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### Art Concept Pluralism

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# ART CONCEPT PLURALISM<sup>1</sup>

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**ABSTRACT:** There is a long tradition of trying to analyze art either by providing a definition (essentialism) or by tracing its contours as an indefinable, open concept (anti-essentialism). Both art essentialists and art anti-essentialists share an implicit assumption of art concept monism. We argue that this is a mistake. Species concept pluralism — a well-explored position in philosophy of biology — provides a model for art concept pluralism. We explore the conditions under which concept pluralism is appropriate, and we argue that they obtain for art. Art concept pluralism allows us to recognize that different art concepts are useful for different purposes, and what had been feuding definitions can be seen as characterizations of specific art concepts.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Much of the literature in the philosophy of art concerns the search for art's essence—some non-trivial feature or set of features (broadly construed) that all and only artworks possess. Essentialists attempt to discover this unique feature, and in doing so elucidate the proper ART concept;<sup>2</sup> anti-essentialists deny that there can be such a feature, and so claim that the proper ART concept must be structured accordingly. While the essentialist debate has shaped much of the contemporary philosophy of art, we claim that its most lasting influence has been to impart a stubbornly unshakable *concept monism* such that even the staunchest anti-essentialist about art implicitly or explicitly endorses concept monism about ART; both essentialists and anti-essentialists agree that there can be only one proper ART concept, they simply diverge with regard to its structure. This assumed monism, we argue, is fatal for the ART concept. That is, while concept monism motivates the standard contemporary accounts of both essentialism and

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<sup>1</sup> We would like to thank Lisa Fuller, Kristen Hessler, and Nathan Powers for helpful feedback on an earlier draft.

<sup>2</sup> As a typographic matter: We use capital letters to denote concepts, so as to distinguish them from specific taxa. For example, a species is a population of organisms; SPECIES is a concept that determines which populations count as species. We do not mean to be making any strong assumptions by using the word 'concept'; it would do as well for our purposes to substitute 'kind' or 'category.'

anti-essentialism, these accounts when fully considered appear incapable of yielding a coherent or productive ART concept.

We argue that the ART concept can be saved only by abandoning concept monism for a responsible form of *art concept pluralism*. While many may think pluralism entails wildly unrestrained multiplicity of the ART concept, we offer a middle way between doomed monism and dangerous anomie: a responsible kind of pluralism that offers a chance for the philosophy of art to move forward, to open new lines of enquiry, and to fruitfully re-explore old ones. We begin by assessing the current state of art concept monism, finding ample reason to declare it bankrupt. We then consider species concept pluralism, a well-developed position in philosophy of biology, and show how it offers general lessons for what responsible pluralism might look like. We then provide a brief sketch of art concept pluralism similarly modeled, which we argue accrues several advantages over the current problem-plagued monism.<sup>3</sup> Finally, we consider a few objections to the aptness of the pluralism model of SPECIES for ART.

## 2. THE STATE OF THE ART CONCEPT

In this section, we provide several reasons to think that neither essentialism (definitional accounts of art) nor anti-essentialism (non-definitional accounts of art) can support a workable monistic ART concept. Note that we do not discuss the details or merits of any specific definitional or non-definitional account of art, nor do we offer any new and penetrating objections to these accounts or the theories of concepts they explicitly or implicitly employ. We argue rather that the balance of evidence already in the literature, in the philosophy of art and in cognitive science, provides ample reason for thinking that ART concept monism is bankrupt.

### CONCEPT MONISM AND DEFINITIONAL ACCOUNTS OF ART

We take the definitional project in art<sup>4</sup> to involve, explicitly or implicitly, the following:

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<sup>3</sup> We do not distinguish between the concept ART and the concept ARTWORK. Should they be thought distinct, our analysis should hold nonetheless—concept monism for either is a mistake.

<sup>4</sup> E.g., Beardsley 1980, Dickie 1992, Levinson 1990, Stecker 1997.

- (1) An account of the nature of art in terms of a real definition: a thing is art if and only if it is  $F$ , where  $F$  is a set of necessary and jointly sufficient conditions.
- (2) This account is arrived at via conceptual analysis chiefly underwritten by the classical theory of concepts (concepts as definitions).
- (3) There is exactly one ART concept, namely a definitionally structured concept for which  $F$  exhausts the application conditions.

The definitional project faces several familiar difficulties. We consider three: the extension problem, the definitional complexity problem, and the concept problem.

*The Extension Problem:* Art essentialism may appear initially attractive, but this quickly fades in the face of the ostensible plurality of art. Little effort is required to summon a horde of counterexamples to specific art definitions (e.g., conceptual art, outsider/folk art, found art, pure music, appropriation art, religious/cultural artifacts, mass art). This plurality represents the fundamental and classic obstacle to any definition of art, and thereby to ART concept monism. No definition of art yet has satisfactorily captured this plurality while remaining coherent and plausible, so philosophers of art often invoke this plurality when expressing exhaustion or suspicion with regard to the definitional project. The problem is taken to provide much of the impetus for non-definitionalism. Moreover, this fugitive plurality itself constitutes a *prima facie* reason to suppose no forthcoming coherent and productive one true ART concept (at least one unaccompanied by a rather impressive error theory).

*The Definitional Complexity Problem:* In order to capture art's plurality, and thereby avoid extensional worries, definitions often become dangerously complex, borderline arbitrary, or circular. Such definitions, in conjunction with concept monism, yield application conditions for ART that are uninformative, highly complex, disjunctive, wholly unrelated, or wholly interrelated. The typical outcome is a definition that is neither well formed nor useful for thinking about art.

*The Concept Problem:* While the classical theory of concepts (that concepts are definitions) has historically been the dominant view, its contemporary supporters are few (see Peacocke 1992, Jackson 1998, Pitt 1999). In fact, one of the few claims enjoying consensus in the philosophy of mind and cognitive science is that the classical theory of concepts is false (Fodor, *et al.* 1999). Of course, some concepts do have definitional structures. The clearest examples are mathematical concepts, like ODD NUMBER, for which the extension is clear and the definition is not too convoluted. So the concept problem is not necessarily fatal to the monist definitional project, but instead amplifies the impact of the extension and complexity problems. A monists' definition of ART both fails to capture a clear extension and becomes a convoluted mess, indicating that the classical theory of concepts breaks down in this case.<sup>5</sup>

#### CONCEPT MONISM AND NON-DEFINITIONAL ACCOUNTS OF ART

One non-definitional approach is to treat ART as a cluster concept — a Wittgensteinian family resemblance — in the fashion of Weitz ([1956]). The non-definitional approach to art is broader. We take it to involve, explicitly or implicitly, the following features:<sup>6</sup>

- (1) The claim that (necessarily) there is no *F* such that: art if and only if *F*.
- (2) This is arrived at via conceptual analysis chiefly underwritten by a prototype/exemplar/cluster theory of concepts.
- (3) There is exactly one ART concept, namely a prototype/exemplar/cluster concept, the application of which involves neither necessary nor sufficient conditions (or at least no individually necessary conditions).

We consider two problems facing the non-definitional project: the necessity problem and the concept problem.

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<sup>5</sup> Alternately, one might insist that the definitional project is in the business of looking for definitions and so not in the business of looking for concepts at all. This maneuver dodges the concept problem, but makes problems of definitional complexity all the more acute.

<sup>6</sup> Of course, an extreme anti-essentialist may take the alleged failure of the definitional project to suggest that there just cannot be any coherent ART concept.

*The Necessity Problem:* While non-definitional accounts may avoid the pervasive extensional concerns plaguing definitional accounts, they do so at the cost of denying that there are any individually necessary conditions for something's being art (and thereby for the application conditions for ART). This denial, however, appears untenable. Being art at least requires being the product of intentional action, and this requirement must be reflected in the proper application of the concept ART. Non-definitional accounts exploit intuitions about art's resistance to definition, and so gain some force by capturing the plurality of art; yet this force is blunted by the rejection of the single condition largely agreed to be necessary. If there is one true ART concept, then being the product of intentional action must be constitutive of its application.<sup>7</sup>

*The Concept Problem:* Instead of first establishing what being a concept minimally requires, non-definitional accounts are motivated primarily by extensional concerns for ART. The definitional project fails because it cannot produce a minimally extensionally-adequate ART concept. Non-definitional accounts attempt to rectify this by appealing to a concept structure—primarily that of prototype theory—more amenable to art's plurality. As a result, non-definitionalists end up relying on a problematic theory of concepts.

Prototype theory (Rosch 1973, Smith and Medin 1981, Ramsay 1992) claims that concept application is a statistical matter in relation to features had by typical members of the extension, rather than one of entailment.<sup>8</sup> Prototype theory, however, looks toxic to concept composition, and compositionality is essential for concept productivity.<sup>9</sup> As such, concepts cannot be structured as indicated by prototype theory (Rey 1983, Fodor 1998). As such, the consequence

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<sup>7</sup> Note that even the most recent defense of the non-definitional project (Gaut 2000, 2005) requires art to be the product of action.

<sup>8</sup> Prototype theory is supposed to have an advantage over classical theory in virtue of explaining typicality effects, but even this appears unwarranted (Armstrong, Gleitman, & Gleitman 1999).

<sup>9</sup> For example, once I have the concepts ELECTRIC and TRUCK, I can think about electric trucks; but the prototypical electric thing and the prototypical truck do not so readily combine into a prototypical electric truck (also consider the standard examples of PET FISH and RED HAIR).

of assuming art concept monism in conjunction with prototype theory is likely to be the absence of a coherent and productive ART concept.

The cluster account of art (Gaut 2000, 2005) may be seen as distinct from prototype theory, but offers no safe refuge for art concept monism.<sup>10</sup> With respect to ART, the cluster theory seems to count irrelevant criteria as conceptually necessary (Meskin 2007). Moreover, the cluster account can be—and perhaps ought to be—viewed as nothing more than a highly complex and variegated disjunctive definition of art (Davies 2004, Stecker 2000). So construed, it looks equally disastrous for monism.

#### MOTIVATING ART CONCEPT PLURALISM

No definitional or non-definitional account described above is a *pluralistic* account. Disjunctive or “dual track” definitions of art (Stecker 1997, 2000) are no more pluralistic than conjunctive definitions. A disjunctive definition still specifies a single concept, and so it cannot capture different senses of ‘art’ or equivocal use of the term. Complex, multi-tiered, non-viciously circular definitions (Dickie 1997) similarly specify one concept, albeit a complex one. Non-definitional accounts inspired by Weitz (1956), relying on family resemblances, prototypes, exemplars, or clusters, are similarly *not* pluralistic; the concept ART is identified as one (e.g.) prototype. These are all *monistic* accounts of the concept ART designed to capture the plurality of art and therefore *not examples of art concept pluralism*.

The tension should now be obvious. The essentialist program stumbles when faced with the plurality of disparate art kinds, art forms, and art functions. Rather than using this failure as evidence for claiming that there can be no singular art concept, anti-essentialists instead attempt to rescue art concept monism by employing a more flexible, though flawed, conceptual structure so as to capture art plurality. If this plurality is in fact a substantive concern, then any

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<sup>10</sup> Gaut’s cluster account is an account of the concept ART and *not*—or at least cannot be taken seriously as—a theory of concepts. Unfortunately, Gaut either explicitly or implicitly denies that ART is classically structured, a prototype, exemplar, or family resemblance concept, which then suggests, rather absurdly, that ART is uniquely structured.

account motivated by monism, essentialist or anti-essentialist, appears doomed to failure. Why then cling to art concept monism?

We think the debate has been structured by a false dilemma: *Monism or Bust*. That is, either there is a singular ART concept or there is no ART concept. Pluralism isn't thought to be an available option because pluralism about the ART concept is seen to be reckless, unrestrained, arbitrary, uninformative, and therefore equivalent to there being no ART concept. This is a mistake. The degree to which concept pluralism can be responsible corresponds to the degree of failure experienced by the essentialist program. A failed essentialist program for art may nevertheless yield *productive* though non-exhaustive accounts of art, and from this a responsible form of pluralism can emerge. With this in mind, we now turn to just such a model of concept pluralism, which we take to offer general lessons for responsible pluralism about ART.

### 3. A MODEL FOR RESPONSIBLE PLURALISM

In this section, we discuss a well-developed position in philosophy of biology: species concept pluralism. We think that species concept pluralism provides a clear example of what responsible concept pluralism looks like and how it might be motivated. It provides a general model for responsible pluralism, a model which we will subsequently argue can be applied to ART concepts.

In the biological sciences, multiple distinct SPECIES concepts are fruitfully employed by practitioners enquiring into various biological matters. Species concept pluralism is the position that these concepts are each legitimate. They have something in common that makes them all SPECIES concepts: We should not expect one fundamental concept to do the work of all the others. Which concept is appropriate depends both on the specific objects of enquiry (the organisms being studied) and on the aims of the specific enquiry.

Pluralism of this kind requires that there be more than one useful SPECIES concept. An exact enumeration is unnecessary here, but there are at least three general SPECIES concepts presently in use. (For a more detailed discussion of the possibilities, see the essays in Claridge et al. 1997.)



The PHENETIC SPECIES concept (also called morphological or typological) divides species based on organisms' exhibited characteristics. The species in Linnaeus' 18th-century taxonomy were phenetic, sorting organisms based on their observable properties. Phenetic species are still used, although the distinguishing properties may be chemical or molecular. The PHENETIC SPECIES concept allows for every organism to be included in some species. By appealing to exhibited features, systematists can readily identify organisms and arrange them into named groups. After Darwin, however, we think that evolution and history of descent are crucial to species. This is entirely overlooked by phenetic species. The PHENETIC SPECIES concept partitions organisms at a time, without reference to their history.

The BIOLOGICAL SPECIES concept was introduced in the 20th century and has been formulated in various ways. One standard version distinguishes a species as a reproductively-isolated, interbreeding group. Although this has sometimes been claimed to be the one true SPECIES concept, it has serious limitations and will not do suffice in all of the contexts where biologists would talk of species. First, it makes a mess of asexual organisms; either they are not part of any species at all, or each individual organism is its own species. Second, populations in different places at different times count as distinct species just because of their separation. Third, it is difficult to categorize hybrids. Fourth, it is operationally difficult to determine whether populations in the wild do interbreed. Fifth, it is conceptually difficult to say how much interbreeding is enough to make for a unified group. For a species concept monist—someone who believes that there is one true SPECIES concept—these shortcomings would doom the BIOLOGICAL SPECIES concept. Not so for the pluralist. The BIOLOGICAL SPECIES concept is useful in many domains, in many enquiries, and for many purposes, but it is not useful in *all* domains, in *all* enquiries, or for *all* purposes.

The PHYLOGENETIC SPECIES concept distinguishes a species as the smallest group of common descent that could be subject to evolution and natural selection. Because it explicitly depends on evolutionary details, it serves biology's aim of discovering the evolutionary relationships between organisms. Yet this makes it hard to apply in practice. An organism's ancestry is not an observable property of it, so classification depends on auxiliary hypothesis about

natural history. When we learn more, the auxiliary hypotheses change and so too must our classification. The PHYLOGENETIC SPECIES concept effectively abandons the objective of having a stable taxonomy in favor of tracking evolutionary lineages—but there is more to biology than evolutionary biology. Biology also needs a stable system for recording and reporting what the world is like. Moreover, as Ereshefsky (2001) has argued, phylogeny gives us no precise way of distinguishing how large a group counts as a species. It removes any principled distinction between genus, species, and subspecies. The Linnaean hierarchy breaks down, and species are only determined by an arbitrarily specified fineness of grain. (This problem arises for the PHENETIC SPECIES concept as well.)

Pluralism can allow for additional species concepts beyond these three, but it does not mean embracing *every* concept as legitimate. It is not a call for anarchy and to let a thousand flowers bloom. The fact that the word ‘species’ is used by some community to denote a concept does not automatically make that concept a legitimate SPECIES concept. For example, we can reject a naïvely essentialist SPECIES concept that rules out boundary cases and intermediate forms as conceptual impossibilities, a SPECIES concept that organizes trees by the type of lumber that may be wrung from them, or a SPECIES concept that organizes animals by how they taste. For any biological enquiry there is a better SPECIES concept than these. Biologists may have diverse projects, but they do not include carpentry (for which we might organize trees by their lumber type) or cookery (for which we would organize animals by their taste). A SPECIES concept must be able to carry its weight for a biologist in order for even a pluralist to accept it. (Regarding the limits of pluralism, see Dupré 2002, ch 1.) The PHENETIC SPECIES, BIOLOGICAL SPECIES, and PHYLOGENETIC SPECIES concepts all do work that the others either cannot do or cannot do well.

It is worth reflecting on the features that make pluralism right for SPECIES.

*Multiple concepts are profitably used by practitioners.* They differ in the details, either the boundary cases of specific taxa or entire taxa of exotic kinds.

*Even without a settled SPECIES concept, we are able to agree on the rough boundaries of many species taxa.* For a great many organisms, the SPECIES concepts will agree on how to organize them into species. As such, biologists can often proceed

without specifying which SPECIES concept they are using, and evidence relevant to one SPECIES concept can be taken as probative for another.

*Nevertheless, no concept can profitably apply to all instances.* Some concepts cannot even conceivably apply to all cases. Each concept emphasizes different features, which are of interest for different purposes.

*Some of the concepts involve an arbitrary fineness of grain.* Using the PHENETIC SPECIES concept, biologists may make species larger or smaller depending on the refinement of their observations and their need to distinguish populations from subpopulations. The PHYLOGENETIC SPECIES concept is similarly plastic. For a monist who thinks that there is a single correct partition of species, this open parameter in a SPECIES concept is a terrible embarrassment. Provided specific biological projects sufficiently constrain the scope of a SPECIES concept, the pluralist may simply accept this result.

#### 4. THE *PRIMA FACIE* CASE FOR ART CONCEPT PLURALISM

The mere fact that no single definition of art has anything remotely like a consensus does not itself show that we should be pluralists about the ART concept. Concept pluralism is neither a retreat position nor a stopgap for a failed essentialist program. For concept pluralism to work, there must at least be more than one plausible and productive ART concept; the philosophy of art needs the rough equivalent of biology's several SPECIES concepts. Just as the history of biology seems to have vetted the legitimate candidates for SPECIES, we argue that philosophy of art has done the same for ART. While defunct definitions of art litter the history of philosophy, we know that some are more productive than others. Moreover, certain kinds of definitions recur in the literature precisely because they capture something substantial about art—while nevertheless failing to be exhaustive.

One might think there is an asymmetry between SPECIES and ART and so object in this way: 'Biologists begin with a well-defined domain of organisms and partition it into species. With art there is no clear specification of what the candidate objects are.' This worry is wrong both about species and about art objects. Even though many things obviously count as organisms, there are

boundary cases such as viruses and prions. Moreover, a successful SPECIES concept need not partition *all* organisms into species; recall that BIOLOGICAL SPECIES has nothing much to say about asexual organisms, i.e. about most living things. With respect to art objects, as we have already noted, there is consensus that they must be the result of intentional action. As such, just as SPECIES concepts employed in biology range over organisms, any viable ART concept must range over artifacts (broadly construed). Just as the BIOLOGICAL SPECIES concept explicitly partitions some but not all organisms, an ART concept may explicitly partition some but not all artifacts.

Our aim here is only to provide a general template for art concept pluralism, not to argue for any particular ART concept or set of concepts. If we can point to at least two distinct and legitimate concepts, then that will be enough for pluralism about ART. With this in mind, we offer the following four.

HISTORICAL ART: Those artifacts emerging from, belonging to, embedded in, art-historical traditions or narratives (Carroll 1993, Levinson 1990, Stecker 1997)—productive for historical inquiries.

CONVENTIONAL ART: Those artifacts recognized, accepted, targeted, governed by artworld conventions, institutions, and practices (Dickie 1984, 1997, Stecker 1997)—productive for sociological and anthropological inquiries (as well as for legal and economic issues).

AESTHETIC ART: Those artifacts satisfying some aesthetic function, e.g., affording some aesthetic attitude, experience, interest, value (Beardsley 1983, Zangwill 1995, Iseminger 2000)—productive for value inquiry and certain cognitive inquiries involving perception.

COMMUNICATIVE ART: Those artifacts that are (act as) vehicles for the communication of certain contents; e.g., representational, semantic, or expressive content (Danto 1981, Dilworth 2004)—productive for certain cognitive inquiries involving learning and emotions, as well as for moral evaluation.

Obviously the several ART concepts agree on a great many cases. Just as biologists can talk about ‘species’ for many purposes without specifying which concept they mean, people can talk about ‘art.’ Of course, we philosophers tend

to focus our attention on boundaries, exotica, and problem cases where specific ART concepts differ.

There is no consensus about what ART is because each concept, though it rewardingly applies to some domains, miserably fails in others. HISTORICAL ART and CONVENTIONAL ART fail to capture outsider or folk art. They are similarly of no use for counter-factual analyses in terms of possible-world art or Martian art; it seems coherent to imagine art from a long, long time ago and a galaxy far, far away, even though such artifacts are imagined to occupy no place in actual art history nor in the terrestrial art world. AESTHETIC ART stumbles over a good deal of contemporary conceptual art. COMMUNICATIVE ART fails to account for purely formal works such as absolute music; pure music, sounds lacking semantic or representational content, cannot communicate but may nevertheless be art. Despite these failures, each concept does substantial philosophical work. We only run into trouble when we demand that one of them apply to all domains and for all purposes.

Adopting pluralism, we can make sense of these failures. We can address problem cases from a variety of perspectives, thereby changing the focus from “What concept of art best captures all problem cases?” to “What particular ART concept best captures this particular kind of problem case?” We should not think that a Baoule tribal mask, a Mozart Concerto, and a Chris Burden performance piece fall under a single, coherent, and non-trivial ART concept. Rather than make a sweeping and damning claim about the futility of the ART concept, however, art concept pluralism parcels the work to multiple concepts for the numerous and divergent inquiries pursued by philosophers of art (e.g., the value of art, art practice, artistic representation).

## 5. OBJECTIONS

One might object to the analogy between ART and SPECIES in this way: An important function of the SPECIES concept is allowing us to judge (of two organisms) whether or not they are members of the same species. This underlies the three-tier distinction between the SPECIES concept, specific species taxa (groups of organisms), and particular organisms. We might agree at the outset

about which things are organisms and how to differentiate them. We then group organisms into species. This grouping is guided by a SPECIES concept, and each of the different SPECIES concepts represents a different way of organizing the individual creatures. The ART concept, however, only has a two-tier arrangement: the ART concept and particular artifacts. It only allows us to judge (of an artifact) whether or not it is art. There is no given domain of individuals within art-centered inquiry prior to applying an ART concept, as there is a given domain of organisms within biology prior to applying a SPECIES concept. As such, ART is different than SPECIES. Even if pluralism is right for SPECIES, the objection concludes, that provides no warrant for adopting ART pluralism.

We reply that the ART concept does introduce a three-tier arrangement: the ART concept, specific works of art, and particular instances of the work. We can ask of two artifacts "Is this artifact the same artwork as that artifact?" The answer we give will depend in part on the ART concept that we employ. Each specific art taxon (*this* painting, *this* melody, or *this* film) comes equipped with its own ontological constraints that are themselves restricted by the general concept capturing them. Some ART concepts will be much looser with their taxa than others.

Consider several examples. First, some works must be performed in order to be instantiated. Imagine 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.<sup>11</sup> Is this an instance of Mamet's play or an instance of a distinct derivative work? The answer depends on how we characterize art works, which in turn depends on the ART concept we employ. Someone employing the COMMUNICATIVE ART concept may conclude that the performance fails to be an instance of Mamet's play since the gender switch radically refigures the content, and as such the performed work fails to preserve the content of Mamet's play; the performance says something different than the play that Mamet wrote. The CONVENTIONAL ART concept may regard it as a proper instance insofar as gender switching is seen as a legitimate theatre convention.

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<sup>11</sup> For those averse to thought experiments, we add that one of the authors did attend such a performance.

Second, consider works that can obviously have multiple instances; e.g. books and prints. Is the font that a book is typeset in a condition on it being an instance of that work? Take the *The Book of Kells*, an intricately and beautifully illuminated text of the Four Gospels transcribed by Irish monks in the early 9<sup>th</sup> century. One ART concept may say that *The Book of Kells* counts a single-instance work, another might say that it can be multiply-instanced but only by preserving all the aesthetic features, and another may count it as nothing more than an elaborately decorated instance of the Four Gospels. The answer depends in part on the operative ART concept.

Third, consider works that one might regard as being single-instance works; e.g. paintings. If a painting is touched-up, altered, or restored, does it remain the selfsame work? Consider Rembrandt's *Night Watch*, which has, over the centuries, been discolored, substantially trimmed, and vandalized with a bread knife. Employing HISTORICAL ART, we might count *Night Watch* preserved through all of this abuse because the resultant object still bears the same art-historical relation or occupies the same art-historical narrative position. Employing AESTHETIC ART, note that the 18<sup>th</sup> century trimming removed key aesthetic features of the painting that were essential to perspective. So we might say that the original *Night Watch* was destroyed by the alteration. AESTHETIC ART might still allow us to count the artifact as an artwork, but not to count the artifact as the original *Night Watch*. Our point does not depend on the ultimate judgment we make about *Night Watch*.<sup>12</sup> Rather, it suffices that the judgment depends in part on the operative ART concept. Moreover, the facts and features of the case that are relevant to the answer depend on the ART concept.

Recognizing this gives us an answer to the objection, by identifying three tiers— ART, artwork, instance — that are parallel to the three tiers SPECIES, species, organism. It also highlights another similarity between ART and SPECIES. As we noted, a specific SPECIE concepts may admit of varying fineness of grain, so that larger or smaller populations may be grouped together in a single species. Similar flexibility is present in several ART concepts. For AESTHETIC ART, one can

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<sup>12</sup> E.g., whether *Night Watch* (1642) currently exists, *Night Watch* (1642) ceases to exist after 1715, or *Night Watch* (1642) and *Night Watch* (1715) are two distinct artworks.

vary the degree of perceptual similarity required for artifacts to be instances of the same work. For COMMUNICATIVE ART, one can vary the degree of content similarity required. Again, pluralists can be comfortable with such an open parameter in ART concepts, provided each concept can be made specific enough to apply in particular cases.

## 6. CONSEQUENCES OF ACCEPTING ART CONCEPT PLURALISM

Adopting art concept pluralism substantially shifts the argumentative focus: Abstract arguments will not be able to reveal the monolithic nature of art. Showing that a proposed ART concept fails in some important cases is not enough to show that it ought to be rejected. Showing that CONVENTIONAL ART fails to capture products of Appalachian whittling does not show that we ought to reject CONVENTIONAL ART; it shows that we ought not employ CONVENTIONAL ART if we want to appreciate the respects in which the whittling is art. Arguments, both positive and negative, are no longer winner-take-all decisive. Conversely, if a particular ART concept works well in any number of applications we should not conclude that it is the one, true ART concept. This, of course, does not mean that anything goes. Philosophers can still argue for or against particular concepts, establishing their range and limitations.

Most importantly, ART concept pluralism refocuses and revitalizes the philosophy of art. Thinking it a fool's errand, many have despaired of the definitional project. Yet by accepting pluralism, we find new hope among the multiple ART concepts. Rather than futilely searching for a concept that satisfies all our intuitions and is also productive across art forms, genres, and cultures, we can focus on the specific work a particular ART concept purports to do. Furthermore, philosophers need no longer lament the rampant incoherence of our intuitions about art; some intuitions will be germane to a concept and others will be irrelevant to that same concept.

Just as there is something that connects the various SPECIES concepts together *as* SPECIES concepts, something connects the various ART concepts together *as* ART concepts. The semantic implication 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. This is especially important if we are realists about species and about art. Even setting realism aside, the constraints of biological enquiry limit what can count as a SPECIES concept. The constraints of art-historical or art-critical enquiry constrain what can count as an ART concept.<sup>13</sup>

We have shown that regardless of one's views about art essentialism, substantial productivity in the philosophy of art has been held hostage to the assumption that, despite methodological divergence, we are all in the business of searching for the one true ART concept. This concept monism is the true obstacle to fruitful philosophical inquiry about art, and so must be abandoned in favor of responsible art concept pluralism.

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<sup>13</sup> This invites the further question of how to individuate enquiries. One promising approach is to do so in terms of the kinds of questions that are asked. Biology is about understanding the natural world. Art enquiries aim at historical understanding, at cultural understanding of existing institutions, at deepening our appreciation of artworks, and so on. Explicating the details of how these questions constrain the appropriate set of concepts is obviously something we cannot hope to do in this footnote.

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