

Beauty is in the eye of the beholder: the difference between art and non-art essa...

[Art & Culture](#), [Artists](#)



There is a common reaction for many people when they see modern art: “this isn’t art,” they’ll say, shaking their heads in disbelief. “I could have done this-- what is it doing in a museum?” Many people are not well-versed in the art world, and do not have a good philosophical understanding of the question of art and non-art. When deciding whether or not the government should fund a certain exhibition of art, whether through grants or public funds, there are a variety of different factors that must be considered by the government and the artist.

The federal and state governments have placed some restrictions on artists, especially regarding what types of funding artists can receive. Artists who are unwilling to comply with those types of restrictions are often unable to obtain grants to continue their artistic pursuits. These artists are, of course, still free to make their art; they may or may not, however, be able to obtain funding from a governmental or public body to make art.

The first question that is often asked in regards to art is “what is art?” It is important because without a definition, anyone can apply for arts grants or public funding with projects that may have little to no artistic merit. Some types of work are considered inherently non-artistic, while others certainly blur the line much more. Defining “art” is subjective and a very individual process, but looking at what the government itself considers art is a good place to start the discussion.

In *National Endowment for the Arts v. Finley*, a landmark Supreme Court decision about the rights of artists regarding federal grant monies, the Supreme Court dealt with the issue of freedom of speech and grants for artists. The Supreme Court held that artists’ speech was not being restricted

when the National Endowment for the Arts declared that there were certain criteria that had to be met by the artist in order to qualify for the grant offered by the endowment (Giarts. org). The NEA had recently adopted a “decency clause” in the endowment process, and in the National Endowment for the Arts v. Finley case the question was presented as to whether or not the decency clause was a violation of the artists’ constitutional right to free speech. The Court decided that the NEA was within its rights to turn down grant applicants on the basis of decency-- this did not constitute a violation of their freedom of speech (Giarts. org).

Although it is helpful to understand the restrictions and qualifications that the legal system places on art and artists, it does not help the philosophical discussion of what constitutes art and what is non-art. For much of Western history, the pursuit of art has been concerned with the depiction of what is beautiful. Renaissance art, for instance, is full of depictions of the ideal form of the day (Tjcenter. org). However, as philosophical thought progressed and changed, artists and philosophical thinkers came to feel that there was more to art than just depictions of ideal beauty.

There are a variety of different methodologies for defining what “ art” and “ non art” consist of, but one of the best definitions comes from the pop artist Marcel Duchamp. Marcel Duchamp, one of the most important artists and artistic philosophers of the 21st century, wrote:

But before we go further, I want to clarify our understanding of the word 'art'
- to be sure, without any attempt at a definition.

What I have in mind is that art may be bad, good or indifferent, but,
whatever adjective is used, we must call it art, and bad art is still art in the

same way that a bad emotion is still an emotion.

Therefore, when I refer to 'art coefficient', it will be understood that I refer not only to great art, but I am trying to describe the subjective mechanism which produces art in the raw state – à l'état brut – bad, good or indifferent (Duchamp).

This is, perhaps, one of the most helpful definitions of art that exists, although it is simultaneously a definition and a non-definition of the nebulous idea of “ art.” Duchamp is essentially postulating that art is the act of creating something with an idea in mind, and calling something art does not inherently give that piece value-- it is the impact and skill of the creator is what gives a piece value. The idea of art being equivalent to emotion is an intriguing one-- many people do, in fact, consider art to be the outward expression of an inward emotion, and emotions can, in fact, be good, bad, or indifferent. Trying to qualify art on whether or not it is “ good” seems to be a losing battle.

Duchamp's words are particularly impactful when they are looked at in the context of his work. Duchamp was an influential artist in the pop art movement, particularly in the genre of “ found” art (Rowan. edu). Duchamp's work in “ found art” is groundbreaking because all of his pieces are pieces of trash that he found-- hence the name, “ found art” (Rowan. edu).

When it comes to funding and displaying art, artists with work like Rothko or Ansel Adams have a much easier time securing governmental support than other artists. One of the most divisive artists of the past century is Robert Mapplethorpe, who became known for his homoerotic photographs (Tjcenter. org). Mapplethorpe was relatively well-known for his photography prior to the

mid-90's, but his fame reached a new level when some of his more explicit photographs appeared in a show that was funded by the National Endowment for the Arts (Tjcenter. org). There was public outrage over the show; because homosexuality was even less widely accepted than it is today, people were outraged that Mapplethorpe was allowed to display his photographs on public property, using public funds (Tjcenter. org).

The controversy raged on, and even today, some years after his death, Mapplethorpe remains a controversial figure. Some claim that his photographs are art, while others claim they are obscene. The Mapplethorpe controversy begs the question of where the line should be drawn between images that are deemed "obscene"-- legally, this term reflects a complete lack of artistic merit-- and images that are artistic but contain obscene or lewd themes.

The government has a tendency to construct complicated systems to define who or what organizations receive funding for various projects, and arts funding is no exception to this rule. However, there are questions that are raised regarding whether or not the government should pay for any arts projects at all. The Economist writes, "As governments struggle to pay for such basics as education and health care—and with private donations in decline—funding for the arts has taken a hit" (The Economist). If the government has a problem defining what art is and what art is not, perhaps it is best to leave the funding of art projects and the creation of grants to the private sector.

The only problem with this particular solution is that it has been shown that the inclusion of arts in the community, particularly in public schools, is an

enriching experience for the community and children within the community (Tjicenter. org). According to some, however, art can exist in the community without governmental funding. “ Art can and does thrive without government support, says Peter Spence at the Adam Smith Institute, a libertarian think-tank in London he argues that the British canon owes much of its existence to patrons and fee-paying audiences, not the fickle bureaucracy of government subsidies” (The Economist). There is something to be said for this argument: artists and bureaucracy mix notoriously badly. When artists are forced to interact with the bureaucracy, they often become disillusioned and frustrated. If the arts can survive without government funding, why not allocate the funding that would go to the arts elsewhere, and allow the private market to take care of grants and funding for the arts?

Those who support the government’s financial support of the arts claim: “ Those who run our great cultural organisations are leaders, impresarios, entrepreneurs and venture capitalists, who know how to make a little money go a long way. They contribute to growth, through the development of creative skills and economic regeneration, as well as the visitor economy” (The Economist). Essentially, these individuals claim that the arts enrich communities, turning them into places that are more enjoyable for people to live in. This is, perhaps, a more convincing argument than the former, but it still does not solve the problem of how to define “ art” in such a way that gives governmental organizations a proper structure for funding the arts. This argument is also a good one because it employs the idea that tourists will come to see places that are known as great centers of the arts-- this increases tourist traffic and will improve the economy of the area.

The only workable solution for choosing who is funded by various governmental organizations is to create a very clear, set system of criteria that artists must meet to be considered for funding. If artists meet these criteria, they can be considered by a group of other artists or experts for the funding or grant that they are seeking.

Rather than excluding artists on the basis of obscenity or various other potentially-restrictive criteria, it would be more logical to merely create a system that judges each artist based on his or her work, output, and creative merit. If an exhibit that is funded by the government could be potentially inflammatory, this is no reason not to fund that particular exhibit-- however, it should be made clear that the ideas expressed by the artist are not a reflection of the philosophical standings of the government or the government agency that funded the exhibit.

Removing government funding for art will not remove the problems that are caused by artists who create divisive works. These types of works are important, as they promote discourse between people who hold different viewpoints. A place with a very active arts community also tends to attract tourists and visitors, increasing cash flow to the area and improving the financial situation of the locale. This is incredibly important, especially in such financially uncertain times. Many people may see government subsidies and funding to the arts as unnecessary and wasteful, but putting these government monies into the arts will often have a very high rate of return on the grant or investment.

Defining art is a complicated philosophical construct, and it is an issue that every grant agency will struggle with when choosing to fund certain projects.

There will always be people who disagree with the decisions made by the grant agencies, but as long as no one is actively trying to silence artists and suppress their work, the government should continue to fund art and artists.

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