

PHIL 4403: Philosophy of Art
Prof. Funkhouser
1/21/05
Opening Clarifications

*What is the difference between studying ‘aesthetics’ and studying the ‘philosophy of art’?

--Aesthetics: Aesthetics is the study of a particular kind of sensory/perceptual experience (aesthetic experience). Though there are many different aesthetic concepts (which we will get to when we read Sibley’s “Aesthetic Concepts”), the dominant concept is beauty, and its opposite ugliness. Importantly, we can have an aesthetic experience while perceiving many different kinds of objects, including non-artworks. The perception of nature, human-made art, and non-art artifacts can all generate aesthetic experiences.

--Philosophy of Art: This is harder to characterize. Let’s just say that the philosophy of art is the application of philosophical methods to the study of art (as a kind, its varieties, and its institutions). Our anthologies and our course syllabus provide a topical characterization of the field.

--The above terms are used in various senses, but the above characterizations capture common philosophical usage. Note that these characterizations show the two terms to cover different, but overlapping or related, phenomena. The aesthetic properties of a work of art are just part of what philosophers of art study. For example, they also are concerned with interpretation, the creative process, paradoxes of fiction, the role of the artworld, etc. In this sense, the philosophy of art is broader than just aesthetics. But, there is also a sense in which aesthetics is broader than the philosophy of art, as non-art objects can give rise to aesthetic experiences.

*We will be using the term ‘art’ in a very broad sense. It will be used to cover various media, such as painting, photography, poetry, dance, sculpture, literature, architecture, music, pottery, etc. This is a broader usage than you would find, for example, in a ‘art history’ course—such a course typically does not cover poetry and literature (among other forms), for example.

*It might seem peculiar (and unfortunate) that, with a few exceptions, we will not be reading from actual artists! What, you may wonder, do *philosophers* know about art? Good question. (But perhaps we could wonder the same thing about ethics, but this is a traditional field of philosophy.) This much is true: the philosopher of art should have knowledge of art and its history, just as the philosopher of science should have knowledge of science and its history. Then, isn’t the artist or scientist better suited to do the philosophy of art or science respectively? Not necessarily, as the philosophy of art involves applying philosophical methods (the rigorous search for definitions, a theory of

interpretation, the raising and handling of paradoxes, reasoned argument, etc.) to the subject matter of art. This may seem presumptuous to those in other fields, but it is common philosophical methodology (note the following fields of philosophy: philosophy of religion, philosophy of science, philosophy of psychology, philosophy of history, etc.). Of course, both the philosophy of art and the artworld itself can benefit from mutual interaction.