intend for regard as' and 'intend to fulfill a function or set of functions' can be considered as interchangeable, and from now on I will use them as synonyms.

The only substantial difference between the intentional characterization and Levinson's definition is that in Levinson's definition, the artworks mentioned in the expression "regard in any way (or ways) in which prior artworks are or were correctly (or standardly) regarded" necessarily existed *before* the production of X, if X is to be considered an artwork. In the intentional characterization, this condition of pre-existence has disappeared. According to the

intentional characterization, an agent calls an artifact X 'art' if it was intended to be regarded in a way that other artworks (with which the agent is familiar, of course) are regarded, *even if these artworks were created after X*.

Ultimately, the question of whether the intentional characterization adequately describes our intuitive use of the concept of art is an empirical one. This paper provides only the preliminary conceptual clarification necessary to frame this future empirical approach. The next section takes the necessary first step in this conceptual clarification—i.e., verifying that the intentional characterization is not blatantly inconsistent with intuitions. In fact, Levinson's theory has been attacked by philosophers who claim that the account categorizes things as art that most people would intuitively categorize as non-art, and vice versa. It is thus essential to examine these objections and show either that they are unfounded or that the abovementioned difference between Levinson's theory and the intentional characterization eliminates them. The following discussion will also help to clarify how the intentional characterization works and how it can frame a more general empirical approach to our relations with artworks.

IV. Conformity to intuitions: comparing intentional characterization and Levinson's definition

One of the most frequently discussed counterexamples to Levinson's account concerns the origin of art. Levinson proposes to define what art is at time t as a function of what art was at t – 1, what art was at t – 1 being defined in turn as a function of what art was at t – 2, etc. Following this logic, it is possible to go back in time to the first artwork. As there were no artworks, and a fortiori no existing ways to regard artworks, before the first artwork, it would seem that there cannot be a first artwork. But this conclusion runs strongly against our intuitions. Let us imagine that the Chauvet cave paintings were the very first artifacts created by humanity that were neither clothes nor tools. This is surely wrong, but let us pretend it were true. Without further specifications about how they were produced, it seems that our default intuition is that the Chauvet paintings are still artworks, even in the hypothetical situation where they are the first artifacts that share some similarity with present artworks. It might be that some further details about their production could have some effect on the clarity of our intuitions (imagine, for instance, that we discover that these paintings were made in the dark under the influence of hallucinogenic substances and that their authors were absolutely unaware of what they were doing), but the specification that they are the very first artifacts presenting some similarity with other artworks does not seem to modify our intuition that they are art.

The intentional characterization is not affected by this problem precisely because of its difference from Levinson's definition. We spontaneously call the Chauvet paintings 'art' because we infer (rightly or wrongly) from the way they look that they were intended to be regarded in a way that certain artworks that we are already familiar with are regarded (as mimetic, expressive, having a particular kind of meaning, etc). It does not matter that the artworks in question were created millennia after the paintings of Chauvet.

The intentional characterization is thus immune to the problem of origins precisely because it eliminates the pre-existence requirement. However, this difference may expose the intentional characterization to other kinds of problems. In particular, it would seem at first glance that the intentional characterization implies that a prehistoric artist could have created a readymade, which seems absurd. Imagine, for instance, that a prehistoric hunter planted his axe in a stump and asked his contemporaries to look at it. Whatever the similarities between this situation and the way Duchamp has presented his readymades, we do not want to call this prehistoric axe an artwork. More generally, the intentional characterization seems to open the door to all sorts of anachronisms, where an agent could create an artwork by producing an artifact whose appearance or process of creation resembles those of artworks created centuries later.

The problem is only apparent, however, and it disappears when we really focus on the agent's intentions, as the intentional characterization invites us to do. In fact, in the scenario where a prehistoric hunter plants his axe in a stump, we do not infer that he could have intended it to be regarded the way Duchamp's readymades are now regarded. In the genesis of the intuition that Duchamp's readymades are art, what we know about the context of their production is crucial, because premises regarding the context determine the inferred intentions that we attribute to Duchamp. For instance, we can only infer that Duchamp intended to mock the seriousness of artistic production, metaphorically call into question the function of art, or break down the frontier between art and non-art because we know that he presented his readymades in an artistic context in which, among other things, acknowledged artistic values were becoming more and more diverse. Since we believe, probably correctly, that 30,000 years ago there was no art world, or at least no art world sharing relevant similarity with the art world of the early twentieth century, we do not attribute to the prehistoric hunter any intention that would lead to the axe's having functions similar to those of Duchamp's readymades. On the other hand, we spontaneously infer, rightly or wrongly, that a prehistoric hunter could paint the wall of Chauvet with the intention of producing a mimetic and expressive representation with a particular meaning, because we believe, rightly or wrongly, that this kind of intention can occur in the mind of an agent even in the absence of any

stabilized artworld. This is why we spontaneously call the paintings on the walls of Chauvet 'art,' but not the axe.

The above thought experiment can be modified to turn it into an argument that the intentional characterization captures the intuitive concept of art better than does Levinson's definition. Let us imagine that in the prehistoric tribe that produced the paintings of Chauvet there was an incredibly intelligent mutant. Call him 'M.' Imagine that M has contemplated and been very impressed by the paintings produced by his peers. M meditates all night about this peculiar kind of artifact. First, he realizes that this kind of artifact could attain even greater perfection in mimetic realism. Then he wonders whether one could not even surpass realism and explore the possibilities of our perceptual system with a more impressionistic kind of representation. This leads him to the realization of the immense power that this peculiar family of artifacts could have for a human society, and the variety of functions that they could fulfill, including being powerful vehicles of meaning. He then imagines the various ways in which these artifacts can bear meaning and he realizes that they could even mock their own power and be ironic about themselves. In the morning, he appears before his fellows, plants his axe in a stump and says, sardonically: "Here is how all that will end!" His peers will presumably not understand anything of the message he intends to communicate by acting this way. Nevertheless, it also seems that we would intuitively call his axe in the stump an artwork, albeit a very visionary one. This example thus shows that if we believe an artifact to have been intended to be regarded in a way that some type of artwork that we are familiar with (in this example the readymades) is regarded, then we will call it 'art' even if the artworks to which it is connected were created long after it.

Thus, the pre-existence condition is not included in the structure of the intuitive concept of art, as it is in Levinson's definition. Pre-existence is only a matter of fact. That is when we call an artifact X 'art' because we believe that it has been intended to be regarded as some other artworks are regarded, these works generally do actually predate X. But when we imagine a situation where this is not the case, as in the above example, we realize that this condition is not necessary and, thus that the intentional characterization corresponds better to our intuitive concept of art than does Levinson's definition.

Artists do not actually have the anticipatory capacities of this prehistoric mutant. That is why the intentions that lead to the creation of a given artwork are generally connected with ways of regarding art that existed prior to it. But again, if we were to find the notebook of the creator of an artifact, and if we were to infer from what we read there that he produced this

artifact with the intention that it be received in a way that artworks created after his have been regarded, we would spontaneously call his artifact a work of 'art.'

The possibility of producing an artwork intended to be regarded in the same was as artworks produced at a later time is also limited by the fact that in most cases, artists produce artworks with the explicit intention that they be regarded in the same way as artworks that they are familiar with. Levinson calls this mode of artistic creation 'relational.' Levinson also describes an *intrinsic* mode of artistic creation, in which the agent produces an artefact intending that it be regarded in a certain way which is, *by coincidence*, an existing way of regarding artworks (Levinson, 1979). In this second mode of artistic creation, these artworks need not necessarily exist prior to this artifact's creation for us to intuitively call it an artwork. As a matter of fact, when we categorize an artifact A as art, i.e. when we attribute intentions to A's creator, implicitly or explicitly, related to functions of what we consider typical artworks, these artworks generally predate A's creation. But this preexistence is only a very probable contingency. As the above thought experiment shows, it is not encoded in the psychological mechanisms underlying our intuitive categorization of something as art.

The above thought experiment is a strong argument in favor of the idea that attribution of intentions is the crucial element that determines the intuitive use of the concept of art. In fact, the only difference between the scenario where the prehistoric man simply plants his axe and the one where he plants it after having envisioned the possible functions of cave painting-related artifacts is the kind of intention that we spontaneously attribute to him (no differences in the artifact itself and no differences in the apparent context of its presentation). This simple difference is sufficient to induce a complete shift in our intuition about whether his planted axe is art or not.

Levinson's definition also raised a second concern focused on the fact that ways of regarding artworks can disappear. Robert Stecker, echoing a thesis of Arthur Danto, wrote that "[not only are there] options available to artists now that were not available in the past, but there were also options earlier that are not available now" (Stecker, 1990, p.270). The problem is that Levinson's definition does not seem to allow for the disappearance of ways of regarding artworks. When a way of regarding art is sufficiently stabilized culturally, it seems that Levinson's definition implies that this way of regarding is, necessarily, always available for subsequent artistic creation.

Noël Carroll expressed this worry with a concrete counterexample (Carroll, 1999). Carroll notes that many portraits in the Renaissance were regarded as mimetic representations of their models. Nowadays, many family photos are taken with the intention to produce mimetic

representations of their models—i.e., they are intended to be regarded in the same way as these Renaissance paintings. Thus, family photos should be classified as artworks according to Levinson's definition, but they generally are not.

The intentional characterization faces the same problem. In fact, it would seem that according to this account an agent who is familiar with Renaissance portraits should call all family photos 'art,' which is clearly not the case.

However, Carroll's counter-example refutes neither Levinson's definition nor the intentional characterization. In answer to Carroll's criticism, Levinson argued that ways of regarding artworks cannot really disappear. According to him, a sufficiently detailed description of the way in which Renaissance portraits were regarded shows that they were not regarded as family photos are today. The portraits of the Renaissance were regarded not only as mimetic representations, but also as expressive, as manifesting a particular amount of skill, as bearing particular formal properties and a certain meaning, etc. (Levinson, 1989)—all of which are ways of regarding artworks. And in fact, if we imagine that a family snapshot has been taken with great attention to its formal properties, that the photographer made a special effort to capture the feeling he was experiencing for his family, and that he wanted these feelings to be partly experienced by someone looking at the photo, or that he wanted his snapshot to embody a particular meaning, we progressively activate the intuition that this snapshot might be an artwork.

To reinforce this response, it is useful to distinguish here again between what actually happens and the structure of the intuitive concept of art. It is likely that, because of the deep differences between Renaissance society and ours, we can no longer experience an artwork today precisely as portraits were regarded in the Renaissance. To cite only one such difference, in the Renaissance the capacity to produce a good mimetic representation was necessarily linked to a great amount of skill and the capacity to see the world in a certain manner. Today, because of photography, the ability to produce a good mimetic representation no longer has these implications. Thus, it is not possible to regard any artifact today exactly as portraits were regarded in the Renaissance. But if it *were* possible, then an artifact intended to be regarded in this way would probably be considered an artwork.

Note that this clarification makes Levinson's definition perfectly compatible with Danto's thesis. According to Danto, there were options for artists in the past that are no longer available. Danto does not state, as Levinson's detractors seem to believe, that there were ways of regarding artworks in the past that have become ways of regarding normal artifacts at present. Instead, Danto's thesis implies that artworks were regarded in the past in ways in

which we can no longer regard them at present, which is perfectly compatible both with Levinson's definition and with the intentional characterization. For instance, painters today cannot intend their paintings to be regarded as paintings were regarded in the Renaissance, if only because today a painter cannot intend his painting to be regarded as a unique kind of two-dimensional colored visually lively representation.

A third counterexample, symmetrical to the preceding one, has been used to criticize Levinson's definition. The argument focuses on 'revolutionary' artworks, paradigmatically Duchamp's readymades. In fact, these artworks seem to be intended to be regarded in a completely new fashion, precisely as no artworks were ever previously regarded (Carroll, 1999). Thus, revolutionary artworks seem to provide direct counterexamples to Levinson's theory and to the intentional characterization.

Levinson (1993) proposed two possible answers. In the first he argued that many artworks that seem entirely revolutionary are in fact revolutionary only in some respects, while in other respects they are strongly connected with tradition. In other words, among the various features that constitute the intended way of regarding a given revolutionary artwork, very few are in fact revolutionary. The majority of such features are similar to features of existing ways of regarding artworks (even if, subjectively, we probably pay more attention to the revolutionary aspects of the work.)

In his second answer, Levinson points out that completely revolutionary artworks (if any such works exist) are intended to be regarded as a rejection of some existing way of regarding artworks. He then proposes to extend the meaning of the expression ''regard in any way (or ways) in which prior artworks are or were correctly (or standardly) regarded'' to include the phrase (in my words) 'regard as a rejection of some ways of, or as a ''conscious opposition'' to, regarding existing artworks' (Levinson, 1979, p. 242; 1993).

The first answer is quite helpful. When Monet produced Impression, Sunrise, it is true that he intended it to be regarded in a way that was not completely different from the way previously existing paintings were regarded. Impression, Sunrise was intended to be regarded as a figurative representation, as an object for contemplation, as having some aesthetic virtues, etc.; each of these were already available as ways to regard existing artworks. In comparison, what was new (closer attention to the raw visual sensations of the artist, say) is, objectively, minor. The case of Duchamp's Fountain can be treated in a similar fashion. In fact, Fountain was intended for an exhibition, as an object for contemplation and as a metaphorical and ironic comment on the art world. Each of these ways of regarding artifacts was already available as a way to regard artworks (metaphorical and ironic comments had been already

used, at least, by the Dadaists). Thus, as Levinson pointed out, the procedure consisting in rejecting some elements of the past works only if, in addition to what is rejected, there are also aspects that respect tradition. More generally, rejecting some of the rules governing artistic production is not equivalent to intending an artwork to be regarded in a completely new fashion. On the contrary, the success of the rejection of some rules is entirely dependent on adhering to the tradition in some way, because if the public has not strongly integrated a rule, and if it is not at least implicitly expecting this rule to be followed, violating it will have no effect. For instance, a film producer, or the author of a comic strip, can conspicuously violate a rule governing a genre only if the audience or the readers are extremely familiar with this rule, and if they expect this rule to be followed. Otherwise, the violation of the rule will simply go unnoticed. Thus, to innovate, one has first to adhere to the tradition (even if subjectively, we often pay more attention to the innovative features). Levinson's second proposed response is more suspectIn order to account for entirely revolutionary art, Levinson proposes to extend the formulation ''regard as some existing artworks are regarded' to include the phrase (in my words) 'regard as a rejection of some ways to regard existing artworks'' (Levinson, 1979, 1993). The major problem with this strategy is that the practice of rejecting the rules of the past has only recently become a major function of artworks. Of course, at least in the Western tradition, many artists have innovated in various ways with respect to tradition. But it is only recently that the rejection of existing codes has become a major function of art and that it has been possible for artists to produce artworks intended to be primarily regarded as an ostensive rejection of the codes of a given artistic tradition. Moreover, the function of rejecting existing codes seems to have followed the same historical pathway as other functions of art, such as bearing formal properties and being expressive. In the Renaissance, these two functions were clearly subordinated to functions related to representation. At the time, a painter could not produce an artwork by intending it to be regarded only as having formal qualities or as being expressive. This has become possible only with the progressive diversification of artistic values, as these functions became at least as important as representation. The same transition – from relative contingency to central importance – has occurred for the function of rejecting existing artistic codes. Thus, including the rejection of existing ways of regarding artworks among the most fundamental features of the intuitive concept of art seems unlikely to be necessary.

However, Levinson's theory can sidestep the problem of revolutionary art in a more efficient and parsimonious fashion. When artists began to produce artworks with the intention of rejecting some existing rule, this caused some resistance on the part of the public to

considering their productions as art. But now this practice has become very common. In the course of the twentieth century, many artists offered their works for regard as a rejection of past habits. 'Being regarded as a rejection of the past' has thus progressively become a standard and classic way of regarding artworks. In other words, nowadays, 'regard-as-a-work-of-art, i.e. regard in any way (or ways) in which prior artworks are or were correctly (or standardly) regarded.' in Levinson's theory can be directly replaced by 'regard as a rejection of some rules or habits governing current artistic practice'. Levinson's theory can thus deal with revolutionary art without modification or extension. Simply, nowadays, and because of the particular history of art in Western society, standard ways of regarding artworks have come to include 'as a rejection of existing artistic rules or habits,' alongside 'as a mimetic representation' or 'as an expression of the artist's feelings.' Thus, revolutionary art jeopardizes neither Levinson's theory nor the intentional characterization.

Thus, none of the three most frequently quoted counter-examples to Levinson's theory refute the intentional characterization. The discussion of the problem of origin shows that the intentional characterization conforms more closely to intuition than Levinson's theory. And careful examination of the two other counterexamples (the disappearance of ways of regarding artworks and revolutionary art) shows that they refute neither Levinson's theory nor the intentional characterization.

To fit with our intuitions, a characterization of the intuitive concept of art must also account for the cases in which our intuitions are indeterminate (cases in which our answer to the question 'Is X an artwork?' is 'I don't know' or 'in a sense') and cases of disagreement (where different individuals give different answers to the question).

In fact, when confronted with certain artifacts, our intuitions do seem to be irremediably indeterminate. We cannot say whether the artifact is or is not an artwork. We can, of course, elaborate a reflective theory in order to justify one or the other choice, but our intuitions alone cannot decide. Some comic strips, for instance, are likely to fall into this intermediate zone for many of us. The way that the intentional characterization deals with these cases is by pointing to the multiplicity of intentions that generally play a causal role in the creation of an artwork. Some of these intentions pull the artifact toward the category of typical artworks, whereas other intentions pull it in the direction of non-art artifacts.

In reading comics, we may feel that they have been produced with the intention that they be regarded as having some formal or expressive properties of the same kind as those we are used to appreciating in typical examples of art, such as classic paintings or great movies. We may also perceive an intention to confer certain semantic properties on the strip through the

use of metaphor in a manner similar to that used in some great literary works. Such perceived intentions will pull intuitions about the comic strip toward the category of artworks.

At the same time, we may discern other intentions, such as achieving commercial success by treating a fashionable theme or by artificially capturing the reader's attention. Since these ways of regarding an artifact (treating a fashionable theme, artificially stimulating attention) do not figure in our repertoire of ways of regarding artworks, detection of such intentions pulls the artifact away from the category of artworks. If the recovery of these two categories of intentions leads them to exert forces of similar intensity on our categorization faculties, the intentional characterization predicts, in accordance with what is observed, that our intuitions about the arthood of this kind of comic will be indeterminate. We can, of course, elaborate reflective arguments to defend or reject the arthood of this work, a process about which the intentional characterization is silent, since it does not directly concern something's intuitive categorization as art. What matters here is that the intentional characterization, because of the multiplicity of intentions that generally govern the production of an artwork, is perfectly compatible with the existence of indeterminate cases.

What about cases of disagreement? The intentional characterization is compatible with the existence of individual idiosyncrasies, because the way agents spontaneously use the concept of an artwork depends on their practical knowledge of ways of regarding existing artworks. Thus, two agents who have had different artistic educations (they may, for instance, be familiar with different artworks, or be familiar with the same artworks but be accustomed to regarding them in a different range of ways) will have different intuitive concepts of art. Thus, even if they are well informed about a particular work, and even if they recover the same kind of intentions behind it, they could well have different intuitions about its arthood.

Note that this proposition is compatible with Noël Carroll's description of cases of conflict. According to Carroll (1993), when there is a conflict between two agents, the agent who defends the arthood of the object of conflict frequently tells a story whose aim is to make explicit the connection between the intentions of its producer and artifacts acknowledged as artworks by both agents. According to the intentional characterization, this procedure works because we intuitively assign the concept of an artwork to an artifact if we perceive a similarity between the content of the intentions of the artist, which determine the way we are supposed to regard her work, and ways of regarding that we have already acknowledged as ways to regard artworks. Sometimes these similarities are obvious and we spontaneously assign the status of art to the artifact. Sometimes they are not obvious, so we need the kind of

story described by Carroll to make them explicit and thereby activate the intuition that the artifact is an artwork.

Leaving aside the question of the conformity to intuition and reframing the debate in terms of the issue of relevance, one might still object that the intentional characterization is not *specific* to art categorization. According to this objection, the intentional characterization is only an adaptation of a general theory about artifacts to the case of art and, as a consequence, it does not teach us anything about art *per se*. However, in a descriptive perspective, the consideration of the cognitive features that are common to art and other domains is as relevant as the specificity of art. Moreover, since it seems quite unlikely that a specialized psychological mechanism has evolved specifically for art cognition, all the psychological mechanisms that are triggered in art cognition can probably be triggered also in other domains of cognition. The specificity of art cognition might lie merely in the specific way those mechanisms are activated by artworks. Notice also that from a methodological point of view, it is more efficient to begin with a clear description of what art cognition shares with other domains of cognition and only afterwards define its specificity. In other word, the specificity of art cognition might be easier to identify once we have a theory describing what art cognition shares with other domains of cognition. In the next section, we will see that there are reasons to believe that the various processes of intention attribution, though none of them can be identified as specific to art cognition, are activated in a particularly deep and complex fashion when experiencing an artwork.

V. Testing the intentional characterization

The intentional characterization predicts that agents will intuitively use the concept of art to categorize an artifact if and only if they infer that this artifact has been intended to fulfill a function or set of functions that they have already accepted as being fulfilled by artifacts that they consider as typical art. The basic paradigm to test it would be to present subjects with examples of artifacts (real artifacts, descriptions of artifacts, real artifacts accompanied by contextual information about their origin, their author, etc) and ask them: "Is this artifact an artwork?" The prediction is that a given subject's intuitions are determined by (1) the functions that she accepts as being fulfilled by typical art and (2) the intentions that she spontaneously attributes to the author of the artifact. Both parameters can be controlled experimentally.

The first parameter varies depending on the subject's background knowledge about artworks and their functions. We may expect, for instance, that someone who is mostly interested in

Renaissance painting and someone who is fascinated by contemporary art will accept different functions as possible functions of typical art. For instance, the latter is more likely than the former to accept the conspicuous violation of existing rules as a function of typical art. The second parameter varies with the artifact's appearance and with what the subject knows about the context of its production, its creator, etc. The intentional characterization predicts that the same person may have different intuitions about two indistinguishable artifacts in the light of contextual information that leads to the inference of different intentions. More precisely, in an experimental context, a change in contextual information accompanying an artifact can have three kinds of impact: it can induce a shift in intuitions from art to non-art or *vice versa*; it can produce a shift in subjects' intuitions between clarity and vagueness; finally, a change in contextual information can affect variability among subjects, going from a case of high consistency between subjects to a case of high disagreement or vice versa.

The numerous thought experiments that analytic philosophers have suggested in this domain (such as those of Danto, 1981) could provide useful material for testing these predictions. In fact, these thought experiments were conceived to create borderline cases in which a single change in an artifact produces a shift in intuitions from art to non-art, or *vice versa*. Thus far, these thought experiments have been put to the test only of philosophers' intuitions, but they could easily be used to experimentally explore the intuitions of various groups of subjects.

Philosophers' normative definitions of art could also be of value to this experimental program. The authors of these definitions claimed to have isolated the *true* function of art. For instance, for Collingwood (1938) the true function of art is expression, for Bell (1915) it is significant form, for Beardsley (1983) it is inducement of aesthetic experience and for Danto (1981) it is the embodiment of meaning. These definitions are normative because their authors claimed that X is true art if and only it has the function that they define as art's true function, whatever people's intuitions about X's arthood might be. As normative theory, these definitions are of little help for empirical research. However, they can easily be turned into descriptive tools claiming that each of them describe one possible function that is fulfilled by some artifacts that people recognize as art. Taken in this way, these definitions become tools that can help describe the complex range of functions that artworks fulfill. They can help, when investigating the intuitions of a given subject or a group of subjects, to give substance to the intentional characterization by offering a specific description of the functions referred to in the phrase "… which she has already accepted as a function or set of functions that can be fulfilled by artifacts that she considers as typical art."

An important precaution when testing the empirical validity of the intentional characterization is to keep in mind how liberal we can be when we attribute intentions. In fact, in some circumstances, we attribute much more intentions than there really are—or at least our mechanisms of intention attribution do not wait for proof before attributing intentions. For instance, pet owners are familiar with the kind of complex and implausible intentions (such as communicative intentions) that we sometimes spontaneously attribute to non-human animals. This is probably why we may find ourselves intuitively categorizing abstract paintings produced by children, animals or computers as art, and even as good art (Hawley-Dolan & Winner, 2011). In the first two cases we probably (rightly or wrongly) infer intentions such as promoting an aesthetic experience (if only one's own) by the arrangement of shapes and colors or expressing some kind of non-propositional mental state such as emotion behind the abstract shapes. In the third case (where subjects intuitively categorize abstract paintings produced by computers as art), the intentions are likely attributed to the creator of the computer program, and subjects probably implicitly attribute to the creator such intentions as creating a program able to randomly produce arrangements of shapes with formal properties that can promote aesthetic experience. Again, these are empirical issues. Artworks produced by children, animals or computers are borderline cases that could help in carefully exploring the parameters that determine people's intuitions about arthood.

Once its empirical adequacy is verified, the intentional characterization could frame an empirical program that goes beyond the question of categorization, targeting the questions of art interpretation, appreciation, evaluation and perception. Indeed, the role of intention attribution in people's relationship to artworks is not limited to categorization.

Here again, it is useful to begin by considering simpler artifacts: imagine that I am an archeologist and that I discover an artifact in the shape of a half-sphere, of unknown function. The kind of intended function that I attribute to it, on the basis of its shape and my background knowledge, would determine both my perception and my evaluation of it. For instance, if after some investigation into the culture that built it, I were to hypothesize that it is intended for drinking, I would see it as a concave and waterproof object. If I were to infer instead that it was built to crack nuts, I would see it as a convex and solid object. My evaluation would also be different in the two cases. For instance, I could see the same object either as a poor bowl or as a good nutcracker. An experiment by Futó and collaborators (Futó et al., 2010) suggests that the impact of attributed function on perception rests on very fundamental mechanisms since it can be evidenced in ten-month-old children. In fact, they

showed that at this age, seeing an artifact used in two different ways induces the illusion of having seen two different artifacts.

The impact of intention attribution on the relation with artworks is likely to be deeper than in the case of simpler artifacts for at least three reasons.

First, as already said, artworks have not one relatively simple and characteristic function but many different and complex functions. Even a single property of an artwork can have many entrenched functions. So that we frequently find ourselves, when confronted with a single property of some artwork, in the position of an archeologist trying to guess what something has been made for. And in fact it often happens that a recalibration of the intentions that we attributew to the artist when looking at an artwork entails a deep change in our perception and evaluation of it. For instance, if when I am looking at *A woman drinking tea,* the sole intention that I attribute (at least implicitly) to Chardin is to produce a mimetic representation, the teapot and the face of the woman will seem to me not fully adequate. The position of the teapot on the table seems anomalous, and the woman's face is not clearly distinguishable from the background. But, reading Baxandall's (1985) analysis, I will learn that Chardin was inspired by the scientific and philosophical theories of visual perception of his time to destabilize perception and induce complex visual effects. Realizing that Chardin's aims were much more complex than the ones I was implicitly attributing to him transforms my experience of his painting. The woman's face and the teapot no longer appear to me to be approximate attempts to fulfill the intention of imitating the way things really look, but as skillful attempts to fulfill the intention to destabilize my perception.

The second reason why intention attribution is more important in the case of artworks than in the case of most artifacts is that artworks have meaning. Gricean theories of human communication have shown that understanding a sentence, or any other communicative act, rests necessarily on a (frequently implicit) attribution of intention (Sperber & Wilson, 1986). According to these theories, the words and syntax of a sentence are used by the receiver's cognitive system as cues that allow him to infer what the speaker wants him to understand, drawing on the context and his background knowledge. Sperber and Wilson (2002) argued that this task is handled by specialized mind reading module that is activated by the recognition of a communicative intention. Elsewhere I have described various ways in which an artwork can embody a communicative intention and thus activate mechanisms of intention attribution that are specialized in communication (Pignocchi, 2012). Sperber and Wilson (2008) and Pilkington (2000) have argued that artworks can activate in a particularly rich manner the pragmatic mechanisms for understanding meanings that are weakly implicated by

a communicative act. This might allow the artist to embody non propositional mental states, such as intuitions and emotions (Pignocchi, 2012).

The third reason why intention attribution is particularly important in the case of artwork is that artworks frequently bear the traces of actions that we could have produced ourselves in their final appearance. In fact, we all perform activities with relevant similarities to artistic practices. We all use pencils and related tools to write and produce at least basic drawings, we tell stories, take photos, and many of us have at least some amateur artistic pastime. Thus, depending on perceivers' procedural knowledge of these kinds of activities, they may be able to perceive some properties of an artwork (for instance the lines of a drawing) as a result of intentional actions that they could have produced themselves (Pignocchi, 2010).

The first step in testing the impact of intention attribution on the experience of an artwork would be to verify that a difference in the intended function attributed to the work entails a difference in how the work is perceived. One way to test this prediction would be to present artworks accompanied by information about the context of their production. Different subjects would be presented with different contextual information and thereby invited to infer different intended functions. Then, a memorization task (recognizing the artwork among different artificially modified versions of it, recognizing which of a set of details belongs to the previously seen artwork, etc.) could be used to test the impact of the inferred intended function on memory for the work's perceptual appearance.

Bullot and Reber (in press) complain that the cognitive approach to art does not take into account the role of historical knowledge in the personal experience of an artwork. The approach advocated here allows for investigation of the role of historical knowledge, since the intentions that we see behind a work are determined both by the work's appearance and by what we know about its creator, the context of its production, etc. Believing that an impressionistic painting was produced in 1874 or last year obviously entails the attribution of different intentions to its creator and thus, according to the model outlined in this paper, also a difference in perception, appreciation, interpretation and evaluation.

Grounding a cognitive approach to art in the mechanisms of intention attribution makes it possible to investigate the role of background historical knowledge and the sources of individual variation, and thus might help to eliminate the incomprehension between cognitive science and the humanities about the nature and study of art.

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