

## REVIEW OF JENNIFER LENA'S *ENTITLED*

by C. Thi Nguyen

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LENA, JENNIFER C. *Entitled: Discriminating Tastes and the Expansion of the Arts*. Princeton University Press, 2019, xiv + 231 pp., \$29.95 cloth.

One of the favorite questions in the philosophy of art has been, to the delight of some, and the abject boredom of others: what is *art*? This might seem a standard definitional question—just the sort of thing which analytic philosophers seem to think they should specialize in. But answering that question has proved rather difficult, despite generations of very intelligent aestheticians throwing themselves at the task—proposing definitions, giving counterexamples, refining theories, adding epicycles.

A more fruitful approach might be to start elsewhere. What hangs on that definition? Obviously, *art* is a gatekeeping concept. When something gets called art, it's allowed into museums and art galleries; it's up for arts funding. Its practitioners and collectors are accorded far more respect. A collector of impressionist paintings is a noble connoisseur; the adult collector of *My Little Pony* gear is merely an odd sort of hobbyist. Whoever controls the boundaries of art wields significant cultural power.

The best contemporary version of such a socio-political analysis might be Jennifer Lena's new book, *Entitled: Discriminating Tastes and the Expansion of the Arts*—an authoritative, eye-opening, and astonishingly detailed look at the power struggle over the boundaries of art, as conducted over approximately the last two centuries of American cultural life. At the center is Lena's interest in the legitimation of new art forms. How do modern dance, photography, graffiti, tap dance, and comics go from mere pop forms to widely accepted forms of art? One thing we learn: much of what we now consider to be paradigms of high art—like opera, ballet, and theater—were, until quite recently, far lowlier on the totem pole. Lena focuses on questions of social power and control. Who got to change the boundaries of art, how did they get that power, and why did they apply it as they did? Lena argues that, while the boundaries of art have expanded to include all sorts of new arts, these expansions have typically come at the behest of, and served the interest of, a limited core of elites.

The argument of *Entitled* emerges, satisfyingly, from the details—the careful observation of a thousand historical and sociological minutiae. Who were the museum curators, and why were they selected? Who got to disperse arts funding, and how did they obtain that power? Where did the professional art administrator and the professional art historian come from—and what forms of restructuring had to occur in the university, in order to birth these new professions? A reader steeped in

traditional philosophy of art may be rather surprised with how much of the book is spent on the details of arts funding. A reader who has finished the book may come to find it surprising how little philosophers of art have thought about arts funding.

Traditionally, the analytic methodology for defining “art” has tested its definitions against some enshrined canon of art. That methodology has become subject to important criticism from feminist and critical race theoretic approaches for preserving and amplifying the historical biases and prejudices that played into the establishment of that canon. *Entitled* stands (quite explicitly) on those critical shoulders. It adds, however, an exhaustively detailed look into exactly who sets the boundaries of art, why they acted, and how they succeeded. Much of the book is based on a thorough literature review of extant work in the field, combined with Lena’s team’s deep-dive into the records of some key arts nonprofits and other new research. This is supported by a rigorous, quantitative analysis of historical records, which offer empirical support for the causal claims about which factors were most important to actually effect artistic legitimations.

Lena’s previous book, *Banding Together: How Communities Create Genres in Popular Music* (Princeton University Press, 2012), was one of the high points in contemporary sociology of music. Lena argued that musical genres often followed a clear life cycle, each stage with its own distinctive values – from the musical innovations of the avant-garde stage, through the community-orientation of the local scene stage, through the profit-driven corporate stage and ending with the purism of the traditionalist revival stage. *Entitled* picks up on and broadens its predecessor’s interest in the entanglements between artistic values, arts funding, and other social interests.

So how do new art forms acquire legitimacy? Lena’s answers are many. One factor is the work of what Lena calls “reputational entrepreneurs”—individuals who have already gathered some cultural capital, in the form of respect and legitimacy. Such entrepreneurs then invest that capital in new art forms, imbuing them with legitimacy by working to “define, isolate, and ‘sacralize’ particular objects” (p. 90). And the isolation part turns out to be particularly crucial. In Lena’s picture, the artistic legitimation of one art form always happens through a contrast with another, more popular form. Legitimation depends on establishing an authoritative basis for separation from some crasser form, a “sacralization” which separates the new art forms from everyday life.

Among the most important modes of separation turns out to be in the *funding structures of the arts*. Commercial culture, says Lena, is typically barred from the art world. In order to attain the cultural status of high art, an art form must appear free of the grip of the marketplace. Lena offers many case studies here, including a fascinating study of the history of opera. Until the 1930s, opera companies operated for profit; these opera companies put on a mixture of grand opera, light opera, musical comedy, and vaudeville. In order to attain a higher cultural status, opera advocates needed to define the boundaries of American opera and fix some generally accepted artistic canon, visibly excluding much of the more

popular material. The watershed moment came in 1908, when the Met Opera announced that it was no longer operating for profit and restructured itself as a non-profit trust. The transition to non-profit status turns out, in fact, to be a standard move in the artistic legitimation process. “Non-profit organizations isolate culture and sacralize it,” says Lena (p. 17).

Another crucial factor in artistic legitimation is the “rationalization of administration and the creation of arts administration as a profession” (p. 6). Lena here charts a transition between two styles of museum management. Before the turn of the twentieth century, most museum directors were “art men”: scions of wealthy families, friends of artists, and with little to no training in art history, curation, or museum management—but full of charismatic authority. The art men had largely unquestioned power over what went in their museums. But, says Lena, their decisions about the boundaries of art were usually not accepted by the general public. These art men did not have the right sort of cultural capital to affect large-scale changes in the public conception of art.

But things changed. By the 1930s, the position of museum director had become a professional role which required specific—and well-regulated—formal training. The professionalization of arts administration was made possible by the growth and widespread availability of art history classes between 1876 and 1930, and by the consolidation of art history departments, whose graduates came to dominate arts administration, and whose academic members became esteemed consultants to non-profit institutions. Academic credentials and professional organizations, it turns out, confer the right form of authority. The public tended to accept the legitimating pronouncement of these credentialed art professionals.

Another important factor in legitimation, says Lena, is the existence of published material which has appropriate cultural authority, and which “can act as guides for sophisticates” (p. 50). To distinguish artistic objects from ordinary ones, aesthetic entrepreneurs need to create usable critical taxonomies and artistic categories. Artistic legitimacy is established, in part, simply through the existence of academic discourse and conversations of informed connoisseurship. Such discourse can’t happen without a stabilized taxonomy. As Lena puts it, such a classificatory effort constructs the sorts of “legible objects of knowledge” over which academic and refined conversation can occur (p. 91).

Academic aestheticians have a special role to play here. A key factor in artistic legitimation is the existence of some criteria for evaluation of artistic quality, separate from market concerns. University aestheticians, says Lena, can create such distinctive sets of evaluative criteria and imbue them with legitimacy. And they do so by “attacking performances that did not merit the commercial acclaim they received, and seeking to highlight undercapitalized materials of high quality” (p. 51). In the very acts of pooh-pooing popular works and praising more rarified works, academics provide some of the social separation needed for artistic legitimation.

The center of the book is a pair of astounding, chapter-length case studies of organized

legitimizing ventures, which illustrate the legitimating impact of nonprofits and funding. The first concerns the profound effect of the New Deal and the Works Progress Administration (WPA) on the development of the American arts. Several key programs in the WPA aimed at supporting starving, out-of-work artists. These efforts, says Lena, ended up radically changing who was funded as an artist, and thus what counted as art. The WPA took the “public subsidy” that had been confined to the high arts, and opened it up to a broad variety of vernacular arts and artists. And it provided an institutional structure that legitimated those vernacular arts. Says Lena, the WPA “effectively legitimated a form of vernacular American culture through the consumption of this culture by elites, who then condoned such consumption as a form of moral and civic engagement” (p. 40). The result was a massive and systematic expansion of the boundaries of what was considered art. (The WPA also opened up access to the arts to a far broader audience, since most of the arts produced with its funding were made available to the public, free of charge.)

Crucially, key figures in the WPA administration believed their goal was to foster an understanding of America’s special artistic richness, and to emphasize its independence from Europe. They thus embraced “Regionalism”—art which depicted real people in real, specifically American settings. The WPA was particularly interested in discovering and promoting uniquely American arts, including vernacular arts such as quilting and folk songs. Thus, perhaps a bit perversely, a dedication to American nationalism ended up funding the efforts of folklorists, folk musicians, and the like, and providing the funding and non-profit cover for a major boundary expansion.

The second major case study concerns the Museum of Primitive Art (MPA), in operation from 1940–1982. This is a story of a struggle for cultural authority which was won by a small group of elite tastemakers. At the center of the story is Nelson Rockefeller, whose contribution to the arts in America, says Lena, has been vastly underrated. Rockefeller was a key figure in the founding of the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA)—which was created to display the sorts of modern art that the New York Metropolitan Museum of Art would not. But Rockefeller and the MoMA later parted ways. Rockefeller had gathered possibly the world’s largest collection of what was called “primitive art” (p. 43). The MoMA itself refused to display Rockefeller’s collection of primitive art, and its curators disparaged Rockefeller for his interests. In response, Rockefeller and the curator Rene d’Harnoncourt founded the MPA.

The MPA was a driving force in the legitimation of primitive art. Up to this point, primitive art objects had been displayed only in ethnological museums, with text that centered on how those objects functioned in religion, work, or community. Rockefeller and d’Harnoncourt created the MPA to display these objects in an aesthetic context, to emphasize their artistic qualities (p. 49). The MPA provided what Lena takes to be another key factor in legitimation: an authoritative display space.

Of course, the particular tastes and theories of the Rockefeller and the curators informed which

sorts of objects acquired legitimacy. First, the MPA emphasized those primitive art objects that resembled traditional high Western art. They typically preferred representational sculptures over decorated surfaces and abstractly patterned textiles (p. 60). Second, the MPA—and the market of collectors and art buyers it helped to create—focused in the kinds of physical objects that could easily be transported and displayed in a museum or in a collector’s home. For example, they preferred primitive arts made of hardwood, bronze, or ceramic, over those made from leaf assemblages, disintegrating fabrics, or other evanescent organics. In many cases, primitive art objects were modified to fit the modes and practices of Western art consumption. For example, Navajo sand paintings were originally made on surfaces designed to be sat or stood upon, and to be erased in that use. Western buyers contracted Navajo artisans to create new sorts of sand paintings, where the sand was fixed onto glue-covered panels, in order to make them durable, portable, and hangable on walls. Much primitive art, says Lena, was unruly by the standards of the Western art world; it needed to be disciplined, transformed to fit into the environments and practices of the Western art world. Other sorts of objects, such as those covered with feathers and leaves, were never even acquired for the Western art market, since that market didn’t have the knowledge or logistical capacity to transport or conserve them. Says Lena: “Whole categories of art might have been eliminated from the canon as a result of the failure to obtain or discipline those objects” (p. 52). Because of the MPA, then, the boundaries of art expanded—but those expansions were steered in directions that suited the purposes and habits of the pre-existing art market.

This consumption and repackaging is, in Lena’s eyes, a special kind of power-move. Cosmopolitan elites get to take on the markers of being inclusive, broad-minded, and tolerant. At the same time, they present themselves as tastemakers—as the arbiters of what counts as high-quality art, and what does not (p. 115). Many Western collectors of primitive art, for instance, seemed to think that the “primitive” cultures that had created those arts were entirely unable to recognize the real value of what they had made, and that these primitives were likely to mistreat and fail to properly preserve their treasures. It took, claimed these collectors, the eye of the trained Western art appreciator to properly appreciate the real value of those works, and up to the Western art appreciator to find, protect, and properly enshrine these primitive works (p. 55–56). The art market, Lena concludes, is an instrument of privilege, setting up one class as the arbiter of another’s culture (p. 116).

And, as a matter of fact, the names that recur over the course of *Entitled* are part of its very argument. The book is full of Vanderbilts and Rockefellers. Lena’s research reveals that a small and tightly-knight cadre of elites—almost entirely wealthy white men—ruled over the WPA and the various museums. One of the central observations of the book, sums up Lena, is of “these elites’ near-stranglehold on the artistic legitimation process” (p. 148). (One notable exception that Lena documents is the importance of African American faculty and graduate students in the legitimation of African American literature.)

What, then, should the response of philosophers of art be to this treasure trove of historical and sociological data? For me, at least, this book puts the final nail in the coffin of certain traditional approaches to the definitional question about art. It is very hard, after *Entitled* and its kindred, to continue to take seriously the standard methodology for defining *art*: that is, by testing proposed definitions against examples and counterexamples of “art” and “non-art”, taken from some set of supposedly shared and supposedly timeless intuitions. These intuitions now stand revealed as abjectly contingent.

What remains for philosophers of art to do, instead? I can see at least two directions for those still interested in philosophical questions about the boundaries of art. First, we could seek an account of the concept of art, not by ignoring the historical contingencies and boundaries fluctuations, but by focusing on the flux itself. When we simply deploy intuitive examples of what is and is not art, we are simply regurgitating one version of the boundaries, as they have been drawn at one particular moment. Perhaps we can unearth a useful conception of art, not by taking as given one particular recent instantiation of these boundaries, but by looking at the sorts of considerations that bring us to redraw those boundaries.

This approach might help us answer one of the lingering questions left in the wake of *Entitled*. That is: is there any coherent meaning at all to the idea of art, or is it an entirely hollow concept? When we legitimate something as “art”, we are conferring some sort of status on it. What exactly is the substance of that status? One might, in a reductive mood, propose that the honorific consists of nothing more than the various powers it contingently confers—that is, that deciding to call some genre “art” is nothing more than a complex social license, which permits that genre access to prestigious display spaces, funding from arts non-profits, etc. But one might also attempt to resist the reductive mood by showing that the status had some conceptual center, and that what has changed is just how we have applied it to the world. We might even suggest that the many of these boundary changes represent our fumbling attempts to improve our application of that stable concept—while fighting with various power-grabs which attempt to repurpose that concept to some other end. This sort of maneuver should be familiar. Many, for example, have claimed that the term “justice” has some kind of conceptually coherent center, and that the endlessly changing justice systems of the world represent our fumbling attempts to figure out how to enact justice in the real world—as well as various perversions of the concept by the power-hungry.

A second response to *Entitled* could be to lose interest in conceptual analysis, and to re-center our inquiries on the social power of the art-concept. In this case, what matters most about the art-concept is precisely its connection to power, access, and legitimacy—that is, its social function. This response would put definitional questions about art directly into conversation with the social and political wing of contemporary philosophy. For one thing, Lena’s analysis helps us to understand much of the history of artistic legitimation as instances of epistemic and testimonial injustice. Her analysis could also prove a fertile ground for connecting aesthetics with the project of ameliorative conceptual engineering. As Elizabeth Cantalamessa suggests, perhaps the arguments over what counts as art cannot be settled by

reference to any antecedent facts of the matter. They are better understood as pragmatic negotiations about how the boundaries of the concept should be drawn [“Appropriation Art, Fair Use, and Metalinguistic Negotiation, *British Journal of Art* (forthcoming)]. Perhaps what Lena teaches us is that, to echo Sally Haslanger’s words, we should focus less on what art is, and more on what we want art to be [“Gender and Race: (What) Are They? (What) Do We Want Them To Be?”, *Nous* 34 no.1 (2000): pp. 31–55].

C. THI NGUYEN

Department of Philosophy and Humanities

Utah Valley University