

## *Nature of Art*

The earliest aesthetic experiences obviously responded to nature, rather than to art. Once the arts flourished they became of great interest to philosophers, because of their importance in our lives. Modern aesthetics begins with the thought that arts as different as architecture and dancing form a single class, which we call 'the arts'. However, faced with a single class showing wide diversity, the first challenge of aesthetics was to attempt a **definition** of the essential nature of the arts in general. Until recently this enterprise was proceeding quite successfully – not because a definition was agreed, but because many illuminating observations were made about what the arts had in common. All of the arts feature imaginative creations, in various forms, which are intended to elicit strong emotional (and possibly intellectual) responses in an audience. Hence the attempts at definition focused on the role of the artist, the nature of what was created, and the mental state of the audience. The **artist** might be expressing feelings, making intuitions public, creating a specialised language, or representing the world (perhaps via the imagination). The **work** of art exhibits structure, relates in some way to the rest of our experience, and offers features which trigger responses in us. The **audience** reaction is harder to specify, but nearly always involves strong emotions (without the usual resulting actions or anxieties), provides an experience related to ordinary life and yet unlike it, and offers a single unified experience.

If we want to understand the nature of all art, a focal issue is to decide its **ontology** – its mode of existence. If we can place art in some category of existence, it is a lot easier to specify its character. However, the diversity of art is immediately striking. Buildings are single objects; so are most paintings, but prints have multiple copies; music, theatre and dance require a performance; classical music is fixed by a score, but jazz is spontaneous; literature is endlessly reproducible. This implies many modes of existence for art, but theorists have explored the possibility of one underlying kind, usually by reducing other art forms to a single type. Thus it has been suggested that works of art are single physical entities, multiple physical entities, abstract entities, mental phenomena, or performed processes.

There is an immediate attraction in the idea that a work of art is a **single** physical entity, because this fits buildings and paintings so well. We can then say that each example of a print edition is a separate artwork. Although music and dance are extended over time, they can be seen as single physical events. Literature is the obvious misfit, because no one copy of a work is special, and literature can be remembered. A better account of the prints and of literature is given if they are seen as **multiple** art works, and music and dance exist as multitudes of performances. Although buildings and paintings are unique, they could (in principle) be perfectly replicated.

However, musical works can exist unperformed, and literature is not tied to specific copies of books, so maybe we should break the tie with physical objects, saying that art exists either in the mind, or in abstraction. The **idealist** view of art says it only truly exists in the minds of the artist and the audience, and the physical objects are just conduits for communicating between the two. Art differs from other mental states by the creation of an artwork, to achieve the communication. Artworks are viewed as **abstractions** if we say they are tied neither to the minds of the participants nor to the communicating objects, but they are 'types' of entity, which may or may not be instantiated. Unperformed music, unread books, and even forgotten plays, exist as pure ideas, perhaps in the way that mathematics or a language exist. A final option is to see the **performance** as crucial, which obviously fits plays, music and dance, but which might fit a gallery-goer viewing a painting, or a reader enjoying a novel. Even buildings only exist as art when visitors make a tour, and construct the experience of its space.

Each of these approaches to art's ontology has supporters, so there is no conclusive view that points to a definition. However, other features of art can be cited, as we try to settle its nature. Art works nearly always exhibit unity, and are bounded by a framework. Art extended over time usually has very obvious beginning and end moments, books come within covers, and pictures usually have margins and frames. This suggests that the **form** of an artwork is crucial for its definition. There is a structure, which reaches out to the work's boundaries, and there are landmarks through which the audience can make a mental journey. The form must be intended to communicate imaginative feelings (said to be 'significant'). A simple colour can be beautiful, but only structured colours can be art.

An alternative suggestion says art is an '**imitation**' of aspects of reality, but merely copying something seems a bit trivial, and vivid imagination can venture a long way from reality. A more abstract view says that each artist is creating a little **language**, whose symbols we learn through experience, and which expresses otherwise inarticulate mental states. A more popular proposal focuses on the **expression** of feeling by the artist, and the corresponding emotional experiences of the audience. Romantic art is especially notable for expressing and stimulating strong emotions, and maybe that is the whole point of art. Artworks are devised as the best means of communicating feelings. Nature, of course, communicates aesthetic feelings without expressing them, but nature is not 'devised' for that purpose. However, this theory seems to fit the audience (which seems to be in search of emotional experience) better than the artist (who may just work for money, and can hardly sustained frenzied emotion for months on end). And emphasising the feeling seems to devalue the work itself, since we might get the same emotion from many different sources.

All of these attempts at defining art were undermined when modern avant-garde visual artists managed to take mundane physical objects, label them, display them in galleries, and insist that they were art. Since artists are in charge here, the artist's insistence that this is art overrules any philosopher's attempt at definition. The result was the **institutional** theory of art, which saw art in more social terms, and built on the earlier thought that art is more important to a whole culture than it is to any individual. The new proposal was that a work is 'art' if it is accepted by authoritative people into the 'artworld', which is defined by its theories and by its history. The essential nature of art is then entirely fixed by its role in a social activity.

Each of the separate arts (notably music, literature and painting) has its own branch of aesthetics, and these have increased in importance as optimism about defining art with precision has begun to fade.