CHAPTER 4
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Part I
Aesthetic theories of art

Art and aesthetics

The term “aesthetics” has a variety of meanings. In ordinary language, people often refer to so-and-so’s aesthetics—for example, Yeats’ aesthetics. What this generally means is something like Yeats’ artistic principles, preferences, and/or his agenda. A reader, listener or viewer can also have “an aesthetic” in this sense. Here it refers to her convictions about art or her preferences. However, “aesthetics” also has a theoretical usage.

With respect to our concerns in this chapter, there are several uses of the term “aesthetics” that call for comment. One of these is very broad; another is narrow; and a third is tendentious.

In the broadest sense, “aesthetics” is roughly equivalent to “the philosophy of art.” On this broad usage, introductory courses to the topics discussed in this book are often called “aesthetics.” In this regard, this book might have been entitled Aesthetics rather than Philosophy of Art. Here “aesthetics” and “the philosophy of art” are interchangeable. Choosing one over the other is a matter of indifference. This is a loose sense, but one that is frequent, even among philosophers.

However, for theoretical purposes, “aesthetics” also has a narrower meaning. “Aesthetics” originally derives from the Greek work, aisthesis, which means “sense perception” or “sensory cognition.” In the middle of the eighteenth century, this term was adapted by Alexander Baumgarten as the label covering the philosophical study of art. Baumgarten chose this label because he thought that artworks primarily address sensory perception and very low-level forms of cognition. The important thing to notice about Baumgarten’s usage of the term is that he looked at art from
the reception side of things. He conceived of it from the perspective of the way in which art addresses spectators.

Thus, when philosophers talk about aesthetics in the narrower sense, that frequently signals that they are interested in the audience's portion of the interaction between artworks and readers, listeners and viewers. Commonly “aesthetics” is used as an adjective, modifying nouns that clearly refer to the audience's share. Some examples include: “aesthetic experience,” “aesthetic perception,” and “the aesthetic attitude.” These phrases all refer to some mental state that a spectator brings to or undergoes either in response to artworks or to nature.

That is, you can have an aesthetic experience of a concerto or of a sunset. The task of a philosopher of aesthetics in this context is to attempt to say what is distinctive about aesthetic experience (aesthetic perceptions, attitudes, and so on) in contrast to other sorts of experiences (perceptions, attitudes, and so on). What, for instance, is the difference between an aesthetic experience and the experience of analysing a computer program? Here the emphasis is primarily on the experiencing subject rather than the object that gives rise to the experience.

However, in addition to “aesthetic experiences,” there are also aesthetic properties or qualities. What are these? Expressive properties, which were discussed in Chapter 2, are a major subclass of aesthetic properties. But not all aesthetic properties are expressive properties, since not all of them involve anthropomorphic terminology. For example, we say of artworks and natural vistas that they are “monumental,” “dynamic,” “balanced,” “unified,” “graceful,” “elegant,” “brittle,” and “disorganized.” Unlike “sad” or “somber,” these usages do not allude to mental states or to uniquely anthropomorphic properties. But like expressive properties, these properties too supervene on discernible properties and structures in artworks.

Moreover, whether aesthetic properties are expressive or not, these properties are nevertheless still different from properties such as being three meters long, because they are response-dependent properties. Being three meters long is a property that an object could have whether or not humans exist. In a peopleless universe, objects would still possess determinate length. However, the property of monumentality—ascribed to a mountain, for example—is dependent upon human perception. Mountains of certain scales and configurations strike creatures like us, given our sensibilities (our perceptual and cognitive make-up), as being monumental.

This is not to say that it is arbitrary that we call a given mountain monumental, since, as creatures of the sort we are, we can all agree that Mt. Cook is monumental. Nevertheless, it depends upon creatures built like us to detect its monumentality. The size and configuration of Mt.
Cook raises a sense of monumentality in our kind on a regularly recurring basis. Godzilla, in all probability, would not be struck by the monumentality of Mt. Cook.

Insofar as aesthetic properties are respondent-dependent properties, they are also implicitly connected to the reception side of things. This is not to suggest that when we attribute the property of monumentality to Mt. Cook, we are referring to our experience. We mean to be referring to a property of the object—to some sensuous or structural property—but it is a property that the object possesses and discloses only in relation to the possibility of experiencers like us. We experience aesthetic qualities as qualities of objects, like Mt. Cook, rather than as properties of ourselves. But these properties of objects can only obtain in relation to subjects like us (I say “like us” rather than “humans,” since other kinds of rational beings, such as E.T., may also be able to detect aesthetic properties).

Understood as a term indicating “audience-relatedness” or “receiver-relatedness,” there is at least a possible distinction to be drawn between “aesthetics” and “art.” In principle, a theory of art could be designed without reference to potential audiences. It might construe art solely by means of reference to the art object and its function, without alluding to an audience. Perhaps prehistoric peoples thought of what we now call art— the bison cavorting in Neolithic cave paintings—as magical devices for populating their hunting grounds with an abundance of prey. What was important for them was not the experience the images raised in viewers or the properties it made available for viewers, but the function of the object for survival. If there had been a prehistoric theory of art, it might have identified art as a certain sort of technology.

Likewise, aesthetic investigation could proceed without reference to art objects. Natural objects and events, like the starry sky at night and storms at sea, provoke aesthetic experiences and possess aesthetic properties. A philosopher could develop a theory of the aesthetics of nature without ever mentioning art. Thus, at least in principle, “art” and “aesthetics” can be viewed as different theoretical domains of study: art is primarily the theoretical domain of certain objects (whose nature, for example, the representational theory of art attempts to define); whereas “aesthetics” is primarily the theoretical domain of a certain form of receptive experience, or perception, or of response-dependent properties which are not necessarily unique to artworks. This book is called a Philosophy of Art because its primary focus of attention is on art. It does not deal with the aesthetics of nature directly, and it treats as an open question the issue of the extent, if any, that a definition of art is dependent upon the aesthetic reception of artworks.

In the broad theoretical sense, briefly mentioned earlier, there need be no difference between the philosophy of art and aesthetics; they might be taken as interchangeable labels for the division of philosophy that investigates art.
But in the narrow theoretical sense, the two terms, at least in principle, signal a different primary focus: the philosophy of art is object-oriented; aesthetics is reception-oriented. One can at least imagine a philosophy of art that renders questions of aesthetics peripheral, particularly in terms of the definition of art.

In principle, then, these two domains of investigation can be contrasted. Aesthetics is broader than the philosophy of art, since it studies nature as well. And a philosophy of art might define “art” without reference to aesthetic experience or audience reception. Such a philosophy of art would not regard aesthetic experiences or aesthetic properties as necessary ingredients in all art (although it still might recognize them as important).

However, to complicate matters, there is also one approach to the philosophy of art which maintains that any definition of art must necessarily involve notions of aesthetic experience. Such definitions, for obvious reasons, are called aesthetic definitions of art. On this view, to be refined in the next section, artworks are objects whose function is to engender aesthetic experiences. For aesthetic theorists of art, though, the philosophy of art and aesthetics might have, in some sense, been independent areas of inquiry. As a matter of fact, art status is intimately and inseparably connected to aesthetic experience. Artworks just are objects and events predicated upon instilling aesthetic experiences in audiences.

This way of understanding the relationship between art and aesthetics is tendentious because it represents a particular theoretical bias; it makes a substantive claim about the nature of art. According to aesthetic theorists, “art” and “aesthetics” might, in some abstract sense, have turned out to be the names for different domains of inquiry; but in fact, once one studies the matter, it is discovered that they are not, because one cannot, so the aesthetic theorist alleges, say what art is without invoking the concept of aesthetic experience. Thus, on this view, the philosophy of art belongs squarely in the domain of aesthetics, along with the study of the aesthetics of nature.

For aesthetic theorists of art, calling this book Philosophy of Art is not a matter of indifference. It should have been called Aesthetics, because such theorists believe that questions about the nature of art are crucially reducible to questions of aesthetic experience. For aesthetic theorists of art, “aesthetics” and “philosophy of art” are not interchangeable because they are merely neutral, theoretically uncommitted labels for the same inquiry. Rather, they are interchangeable because art is essentially a vehicle for aesthetic experience. Thus, on the tendentious use of “art” and “aesthetics,” the underlying theoretical viewpoint is that the two terms are interdefinable: specifically, art can be defined in terms of aesthetics. For the aesthetic theorist of art, the discovery that art can be defined in terms of aesthetic experience is akin to the discovery that water is H₂O.
The aesthetic definition of art

We have already had a brush with aesthetic theories of art in our discussion of formalism. Clive Bell defined art in terms of significant form. However, if you had asked him how to identify significant form, his answer would have been in terms of that which has the capacity to engender aesthetic experience, or, as he calls it, aesthetic emotion. Nevertheless, we did not treat Bell’s version of formalism as an aesthetic theory of art, since he does not mention aesthetic experience in his definition explicitly. The difference between a Bell-type formalist and an outright aesthetic theorist of art is that the latter, one might say, “cuts to the chase,” referring directly to aesthetic experience, without the intervening concept of significant form, in his definition of art.

The aesthetic theorist of art starts with the supposition that there is something special about our commerce with artworks. Artworks, she claims, afford a unique kind of experience. The experiences we have strolling through a gallery or seated in a concert hall are different in kind from other sorts of experience like completing tax forms, shoveling snow, buying groceries, building rocket ships, or writing news bulletins. Moreover, though different in kind from other sorts of experiences, there is also something uniform about our encounters with artworks. They abet a peculiar—that is to say, distinctive—type of contemplative state. Though more will be said about this contemplative state in the next section, suffice it to say for the time being that, customarily, when encountering artworks, our attention is engaged by its sensuous forms, its aesthetic properties, including expressive ones, and its design. We peruse the object, we let our attention roam, but not aimlessly, since what we see and hear has been structured to guide our attention along certain pathways, rather than others. In the best of cases, the aforesaid features of the work are inter-related in interesting ways and detecting these correspondences is satisfying. This sort of contemplation or absorption is reputedly different in kind from what we experience when pursuing a practical task, like looking up a phone number. There we do not savor the experience for its own sake, but hurry through it to get the job done. With artworks, the aesthetic theorist argues, the contemplative state is its own reward; we do not enter it for the sake of something else.

This contemplative state is what theorists call aesthetic experience. Artworks are opportunities to undergo this special state. Artworks are devices that facilitate it. Moreover, it is for the purpose of having such states raised in us that we attend to artworks. That is, we seek out artworks in order to obtain aesthetic experiences. Artworks are primarily esteemed by audiences as potential sources of these self-rewarding, aesthetic experiences.
So far, we have only considered the reception side of things. We have spoken of the audience’s interest in attending to artworks. But what of the artist? Presumably, if audiences are interested in artworks in order to obtain aesthetic experiences, and if artists are typically interested in acquiring audiences, then there will be some connection between what artists set out to do and what audiences expect to derive from artworks. What audiences expect to derive, according to aesthetic theorists of art, are aesthetic experiences. Therefore, it is reasonable to hypothesize that what artists intend to do by way of making artworks is to afford the opportunity for audiences to have aesthetic experiences—for example, by making objects replete with aesthetic properties.

To appreciate the aesthetic theorist’s argument, consider this analogy. People buy nails to drive through surfaces in order that those surfaces will adhere to each other. Hardware stores stock nails so that people with this goal can find what they are looking for. Therefore, it is reasonable to conjecture that the manufacturers of nails, who supply the hardware stores, intend by making nails to provide the sort of implements that will facilitate the goals of nail-buyers. This is the best explanation we have of the social nexus among nail-makers, hardware-store owners, and nail-consumers. Similarly, if audiences typically use artworks to secure aesthetic experiences and seek out artworks for this very purpose, then it is a good bet that artists typically intend artworks to function in ways that are conducive to realizing the audience’s goals of obtaining aesthetic experience.

That is, the aesthetic theorist argues:

1 Audiences use all artworks to function as sources of aesthetic experience; this is the reason audiences seek out artworks.
2 Therefore audiences expect artworks to function as sources of aesthetic experience (this is the reason they seek out artworks).
3 If artists are interested in having audiences, then artists intend their works to be serviceable for realizing the expectations that audiences have in seeking out artworks.
4 Artists are interested in having audiences.
5 Therefore, artists intend their works to be serviceable for realizing the expectations audiences have in seeking out artworks.
6 Therefore, artists intend their works to function as sources of aesthetic experience.

Furthermore, if artists intend their works to function as sources of aesthetic experience and this is what audiences expect from artworks, in addition to how they use them, then this suggests a thesis about the nature of art, viz., that artworks are things produced with the intention of possessing the capacity to engender aesthetic experiences. Support for this theory derives
from the fact that it ostensibly gives us the best explanation available of the characteristic activities of the creators and consumers of the objects and performances we call artworks. That is, postulating that artworks are things designed with the capacity to afford aesthetic experience makes the most sense of the activities alleged to be central to our artistic practices—both the practices of artists and spectators, and the relation between the two.

Or, perhaps another way to say it is: we supposedly know what the characteristic behaviors of artists and audiences are with respect to artworks; hypothesizing that artworks are objects that are intentionally designed to function as sources of aesthetic experience is the posit that coheres best with what we think we know about the behavior of the creators and consumers of art. The aesthetic definition of art, then, is supposedly the most intelligible account of the artwork—the account that is maximally consistent with and fits best with the rest of what we believe about our artistic practices.

Stated precisely, the aesthetic definition of art maintains:

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x \text{ is an artwork if and only if (1) } x \text{ is produced with the intention that it possess a certain capacity, namely (2) the capacity of affording aesthetic experience.}
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This is a functional definition of art, since it defines art in terms of the intended function that all artworks are alleged to have. It is an aesthetic definition of art, since it designates that intended function in terms of the capacity to afford aesthetic experience. The aesthetic definition of art is a rival theory of art to the representational theory of art, the expression theory and formalism, since it is advanced as a comprehensive theory of all art. It proposes two necessary conditions for art status that are conjointly sufficient.

The aesthetic definition of art has several components. It is instructive to review them one at a time in order to see why they are included in the theory. One component of the theory is the artist’s intention. We can call this an aesthetic intention, since it is the intention to create something capable of imparting an aesthetic experience.

The first thing to notice about this theory is that it merely requires that the work be made with such an intention as at least one of the motivating factors in the creation of an artwork. The aesthetic definition does not require that the aesthetic intention be the only intention, nor does it require that it be the dominant or primary intention. It simply requires that an aesthetic intention be one of the intentions operative in the production of the work.

This allows that an artwork might also be produced in order to realize certain religious or political intentions. It will be an artwork just so long as there is, in addition, an aesthetic intention behind it. Indeed, an artwork might be created primarily with the intention to realize some religious or
political goal. But it will still count as an artwork, insofar as there is also an aesthetic intention motivating it. Portrayals of Christ’s crucifixion, even if primarily intended to instill adoration, will count as art inasmuch as there is also a co-existing intention to promote aesthetic experience.

This aesthetic intention may only be secondary. However, something is an artwork, only if it numbers an aesthetic intention among its intentions. Some artworks may be motivated solely by aesthetic intentions; others may have dominant intentions other than aesthetic ones. However, the possession of an aesthetic intention is a necessary condition for art status. Nothing shall count as an artwork unless it implements an aesthetic intention.

Moreover, it is important to note that the relevant intention is an intention to afford aesthetic experience; it is not an intention to create art. If it were an intention to create art, then the definition would be circular, since in order to tell whether a work was motivated by an intention to create art, we would have to know antecedently what counts as art. And in that case, we would be presupposing knowledge of the nature of the very thing the theory is supposed to define.

Some may fear that by alluding to aesthetic intentions, the definition is impracticable. How can we know whether or not there is an aesthetic intention behind a given work? Isn’t any intention something that exists in the mind of the artist and isn’t the mind of the artist remote from spectators? How can we know that the artist had such an intention?

Actually, this is not so hard to determine. If a painting, for example, exhibits care in its composition, harmony in its color arrangements, and subtle variations in its lighting effects and brushstrokes, then that is evidence that it is intended to support aesthetic experience. Here we infer the presence of an aesthetic intention on the same kind of grounds that we infer everyday intentions—as the best explanation of the behavior of agents.

In this case, the agent is the artist; her behavior is the way in which she handles her materials. On these grounds, that she had an aesthetic intention is the most probable explanation of her behavior. Furthermore, with artworks, additional evidence for hypothesizing aesthetic intentions includes the genre of the work. If a work belongs to an artistic genre in which the promotion of aesthetic experience is a standard feature of works in that genre, then it is likely that anyone working in that genre shares this generic intention.

By including the requirement of an intention in the definition of art, the aesthetic theorist succeeds in drawing a distinction between artworks and nature. Earlier we noted that aesthetic experiences also accompany many encounters with nature. If the aesthetic definition of art were framed only in terms of the capacity of an object to afford aesthetic experience, the theory would be too broad; it would not differentiate artworks with the capacity to engender aesthetic experiences from majestic waterfalls that share that
power. This would make the theory too inclusive, thereby undercutting its claim to provide sufficient grounds for discriminating artworks from other things. But by requiring that artworks be underwritten by aesthetic intentions, the aesthetic theorist segregates artworks from nature in general, since nature, even natural objects possessed with aesthetic capacities, is not the result of anyone’s intention.

Similarly, by incorporating reference to intentions in the definition, the aesthetic theorist is able to accommodate the existence of bad art. Bad art comprises works intended to afford aesthetic experience which fail to realize their intentions. If the aesthetic definition only spoke of a capacity to promote aesthetic experience, the theory would only count successful works as art—i.e., it would only count as art works that actually stimulate aesthetic experience. This would leave us no way to classify bad art as art. But, as we saw in the previous chapter, this would be a very counterintuitive result. Nevertheless, it is not a problem for the aesthetic definition of art, since by referring to artistic intentions, the theory allows for failed intentions, and, thereby, for bad art.

One might fear that by relying so heavily on the notion of intention, the aesthetic theorist of art renders his definition virtually toothless. That is, if all that is required for art status is the mere intention to provide aesthetic experience—rather than the realization of said intention—that makes it too easy for a candidate to count as an artwork. If a work need not deliver on its aesthetic intention to any degree whatsoever, then anyone can claim that any artifact is underwritten by an aesthetic intention and, therefore, that it is art. Thus, the aesthetic definition of art appears too broad. It really possesses no means to exclude anything from the order of art.

But this worry is misplaced. The aesthetic definition of art has resources to deny large numbers of artifacts art status. These resources reside in the notion of what it is to have an intention and, by extension, an aesthetic intention.

An intention is a mental state that is itself comprised of at least two constituent types of mental states: beliefs and desires. In order to intend to take the bus to Baton Rouge, I must not only desire to go to Baton Rouge, I must also possess certain beliefs, such as: that Baton Rouge exists and that it is a place that one can reach by taking a bus. Before you ascribe to me the intention to go to Baton Rouge by bus, you must satisfy yourself that I possess the relevant beliefs and desires. If I tell you that I intend to go to Baton Rouge by bus, but you see me in an airport without bus service, and I tell you sincerely that I know there is no bus service connected to the airport, then you will be very reluctant to attribute the intention to go to Baton Rouge by bus to me. Maybe you will think I am just ribbing you, or trying to cover something up.
Why will you refrain from attributing to me the intention to go to Baton Rouge by bus? Because I do not seem to have the beliefs appropriate to that intention. My behavior, including my verbal behavior, doesn’t support an intention to go to Baton Rouge by bus; indeed, my behavior appears to be at odds with such an intention. To ascribe to me the intention to go to Baton Rouge by bus, you need to satisfy yourself that I have the right sort of beliefs. If your best explanation of my behavior blocks the hypothesis that I have the right sort of beliefs, then, all things being equal, you are ready to override what I say and to deny that I intend to go to Baton Rouge by bus.

A similar story may be told about the desire component of intentions. If my behavior indicates that I do not possess the right kind of desires, then you refrain from attributing to me an intention to go to Baton Rouge. If I sit in an airport for two months without making any effort to get from there to Baton Rouge, then you discount what I say and surmise that I don’t really desire to go to Baton Rouge, and, therefore, that I don’t intend to, either.

What does this story about Baton Rouge have to do with art? According to the aesthetic theorist, an intention to afford aesthetic experience is an essential constituent of art status. Consequently, in order to attribute an aesthetic intention to an artist, we must be satisfied that he has the beliefs and desires requisite for that kind of intention. If his behavior, notably his work, fails to indicate his possession of the relevant beliefs and desires, the aesthetic theorist of art has grounds to deny that the artist has an aesthetic intention, and, thereby, the grounds to deny that his work is art.

Consider an example—Edward T.Cone’s musical composition “Poème Symphonique.” The piece involves one hundred metronomes running down. Can it be said to be motivated by the intention to promote aesthetic experience? According to at least one aesthetic theorist of art, it cannot. For it does not seem likely that someone like Cone, a professor of music steeped in the tradition, could believe anyone would be able to derive an aesthetic experience from the aural spectacle of one hundred metronomes clicking to exhaustion. Undoubtedly, Cone, like everyone else, realizes that the effect of his work is more likely to drive listeners batty than it is to engender contemplation. Cone would have to be a lunatic to think that this piece could possibly afford aesthetic experience. But he is not a lunatic, and the principle of charity in interpretation encourages us to presuppose that Cone, like everyone else, does not believe that “Poème Symphonique” has the capacity to afford aesthetic experience.

Moreover, for the same reasons, we will not attribute to Cone the desire to stimulate aesthetic experiences in his audience. Undoubtedly, he desires to engender some other sort of state, for other reasons, in his auditors. A music critic, or Cone himself, might be able to tell us about the identity of this other state, and Cone’s reasons for wanting to induce it. But, in any case, we will not attribute to Cone the intention to afford, by means of “Poème
Symphonique,” the opportunity for aesthetic experience, because we find it vastly improbable that Cone could really have the beliefs and desires required to form such an intention.

But if the aesthetic theorist of art has the conceptual wherewithal at her disposal to deny that an artist has the relevant aesthetic intention with respect to a given work, then the aesthetic definition of art has teeth. It can filter out certain prospective candidates from the order of art because there are grounds for denying that the relevant works are genuinely underwritten by aesthetic intentions. The aesthetic theorist can do this wherever she is able to argue that it is not plausible—indeed, that it is wildly implausible—to attribute to the pertinent artist the sorts of beliefs and/or desires that are the constituents of aesthetic intentions.

Thus, some aesthetic theorists of art exclude readymades, like Duchamp’s *Fountain*, from the realm of art proper on the grounds that it is ridiculous to attribute to someone as savvy and as informed as Duchamp the belief that an ordinary urinal could afford an aesthetic experience. Perhaps, they will admit, he was up to something else. But, additionally, they will argue that he was clearly not intending to engender aesthetic experience, and, therefore, that *Fountain* is not an artwork.

Consequently, one can fail to make an artwork according to the aesthetic definition of art. Admittedly, it may be the case that it is not that difficult to make a work of art according to the aesthetic theory. But two things remain to be said. First, it is not really too difficult to make a work of art in the classificatory sense (even though it is difficult to make a good one). Thus, the aesthetic definition of art, appropriately enough, reflects the way things are. And, second, though it is easy to make a work of art, according to the theory, it is not so easy that one cannot fail to make one. One could fail to create an artwork if one’s intentions were not aesthetic. Thus, the aesthetic definition of art is not too broad. It can exclude candidates from the order of art.

In addition to the intention component, the aesthetic definition of art also contains a function component. The function component is nested inside the intention component. It is the requirement that the relevant intention be the intention that the work have the *capacity* to afford aesthetic experience. Here, capacity-talk is ultimately function-talk. That is, the artwork is designed to function as a source of aesthetic experience. But this intended function of the artwork is described merely as a capacity to *afford* aesthetic experience, since with artworks the artist only proposes, while the audience deposes.

The artist makes something capable of supporting an aesthetic experience. But it is up to the audience to take advantage of this opportunity. Christian audiences, for example, refused to engage the possibilities for aesthetic experience richly afforded by the internal
structures of Martin Scorsese’s film *The Last Temptation of Christ*. But the film is still a work of art, since it is structured in a way that affords aesthetic experience, even if this capacity was ignored by many.

Thus, rather than saying that an artwork is designed with the function to cause aesthetic experiences invariantly, the definition is stated in terms of an intended capacity, which may remain latent; even if audiences are not disposed to be receptive, a work is still an artwork. The fact that the audience, for some reason, refrains from using a work to serve the function it was fashioned to discharge does not compromise its artistic status.

The aesthetic definition of art is particularly attractive because of the way in which it suggests systematic answers to many of the leading questions of the philosophy of art. It enables us to say why artworks are good, when they are good. Specifically, artworks are good when they realize their presiding aesthetic intentions—when they indeed afford aesthetic experiences. They are bad when they fail to deliver the goods, i.e., aesthetic experiences.

The aesthetic theory also suggests a criterion for what counts as a critical reason when commenting on artworks. A critical reason for or against an artwork pertains to comments about whether and/or why an element of an artwork or the artwork as a whole contributes or fails to contribute to the potential production of aesthetic experiences. Saying that a work is unified, for example, is a critical reason, since unity is a feature of artworks that is conducive to having aesthetic experiences.

And, finally, the aesthetic definition of art puts one in a position to say why art is valuable. Art is valuable because it affords aesthetic experience. Thus if we can say why having aesthetic experiences are valuable, then we are also on our way to saying why art is valuable. The value of art will be derived from the value of having aesthetic experiences.

If the aesthetic definition of art is true, then it can serve as the cornerstone of a systematically unified theory of art that can explain why artworks are good (and bad), what counts as a critical reason, and why art as an organized form of human practice is valuable. Providing such a remarkably unified account of art with this scope is certainly a large consideration on behalf of the aesthetic theory of art.

Of course, the component of the theory that enables it to explain so much in a systematic way is aesthetic experience. It is the central theoretical term in the edifice of such theories. Since artworks are intended to function to afford aesthetic experience, they are said to be good when they possess the capacity to do this. Critical reasons are ones that remark upon features of artworks that facilitate or inhibit this function. And art as a practice has value because aesthetic experience has
value. Undoubtedly, the notion of aesthetic experience is the fulcrum upon which the aesthetic definition of art and its various systematically inter-related, explanatory bonuses are balanced. Thus, in order to assess the aesthetic theory, we need to get clear on what is involved in its central notion.

Two versions of aesthetic experience

As we saw in the previous chapter, a major problem with Bell’s theory of significant form was the failure to specify exactly what it is. He maintained that it is whatever provokes aesthetic emotions, but since he did not clarify the nature of the aesthetic emotion, the concept of significant form remained disastrously undefined. “The capacity to afford aesthetic experience” performs an analogous task in the aesthetic definition of art to that of significant form in formalist theories. Thus, if the aesthetic definition of art is to avoid the same kind of objections leveled at formalism, some conception of the notion of aesthetic experience must be supplied.

There are many diverse conceptions of aesthetic experience. Entire books have been devoted to discussions of different characterizations of aesthetic experience. Thus, we must be selective in our discussion here. Let us look at two major accounts of aesthetic experience—what we may call respectively the content-oriented account and the affect-oriented account.

The content-oriented account is very straightforward: an aesthetic experience is an experience of the aesthetic properties of a work. Here it is the content of the experience—what we attend to—that makes an experience aesthetic. Aesthetic properties include the expressive properties of a work, the properties imparted by its sensuous appearance (elegance, brittleness, monumentality), and its formal relations. For convenience’s sake, these properties can be sorted under three broad headings: unity, diversity and intensity. On the content-oriented account, attending to the unity, diversity and/or intensity of a work (or of its parts) amounts to an aesthetic experience of the work.

The unity of a work depends on its formal relations. Where the elements of the work are co-ordinated in part or throughout, the work is unified. It may be unified by virtue of repeating motifs and themes (its parts may resemble or recall each other in pertinent respects), or it may build to a singular, coherent effect, like the plot of a story where most of
its elements led to closure. When we attend to the unity-making features of a work and their mode of inter-relationship, our attention to the piece is an aesthetic experience, an aesthetic experience of unity. That is, unity is the content or object of our experience that makes our experience aesthetic.

Works may also possess various properties—like sadness and gracefulness—in varying intensities. A work may be extremely joyous or only mildly so. It may appear hectic or delicate, implacable or strong in different degrees. Attending to the aesthetic properties of the work, discriminating their variable intensities, is an aesthetic experience of the work. It is an experience of the qualitative dimension of the work as it offers itself in appearance. And since these qualities will always appear with some degree of intensity—whether high, low or somewhere in between—experiences of the aesthetic qualities of a work will always be experiences of the intensity of the work.

A work that foregrounds certain aesthetic properties relentlessly—that, for example, projects sadness in every register (as in an opera where the plot, music and gestures are all sad)—is highly unified and, therefore, affords a very unified experience of sadness. But not all works aspire to this sort of unity. Many are designed to project a variety of different feeling properties. Some of these may contrast with each other. But many different feeling tones may also be enlisted by a work to suggest the overall effect of richness. Many of Shakespeare’s plays are like this. They juxtapose many different and sometimes opposing expressive properties in order to hold our attention by alerting us to the stunning variety of things.

Diversity can be secured in artworks not only by projecting a wide variety of expressive properties, but also by multiplying the range of characters, events, or vocabularies (words, musical structures, visual forms, and so on) deployed in a given artwork. Obviously, unity and diversity are co-varying terms here. As the work becomes more complex in its different elements, its unity may diminish, while, as its themes and elements recur or blend into each other, it becomes less and less striking for its diversity. Monochrome paintings exhibit a low degree of diversity, whereas largescale novels, like The Brothers Karamazov, appear sprawling rather than unified. Nevertheless, few works are altogether diverse, with no unity whatsoever. Rather, diversity is standardly a feature of works that have some unity—that is, diversity typically is a matter of variety amidst unity. When a work is notable for this type of diversity, we often refer to it as complex.

Speaking roughly, then, an aesthetic experience, according to the content-oriented account, is an experience of unity, diversity and/or intensity, where it is understood that these very features of a work may
be inter-related in various ways. It is the possession of features like these that make aesthetic experience possible. That is, a work has the capacity to afford aesthetic experience—experiences of unity, diversity and intensity—inasmuch as the work has features of this sort. An artwork is something intended to present features like these for the audience to apprehend.

Plugging the content-oriented account of aesthetic experience into the aesthetic definition of art, then, we get: x is an artwork if and only if it is intended to present unities, diversities and/or intensities for apprehension. Something not intended to present these features to audiences is not an artwork. Artworks that succeed in presenting such features for audience attention are good; ones that fail in this regard are bad. A critical reason on behalf of an artwork takes note of its possession of unity, diversity, and/or intensity; a critical reason that counts against an artwork points out its lack of unity, diversity and/or intensity. In addition, art, as an organized form of human activity, is said to be valuable because it is valuable for human life to have experiences of unity, diversity and intensity. Who could deny it?

This is the content-oriented account of aesthetic experience. It is not the only account of aesthetic experience, and, in all probability, it is not the most popular one. In discussions of aesthetic experience, affect-oriented accounts usually dominate. Indeed, the affect-oriented account, in all likelihood, can claim to be the canonical account of aesthetic experience.

The content-oriented account relies on aesthetic properties to define aesthetic experience; aesthetic properties are what aesthetic experiences are experiences of. This says nothing at all about the special modalities of such experiences; it says nothing about what such experiences are like. That is, it does not offer a phenomenology of such experiences. Speaking very crudely, the content-oriented account characterizes such experiences in terms of what they “contain.” It does not inform us about the nature of the “container.” Affect-oriented accounts, metaphorically speaking, attempt to do just that.

According to one very well-known version of the affect-oriented account, an aesthetic experience is marked by the disinterested and sympathetic attention and contemplation of any object of awareness whatsoever for its own sake alone. Aesthetic experience is a form of attention. What sort of attention? Disinterested and sympathetic attention.

Disinterested attention, here, is not equivalent to noninterested attention. Attending to an artwork with disinterest is not the same as attending to it without interest. Disinterest is compatible with being interested in the artwork. What disinterest amounts to here is “interest
without ulterior purposes." With respect to the law, we want disinterested judges—judges who do not have personal interests in the case (such as standing to gain, if the plaintiff loses), or ulterior motives (such as wanting to send a message to the electorate). We want judges to make rulings disinterestedly—to judge the case impartially and on its own merits, rather than on the basis of issues and purposes external to the case.

Similarly, aesthetic experience is allegedly disinterested in this way. We attend to the artwork on its own terms. We do not ask whether it will corrupt the morals of children. Rather, for example, we attend to whether or not its formal organization is suitable. If we are Muslims and the work concerns Islam, we do not ask whether the work is good for our people. We ask whether it is unified, complexly diversified, or intense. A film-producer who watches her movie trying to calculate whether it will draw large audiences into the cineplexes is not viewing the film disinterestedly. Her viewing is connected to her personal interests—to the amount of money she hopes to make.

In attending to something disinterestedly, we feel a release from the pressing concerns of everyday life—from our own concerns, such as our monetary interests—and from the issues of society at large—such as the moral education of children. Some authors speak of aesthetic experience as freedom from the pressures of ordinary life. We leave life outside when we enter the concert hall and listen to the music.

When we attend to an artwork disinterestedly, we appreciate it for its own sake, not for its connection with practical issues. Are its structures unified, is it pleasingly complex, what are its noteworthy aesthetic properties, and are they intense or not? These are the questions that occur to disinterested viewers—not "Is this good or bad for society?", "Will it make money?", or "Will it arouse me sexually?"

Attending to something aesthetically is disinterested. But it is also sympathetic. The relevant sort of sympathy involves more than simply not allowing ulterior motives to influence our attention. It involves surrendering to the work—allowing ourselves to be guided by its structures and their purposes. Sympathetic attention is directed at the object and willingly accepts the guidance of the object over the succession of our mental states by the properties and relations that structure the object. Sympathetic attention presupposes playing by the object’s own rules, rather than importing our own—for example, going along with the convention of people singing to each other in operas, instead of saying people don’t behave like that, or accepting the notion of warp-drive while reading a science fiction story. Attending sympathetically involves placing yourself in the hands of the maker of the object—going wherever she bids you, and attending to whatever she makes salient.
Aesthetic experience is also described as a form of contemplation. This should not be understood as a passive state. When contemplating an object, we do not simply receive its stimuli passively. It is not a matter of a cow-like, vacant gaze, nor is it a state of distraction or inattention, as in the expression “lost in contemplation.” It is not aimless wool-gathering. To contemplate an object is to be acutely aware of its details and their interrelationships. Contemplation, in this sense, calls for keen observation. It also involves exercising actively the constructive powers of the mind, of being challenged by a diversity of often initially conflicting stimuli and of attempting to make them cohere. Contemplation here is riveted on the object of attention, is closely observant of its discrete elements and properties, and strives to find connections between them.

This process of contemplation, when supported by the object of our attention, can be a source of immense satisfaction. The active search for details and connections itself can be exhilarating, and the success of such activity, where it occurs, can bestow a kind of self-rewarding pleasure on the activity as a whole. With aesthetic experience this sort of pleasure is said to be valued for its own sake. Just as we value the pleasure that accompanies employing the powers of our minds (irrespective of whether we win or lose) in a chess match for its own sake—and not because it might make us better military strategists—similarly the mental and emotional workout afforded by aesthetic experience is its own reward.

We do not enter such experiences for the sake of becoming smarter or more sensitive, even if this might result from such encounters, but because the active exercise of our constructive powers, perceptual skills, and emotional resources is exciting in and of itself. Just as we enjoy fairground rides for the fun of it, and not because they prepare us for being astronauts (though some of the rides might), aesthetic experience is something we pursue for its own sake.

According to the affect-oriented account, aesthetic experience is the disinterested and sympathetic attention to and contemplation of any object whatsoever for its own sake. This way of putting it allows that anything could be an object of aesthetic experience. Nevertheless, some objects are more conducive to this sort of experience than others. Clouds are more conducive to being attended to and contemplated than are waterlogged construction sites.

Moreover, certain objects can be intentionally constructed in such a way that they are eminently suitable for disinterested and sympathetic attention and contemplation. They will contain structures that guide attention and contemplation—that encourage it by means of their intentionally designed features of unity, complexity and intensity—and that reward such attention and contemplation. The aesthetic experien
will not have to do all the work herself. The object itself will be structured intentionally to invite, sustain and, optimally, reward disinterested and sympathetic attention and contemplation. Such objects, of course, are artworks.

Plugging the affect-oriented account into the aesthetic definition of art, then, \(x\) is an artwork if and only if \(x\) is intentionally produced with the capacity to afford the disinterested and sympathetic attention and contemplation of \(x\) for its own sake. Natural objects are not produced with this capacity, and, therefore, do not count as artworks. Nor are the majority of human artifacts created with this intention either; so they are not artworks either. It may be that many human artifacts can be contemplated disinterestedly and sympathetically, but they are not designed to be conducive to this mode of attention, and, in many cases, the question of design notwithstanding, many human artifacts are not conducive to the relevant form of contemplation—they neither invite, sustain nor reward it. Autobody repair shops, for example, typically do not.

Employing the affect-oriented account, we can identify artworks as artifacts (both objects and performances) designed with the intended capacity to invite, abet, and repay disinterested and sympathetic attention and contemplation. This is the affect-oriented version of the aesthetic definition of art.

This approach also suggests grounds for pronouncing an artwork to be good: it is good where it indeed has the capacity to encourage, support and remit disinterested attention and contemplation. It is bad when it fails to do so. A critical reason in favor of an artwork is one that comments upon its capacities to realize its intended function, whereas negative critical evaluations will rest on showing how a work lacks these capacities.

The importance of art in general resides in the value of developing our powers of disinterested and sympathetic attention and contemplation. Here there are a variety of advantages to be had from cultivating these human powers, though we do not seek out aesthetic experiences in order to enhance these powers, but rather simply for the sake of having these powers exercised. That our human powers are augmented by aesthetic experiences is a concomitant value aesthetic experiences happen to possess. We would seek out artworks and the aesthetic experiences thereof, even if they were not beneficial for human life. However, that they are so beneficial, through their exercise of our powers of observation and construction, helps explain why art is such a valued province of social life.

Unlike Bell, the aesthetic theorist of art need not remain silent about what she means by aesthetic experience. Thus, her theory cannot be rejected because it provides no instruction about its central terms. Indeed, we have seen that the aesthetic theorist has at least two ways to define aesthetic experience: the content-oriented account and the affect-oriented account.
These accounts, in turn, yield two different versions of the aesthetic definition of art. Thus, to assess the aesthetic definition of art, we need to examine each version respectively.

Objections to the aesthetic definition of art

The aesthetic definition of art can be construed either in terms of the content-oriented account of aesthetic experience or the affect-oriented account. These two accounts, of course, could be connected. However, for analytic purposes it is more convenient to consider them one at a time. And, in any case, if neither is convincing on its own, it is unlikely that they will be convincing when added together.

Reading “aesthetic experience” after the fashion of the content-oriented account, \( x \) is an artwork if and only if \( x \) is intended to present unities, diversities and/or intensities for apprehension.

But this formula is far too broad to provide a sufficient condition for art status, since virtually every human artifact will present unities, diversities and/or intensities for apprehension. A loaf of bread possesses unity in virtue of being a single object, and the baker presents it to us with the intention that we apprehend it as such. Most human artifacts have different parts—telephones have numerous buttons, for example—and they are diverse to that extent, while, in addition, the telephone company wants us to apprehend the parts and believes that we will. Likewise, everyday artifacts and their parts possess properties of varying intensity—perhaps they are color-coded—and their designers intend us to discriminate these signals by virtue of their varying intensities. But none of these examples are artworks, though they seem to satisfy the conditions of the aesthetic definition.

In response to these observations, the aesthetic theorist is apt to say that we have misunderstood what he means by unity, diversity, and intensity. These are to be conceived of as aesthetic properties, not as brute properties of objects. They are properties of the appearance of objects. Hills covered with green trees may strike us as soft and downy as we drive past them; this is how they impress us and creatures like us. But such hills and trees are not soft—when you get close to them, they are rough and scratchy. Rather, they appear to be soft and downy.

Similarly, when speaking of unity, diversity and intensity aesthetically, we are talking about the way in which such objects strike us and people like us. Artworks are objects intended to present unities, diversities and/or
intensities for apprehension where these are understood to be aesthetic properties.

But this still results in a theory that is far too broad to be an adequate definition of art. For many human artifacts, notably, for our purposes, myriad nonart objects, are designed to present aesthetic properties for apprehension, including the properties of unity, diversity and intensity. Motor boats are designed to exhibit many expressive properties intensely. They connote aggressiveness and strength, and their possession of these intensely projected properties give them a compelling unity of appearance. We might say they look very “macho.” This may not be the only intention behind the design of speed boats, but it is undeniably one of them.

On the other hand, children’s playgrounds are often laid out to suggest a pleasing diversity. But neither power boats or playgrounds are art. The problem here is that human artifacts of all sorts are intended, among other things, to present aesthetically unified, diverse, and intense arrays for apprehension. But only a subset of such artifacts are artworks. The presentation of aesthetic properties intended to be apprehended is not enough to qualify an object as an artwork. Something stronger is required. But what?

The aesthetic theorist might be tempted to say that the aesthetic unity, diversity and/or intensities intended for apprehension must be artistically relevant. And it is true that features like unity, diversity, and the intensity of their aesthetic properties are characteristically artistically relevant properties of artworks. That is, they are generally relevant to our appreciation of the artworks that present them. However, the aesthetic theorist cannot invoke the notion of artistic relevance in his definition, since that would presuppose that he already knows how to identify art (in order to say what is artistically relevant) and that is what his definition is supposed to be elucidating. Thus, to speak of artistically relevant properties here would be circular.

Indeed, very often we look for properties like unity, diversity and intensity in certain objects just because we know that they are artworks. We apprehend diversity as a significant feature of Cage’s 4’ 33? because it is an artwork; we are not struck by the diversity of everyday ambient sounds, and we rarely, if ever, suppose that they are intended to foreground the property of diversity for our apprehension. It is the fact that 4’ 33? is an artwork that leads us to attribute the aesthetic property of diversity to it. But if art status is what makes the intended presentation of aesthetic properties for apprehension possible, it seems wrong to attempt to characterize art status in the way the aesthetic definition does. The definition appears to get things the wrong way around.

The aesthetic definition of art, construed in light of the content-oriented account of aesthetic experience, does not give us a sufficient condition for art status. But is the intention to present unities, diversities and/or intensities
for apprehension a necessary condition for art? Certainly artists can intend to make works bereft of each of these properties individually. Some artworks, like Luis Buñuel’s film *Un Chien Andalou*, appear intended to subvert any sense of unity—images are deliberately cut together with no apparent narrative logic. Many of Sol LeWitt’s sculptures—repetitions of a simple geometric shape—seem scarcely diverse at all, and they look as though they were intended to be that way. And many readymades are chosen for the absence of any striking aesthetic properties in them, and, therefore, they lack intensity altogether. Aren’t these counterexamples to the theory?

Perhaps the aesthetic theorist will say “no.” He may grant that a work may lack either unity, or diversity, or intensity, but deny that there could be an artwork that was intended to present none of the preceding properties for apprehension. The argument might go like this: unity and diversity co-vary. So if an artist presents a work remarkable for its intended lack of unity, then the work will inevitably impart a sense of diversity. Conversely, a work that downplays diversity will automatically yield a sense of unity. Consequently, any artwork will have to be presented with the intention to present either unity or diversity for apprehension, since the absence of one will entail the presence of the other for apprehension. Therefore, the intentional presentation of either unity or diversity for apprehension is a necessary condition of all artworks. There is no way of getting around it.

Whether one accepts this argument partly depends on one’s understanding of the terms “unity” and “diversity.” If presenting the property of diversity for apprehension means that we are struck by the variety of the work amidst its unity, then surely there are artworks, like some Abstract Expressionist paintings, where the perceptible array strikes us as confused, rather than diverse. Moreover, confusion may be what the artist is after, rather than a sense of variety amidst unity. Historically, artists have had a number of reasons for intending to provoke confusion. Thus, an artwork that lacks unity may not be intended to present the relevant sort of diversity for apprehension. The artist may be interested in exploiting disunity in order to sow total confusion and disorientation.

Furthermore, if an artist intends to engender confusion, it does not follow that she intends to present diversity for apprehension. It may be the incredible wealth of different things in the work that brings about confusion and disorientation, but the artist may not present the work with the intention that we locate our confusion in the diversity of elements in the work. The purpose of the work may not be to encourage us to contemplate the diverse elements of the work, but to overwhelm and bewilder us by it. Some of Robert Morris’s installations, which were discussed in the previous chapter, are pertinent examples to think about here.

Likewise, a work that downplays diversity need not be intended to present unity for apprehension. Andy Warhol’s film *Empire*—an eight-hour view of
the Empire State Building—is hardly describable as diverse or complex. It is intentionally minimal in its content and its execution. One could call it unified, but it is not the intention of the film-maker that we apprehend its unity. Rather, it is the implications of the experiment for common notions about the nature of film that Warhol ultimately wants to explore by means of Empire. It is a reductio ad absurdum of certain claims about film realism and of the view that what is important about film is the mechanical reproduction of the world. To respond to the film by saying “Ah! How aesthetically unified!” would be to miss the intended point of Empire. Thus, an artwork that underplays variety need not be intended to present unity for apprehension. It may have very different fish to fry.

At the same time, Empire is intentionally unemphatic in the manner in which it shoots the Empire State Building. It does not invest its subject with intense aesthetic properties, nor does it underline any of the aesthetic properties for which the building is duly famous. The film is intentionally as mundane as mundane can be. Thus, if Empire is an artwork, then there are artworks that are not intended to present unities, diversities, or intensities for apprehension. They may be underwritten by altogether different intentions. Consequently, the aesthetic definition of art, stated in terms of the content-oriented account of aesthetic experience, does not identify a necessary condition of all art.

But what if we read the aesthetic definition of art in terms of the affect-oriented account of aesthetic experience? Will that improve matters? On that view, x is an artwork if and only if x is intentionally produced with the capacity to afford disinterested and sympathetic attention and contemplation for its own sake. Is it plausible to believe that all artworks are necessarily produced with such an intention?

It seems unlikely. The biggest problem here is the notion of disinterestedness. As we have already noted more than once, many artworks are produced with religious and political purposes in mind. They are not designed to be contemplated disinterestedly, but are connected to practical affairs. A feminist novel may be intended to rouse readers—both women and men—to change their lives. Here the personal may be political, and the novel may address interests of readers that intertwine the two. Such a novel is not designed to be perused disinterestedly. Indeed, a disinterested reading might subvert the intention of the novel. That is, it is hard to imagine that a disinterested reading is even a secondary goal of such a novel, since any such reading is antithetical to its primary purpose. Thus, not all artworks need be underwritten by the intention to invite, sustain and reward disinterested contemplation. Some enjoin interested contemplation and application to one’s interested, practical affairs.

Of course, the aesthetic theorist may claim that such works are not really art, but that just seems to beg the question, especially since there
are so many examples of this sort that are considered to be canonical works of art. Nor does it make much sense to argue on the grounds that such works have aesthetic properties and formal structures that the works have a secondary intention to invite disinterested contemplation, if those features are all rhetorically in the service of moving readers to an interested consideration of personal and political oppression.

Indeed, cases like this one suggest an even deeper problem with the aesthetic definition of art. The theory may be fundamentally incoherent. The definition requires that an artwork be intended to have the capacity to afford a disinterested and sympathetic response. But in many cases, this may be an impossible combination. Surely, a sympathetic response to a social protest fiction about racism—like a dramatization of *Cry the Beloved Country*—involves being moved to indignation. The drama calls for readers to change their society and to change their lives. A sympathetic response to *Cry the Beloved Country* should predispose the spectator toward certain practical actions, or, at least, toward thinking about such practical actions. And some of these practical actions may even be connected to possible actions in the spectator’s everyday life.

*Cry the Beloved Country* addresses practical problems that may be connected to the spectator’s personal and political interests, and it endorses certain solutions that anyone worth calling a sympathetic viewer should take seriously. Being a sympathetic viewer (or reader) in this case is bound up with broader social and even personal interests (especially if one is a victim of racism, as both black and white spectators may be). So in what sense can the sympathetic viewer also be disinterested? The disinterested stance and the sympathetic stance are in conflict here. If one genuinely places oneself under the guidance of artworks like *Cry the Beloved Country*, it is difficult to see how one’s attention and contemplation of the work can be simultaneously disinterested. Furthermore, it is hard to understand how an artist can rationally intend such a work to have the capacity to promote both of these modes of attention and contemplation, since each cancels out the other.

Art history provides many examples of works that are bound up with personal and social interests. Artworks frequently function to forge personal identities and to advance practical projects. If we suppose that the makers of these works intend them to possess the capacity to afford disinterested and sympathetic attention, must we not then agree that the makers of the relevant works have self-contradictory intentions? But it is a very dubious definition of art that entails that so much of art history is made up of self-contradictory works.

Of course, it is open to the aesthetic theorist to claim that where works possess only the capacity to afford sympathetic responses that somehow
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preclude disinterested responses, then we are not dealing with art. A work is art only where both intended capacities can be realized. But this would result in a radical gerrymandering of art history. So many works regarded as paradigmatic would drop out of the tradition.

Or, the aesthetic theorist might bite the bullet and say that the creators of engaged artworks are self-contradictory, but they just don't realize it. However, assigning irrationality to artists on such a large scale seems quite unpalatable, especially since so many artists are self-consciously explicit about their opposition to the concept of disinterestedness. A more obvious solution to the dilemma is to admit that the aesthetic definition of art, framed in terms of the affect-oriented account of aesthetic experience, does not provide a necessary condition for art status.

Needless to say, the aesthetic theorist can remove the incoherence in his theory by dropping the idea that the artwork is intended to have the capacity to afford both a sympathetic and a disinterested response. Instead he may require only that artworks have the capacity to afford disinterested attention and contemplation. That gets rid of the incoherence, but it only questionably makes the definition more attractive, since there are many artworks that are not intended to encourage or to afford disinterested responses.

For example, the shields of the Sepik and Highlands warriors of New Guinea have a fair claim to art status. They are replete with representational, expressive, and formal properties, and they belong to an intelligible tradition of making. And yet the horrific faces on them are intended to frighten their enemies, not to promote disinterested attention and contemplation. They are not meant to release onlookers from the oppression of practical interests, but to give them a practical interest in running away. Fetishes of all sorts are intended to serve practical interests that are inimicable to a disinterested stance. The discussion of statues of demons in the previous chapter raises another case in point. If any of these examples are artworks, then it cannot be the case that an intended capacity to afford disinterested attention and contemplation for its own sake is a necessary condition for all art. That we citizens of other cultures choose to peruse these objects in our museums with what is called disinterested attention does not indicate that these works were produced with the intended capacity to afford such responses.

Nor can the aesthetic theorist drop the requirement that the capacity here must be intended in favor of saying merely that a is an artwork only if it affords disinterested attention, since that will lose the distinction between good art and bad art. That is, a work that fails to afford disinterested attention and contemplation—that fails to afford aesthetic experience—will not count as art at all. But a definition that does not cover bad art does not adequately capture our concept of art.
Does the aesthetic definition of art, read in terms of an affect-oriented account of aesthetic experience, supply a sufficient condition for art? No, and for reasons with which we are already very familiar. Many nonartworks are intended to have the capacity to promote the kind of attention and contemplation that the aesthetic definition of art ascribes to all and only artworks. High-priced cutlery often has intended aesthetic properties that warrant attention and contemplation, independently of their practical purposes. A Sabatier knife can be a thing of beauty—so much so that we would prefer to look at it rather than to use it.

Cars too often afford occasions for aesthetic experience. We may stand back and appreciate their lines for the aesthetic properties they impart. Undoubtedly, these lines are also intended to serve practical functions. But they are also intended to project an aesthetic profile. A car may connote elegance by its design.

Perhaps part of the reason for this is that car manufacturers hope that buyers will purchase such vehicles in order to say something about themselves to the world. But one can attend to the shape of a car and dwell upon its dashing curves without having any personal interests in owning the car or buying stock in the company. Moreover, the intention to appeal to the eye in this way by means of arresting appearances undeniably numbers among the intentions of car designers. But our highways are not jammed with artworks. That is, most cars are not artworks, but it would appear that the aesthetic theorist would have to count most of them (and not just the custom-made ones) as such. And this indicates that the affect-oriented aesthetic definition is too broad.

On neither the content-oriented nor the affect-oriented account of aesthetic experience, does the aesthetic definition of art provide necessary or sufficient conditions for art. Some readers may feel that the problems we’ve encountered here are really the result of the limitations of the accounts of aesthetic experience that we’ve inserted into the aesthetic definition of art. They may suspect that if we just stated that x is an artwork if and only if x is intended to have the capacity to afford aesthetic experience —using our ordinary language notions of this concept—the aesthetic theory of art would have a better chance of succeeding.

Of course, there is a real question about whether we have any ordinary language intuitions about the phrase “aesthetic experience.” The concept really seems primarily a technical one. But if we do have some ordinary sense of the notion, then it still seems that the theory is doomed. The aesthetic definition does not pick out only artworks, since ordinary language recognizes that things other than artworks can be intentionally designed with the capacity to afford aesthetic experiences—Fords, for example.

Moreover, not all artworks are designed to afford aesthetic experiences in any “ordinary” sense of the phrase. The capacity to afford aesthetic
experience is not a necessary condition for art. Some artworks, like Duchamp’s *Fountain*, are idea based, rather than experience based. One can derive satisfaction from thinking about *Fountain* without even experiencing it, let alone experiencing it aesthetically. One can read about it and think about it without knowing what exactly it looked like in terms of its form and its perceptible properties. Arguably, Duchamp would have subverted his own intention to provoke thinking about the nature and future of art, if *Fountain* had the capacity to afford the disinterested contemplation of its form and perceptible properties.

Thus, the aesthetic theorist of art was mistaken earlier in the first premise of his argument. It is not the case that audiences use all artworks to function as sources of aesthetic experience, nor is this the reason they seek out all artworks. Some artworks are sought for their ideas, not for the aesthetic experiences they afford.

Another generic problem with aesthetic definitions of art is that they treat art status as dependent upon the intended function to promote aesthetic experience. But whether or not a candidate has this capacity is frequently dependent on whether or not it is an artwork. Duchamp presented a vial of fifty cubic centimeters of Parisian air as an artwork. Called *Paris Air*, it is *impish* (and affords an aesthetic experience of quality of impishness) just because it is an artwork. It offers a satirical comment on the artworld’s obsession with all things Parisian.

An ordinary vial full of Parisian air, even one perceptually indiscernible from Duchamp’s, would not afford, nor is it intended to afford, a comparable aesthetic experience. It is the fact that we know that Duchamp’s vial is an artwork that enables us to appreciate its impishness; indeed, it wouldn’t be impish if it weren’t an artwork. But if aesthetic experience is sometimes dependent on art status, then art status cannot be defined noncircularly in terms of aesthetic experience.

Many of the preceding counterexamples to the conjecture that the intended capacity to afford aesthetic experience is a necessary condition for art status have been drawn from the avant-garde. This may seem unfair, since earlier it was noted that often aesthetic theorists of art deny that works of the avant-garde are artworks. We reviewed the case against Cone’s “Poème Symphonique,” for instance. So if aesthetic theorists of art do not regard such works as artworks, is it legitimate to introduce avantgarde works as counterexamples to the aesthetic definition of art?

Inasmuch as a great deal of avant-garde art is avowedly anti-aesthetic, it should come as no surprise that the aesthetic definition of art cannot accommodate it. Aesthetic theorists of art are aware of this, and, as a result, they deny that so-called anti-aesthetic art is genuinely art. Doesn’t it simply beg the question, then, to cite it against aesthetic definitions of art?
And yet we expect definitions of art to track our practices of classifying art. Anti-aesthetic art has existed for over eighty-five years, and it has been classified as art by art historians, critics, collectors, and a great many informed viewers. Nor is it a marginal movement in twentieth-century art. It has often commanded the limelight. Names like Duchamp, Cage, and Warhol are generally regarded as central figures of twentieth-century art, and they exert a continuing influence on artmaking and criticism today. This is not to say that there are no dissenters. But they have not deterred the unflagging interest in anti-aesthetic art among impressively large numbers of artists, experts, historians, critics, and art lovers. That presents a prima facie case that anti-aesthetic art warrants inclusion under our operative concept of art. It is difficult to explain the practices of modern art, unless our concept is inclusive enough to countenance anti-aesthetic art.

It seems that the existence of anti-aesthetic art is a fact of the artworld and has been for some time. The aesthetic theorist of art cannot define it away. If that is a consequence of the aesthetic definition of art, then it seems that the definition’s proponent, not the critic, is begging the question. A comprehensive theory of art must accommodate the facts as she finds them revealed in our practices. Where, indeed, should we look for our facts, except in our practices? The aesthetic theorist cannot stipulate what she will count as facts in the face of massive amounts of countervailing evidence, which continues to grow daily. We have every reason to believe that anti-aesthetic art is art on the basis of our evolving practice, which, in turn, gives us compelling grounds to deny that the aesthetic definition of art is a comprehensive theory of all art.

**Part II**

**The aesthetic dimension**

Aesthetic experience revisited

Aesthetic experience is not definitory of all art. There is nonaesthetic and even anti-aesthetic art. Thus, the aesthetic theory of art is not a comprehensive theory of all art. However, the notion of aesthetic experience pervades our discussion of art. Therefore, we must ask what sense, if any, can be made of it.

As already noted, the most popular conception of aesthetic experience claims that it is the disinterested and sympathetic attention and