

# Art concept pluralism undermines the definitional project

P.D. Magnus and Christy Mag Uidhir

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forthcoming in the *British Journal of Aesthetics*

**ABSTRACT:** This discussion note addresses Caleb Hazelwood's 'Practice-Centered Pluralism and a Disjunctive Theory of Art.' Hazelwood advances a disjunctive definition of art on the basis of an analogy with species concept pluralism in the philosophy of biology. We recognize the analogy between species and art, we applaud attention to practice, and we are bullish on pluralism—but it is a mistake to take these as the basis for a disjunctive definition.

We adopted the strategy of arguing for art concept pluralism by analogy with species concept pluralism in a paper several years ago (Mag Uidhir and Magnus 2011). In 'Practice-Centered Pluralism and a Disjunctive Theory of Art', Caleb Hazelwood uses that same analogy to argue for a disjunctive definition of art. In a footnote, he comments that he only learned about our earlier paper when his was in preparation (Hazelwood, 2021, fn. 1). (For another discussion of art concept pluralism and the analogy with species which predates Hazelwood, see Millsop 2016.)

Hazelwood summarizes his 'conceptual maneuvers' as 'a practice turn, a pluralistic framework, and an ensuing disjunctive definition' (2021, p. 14; page numbers reflect the on-line first edition). He groups traditional definitions of art into three broad categories: functionalist, proceduralist, and historical definitions. The practice turn, as he sees it, is to understand each of the categories in terms of artistic practices. He writes, 'notice what is central to each: the *practices* of intending an artistic function, a certain kind of regard, or participation in an artistic procedure' (2021, p. 9; emphasis in original). One might worry that intending such-and-so is not itself a practice. Implementing the function is a practice, but the intention to do so is not. Still, a practice is an activity and so must be directed by intentions. The categories he distinguishes are familiar enough, corresponding to what we called aesthetic art, conventional art, and historical art; we also distinguished communicative art (2011, pp. 91-2). What matters is that there are multiple would-be definitions which serve different purposes. Hazelwood continues, 'When we engage in these practices, we have different art concepts in mind, yet no concept is more correct than the other, nor does one offer

a more “objective” picture of art’s ontology. Instead, each concept captures legitimate and ineliminable aspects of artistic practices’ (2021, p. 9). This is the pluralism: Each of the analyses captures something important, and none provides a complete or absolute answer to the nature of art.

He goes on to define ‘art’ in terms of the disjunction of the would-be definitions, which he expresses schematically as ‘ $\text{Art} \leftrightarrow (F \vee P \vee H \dots \text{etc.})$ ’ (2021, p. 10). Importantly, this move to a disjunctive definition is not a commitment that follows from pluralism itself. We did not make it in our earlier work, and there are several reasons not to follow Hazelwood in this regard.

First, whatever its value in philosophy of art, a disjunctive definition fits poorly with the motivating analogy from the philosophy of biology. It is widely held in the philosophy of science that disjunctive definitions do not capture genuine kinds. A kind need not be characterized by a list of necessary and sufficient conditions, but a purely disjunctive category lacks the requisite unity to be a real kind. Unless each disjunct shares some important common ground, a disjunctive category will not be projectible—that is, its members will tend to have different features depending on which of the disjuncts they fall under. For a survey of this issue, see Khalidi (2013, pp. 15-21).

Second, in the formulation ‘ $\text{Art} \leftrightarrow (F \vee P \vee H \dots \text{etc.})$ ’, the ‘... etc.’ hides an important ambiguity. Either the formula can be filled out with a completed list of additional disjuncts or it cannot. If it can be filled out, then Hazelwood’s definition commits us to being able to exhaustively list all of the art concepts. We are dubious as to whether this can be done. Even if it could be, building that aspiration into a definition of ‘art’ abandons the allowance to think in terms of a specific art concept for a particular purpose without having to reckon with the totality—which is precisely one of the appeals of pluralism. Contrariwise: If it cannot be filled out, then ‘etc.’ amounts to saying *or it is art in some other way*. One cannot turn a sufficient condition or a list of sufficient conditions into a definition just by adding *or it counts in some other way*, so the formula would not really be a definition at all.

Third, a disjunctive definition fails to capture the important insight of pluralism that there are different concepts which are used under the heading *art* for different applications and with different interests. Consider a discussion in which two people are deploying different specific art concepts. Imagine Alice says that a prehistoric artifact is an artwork, while Bob says that it is not. They also squabble about Duchamp’s *Fountain*; Bob says it is an artwork, but Alice says it is not. Let’s suppose that they do not articulate why they make the judgements they do but that Alice is thinking in terms of decorative and formal features (functionalist, aesthetic art) while Bob is thinking in terms of institutional

features (proceduralist, conventional art). The disjunctive definition would return the verdict that Alice is wrong about *Fountain* and Bob is wrong about the prehistoric artifact, because satisfying one disjunct suffices for a thing to be art. But it is unprofitable to see them as flatly disagreeing, thinking that one of them is unequivocally wrong in each case. Pluralism, recognizing that Alice and Bob are operating with different art concepts, allows us to say that they are talking past each other rather than genuinely disagreeing. If they have a disagreement, it is at the meta level of how to think about art rather than at the object level of whether this or that is art.

Importantly, we do not think that pluralism yields a definition of ‘art’—disjunctive or otherwise. We wrote, ‘The semantic implication [of pluralism] is that prior unqualified uses of “species” or “art” need not have been incoherent or empty, just underspecified or somewhat confused. Even pluralists will still use “species” and “art” in casual conversation without specifying which specific concept they intend’ (2011, p. 95). This treats the word ‘art’ as a kind of rough umbrella which has each of the art concepts underneath it. There are conversational reasons to use the sloppy term ‘art’ rather than always saying precisely what we mean. Many works count as art according to all of the art concepts, and there is no need to distinguish the different concepts when discussing such works. Even when discussing works that count as art under some concepts but not others, the discursive context may fix one concept as the relevant one. This is a matter of how the word ‘art’ is used rather than of what it means.

Fourth, organizing the plurality of concepts into a disjunctive definition confuses questions of art individuation. An important feature of species talk in biology is that it works both at the level of the category (what kind of lineage counts as a species) and at the level of specific taxa (whether two organisms are members of the same species). This makes it possible to say that many species taxa are natural kinds even though the species category is not (Magnus 2012). Applying this distinction to art, we note that art concepts serve a purpose beyond just determining whether something is art or not. The concepts also play an important role in individuating art objects. We gave a number of examples in our 2011, but let’s consider just one: ‘a group of players performing the action and dialogue of David Mamet’s *Sexual Perversity in Chicago*, but with men playing the female roles and women playing the male roles’ (2011, p. 93). Is this an instance of Mamet’s play or a distinct work that is based on Mamet’s play? A conventional art concept, looking to gender switching as a standard theatrical practice, might say that it is Mamet’s play. A communicative art concept might count it as a different work on the grounds that it ‘radically refigures the content’ (2011, p. 93). This question of drawing different boundaries around particular

works cannot even arise if we elide the plurality of concepts into one disjunctive definition.

As such, the fact that pluralism does not underwrite a disjunctive definition is more than just a semantic point. Different contexts will make specific art concepts relevant— either because different works are at issue or because the interests of enquirers are different. Relative to some particular art concept, we can have productive and determinate discussions. To return to the example, once we specify that a communicative concept is at issue, we can discuss what the content of the play is and whether the deliberate change in casting does (or does not) radically refigure it.

Fifth, even if one is inclined to abandon pluralism for a single definition of art, it is unclear why that should be a disjunctive definition. One might instead adopt a supervaluationist semantics. Schematically, the definition would be  $\text{Art} \leftrightarrow (F \ \& \ P \ \& \ H \ \dots \text{etc.})$ . On such an account, an object is strictly-speaking an art work only if it meets all the separate conditions. It would be false to say that something like Duchamp's *Fountain* is an artwork, but permissible because the context of utterance allows the speaker to use the false sentence to implicate something about just one or two of the conditions. The extension of 'art' would be smaller than on the disjunctive definition, but all the same utterances would be appropriately assertable. This has comparable charms to the disjunctive definition, including all the same disadvantages vis-a-vis pluralism.

To summarize: We recognize the analogy between species and art, we applaud attention to practice, and we are bullish on pluralism— but these do not lead to a disjunctive definition. Conversely, if you end up with a disjunctive definition, you have given up any meaningful pluralism and failed to learn the lessons of the species debate.

## Works Cited

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