

INTRODUCTION

The most obvious place to start is by describing what art is. What could be simpler?



*THAT'S
EASY. ART IS PAINTING, SCULPTURE
AND STUFF. WHY DO YOU NEED ART THEORY?
IT'S JUST WHAT YOU SEE IN THE GALLERIES
AND MUSEUMS.*

There is an everyday idea of what art is, but the problem is that it tends to break down—or break up—as you try to explain it. A separate, but related problem is to know if the art is any good. To do this you need a **theory of art**. A theory that explains both how you recognise art, what distinguishes it from other things, and what it is for.

Oscar Wilde 1854–1900, who was a great wit, once said:



*"NO GREAT ARTIST EVER SEES
THINGS AS THEY REALLY ARE. IF
HE DID HE WOULD CEASE TO BE AN
ARTIST."*

Oscar Wilde

This tells us that for Wilde:

Artists have superior insight.

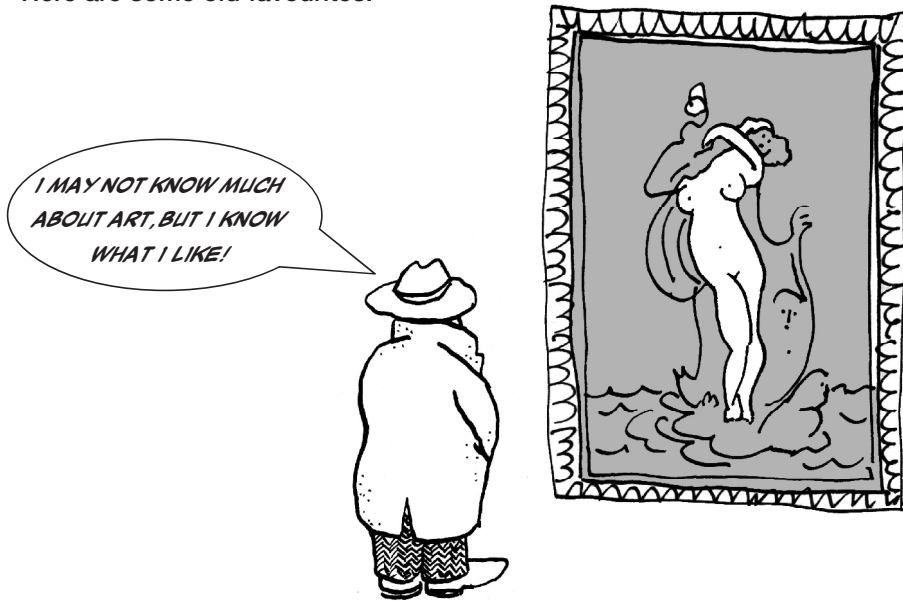
Art represents reality. It does not present things "as they really are."

And artists are always men!

The assumptions that underlie this seemingly flippant comment by Wilde contain several ideas about art which are, in fact, a theory of art. Everybody has a theory of art, although they probably have not stopped to consider it.

EVERYBODY HAS A THEORY OF ART

Here are some old favourites:

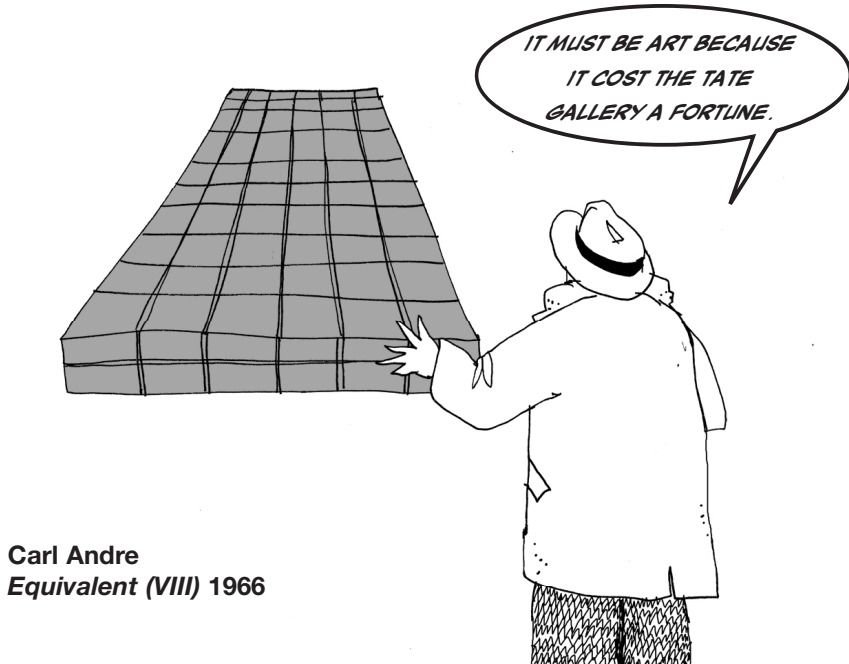


This theory doesn't get you very far, because art may well be about asking you to think about things you don't know or understand.



The idea about what makes an object, or experience, attractive or beautiful came to be known as the theory of aesthetics. Therefore an art object was valued for itself alone and not for its purpose or function. But, nowadays, plenty of art isn't attractive or beautiful and isn't meant to be—it might well be ugly and a bit gross. So this theory, although once very important, now seems less useful when looking at art.

Sometimes commercial value and artistic value get confused:



Carl Andre
Equivalent (VIII) 1966

So, it is worth remembering that:



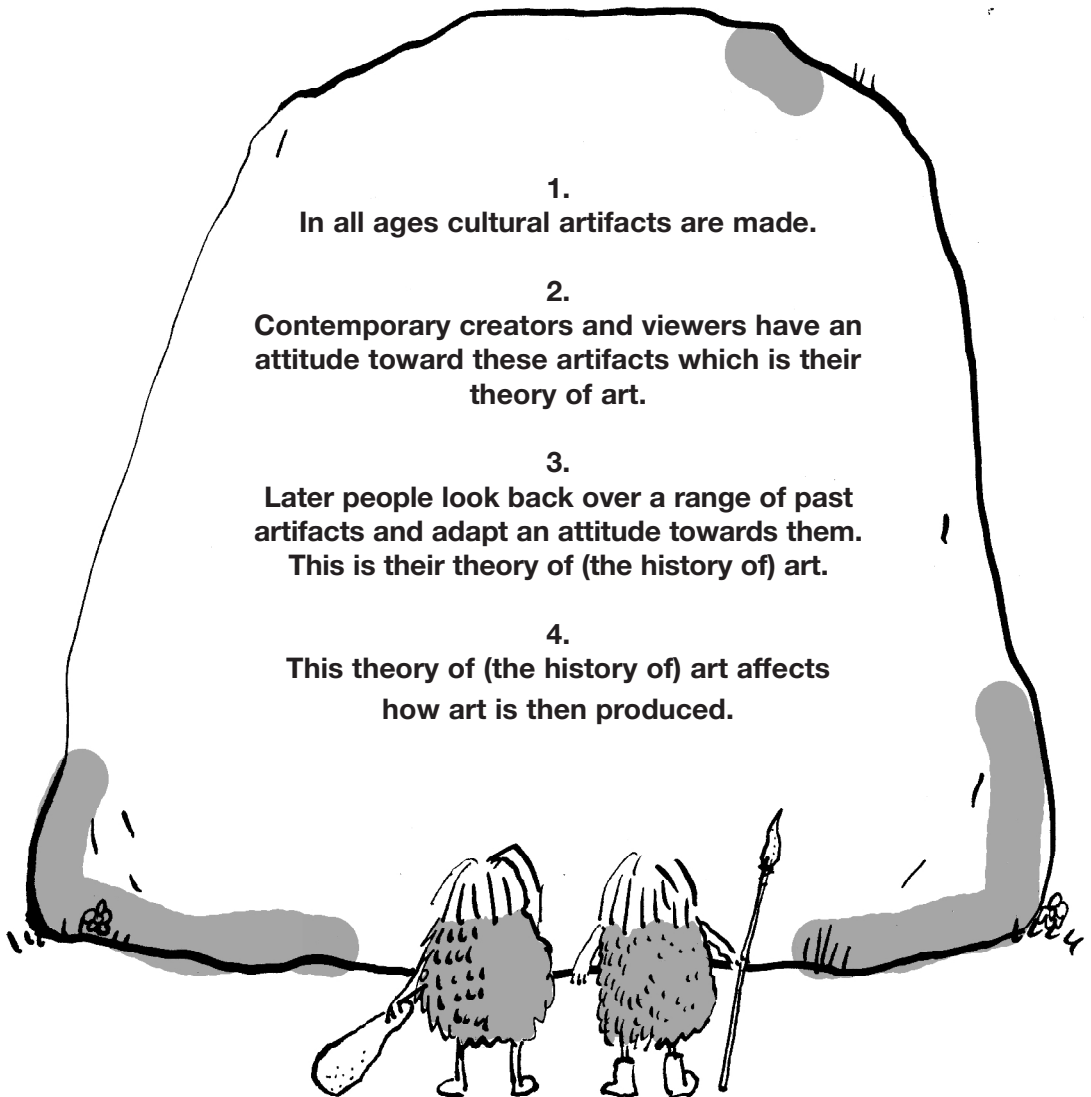
Vincent van Gogh
Self-Portrait with Bandaged Ear 1889

The point is, that what is valued as art today may not be later, and the *idea* of what art is today is very different from the idea of what art was in say, the 1960s, let alone van Gogh's day or the Renaissance. Our appreciation of these differences adds to our interest in art.

WHAT ACTUALLY IS ART THEORY THEN?

A theory is basically a reflection, often a self-reflection, on things we see and understand. Art theory is a set of principles that attempts to reflect on why we describe certain objects or events as art, and which can help identify common characteristics of works of art.

What we can say for sure is:



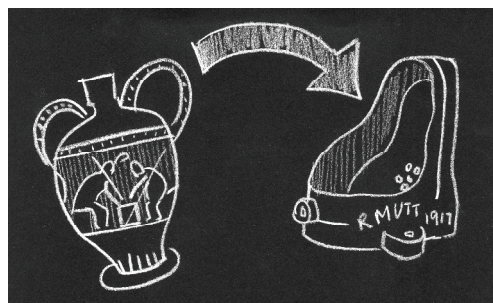
Any theory of art will need to be able to answer the questions a particular age thinks are relevant for art:



But given that art is so complicated why don't we just have a history of art?



The problem of having a history of art is that in order to arrange your material you need a theory of art: when art started, what it is, and how it developed. Some people argue that art started with the Greeks and ended with **Marcel Duchamp** 1887–1968, but that is really just one theory of classical Western art; and although it has proved very popular, it's certainly a theory with limitations.



THE NEXT QUESTION IS WHERE TO START?

*ART STARTED WITH CAVE PAINTING, GOT
SPEEDED UP BY THE GREEKS, FORGOTTEN
ABOUT FOR AWHILE AND THEN REINVENTED IN
THE RENAISSANCE. THE ROMANTICS MADE IT
ALL PERSONAL AND NOW IT'S VIDEOS,
INSTALLATIONS AND STUFF.*



This pretty much sums up the common-sense idea of the history of art, and of course it is both completely wrong and kind of right at the same time.

It is an illusion that current ideas of art are universal, that is to say they represent some quality that goes back to the Greeks or beyond. This is a retrospective invention in which we paint a history of art as being a development towards the universality of art, which is itself an Enlightenment idea.

Paleolithic man, the Greeks, and all the cultures in between, didn't talk about art like we do. Even the great artists of the Renaissance had different ideas as to what art was. They would all have had their own theories about what they were making.

