

THE MARXIST THEORY OF ART

Roger Taylor

It is one of the orthodoxies of contemporary philosophical aesthetics that 'art' is an open concept. For those unfamiliar with the field one could do no better than recommend Morris Weitz'[1] article 'The Role of Theory in Aesthetics' in which, following Wittgenstein, Weitz propounds the orthodoxy. This orthodoxy is not without its critics, but for the purposes of this paper the criticisms will be ignored and the orthodoxy taken up as a basic assumption. My toleration of this procedure stems in part from my belief that what criticisms there are, are only important in fulfilling obligations towards academic circulation. More to the point, however, is my wish to argue, if only by implication, that open concept theory is minimally explanatory unless the detailing of an open concept involves a social perspective. Thus, though accepting open concept theory, it is my contention that contemporary anti-essentialists, where they have bothered to look at the family resemblances within a concept, have thought it sufficient to exhibit a number of differences. Accordingly, open concept theory has been used largely as a weapon for defeating essentialists but this, in itself, does not take us very far towards understanding our conceptual apparatus. Open concept theory urges us to take an organic, rather than a static, view of our concepts and therefore should lead to social and historical investigations. It is with such an elaboration of the orthodoxy within contemporary aesthetics that this paper is concerned. The conclusions reached go far beyond anything in Weitz's article for they propose a theory of art which is Marxist in method, where existent Marxist theories of art are Marxist only in coming from Marxists.

Before proceeding with the main body of the paper I offer a short clarification of my methodology. For Wittgenstein, games did not have some common characteristic in virtue of which they were games; instead of some shared essence one finds family resemblance. Now, if this is so, why is it so? At one level the answer must lie in the growth of the concept. The word 'game' was not given divinely along with a set of rules specifying all its applications, rather it exists dialectically within human practice determining it and being determined by it. As Wittgenstein says in *Philosophical Investigations*: [2]

And is there not also the case where we play and - make up the rules as we go along? And there is even one where we alter them - as we go along.

1 M. Weitz, 'The Role of Theory in Aesthetics' in *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* Vol.XV, September 1956.

2 L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, Oxford, 1953.

Therefore, concepts have histories and that this is so has rich implications for conceptual enquiries, for with the demise of essences concepts become no more and no less than historical phenomena, so that their history is not incidental to what they are. Thus, conceptual investigation must investigate social practice. So construed, this investigation is not just collecting together relevant verbal practices. The entire range of behaviour associated with a society possessing a certain concept needs to be related, not only to the way other concepts of that society manifest themselves, but also the society's projects, functions and structures. This approach is not one of recommending social explanations for instances falling under concepts (though of course instances require such explanations), but one which emphasises that conceptualising itself is a social process and must be understood accordingly. The truth of this directs us to two perspectives on our concepts, one internal and the other external such that taken together they may not match up, one being ideal and the other real. It is my contention that contemporary Anglo-American philosophy has concentrated on what is internal to the exclusion of what is external, and thus an understanding of a practice has been conducted from within the practice, therefore running, *prima facie*, the risk of distortion. At this point my argument is too general to be clarifying, and, therefore, I turn to the specific issues of this paper with the hope that they will cast some light where there is gloom. If my optimism is not misguided it will be seen that the social considerations with which this paper is concerned, unravel the problems which aesthetics, when it is pursued from within, generates rather than solves. I take up the theme of this paper by means of what might appear initially to be a digression. It concerns constructing a fantasy through the assertion of a number of predictions which are not meant as true. The digression quickly leads into the main theme.

In 200 years from now the society which will then exist will have preserved our art. They will call what they preserve the Art of the 20th century. Their choice will have been made after entertaining the following considerations:

- 1 What did the 20th century produce that was distinctive of it?
- 2 What did the 20th century produce which convinces us, which allows us to enter into it?

Their deliberations lead to the conclusions that works of Picasso, Moore, Brittain, Eliot will not be preserved, or if preserved ('let's preserve them as curious examples of the bad taste of the 20th century') not preserved as art, and that 20th century art consists of cranes, gasometers, power stations, farm machinery, cars (not forgetting motor-bikes), bubble-gum machines, petrol pumps, Stevie Wonder, Elvis, Vera

Lynn, Ivor Novello, Harold Robbins, Agatha Christie, Leslie Charteris and here perhaps it makes sense to say etc.

This fantasy stems from a possible misunderstanding of a stray comment made by the Pop-painter Robert Indiana, who is reported as having said,

When the remains of our civilization are dug up in a thousand years it will be our washing machines more than the contents of our museums which will define our culture.

Now we might say of these predictions that the choices made are made in an artificial, if apparently ideal way. We might like to think our own choices are made in this way, but we must attend to another factor.

There are certain presuppositions in our society about which objects are art objects. It would be agreed (this is the prevailing, though not necessarily the majority view) that Bach, Rembrandt, Shakespeare, Keats and Rodin all produced works of art. Given the appropriate education, we will all know how to extend this list, even if we have doubts about the value of art or high culture. We will be able to select solid, middle of the road contenders for the list, instances which no one in his right mind would challenge; we will also have a feel for the marginal disputable cases, for instance Lichtenstein, Cage, Robbe-Grillet, Godard, the Beatles.

The factor we need to attend to then is the influence and primacy of the lists. The predictions predict artificial choice-making because they neglect the influence of what we might reasonably call tradition. The generation, which it is supposed would have to make these choices, would have lists. They might modify them or make alterations, but it would be unreal to suppose they could ignore them. Of course, individuals might ignore them, but under what conditions could a society in general? As a society we cannot decide afresh what constitutes the art of the 18th century (we may quibble about a few specific cases) for this is a *fait accompli* and so would be the art of the 20th century to the people of the 22nd century.

However, dropping these thoughts for a moment, if we assume that these predictions turned out to be true, this would suggest either that we have made a mistake, or that the people to come will have done so. Let us take the former view and ask how we might explain our mistake.

We might try this hypothesis: The lists of course have their own influence, which in part is to say that people within the culture will be taught the lists, as they are taught for example the list of the kings of Europe. But, nevertheless, the lists are made. However, an addition to the list is not arrived at as one arrives at, for example, the winner of a beauty contest. An addition to the art list is not arrived at by a panel of judges coming together to adjudicate. The process involved is more diffuse and less deliberative. To explain it we require social analysis. The kind of social analysis required is that which we glimpse in books like Hauser's *The Social History of Art* [3] when, instead of explaining the structure of a work of art through the social complex in which it emerges (this is the main feature of Hauser's book and in general the main feature of Marxist aesthetics), one explains how a work's being taken up and becoming established is the result of social processes. Within contemporary society one might well see these processes as constituting a business or industry. We might advance the proposition that the process which makes something a work of art - or, if you like, makes something be held as a work

of art - is an involved social process, concerning the interaction between this industry and other aspects of society. Thus, we might profitably compare an addition to the art list with the way in which a washing powder establishes itself as successful. Clearly, in the latter case, success is not the result of a fully deliberative and rational process on the part of consumers. If it was, a magazine like *Which* would be a sell out, rather than a necessary primer for the minority group of efficient technocrats.

We might go on to conclude that the list we can construct is the outcome of a certain class situation in society. Thus within contemporary society the art list, and growth within it, stem from social processes within upper middle class society. For instance, in our schools it is not working class culture which is commended to the pupils, but high culture. High culture emanates from the upper middle class. Of course, there are members of this class, who, in the language of the class, are philistines; just as there are devotees to high culture within the working class. But too much is made of this point. It certainly is not enough to justify the excessive time given to classical music on the BBC's music programme, that is, as an answer to the charge that the programme caters exclusively for an unfairly privileged minority class.

At this point we might propose the following explanation of the posited mistake: Namely, the mental set of the predominating class in this area blinkers it from what is of true value. Though this is not my thesis, the suggestion it contains is not so preposterous, for, analogously, it is argued that it is because of their background that the working class prefer say, *Family at War* to *Waiting for Godot*, and thus make the mistake of thinking the former of more value. To add weight to the explanation, we might allege that the vocabulary or the concepts of aesthetics constitute a mystique evolved within the upper middle class in order to wrap up its preferences. The class speaks of its preference being 'art'. The language itself confers a special status on what is enjoyed. Such a thesis about the concepts of aesthetics would be reinforced by the work of such people as Kristeller and Tatariewicz. I won't say anything further about the nature of their work here as I shall have occasion to return to it.

In explaining the assumed mistake in this way it is tempting to go on to say, 'this art of ours is not art, it is merely what the upper classes enjoy, whereas real art is petrol pumps and bubble gum machines'. Similar moves to this can be found, for instance, in Tolstoy [4] and Plekhanov [5]. For Tolstoy, having dismissed the art of the upper classes as art, goes on to specify true art as that which transmits emotion, and Plekhanov, having made a similar dismissal, goes on to specify true art as having firm roots in reality and claims that in the final analysis, form must correspond with content. However, what I want to say is that, though we have already touched upon some of the factors relevant to an understanding of the concept of art, something has gone wrong at a methodological level. In fact the mistake we have been trying to explain does not exist, and there is no category of true art apart from the established category.

To bring out something of my meaning I refer next to a section in Istvan Meszaros's book *Marx Theory of Alienation* [6]. I quote:

4 L. Tolstoy, *What is Art*, New York, 1960.

5 G. Plekhanov, *Art and Social Life*, London, 1953.

6 I. Meszaros, *Marx Theory of Alienation*, London, 1970.

3 A. Hauser, *The Social History of Art*, London, 1962.

What matters here is to point out that art, in so far as it is negatively affected by the division of labour, must be superseded. Since (and here we are given a quotation from Marx) 'Religion, family, state, law, morality, science, art, etc., are only particular modes of production' (quotation ends) and since production in general is under the spell of alienation, the positive transcendence of human self-estrangement can only be realized by means of a (and here another quotation) 'return of man from religion, family, state, etc., to his human, i.e. social mode of existence'.

Meszaros goes on:

'etc' here clearly includes art that occurred in previous enumerations to which this latter one refers.

This passage does not mean that art, science etc. ought to be abolished - although this impression may be created by references to religion, state and law. It goes without saying that in Marx's view mankind without art and science would be an enormously impoverished humanity if conceivable at all in concrete historical terms.

Of course Meszaros's interpretation of Marx is quite correct. For Marx art is not a concept of the same type as the concept of the state. Thus, for Marx art is a universal feature of human reality, whereas the state is, in comparison, temporary. Unlike many critics of Marx, I do not see his view of the state as essentialist. For Marx 'the state' is a phrase used to refer to an assortment of institutions within society. These institutions, in themselves, tend to conform to certain assertions about them, such as their being controlled by the ruling class, their not emerging until the division of society into classes, and their fulfilling the function of preserving the status quo. These assertions are not an unsystematized collection of observations, but assertions explained by a comprehensive theory about social development. It is for this reason that they take on a law-like significance. These assertions then have an air of necessity about them, though this necessity is not logical necessity. Thus, there is no contradiction in Marx citing instances when the state has functioned independently of the ruling class, as for instance Popper [7] supposes, nor does the thesis about the state fall, as Plamenatz [8] supposes, because it is not logical nonsense to assert that a society lacking class divisions might require institutions like the institutions of the state to resolve conflicts between different interest groups. A real attack on Marx here would involve showing that the state is in fact independent of the ruling class for the most part, and that there have been perfectly normal human societies lacking classes but possessing interest groups which developed a state to reconcile conflict between them. For Marx there is no abstract problem about the nature of the state. The state is an evolving set of institutions (i.e. an historical set), about which we may ask for the social practices out of which they arise and for the social practices which they imply. To call these institutions the state is one other social fact which requires explanation, and in its turn it implies a collection of notions and concepts which, again, we can only understand in terms of the social practices which give rise to them and the social functions they fulfill. It is against the background of this methodology that it makes sense to predict the withering away of the state.

7 K. Popper, *The Open Society and its Enemies* Vol.2, London, 1957.

8 J. Plamenatz, *Man and Society* Vol.2, London, 1963.

However, when we return to art the method is not the same. Art is somehow a more basic category like, say, language. Alicja Iwanska, a social scientist, asserts: [9]

... there exist in all human societies four basic orientations towards the environment: cognitive orientation, moral orientation, activist orientation and aesthetic orientation.

As far as art is concerned, Marx would have agreed.

Incidentally, Iwanska doubted, at one stage, the universality of what is called 'aesthetic organisation'. Investigating a community of farmers in Good Fortune, she had concluded that they had no 'aesthetic orientation' whatsoever. It was only some time later, when she found in her field notes a record of a monologue indulged in by one of the farmers, that she changed her mind. He had some welding apparatus and used to weld things together without purpose. She found that he had said to her, 'Look at these sparks, isn't this like Hollywood? And this is me who is doing it all..., sparks like fireworks, like stars, like aeroplanes... I feel like God creating the world... Isn't this wonderful!' In retrospect she concludes,

I do not hesitate today to call this non-utilitarian welding of the Good Fortune farmer a non professional artistic activity of creative type.

Belatedly perceptive perhaps, she got there in the end. But it might have been better to send the novelist Patrick White.

Returning to Marx, it would be wrong to make too much of his views on art, for he dealt with the subject only in passing, and if he had given it his full attention we might have something very different. Raymond Williams makes this point nicely in his *Culture and Society* [10]. He says,

Marx himself outlined, but never fully developed, a cultural theory. His casual comments on literature, for example, are those of a learned, intelligent man of his period, rather than what we know as Marxist literary criticism. On occasion, his extraordinary social insight extends a comment, but one never feels that he is applying a theory. Not only is the tone of his discussion of these matters normally undogmatic, but also he is quick to restrain, whether in literary theory of practice, what he evidently regarded as an over-enthusiastic, mechanical extension of his political, economic and historical conclusions to other kinds of fact. Engels, though habitually less cautious, is very similar in tone. This is not to say, of course, that Marx lacked confidence in the eventual extension of such conclusions, or in the filling-in of his outline. It is only that his genius recognized difficulty and complexity, and that his personal discipline was a discipline to fact.

Now my suggestion is that to understand the concept of art it should be treated as Marx treats religion, state or law, and perhaps even to the point at which we foresee its abolition. Meszaros is quite right in saying Marx did not see things in this way, but it is being suggested that it would be fruitful to do so. As it stands, the view of art as some fundamental human dimension plus the Marxist doctrine of realism leads Marx, if not Marxist aestheticians, [11]

9 A. Iwanska, 'Without Art' in *British Journal of Aesthetics*, October 1971.

10 R. Williams, *Culture and Society*, London, 1968.

11 K. Marx and F. Engels, *Literature and Art*, selections, New York, 1947.

into some curious rationalisations. Thus Marx, in trying to explain the validity of our interest in Greek drama, which he concedes presents a false picture of the world, argues that this interest is like our interest in a child's first attempts to understand its environment: though they are naive we are entranced by their naiveté. This example can be found in *A Contribution to a Critique of Political Economy* [12].

In trying to construct a Marxist theory of art (in the methodological sense indicated previously), we might start by attending to the distinction between the category of art and what might appear to be another category with which it could be confused. This second category is indicated in saying it includes music, dancing, poetry, sculpture, painting, drama, ballet, opera, novels, architecture, and at this point it makes sense to say etc. Thus if you were asked to extend the list you would be unlikely to say 'petrol' or 'shears'. Now this category is not the category of art, though it includes it. Thus, for instance, the category includes contemporary low culture which is excluded from the category of art. At this point we might question whether the claims that art is universal are invalidly deduced from the belief that this more general category is universal, i.e. as though to claim the latter was to claim the former. However, even in the latter case universality is far from clear, for though it might be legitimate to identify dancing, music and poetry in most societies, this is not the same thing as identifying the more general category. To identify the more general category, we should need to be satisfied that the society being investigated did in fact divide its world up in this way. But more important than any of this is the fact that, as we make a distinction between art and the general category, it is this distinction which needs to be explained if the category of art is to be understood. Thus, if art is a sub-class of the more general category, why is this? It seems quite obvious, from the ways in which we use these notions, that the distinction must have something to do with evaluation, prescription, commendation, etc, despite Richard Wollheim's disclaimer at the end of his recent and influential *Art and its Objects* [13] where he says,

It will be observed that in this essay next to nothing has been said about the subject that dominates much contemporary aesthetics: that of evaluation of art, and its logical character. This omission is deliberate.

To say of a novel that it is a work of art, is, within a standard setting, to evaluate it favourably compared with other novels from which this categorisation is withheld. Thus the sub-class art, within the more general category, ostensibly indicated as music, dancing, poetry, sculpture, painting, drama etc., is set up as the range of notably superior instances within the category. So it seems to me that we are not going to make much progress in understanding the distinction, unless we lay stress on evaluation. But now, how are we going to account for this? What seems obvious is that no aesthetic theory by itself, nor, I believe, in conjunction with others, will justify this distinction. The history of aesthetics would not be so barren if things were otherwise. However, if we turn our attention from internal attempts to justify the distinction, and take on a social perspective, I think we begin to arrive at an explanation. And this is an explanation which rather undermines attempts at justification. The details which this social perspective reveals are documented, to some extent, in many of the books and articles to which I have been referring.

12 K. Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, London, 1859

13 R. Wollheim, *Art and its Objects*, New York, 1968.

The general thesis I have in mind is summarized in Adkins Richardson's article [14]. He says,

The appearance of Art as distinct from craft or skill is a phenomenon of modern history.

Raymond Williams, in Culture and Society, shows that this use of the term comes into common English during the last decades of the 18th century in company with the use of 'culture' to designate a norm opposed to that of the despised masses. Only as capital and industry make possible the total democratization of life is there any serious demand from the highly literate for prescriptions of éliteness to distinguish their values from those of common folk. It can be argued to considerable effect that the very notion of absolute standards of decorum in life was already a response to the incursions of a 'patent nobility' (drawn from the wealthy middle class) upon the ancient privileges of the nobility of gentle birth.

This last point that Adkins Richardson makes is very much drawn from Hauser.

In discussing Leonardo's conceptualisations of his world Adkins Richardson goes on,

For him the suggestion that a panel painting by a routinely competent artisan might not be art would have been meaningless. Such transcendent, exclusive concepts of value did not exist for the Quattrocento... Art was invented by a later industrial age.

The suggestion to be derived from this is that the notion of exclusive value was initially an invention of the aristocracy, as a way of distinguishing the superiority of its form of life from the assault on it by the revolutionary bourgeoisie. This constitutes the origins of art. The victorious bourgeoisie subsequently takes over the concept, in part, as the result of its aspiration to be the ruling class and in part, as a response to the class conflict that, as the ruling class, it generates. It is part of this thesis that the category of art, which we possess, is no older than Capitalism itself.

The truth of this thesis is supported by certain accounts of the history of aesthetics, and here I have in mind the work of Tatarkiewicz and Kristeller. It is Kristeller's argument [15], for instance, that it is only in the 17th and 18th centuries that the modern system of the arts emerges. In the ancient world art meant grammar, rhetoric, dialectic, arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, music, medicine and architecture; or rather this would be a typical list of the liberal arts, whereas a rather sketchy notion of the 'imitative arts', though including poetry, sculpture and music, would also include sophistry, the use of mirrors and magic tricks. It is Tatarkiewicz's suggestion [16] that for the ancient world any rule bound activity was art. Kristeller maintains that the absence of the modern concept of art is also noticeable throughout the Middle Ages. He says,

The very concept of 'art' retained the same comprehensive meaning it had possessed in

14 J. Adkins Richardson, 'Illustration and Art' in *British Journal of Aesthetics*, October 1971.

15 P. O. Kristeller, 'The Modern System of the Arts: A Study in the History of Aesthetics', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Vol. XII (October 1951) and Vol. XIII (January 1952).

16 W. Tatarkiewicz, 'The Classification of the Arts in Antiquity' in *Journal of the History of Ideas*, April 1963.

antiquity, and the same connotation that it was teachable. And the term *artista* coined in the Middle Ages indicated either the craftsman or the student of the liberal arts. Neither for Dante nor for Aquinas has the term Art the meaning we associate with it, and it has been emphasised or admitted that for Aquinas shoe-making and cooking, juggling, grammar and arithmetic are no less and in no other sense *artes* than painting and sculpture, poetry and music, which latter are never grouped together, not even as imitative arts.

For Kristeller the same sort of thing holds for the Renaissance. Though Leonardo gives us something looking like the modern system of the arts, this is only so with important reservations. Thus the work in question, Leonardo's *Paragone*, was not composed by Leonardo in its present form, but put together from his scattered notes by one of his pupils and again rearranged by most of the modern editors. And in any case, architecture is omitted, the separation between music and poetry is not consistently maintained and the comparison seems to be extended to the mathematical disciplines with which painting, as a science, is closely linked. Moreover, Kristeller tells us, people like Castiglione see no real distinction between poetry, music and painting on the one hand and fencing, horse-riding, classical learning, the collecting of coins and medals and of natural curiosities on the other.

From Kristeller's own somewhat limited perspective the ground is paved for the modern system of the arts, that is for our concept of art, by the emancipation of the natural sciences. A development which, of course, needs to be linked to a more general process of social change, though Kristeller does not do so. Kristeller says,

A point by point examination of the claims of the ancients and moderns in the various fields led to the insight that in certain fields, where everything depends on mathematical calculation and the accumulation of knowledge, the progress of the moderns over the ancients can be clearly demonstrated, whereas in certain other fields, which depend upon individual talent and on the taste of the critic, the relative merits of the ancient and moderns cannot be so clearly established but may be subject to controversy.

Thus the ground is prepared for the first time for a clear distinction between the arts and the sciences, a distinction absent from ancient, medieval or Renaissance discussions of such subjects even though the same words were used.

In this paper a full documentation of this thesis is impossible. It is clear that a great deal of work is required. Much of it, to my knowledge, remains unwritten; although in this connection, one should mention Reitlinger's very detailed *Economics of Taste* [17] as a very important source book. So, instead, let me summarize where the articles to which I have been referring lead.

The question 'What is art?' begins with the concept we possess. In other words, the question asks, 'What is this which we have?'; for unless we are trying to explain what we have, the question makes very little sense. We find that what we have is of recent origins. To borrow a phrase from Wittgenstein we find that a distinctive form of life emerged in the 17th and 18th centuries and that, through a process of evolutionary and revolutionary change, grew into the category of art as we now possess it. Ultimately, the emergence of this form of life can be shown to be dependent upon the

development of science and the rise of Capitalism. Throughout the process of change within this form of life, we find that Kristeller's notion of the modern system of the arts remains constant - though there are additions (e.g. film in the 20th century) - and yet this constant feature fails to close the concept, for, as we have already noted, art is a sub-class of a more general category and the more general category is really Kristeller's notion. That art is a sub-class in this sense depends on the intrusion of value. This concept of value cannot be understood abstractly but must be interpreted socially. We find that it is an invention of the ruling class brought on by a situation of class conflict; there is need to create exclusive values. Thus art does not simply mean the best within Kristeller's modern system of the arts, that is within the more general category, for it can be plausibly maintained that within this category the contemporary working class mark off certain areas as being of more value, yet clearly they refuse to refer to their preferences as art. Thus the notion of value tied into the category of art requires social explication, for the only move which avoids such an analysis would depend upon being able to exhibit the criteria for this notion of value (i.e. in a theoretical sense), but the tangled history of aesthetics cancels any hope of this.

Thus art is a very specific form of life, identifiable only within a specific social setting, and contains within it works of art which are identifiable as such simply because social processes within the form of life have fixed on to them the label 'art'. That this is the sole ground of identification is shown (a) by the fact that social acceptance within the appropriate social area guarantees that something is art, and (b) by the fact that the reasons for and the explanations of acceptance have been so diverse that acceptance cannot be anything other than arbitrary. Therefore, acceptance has been and is sufficient. In a simplified form I am saying that art is nothing over and above what the high bourgeoisie calls art and that for this class these accreditations are labels of value affixed without rationale, although this is not to say that we cannot explain the general strategy behind the practice. It is a feature of this analysis that we cannot go on to say 'our art is an art of the upper classes only and that real art is x, y, z', which is the move made by Tolstoy and Plekhanov, and the reason for this is that the concept of art cannot be understood as an abstraction, because it is quite without significance divorced from an evolving set of social institutions. This is the methodological mistake referred to earlier. Thus, art is an open concept, but to say this is insufficient, because we need explanations as to the contingent structure of this open concept. We need to explain the origins of the concept, which is clearly a task for social analysis. We need to investigate its social significance, that is, not the social significance of particular works of art but the social significance of the category as a whole. If to say of a concept that it is open is an invitation to regard it organically, then we will have done no more than scratch the surface if we fail to uncover the social practices upon which its growth depends.

In conclusion, I shall try to be a little less abstract and bring out the nature of my argument by explaining some of its consequences and some of the problems it gives rise to.

To begin with, consider the question of primitive art. It is a direct consequence of the thesis for which I have been arguing that the primitive world lacks the concept of art. Thus, to take up a notion from Wollheim, the primitive craftsman had no means by which he could have made the objects (which we regard as primitive art) under the concept of art. To make something under the concept of art

implies a whole set of social institutions to which one's activities are related, and these are and were conspicuously absent within the primitive world. Primitive art is art simply on the grounds that the high bourgeoisie has assimilated such works into the category it has created. In fact, as we know, this assimilation is very recent and it has involved the removal of such objects from museums to be rehoused in art galleries. The point at which the high bourgeoisie takes up the objects is the point at which they enter the category of art. Another significant case of this is the gradual incursion of Pop music into the category of art. At the point at which the high bourgeois press creates space for Pop, comes the haggling as to its aesthetic status. Fifties Pop doesn't enter the upper middle class world and so there are no pedantic debates as to whether the performers are the new musical avant-garde, whereas sixties Pop does and so the debate begins. The point being made about primitive art here clearly undermines certain Romantic conceptions of the artist. According to these conceptions there is a natural, primitive, artistic impulse such than an individual living in total isolation from the institutions of art can nevertheless agonise himself into the production of works of art. In opposition to this it is being said that without knowledge of the appropriate social form of life one could not intend one's activity as art (this is the thesis to which Richard Wollheim is committed) and that for one's products to enter the category of art depends entirely on what use the high bourgeoisie make of them (Wollheim's thesis fails to go this far).

Clearly in this explanation of the concept of art the dominance of the high bourgeoisie is very important. However, this idea of dominance should not be misunderstood, for it certainly does not imply that the practices of this class in this area are rational, or that there is within the class a conscious conspiracy that things should be thus, or even that the class controls (autonomously) the process which it makes. The form of life primarily embraces this class, but this class is very much a victim of this form of life with respect to the irrationality of its practices and the traditions it imposes. Nothing demonstrates this more clearly than the way in which an expansion of consciousness within the creative agents in art has enabled them to twist the ruling class tail quite severely. Clearly enough the class of artists has been much less homogeneous or cohesive than the class of spectators. Within the history of art the artist has been very much the performing monkey and his class origins have not been universally influential. Thus, for instance, in the spectators' attitude to Van Gogh we come close to perversion, and a perversion not so far removed from the toleration of the cigarette burns on the monkey's paw in the interests of the act. The need to be overwhelmed by what will be referred to as Van Gogh's great genius, or his great vision, allows the spectator to justify the hideous life without which, it is held, the vision would have been impossible. However, many contemporary artists would view it as retrogressive to attempt to emulate a life of such solitary masochism. The artist has achieved some detachment from the concept of art and what passes for his artistic activity, as is commonly allowed, is a matter of commenting on the concept of art. However, just because the artist is labelled artist (i.e. it is deemed works of art may possibly come from him), his activity is not, or rather cannot be, wholly reflective or theoretical; for what he may offer as a comment will inevitably be regarded as one of the objects of art, or be assessed as such. This is not the fate of a treatise on aesthetics. The contemporary artist is very much aware of the élitist character of art and the more cynical artists have traded on this fact to make the category as overtly absurd as possible. It has been concluded that there is no rationale behind what instances are instances of art, and that the instances of art are instances of art as the result of the arbitrary fiat

within the high bourgeoisie. The fiat is not arbitrary in the sense that there are no explanations of them, but they are arbitrary in the sense that there is no rationale behind them. However, it is realized that, though the decisions have to be made by a certain élite, this is not to say that, in making the decisions, the élite is not a victim of various influences. The biggest influence on the élite is the way in which it is trying to fit into the form of life. Similarly, the upper classes have the public schools as their exclusive province, but this is not to say that each generation does not have its own problems of trying to match up to the required form of life. It is a preconception that works of art are likely to emerge from those who have received training in the visual arts, it is also a preconception that what emerges as art from the present generation of art students may differ in a revolutionary way from the present accredited instances of art. What now if the artist group makes an arbitrary choice (randomising operations etc), amongst the instances of non-art (i.e. things not accredited as instances of art by the appropriate class) and presents them as art (i.e. offers them in an appropriate setting). Well, what happens is a small part of the present history of art. Exhibitions contain Squeezy bottles, artists in their beds drinking beer, piles of human shit etc, and the bourgeoisie buy the catalogue and duly make the rounds. The more these activities occur the more they become part of the relevant form of life and thus the more they are assimilated within the category of art. The social practices of the bourgeoisie make the category, but this is not to say that the bourgeoisie has full autonomy regarding these practices.

As a final point let me add a word of caution. The part played by the bourgeoisie in all of this is a contingent rather than a necessary role, which is to say that the bourgeoisie is not a defining attribute of art. As things stand art is what the high bourgeoisie calls art, and there is no more to this than a nominalist analysis, but this thesis, as it has been developed, implies that art is an open concept and that the only adequate understanding of this open concept is understanding it as an organic form of social life. Thus, there is no way in which we can logically preclude developments within this form of life which might oust the bourgeoisie from a position of prominence. Following a proletarian revolution the proletariat might well take over the conceptualising habits of the previous ruling class and so art as a form of life could continue. Significantly, revolutionary activity proceeding from a very different social setting would make the identification of that post-revolutionary society as possessing the concept of art imponderable. Perhaps this is the case in Mao's China.

