

WHY WE NEED A THEORY OF ART

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In this article, I argue against Dominic McIver Lopes's claim that nobody needs a theory of art. On the one hand, I will demonstrate that Lopes's alternative to theories of art – namely, the buck-passing theory of art – is neither more viable nor more fruitful: it is likewise incapable of resolving disagreement over the status of certain artefacts and of being fruitful for the broader field of the arts. On the other hand, I will defend the view that we are in need of a viable theory of art. The concept of art has a profound impact on our cultural practices. Concepts of art in use now showcase biased and arbitrary features. Correspondingly, certain artefacts and practices are excluded from the domain of art without adequate justification. Therefore, I will argue, it is unwarranted to abandon the search for a viable theory of art.

I. INTRODUCTION

In his book, *Beyond Art*, Dominic McIver Lopes defends a moderate form of art eliminativism.¹ While Lopes does not maintain that there is no such thing as an artwork or that we should fully eliminate the concept of art from our vocabularies, he does minimize the significance of this category, arguing that the category fully reduces down to other simpler categories – namely, the individual arts, such as painting, dance, sculpture, and music. Correspondingly, Lopes maintains that we do not need a theory of art to answer the question 'What is art?'; we merely need theories of the individual arts. Succinctly put, the 'buck-passing theory of art' Lopes proposes entails that the question 'What is art?' can be answered by referring to two new questions: 'Which kinds are art kinds?' and 'Given a list of the arts, what is each art?'² This enterprise is claimed to be both more manageable and more fruitful for (1) handling 'hard cases', artefacts whose art status is controversial, and for (2) serving empirical art studies. In this article, I evaluate this proposal and ultimately reject it. I will show that the buck-passing theory of art is neither more manageable nor more fruitful. And I will defend the need for a theory of art against any form of art eliminativism. In this way, I set out to highlight the potential significance of the project of defining art in general.

Section II will expose Lopes's buck-passing theory and spell out how it implies moderate art eliminativism. In Section III, it will be argued that defining

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¹ Christy Mag Uidhir, *Art and Art-Attempts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 205.

² Dominic McIver Lopes, *Beyond Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 14.

the individual arts is not fundamentally easier than defining art as a whole. Section IV will show that, as Lopes admits, a satisfactory theory of the arts, a theory that states which kinds are art kinds, is not forthcoming. Unlike Lopes, I will argue that this does negatively affect his buck-passing theory of art. Section V will establish the need for a theory of art as a whole. Lopes has convincingly shown that the arts as a grouping is to some extent arbitrary. I will demonstrate that this arbitrariness has fundamental political and cultural implications and is not resolved by simply ignoring the category of art.

II. THE BUCK-PASSING THEORY OF ART

Dominic McIver Lopes has developed a new framework for thinking about the definitional question, 'What is art?', by shifting the attention away from 'art' to the different 'art kinds'. His buck-passing theory of art states that x is a work of art if and only if x is a work of K , where K is an art: 'The buck passing theory of art states that a work of art is a work in an art kind, hence typically a product of an activity outputting works of that kind.'³ The buck-passing theory answers the question 'What is art?' by asking two new questions, namely: 'Which kinds are art kinds?' and 'Given a list of the arts, what is each art?'⁴ Buck-stopping theories of art, as Lopes calls them, conversely, state what it is for an artefact to be a work of art without raising new questions; these theories aim to give non-question-begging criteria for arthood. Virtually all proposed analytic definitions and theories of art fall into the latter category.⁵ These theories, then, assume that the reason why a piece of music is art is the same reason as why a work of architecture is art. The buck-passing theory of art, by contrast, aims to take seriously the plurality of the arts. What we need in order to answer the question

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Examples of buck-stopping theories are abundant: Paul Crowther, 'Defining Art, Defending the Canon, Contesting Culture', *British Journal of Aesthetics* 44 (2004): 361–77; Arthur Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981); George Dickie, *The Art Circle: A Theory of Art* (Evanston, IL: Chicago Spectrum Press, 1997); Denis Dutton, 'A Naturalist Definition of Art', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 64 (2006): 367–77; Berys Gaut, 'Art as a Cluster Concept', in *Theories of Art Today*, ed. Noël Carroll (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2000); Gary Iseminger, *The Aesthetic Function of Art* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004); Jerrold Levinson, 'Defining Art Historically', *British Journal of Aesthetics* 19 (1979): 232–50; Alessandro Pignocchi, 'The Intuitive Concept of Art', *Philosophical Psychology* (2012): 1–20; Nick Zangwill, *Aesthetic Creation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); Catharine Abell, 'Art: What It Is and Why It Matters', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 85 (2012): 671–91; Noël Carroll, 'Historical Narratives and the Philosophy of Art', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 51 (1993): 313–26; Robert Stecker, 'The Boundaries of Art', *British Journal of Aesthetics* 30 (1990): 266–72.

'What is art?' are theories of the individual arts. Unlike a theory of art, a theory of an individual art does not need to 'treat the various arts in a unified manner, so that what makes a Rolling Stones song a work of art is the same as what makes the Barcelona Pavilion a work of art, which is the same as what makes *Beowulf* a work of art'.⁶ In other words:

The specific features of each art – the ones in virtue of which it differs from its sister arts – need not be represented in a theory of that art as realizing a feature it shares in common with its sister arts. Whatever the similarities among the arts, these similarities need not be built into what makes each art the art that it is. Indeed, the buck passing theory of art invites us to freely borrow the resources of buck stopping theories of art, putting them to work in constructing theories of the several arts with absolutely no regard for uniformity.⁷

Thus, Jerrold Levinson's intentional-historical definition might be suited to define painting, while Berys Gaut's cluster account might be suited to define music, and so on. Lopes argues that his buck-passing theory is superior to theories of art since it is both more viable and more fruitful. It is more viable, since the task of defining the individual arts is more likely to lead to successful results than the task of defining art. He admits that one defining an individual art, say ceramics, will still need to show why some ceramic artefacts are art, while others are not. This job of theorists of the individual arts, so Lopes argues, 'is much, much easier if what differentiates the art of painting from non-art painting need not be the same as what differentiates literature from non-literary writing'.⁸

The buck-passing theory is not only more viable, it is also more fruitful since (1) it is better at handling hard cases, works 'whose status as art is controversial from a theoretical perspective';⁹ and (2) it is better at serving empirical art studies, such as art history, the sociology and anthropology of art. (1) We do not need a theory of art to handle hard cases, Lopes states. About John Cage's *4'33"* he wonders: 'Is it genuinely an option to fret about what does or does not make *4'33"* a work of art and remain sanguine about what does or does not make it a work of music?'¹⁰ In other words, if it can be shown that the work is in an art kind, then the work is art; if not, then it is not art. We need theories of the individual arts to settle its art status, not a theory of art. Moreover, (2) we do not need a theory of art for grounding empirical art studies, Lopes maintains, since '[a]rt as a whole

⁶ Lopes, *Beyond Art*, 61.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 62.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 160.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 59.

is not the object of any field of empirical inquiry. That is, there are no serious psychological, anthropological, sociological, or historical hypotheses about all and only works of art.¹¹ Theories of the individual arts more directly serve the formulation of such hypotheses, since they, like empirical art studies, focus on art kinds such as painting, dance, and sculpture.

Although Lopes's buck-passing theory clearly does not entail radical art eliminativism, the concept or category of art still figures in his account, it does entail a moderate version of art eliminativism – namely, art reductionism, as Christy Mag Uidhir has suggested. In Mag Uidhir's words: 'Ultimately, what sets the reductionist philosophically and methodologically apart from the group is the view that there is nothing to being an artwork over and above being in one of the individual Arts, and as such, the philosophy of art enterprise, and all legitimate inquiry therein, must take place at the lower level of *the philosophies of the Arts*.'¹² Correspondingly, the need for a theory of art is eliminated. There is no insight we can gain from such a theory. The category of art cut loose from individual art kinds has no meaning, in this view.

Lopes's commitment to moderate art eliminativism is further illuminated when we consider the parallels between Lopes's account and reasons that some scholars of visual culture have put forward for neglecting or deconstructing the category of art. These scholars consider themselves to be studying visual culture, and whether the objects they study are artworks is insignificant or of minor interest, since the category of art is merely a social fact.¹³ Their objects, then, are 'those material artefacts, buildings and images, plus time-based media and performances, produced by human labour and imagination, which serve aesthetic, symbolic, ritualistic or ideological-political ends, and/or practical functions, and which address the sense of sight to a significant extent'.¹⁴ In this way, visual studies purportedly wants to abolish certain hierarchies inherent in the category of art.¹⁵ Visual studies scholars who defend art eliminativism maintain that the term 'art' comes with a lot of baggage: it has been used to elevate the cultural endeavours of a very limited group of people. This grouping of cultural endeavours, however, is

¹¹ Ibid., 65.

¹² Mag Uidhir, *Art and Art-Attempts*, 205.

¹³ As in many academic disciplines, there are deep disagreements regarding which principles the discipline is committed to. Some have contested the idea that visual culture studies neglects the category of art. See W. J. T. Mitchell, 'Showing Seeing: A Critique of Visual Culture', in *Art History, Aesthetics, Visual Studies*, ed. Michael Ann Holly and Keith Moxey (Williamstown, MA: Yale University Press, 2002), 231–50.

¹⁴ John A. Walker and Sarah Chaplin, *Visual Culture: An Introduction* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), 1–2.

¹⁵ James Elkins, ed., *Is Art History Global?* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 129.

arbitrary.¹⁶ One of the reasons why visual studies scholars want to change the subject from art to visual culture is this arbitrariness. Similar concerns are expressed by Lopes:

The buck passing theory of art ventures to change the subject. For a hundred years after the art question first gripped the Parisian salons and German coffee houses, philosophers struggled to know what singles out some activities as arts, hence as deserving a special prestige and attention. The twentieth-century avant-garde changed the subject once by confronting us with hard cases that provoked us to ask what makes some items works of art. While the buck passing theory declines to take up the question that exercised the early modern, it does take seriously the provocations of the artistic avant-garde, by reconfiguring them as challenges to theories of the individual arts.¹⁷

Put differently, insofar as the category of art is used as a way to single out some activities as more prestigious and worthy of attention than others, the category should not concern us. Lopes tellingly wonders: 'is someone fascinated by comics likely to gain much insight into that genre by campaigning for its art status, once its character and value have been fully appreciated?'¹⁸ Lopes also grants that to determine which activities are arts and which are not is to some extent arbitrary. He concludes that this should not be seen as a major problem, since, '[t]he proposal is that the arts are fundamentally appreciative kinds, to be theorized alongside other appreciative kinds.'¹⁹ This is not unlike visual studies scholars who argue that they are studying visual culture and the objects of visual culture include, but are not limited to, artworks.

Having elucidated the rationale behind Lopes's buck-passing theory of art, let us now turn to the question whether the buck-passing theory of art is both more manageable and more fruitful than buck-stopping theories of art.

III. THEORIES OF THE INDIVIDUAL ARTS

As we have seen, Lopes proposes to answer the question 'What is art?' by referring to two novel questions – namely, 'Which kinds are art kinds?' and 'Given a list of the arts, what is each art?' The former question is answered by a theory of the arts

¹⁶ Walker and Chaplin, for example, suggest that visual culture entails an expansion of the subject matter beyond art. A welcome consequence is that 'the specialness of art diminished as theorists noted that all forms of visual culture possessed aesthetic qualities'. Walker and Chaplin, *Visual Culture*, 5. Consider also the following quotation by Pinney: 'Visual culture encompasses a scepticism towards the transcendent claims of the art-idea, "anthropologizing" the mythography of art and the heroic artist.' Christopher Pinney, 'Four Types of Visual Culture', in *Handbook of Material Culture*, ed. Chris Tilley et al. (London: Sage, 2006), 134.

¹⁷ Lopes, *Beyond Art*, 203.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 204.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 121.

and the latter question is answered by theories of the individual arts. In this section, I will tackle Lopes's claim that theories of the individual arts are easier to come by.

Lopes argues that buck-stopping theories structurally fail to address the hard cases adequately. Hard cases, in Lopes's view, mainly consist of avant-garde artworks. So-called traditional theories of art, which define art in aesthetic terms, tend to deny them art status, while so-called genetic theories of art, which define art in terms of provenance, tend to include them in the domain of art. Lopes rightly states that both parties not only disagree over the art status of hard cases: traditionalists see it as a virtue of their theories that it denies hard cases art status, while geneticists see it as a virtue that they include them in the domain of art.²⁰ It is unclear, however, on what basis we can choose between the two positions. This disagreement is not solely grounded in conflicting intuitions. Disagreements over intuitions, so Lopes argues, can be resolved by independent criteria for theory choice, criteria that decide which intuitions must be given priority. However, with regard to the art status of hard cases, there are no independent criteria for theory choice since 'there is deep disagreement about the criteria for choosing a theory of art and this disagreement about criteria for theory choice stems from clashing intuitions about the hard cases.'²¹ Traditionalists favour heuristic adequacy, that is, a definition must be serviceable to the broader domain of the arts, as the main desideratum for definitions of art, while geneticists favour extensional adequacy, that is, a definition must capture the full extension of art. This leads to what Lopes calls 'a dialectical impasse': we have no independent resources for establishing who is right and who is wrong.

The question that needs to be answered is whether the buck-passing theory of art can evade these problems; is defining the individual arts not more likely to end up in a dialectical impasse? As we have seen, Lopes believes that formulating theories of the individual arts is less difficult than formulating a theory of art, since there is no need to propose criteria that are appropriate for artefacts as diverse as, say, painting, sculpture, music, and dance. Lopes argues that the buck-passing theory 'channels our questioning into theories of the arts, where answers are easier to come by.'²² Against the idea that defining individual arts is more plausible to yield worthwhile results, Aaron Meskin has argued: 'the concepts of painting, sculpture, and music turn out to contain more diversity than one might initially think. [...] many of the individual arts display almost as wide a range of functions

²⁰ Ibid., 53.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid., 203.

as art.²³ As Stephen Davies has remarked, if we take a closer look at the debate about definitions of music, it is clear that these definitions 'are highly divergent, are mutually critical, and reach no common ground'.²⁴ Disagreements about the extension of music seem as wide-ranging and fundamental as disagreements about the extension of art. To give a few examples: Stephen Davies and Andrew Kania think that at least some forms of muzak should be included in the domain of music, while Levinson sees it as a virtue of his definition that it excludes these phenomena, since muzak is not intended to be listened to.²⁵ Moreover, they disagree over a familiar hard case for theories of art, namely John Cage's 4'33". Granted, all three agree that it is an artwork. But Davies argues it is 'a performance piece, a theatrical work if you will, about the performance of music, not a musical work as such',²⁶ Levinson argues that it is music,²⁷ and Kania suggests that it is a work of sound art.²⁸ Given that these philosophers each situate the work in a different art kind, they have not, so it would seem, been in the service of the scholars of empirical art studies, who want to know whether they should study 4'33" as a piece of music. Moreover, other philosophers, like Roger Scruton, seem to suggest that the piece is neither art nor music.²⁹ Scruton maintains that the questions regarding the piece's status as either art or music are misguided:

all such questions seem to me to get nowhere. For they can all be answered as you will, without casting any light whatsoever on why works of art are significant to us, and what kind of significance they have. Matters would be different if we had a viable account of aesthetic interest. For then we could define art as a functional kind, namely the kind designed as objects of aesthetic interest [...].³⁰

As with buck-stopping theories of art, there are deep disagreements both regarding whether hard cases fall into the category of art or the category of a specific art kind and regarding the correct criteria for theory choice. Consequently, there are, again, no independent criteria for preferring one

²³ Aaron Meskin, 'From Defining Art to Defining the Individual Arts', in *New Waves in Aesthetics*, ed. Kathleen Stock and Katherine Thomson-Jones (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 143.

²⁴ Stephen Davies, 'Beyond Art', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 72 (2014): 330.

²⁵ Jerrold Levinson, 'The Concept of Music', in *Music, Art, and Metaphysics: Essays in Philosophical Aesthetics*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 274; Andrew Kania, 'Definition', in *The Routledge Companion to Philosophy and Music*, ed. Theodore Gracyk and Andrew Kania (New York: Routledge, 2011), 10–11; Stephen Davies, 'On Defining Music', *Monist* 95 (2012): 537.

²⁶ Davies, 'On Defining Music', 536.

²⁷ Levinson, 'Concept of Music', 270.

²⁸ Andrew Kania, 'Silent Music', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 68 (2010): 343–53.

²⁹ Roger Scruton, 'In Search of the Aesthetic', *British Journal of Aesthetics* 47 (2007): 238.

³⁰ Ibid.

definition over the other. Andrew Kania, for example, relies on extensional or descriptive adequacy more than on heuristic adequacy and normative adequacy. In other words, he wants to reveal the criteria we use to distinguish music from non-music, rather than showing how the distinction should be made in order to have a fruitful concept or category of music for scholars working on music or for appreciators of music. This is apparent in the way in which he rejects and defends claims with regard to the concept of music. Against Levinson, Kania argues that the practising of scales is music, pointing out that 'few would deny that such activities produce music'.³¹ He rejects subjective definitions since these have unintuitive consequences.³² Consider also this quotation regarding pieces by John Cage and Yoko Ono: 'You might, of course, simply deny that such works are music, though that would require a revisionist view of much of twentieth-century music history. However, it would be wise to investigate why people have been inclined to call such works music before dismissing them.'³³ Levinson, on the other hand, either does not accept or does not care that his definition of music has 'counterintuitive' consequences, like excluding muzak from the domain of music. Muzak simply should not be included for the reasons stated above.³⁴ Thus, either Kania and Levinson disagree over what is intuitive, or they disagree over what role intuitions should play in defining music. The latter seems to be most plausible explanation: Levinson believes it is more fruitful to exclude pieces from the domain of music if they were not intended to be listened to. Admittedly, there might be some obscurity regarding Levinson's preferred criteria for theory choice. Scruton and Kania, however, clearly disagree with regard to criteria for theory choice: Scruton suggests that we have not said anything at all if we have not clarified why art or music is important to us. Since definitions of art and music that strive for descriptive adequacy do not deliver us these kinds of insights, descriptive adequacy is an inferior criterion for theory choice.³⁵

In summary, there are no strong reasons for accepting that theories of the individual arts will turn out to be more viable and more fruitful. Disagreement regarding the extension of the individual arts also seems wide-ranging. Moreover, Lopes has not shown that there are independent criteria for discarding some categorization judgements and retaining others with regard to defining the individual arts.

In the next section, I will assess Lopes's reflections concerning the question 'Which kinds are art kinds?'

³¹ Kania, 'Definition', 3.

³² *Ibid.*, 6.

³³ *Ibid.*, 9. Against this, it could be argued that in fact many people, including the well-informed, would be disinclined to call such pieces music.

³⁴ Levinson, 'Concept of Music', 274.

³⁵ Scruton, 'In Search of the Aesthetic', 238.

IV. A THEORY OF THE ARTS

Even if we assume that satisfactory theories of the individual art kinds are forthcoming, the buck-passing theory of art still needs to establish which kinds are art kinds. The project of defining the individual arts can only start off, so it would seem, if we know how to distinguish between art and non-art kinds. To put it more concretely, do we have principled reasons to count novels, dance, and mime among the arts, but not biographies, ice dancing, and clowning?³⁶ The problem is analogous to what Richard Wollheim has called the 'bricoleur problem': why is it that 'arbitrarily identified stuffs or processes should be the vehicles of art'?³⁷ A theory of the arts, so Lopes maintains, is only informative insofar as it solves the bricoleur problem.³⁸ Lopes argues that all art kinds are appreciative artefactual kinds, yet not all appreciative artefactual kinds are art kinds. He states: 'An appreciative kind is a kind whose nature connects to the value of its members.'³⁹ The bricoleur problem, then, can be reformulated as follows: How can it be established which appreciative kinds are art kinds?

Even before fully addressing the bricoleur problem, Lopes admits that 'the prospects are not good for an informative theory of the arts.'⁴⁰ Broadly stated, there are two not fully satisfactory answers to the problem. Firstly, like George Dickie, one can argue that it is simply arbitrary which kinds are art kinds: determining which kinds are part of the artworld depends on contingent historical and sociological factors.⁴¹ Concisely put, there is no theoretical solution to the bricoleur problem.⁴² Secondly, like Catherine Abell and Gary Iseminger,⁴³ one can argue that the artworld has reasons to accept some kinds as art kinds. Iseminger has stated that the artworld's function is to promote aesthetic communication. Lopes rightly points out that if we accept this kind of position, we will have to include kinds in the domain of art that are usually not included, such as furniture design, cooking and gardening. Although we might agree to accept some of these in the domain of art, it will be hard to exclude certain kinds we do want to exclude, like bodybuilding and philosophy.⁴⁴ In the end, Lopes sides with the first approach, one that 'declines to attempt a solution to the bricoleur problem.'⁴⁵

³⁶ Lopes, *Beyond Art*, 107.

³⁷ Richard Wollheim, *Art and Its Objects*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 43.

³⁸ Lopes, *Beyond Art*, 108.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 130.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 107.

⁴¹ Dickie, *Art Circle*, 76–77.

⁴² Lopes, *Beyond Art*, 110.

⁴³ Abell, 'Art'; Iseminger, *Aesthetic Function of Art*.

⁴⁴ Lopes, *Beyond Art*, 113–14.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 115.

Lopes suggests that the fact that the prospects for an informative theory of the arts are 'grim' is not fatal to his buck-passing theory of art since 'a workable solution to the bricoleur problem can be pieced together from more modest resources than a theory of the arts'.⁴⁶ How can this be done? Lopes notes that debates about the art status of certain practices, like photography, appeal to 'analogies and disanalogies that hold only among subsets of the arts'.⁴⁷ In other words, in order to defend or contest the art status of certain activities or kinds, local analogies, that is, features they may share with some other arts, and not global analogies, that is, features that they share with all other arts, are used as evidence.⁴⁸ Consequently, we have little reason to believe that 'a systematic and unified concept of the arts can be extracted from these disputes'.⁴⁹ Such debates can be illuminated by reference to theories of the individual arts, not a theory of the arts. Hence, the need for a theory of the arts evaporates. Moreover, as we have seen, Lopes proposes 'that the arts are fundamentally appreciative kinds, to be theorized alongside other appreciative kinds'.⁵⁰ Therefore, Lopes seems to suggest, we need not worry much about some arbitrariness in grouping kinds together as art kinds, since other appreciative kinds will also be included as objects of inquiry. He concludes: 'The arts belong in a very large company, which includes natural objects and settings, the crafts, industrial design, and much else besides. We can be secure in the knowledge that the arts keep such (good!) company, even if we suspect that their own clique is not much more than a matter of convenience'.⁵¹

In what follows, I will demonstrate that since Lopes has not found an adequate answer to the bricoleur problem, he cannot handle hard cases, such as fashion, cooking, or industrial design. Lopes defines hard cases as any work whose status as art is controversial from a theoretical perspective. Thus, they are hard cases for theories of art, not necessarily for the field of the arts as a whole. He states:

A work's being a hard case is consistent with its being a work of art and also with its not being a work of art. If it is in fact a work of art then it is puzzling what makes it a work of art, and if it is *not* in fact a work of art then there is a temptation to take it for one. No case is less hard for being deprecated as not art or for being promoted as art: deprecation and promotion generally make a hard case harder, not easier.⁵²

⁴⁶ Ibid., 108.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 119.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 117.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 119.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 121.

⁵¹ Ibid., 124.

⁵² Ibid., 6.

Lopes virtually considers only 'bewildering' avant-garde works as hard cases.⁵³ Here, I want to argue that the collection of hard cases is much broader than avant-garde works. Gardening, fashion, industrial design, tapestry, and cooking, to name but a few, all satisfy the criteria for being hard cases. There are strong disagreements regarding their art status and these disagreements can neither be resolved by appealing to intuitions, since they conflict, nor by relying on independent and agreed-upon criteria for theory choice, since there are no such criteria. Note that the question is whether some instances of the categories mentioned above might be art, not whether all of their instantiations are art. This does not speak against their art status, since it is commonly and rightly accepted that not all paintings are art, not all ceramic artefacts are art, not all dances are art, and so on.⁵⁴ Since Lopes has not formulated an informative theory of the arts, he cannot easily deal with these hard cases. We can indeed look for local disanalogies and local analogies with neighbouring art kinds, yet what matters is that these (dis)analogies point in different directions. Let us consider fashion and gardening. Philosophers with aesthetic/traditionalist sympathies might be inclined to argue that some instances of fashion or gardening are art, since some of their instantiations promote aesthetic communication, are the product of aesthetic creation, or are intended to provide aesthetic pleasure. Philosophers with institutional or genetic sympathies, on the other hand, might be inclined to exclude these kinds from the domain of art since they are not firmly embedded in artworld institutions. Lopes seems to favour the institutionalist position in most of these cases. Conceding that activities like ice dancing are art, he argues, is venturing onto a slippery slope and we might end up having to include bodybuilding in the domain of art.⁵⁵ However, the buck-passing theory in itself does not give us much reason to favour this position, nor does it shed new light on these hard cases: it neither takes them seriously, nor provides a solution to them.

Sections III and IV have shown that the buck-passing theory faces the same problems as buck-stopping theories with regard to the hard cases. In the next section, I will focus on Lopes's claim that we do not need a theory of art.

V. WHY WE NEED A THEORY OF ART

As shown in Section II, Lopes does not merely argue that theories of the individual arts are easier to come by than a theory of art. Ultimately, so Lopes argues, we do not need a theory of art. Art scholars and art lovers are not

⁵³ Ibid., 36.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 17.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 113.

interested in 'art as a whole'; rather they are interested in specific art activities; they are interested in the individual arts. Therefore, the buck-passing theory of art serves their purposes better than a theory of art, so the reasoning goes.

It could be questioned whether Lopes's claim that there are no serious psychological, anthropological, sociological, or historical hypotheses about all and only works of art is correct.⁵⁶ There seem to be adequate examples of sociologists who were genuinely interested in the category of art per se.⁵⁷ Moreover, on first sight it would seem that these empirical art studies need a concept of art, or at least a theory of the arts, to know and justify their objects of study.⁵⁸

In this section, however, I want to focus on more fundamental reasons why we need a theory of art as a whole. Art eliminativism in any form is not opportune, since art, as I will argue, functions as a 'framework concept', a notion I borrow from Sally Haslanger.⁵⁹ A framework concept is a concept that has a structuring role in the field in which it is functioning. In other words, it is hard to imagine how the field under consideration could operate without that concept. Moreover, a framework concept brings with it a certain normative weight and entitlement. Let me clarify this with an example Haslanger gives. She states that 'parent' is a framework concept, while 'primary caregiver', which is argued to be a more inclusive and neutral concept, is not. First, it is difficult to imagine a social theory that does not employ the notion of parent, while there are plenty of examples of

⁵⁶ Ibid., 65.

⁵⁷ He rejects the idea that sociologists like Pierre Bourdieu formulate hypotheses about art as a whole, since his hypotheses are also applicable beyond the domain of art: 'Of course, there are hypotheses about all art works, but they are also hypotheses about non-art.' Ibid. Admittedly, Bourdieu is interested in the field of cultural production as a whole. But he is also interested in the field of artistic production more specifically. This is the field that 'produces belief in the value of art and in the value-creating power of the artist'. Pierre Bourdieu, 'But Who Created the "Creators"?', trans. Richard Nice, in *The Sociology of Art: A Reader*, ed. Jeremy Tanner (London: Routledge, 2003), 103. In general, it could reasonably be argued that while many sociologists see the category of art merely as a social convention, often considered to be held together solely by its ideological function, they are interested in how the category functions in our society. Norbert Elias, for example, is interested in the relationship between art producers and art consumers. Norbert Elias, 'Craftsmen's Art and Artists' Art', in Tanner, *Sociology of Art*, 132–36; David Brain investigates what separates technical artifacts from works of art. David Brain, 'Material Agency and the Art of Artifacts', in Tanner, *Sociology of Art*, 137–46.

⁵⁸ In fact, sociologists have been reflecting upon what should be considered art and what not. Some have tried to widen the definition of art objects by focusing on the aestheticization of the home. Ron Eyerman and Magnus Ring, 'Towards a New Sociology of Art Worlds: Bringing Meaning Back In', *Acta Sociologica* 41 (1998): 279.

⁵⁹ Sally Haslanger, 'What Good Are Our Intuitions?', *Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume* 80 (2006): 114.

social theories that do not refer to 'primary caretaker'. The concept 'parent' is central to our thinking about community and family, while 'primary caregiver' is not. Second, the concept of parent has a certain normative weight. While being a parent does not necessarily entail being a good parent, what it means to be a parent is strongly connected to what we believe to be good parenthood. In this way, the notion of 'framework concept' seems highly analogous to what Joshua Knobe, Sandeep Prasada, and George E. Newman have called a 'dual character concept': 'Dual character concepts characterize their members in terms of both (a) a set of concrete features and (b) the abstract values that these features serve to realize.'⁶⁰ Thus, *x* can fall under the dual character concept *A* because it satisfies a set of concrete features without realizing the abstract values attached to the concept. In this case, *x* is an *A*, without being a 'true' *A*.⁶¹ This seems applicable to the concept of parent: one can be a parent, while not being a 'true' parent. Also, certain normative attitudes towards a parent are expected. The concept of primary caretaker, on the other hand, is not so closely connected to certain abstract values and normative attitudes. Haslanger argues that it is unwarranted to eliminate framework concepts like 'parent' from our theoretical vocabularies. She states that while eliminativists rightly argue that our concept of parent is confused and has many discriminatory and biased implications, it is better to revise and ameliorate our concept of parent than to erase it from our vocabularies altogether. Why is eliminativism not a solution according to Haslanger? Eliminativists would need to introduce a whole new conceptual framework. Yet since a framework concept is so deeply entrenched in our practices, it is virtually unimaginable that such a new conceptual framework would be accepted. In the end, the confused and biased concept of parent will be the one that structures our social relationships and our thinking about social relationships. We should therefore not adhere to parent eliminativism, but ameliorate our concept(s) of parent.

Similarly, I argue that 'art' functions as a framework concept, while 'visual culture' and 'appreciative artefactual practice' do not. Firstly, it is hard to convey cultural studies, art education, and art practice that do not refer to 'art'. Moreover, the concept of art brings with it certain expectations. While not all art is good art, what it means to be art is strongly connected to what it means to be good art. To return to the dual character concepts, although it makes much sense to talk about a 'true work of art', it does not make much sense to speak of a 'true object of visual

⁶⁰ Joshua Knobe, Sandeep Prasada, and George E. Newman, 'Dual Character Concepts and the Normative Dimension of Conceptual Representation', *Cognition* 127 (2013): 242.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 243.

culture' or a 'true appreciative artefactual practice'.⁶² Also, we are expected to showcase certain attitudes in our commerce with art. Questions regarding whether and how a cultural artefact should be preserved, presented, and appreciated are to a large extent dependent on whether the artefact is held to be art. The concept also has legal implications: consider, for example, art vandalism, plagiarism, and copyright. Objects of 'visual culture' or 'appreciative artefactual practices', on the other hand, do not carry this normative weight. Thus, I think it is warranted to conceive of 'art' as a framework concept.

Lopes seems to agree that 'art' brings with it some normative weight and entitlement, when he argues, 'consensus upon the grouping of the arts was understood in the salons and lecture halls of the early modern period to be a high stakes enterprise, with winners and losers contending over a prize package of social prestige as well as financial reward'.⁶³ Also, he seems aware of the fact that, by allowing that the grouping of the arts is somewhat arbitrary and leaving it at that, some gender and racial biases will persist. Indeed, the concept of art could be critiqued for 'excluding certain activities associated with women and members of underprivileged classes'.⁶⁴ He gives the example of landscape design: when it was executed by males, it was accepted as an art kind, but its status 'slipped' once it became associated with the 'feminine pursuit of gardening'.⁶⁵ He has no clear answer to these problems. As we have seen, he suggests that all these activities are appreciative kinds – some are considered to be arts, others are not, but they can and should be studied side by side.

The arbitrariness of the grouping, however, does not go away by focusing less on it and more on smaller groupings (the individual arts) and bigger (appreciative practices). The effects remain the same, since art functions as a framework concept: it is deeply entrenched in our cultural theories and (institutional) practices. In this way, the exclusion of activities associated with underprivileged groups will persist. Since it is unlikely that a new conceptual scheme with no role or only a marginal one for the concept 'art' will be accepted and adopted in the cultural field, art eliminativism is unattractive. Haslanger has argued: 'because framework concepts are embedded with normative principles, rejecting the concepts may leave us with old practices and no new principles to guide us'.⁶⁶ In other words, categorizing an artefact as art brings with it a cluster of normative

⁶² Liao, Meskin, and Knobe defend the notion that art is a dual character concept. See Joshua Knobe, Shen-Yi Liao, and Aaron Meskin, 'Dual Character Art Concepts' (talk, London Aesthetics Forum, University College London, November 2014).

⁶³ Lopes, *Beyond Art*, 31.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 119.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ Haslanger, 'What Good Are Our Intuitions?', 115.

attitudes towards it, regarding its preservation, treatment, and evaluation. Let us consider the example of ceramic artefacts (such as Mangbetu pots) and comics. When Mangbetu pots are classified as art, then they will potentially be presented in art museums. Art museums usually grant exhibited artworks lots of space, so the audience can see the artwork from many different angles and distances. When these pots are denied art status, they are more likely to be presented in historical, natural, and anthropological museums. Usually ceramic pots are packed together in large cabinets. In such contexts, more attention will be paid to functional and ritual concerns, as separated from the artistic values the artefact might have. To return to Lopes's comments on comics: campaigning for the art status of comics is important for the makers and appreciators of comics: whether comics will be included in art museums and educational curricula, will be funded with state money, and will be preserved for future generations, all substantially depends on whether comics are considered to be art or childish entertainment. Ignoring the category of art in our theories will not change this. It is therefore important to reflect on how the concept can best be used, rather than abandoning it altogether. Otherwise, old uses, likely to be informed by gender, racial, and social biases, will remain unquestioned. As Kitty Zijlmans has rightly argued with regard to visual studies: 'The replacement of the term "art" by that of "visual culture" seems to offer too easy a way out. In the first instance, the modernist concept of art will not be challenged and will continue to be constrained within the confines of its narrow definition. Outdated and limited as it may be, in many cases it still is and will remain the point of reference.'⁶⁷ Put differently, the arbitrariness of the grouping of the arts is by no means innocent; indeed, it has serious implications for the treatment and evaluation of practices of minority groups. In this way, Paul Crowther is right to argue that the task of defining art 'has explosive epistemological and cultural implications that have scarcely received the consideration they deserve.'⁶⁸

It could be objected, however, that while these worries do apply to radical eliminativism, they do not apply to moderate eliminativism, the strain of eliminativism Lopes defends. Let me clarify this objection. I have argued that art eliminativism is unattractive because non-normative replacement concepts like 'visual culture' or 'appreciative artefactual practices' cannot play the structural and normative role the concept of art plays. However, Lopes does not merely replace the concept of art with 'appreciative artefactual kinds'; rather, he reduces it to

⁶⁷ Kitty Zijlmans, 'The Discourse on Contemporary Art and the Globalization of the Art System', in *World Art Studies: Exploring Concepts and Approaches*, ed. Kitty Zijlmans and Wilfried van Damme (Amsterdam: Valiz, 2008), 137.

⁶⁸ Crowther, 'Defining Art', 361.

concepts corresponding to the individual arts. Subsequently, if the concepts corresponding to the individual arts, such as 'painting', 'ceramics', and 'dance', have the same strong structural and normative role as 'art', relative to the art kind in question, then Lopes's moderate art eliminativism is a viable alternative to a theory of art as a whole: bias and arbitrariness can be resolved by ameliorating these art-kind concepts. At first sight, the objection seems to succeed. A concept like 'painting' arguably plays a normative and structuring role akin to that of the concept of art. In keeping with the notion of dual character concepts, it makes sense to declare that an artefact is a painting, while not being a 'true' painting. From a moderate art-eliminativist's perspective, it is then up to the theorist of painting to show what marks the distinctions between a painting and a 'true' painting – a distinction that is likely to coincide with the distinction between paintings that are not art and paintings that are art.⁶⁹ In what follows, it will be shown that this objection is not entirely compelling, for mainly two reasons. Firstly, the normative and structural role of such art-kind concepts demonstrably differs from and is weaker than the normative and structural role of the concept of art. Secondly, these art-kind concepts differ amongst each other qua normative and structural impact.

The first counter-objection can be illustrated by determining what follows from misclassification. Consider the following two cases: in the first case, an artwork, a drawing, is mistaken for a child's scribbles,⁷⁰ and in the second case the same drawing is mistaken for a painting. In the first case, much hinges on the misclassification: the artefact under consideration will not be eligible for government funding, for inclusion in art galleries, art museums and art curricula, and so on. Bluntly put, the drawing is likely to end up in the dustbin. In the second case, the eligibility of the artwork for these benefits is virtually untouched by misclassification, since whether the drawing will lose its art status and eligibility for these benefits usually depends on art status, not on whether the artefact is a drawing.⁷¹ These cases show that the concepts of drawing and painting play a starkly different and less fundamental structural role than the concept of art. The difference in normative impact should also be clear. While an artist is likely to be outraged, or at least offended when somebody mistakenly classifies her artwork as a child's scribbles, she is very likely to be less upset when somebody mistakenly classifies her drawing as a painting.

⁶⁹ See Lopes, *Beyond Art*, 160.

⁷⁰ In this example and those that follow, I assume that children's scribbles are considered to be non-art.

⁷¹ Exceptions are initiatives, whether private or public, which are specifically aimed at promoting one specific artform.

The difference between the two kinds of misclassification with respect to how the artefact will be appreciated is also remarkable. In the first case, if the drawing is misclassified as a child's scribbles, the quality of the drawing will be judged largely according to the age of the child. When the drawing is judged as an artwork, the age of the maker will not matter. Unlike the child's scribbles, its qualities will be measured against an art historical background. It must be granted that in the second case, there is likely to be a difference in appreciation in the event that the drawing is misclassified as a painting, since medium often plays a role in people's appreciation of art. Some of the main standards for appreciation will, however, remain the same, such as use of colour, composition, and expressiveness.

The second counter-objection concerns the fact that the strength of the structural and normative role of concepts like 'painting', 'music', and 'ceramics' varies greatly. The structural role of 'painting' and 'sculpture' is substantially weaker than the structural role of 'music' or 'film'. In visual-art institutions, such as art galleries and museums, the study of art history, and artist grants, all visual arts are grouped together. Films and music, on the other hand, both have their own institutions. By means of illustration, sculptures, paintings, drawings, and photographs are all equally eligible for inclusion in the Venice Biennale; only films are eligible for inclusion in the programme of the Cannes Festival. The difference in normative weight between the different art-kind concepts is even more significant than differences in structural impact. While 'music' has a rather strong normative impact, as is evidenced in debates about whether pop music is 'real' music, 'ceramics' seems to lack this strong normative impact. Non-factual debates about whether an artefact is a ceramic artefact are virtually non-existent. Nobody will contest that Picasso's *Owl*, Mangbetu pottery, and ceramic tableware from IKEA are 'real' ceramic artefacts. Put differently, while it makes much sense to speak of a true piece of music, it does not seem clear what a true ceramic artefact would entail.

In summary, the art-kind concepts lack the strong and consistent normative and structural impact the concept of art has. Moderate art eliminativism therefore suffers from the same problem as radical art eliminativism: it does not offer us sufficient tools to combat the bias and arbitrariness inherent in our current concepts of art.

VI. CONCLUSION

In this article I have argued that art eliminativism, even in its moderate form, is unwarranted. First, unlike what moderate art eliminativism assumes, the category of art cannot be easily reduced to smaller, more manageable units.

These smaller units, that is, the individual arts, are equally hard to define since there are also deep disagreements about their extension. Second, moderate art eliminativism cannot provide us with an informative theory of the arts, and therefore accepts that the grouping together of certain activities as art is to some extent arbitrary and ad hoc. More specifically, it excludes certain activities from the domain of the arts based on gender, social, and cultural biases. This is all the more problematic since art functions as a framework concept in that it structures the cultural field and our thinking about culture and aesthetics and is embedded with normative principles: how cultural artefacts are preserved, presented, and appreciated hinges on whether the concept of art is applied to them. Given that the grouping of the arts is to some extent arbitrary and biased, it is important to revise and ameliorate this concept, rather than ignore it altogether. The latter solution simply leaves old biased concepts of art unchallenged.

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