

Institution: The Open University

Unit of Assessment: D32 Philosophy

Title of case study: What is art? Bringing a philosophical perspective to engagement with the art world and the wider public

1. Summary of the impact

Derek Matravers' research in aesthetics has contributed to the public discourse on art by offering a plausible postmodern definition of 'art'. Matravers' definition offers a way of understanding art that places the emphasis on reasons, and thus moves beyond the obscurantism associated with contemporary art. His podcast on the subject, as part of the PhilosophyBites series, has taken the topic into public discourse. His work has also influenced the art world. Matravers participated in a conceptual art piece, where his ideas on the definition of art were incorporated into the art piece, effectively blurring the borders between the philosophy and the object of study.

2. Underpinning research

During the REF period, Matravers was a Senior Lecturer in Philosophy until May 2010, thereafter Professor of Philosophy.

The question of art's definition is central to the discipline of the philosophy of art, as well as being central to public discourse about the arts. The dominant philosophical answer is some version of George Dickie's 'Institutional Theory'. This holds that something is art if and only if it stands in the right relation to some social practice: the art world (*Art and the Aesthetic*, Cornell University Press). An approximation to the theory is that something is art if the right kind of person puts it forward as art. However, this theory is widely thought to suffer from a fatal dilemma: either the person putting the object forward has reasons for doing so, or they do not. If they do, then those reasons can form the basis for a definition of art. If they do not, then all we are left with is an arbitrary collection: a collection of objects for no reason at all.

Matravers' research into the definition of art spans a decade and emerged from his interest in the 'crisis of legitimacy' in the arts, grounded in the rejection of the need to provide reasons by some of the art world. His insight was that the dilemma could be answered by pointing out a scope ambiguity: although there is no reason such that everything that is put forward is put forward for that reason, it is nonetheless the case that, for everything that has been put forward, it has been put forward for a reason. This is a much more interesting and defensible version of the Institutional Theory.

Recently, Berys Gaut has produced a further attempt to elucidate the concept of art ("Art" as a Cluster Concept' in *Theories of Art Today* (ed.) Noel Carroll, University of Wisconsin Press, pp. 25–44). Gaut claims that 'art' is a 'cluster concept': there is a list of conditions that make something art. One of these (that the object is an artefact) is necessary, and (in particular cases) some number will be sufficient for something to be art. Matravers has argued that this attempt fails for a number of reasons. However, using the earlier research, it can be shown that Gaut's insights can be combined with an Institutional Theory to show that it is a mistake to think that the Institutional Theory can excuse those working in the art world from any need to justify their practices.

Matravers' demonstration that accounts of art cannot avoid reason-giving opens the opportunity for debate about what is and what is not art, and why. Public scepticism about much contemporary art (that it is obscure and self-serving) should be answered with debate about the nature and value of art, and the nature and value of particular purported works of art.

3. References to the research

Matravers, D. (2000) 'The Institutional Theory of Art: A Protean Creature', *The British Journal of*

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Aesthetics, Vol. 40, No. 2, pp. 242–50. (This has been translated and published in Latvia.)

Matravers, D. (2007) 'The Institutional Theory and Reasons', *The British Journal of Aesthetics*, Vol. 47, No. 3, pp. 251–57.

The two papers were published in an international peer-reviewed journal and entered in previous Research Assessment Exercises.

4. Details of the impact

Art is such a contested area in our culture that the term is extremely difficult to define. Developments in art since the early 20th century have made the issue particularly problematic. Matravers' work on the subject rejects the view that institutional definitions excuse the art world from having to engage in reasoned discourse, making his work of interest to members of the public who engage with art and used by people within the art world. He contributes to the public discourse on the definition of art by presenting his view in a way that is deliberately accessible to an audience outside the world of philosophy.

Matravers has contributed to the PhilosophyBites podcasts, recorded by David Edmonds and Nigel Warburton. The podcasts consist of 10 to 15 minute talks with a philosopher deemed to be an expert on some particular topic, with a view to engaging an audience outside academia. Matravers' podcast has proved very popular with users of the website: the interview has been downloaded 87,748 times (September 2013 figure). In comparison, the average number of unique visitors of podcasts from OU platforms is around 1000. The podcast has been used in various educational contexts (for example, on a wiki at Middle Tennessee State University and an Academy in Argentina) and is discussed in various blogs (for example, *The Wondering Kiwi* and *The Chaotic Semiotic*).

Furthermore, the transcript of the talk was one of 25 published in *PhilosophyBites* (OUP, 2010). This book aims to bring interviews with leading philosophers to a general audience: to date, it has sold more than 12,000 copies. In a review in *The Guardian*, the book was described as 'an excellent sampler of key philosophical issues'.

Matravers has also published an introduction to the philosophy of art, including a discussion of his views on the definition of art, which is aimed at the general public and, specifically, at interested members of the art world (*The Philosophy of Art: An Introduction with Eight Examples*, Acumen, 2013). The book is carried by art gallery bookshops; Tate Modern, for example. Although it is too early to get meaningful sales figures, the book has already led to invitations to give talks on the book: first, to the Oxford University Continuing Education Department and second, to students at Hills Road VIth Form College.

Matravers' discussions with the artist Alana Jelinek (artist in residence at the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology in Cambridge) have contributed directly to her work. In particular, he worked with her on a conceptual art piece, 'Not praising, burying', in which ten academics and artists painted pots and discussed the nature and value of art. The event was held in the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge on 2 November 2012. The work was performed in private, although a record of it is publicly available (problematizing the ontology of artworks being part of the point of the work). A follow up discussion took place on 8 November in front of a public audience of about 40 people. Jelinek has said that:

"This is Not Art: activism and other not-art' (2013) [her book] and the artworks, 'Not Praising, Burying' (2012) and 'The Field' (2009-ongoing) in particular have been an attempt to introduce the ideas of Derek Matravers to the contemporary art world and engage with them critically within that context.'

Matravers has been invited to continue this in a paper to be published in the fine art journal, *The Journal of Visual Arts Practice*.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

PhilosophyBites interview: <http://philosophybites.com/2008/03/derek-matravers.html>

Referencing the interview: <http://baicaphilo11.wordpress.com/2013/04/04/philosophy-bites-the-definition-of-art/>

<http://cophilosophy.blogspot.co.uk/2012/11/sec-19-group-4-matravers-on-art.html>

<http://thechaoticsemiotic.wordpress.com/tag/matravers/>

<http://wonderingkiwi.wordpress.com/2010/01/23/philosophy-bites-on-the-definition-of-art/>

Guardian review of PhilosophyBites: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2012/jan/24/philosophy-bites-david-edmonds-nigel-warburton-review>

Introductory book (*Introducing Philosophy of Art in Eight Case Studies*):
http://www.acumenpublishing.co.uk/display.asp?K=e2012040412033006&dtspan=180:420&sort=sort_date/d&m=9&dc=21

'Not praising, burying': <http://www.alanajelinek.com/notpraising-burying.pdf>

BBC website page listing 'Not praising, burying': <http://www.bbc.co.uk/thingstodo/activity/not-praising-burying/occurrence/193496>