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The Shifting Boundaries of Art

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Abstract: Art has long been understood as a dynamic cultural practice whose boundaries are shaped by changing philosophical, institutional, social, and technological conditions. This review examines the contemporary renegotiation of art's boundaries through an interdisciplinary synthesis of scholarship spanning philosophy and aesthetics, art history and criticism, art education, art therapy and well-being, art worlds and markets, and digital and technological transformation. The reviewed literature demonstrates that the question of what constitutes art can no longer be addressed solely through formal or aesthetic criteria. Philosophical debates have challenged the possibility of a single, stable definition of art, while developments in art history and criticism have exposed the contested nature of artistic canons, media, and audiences. At the same time, art education increasingly incorporates local heritage, critical literacy, and participatory approaches; art therapy research highlights the relational and material dimensions of artistic practice; and studies of art markets and institutions reveal the influence of commercialization, cultural policy, and institutional gatekeeping on artistic value. Digital technologies further complicate these boundaries by transforming artistic production, reception, authorship, and participation, particularly through generative and interactive forms of art. Despite these substantial developments, existing scholarship remains largely fragmented across disciplinary domains, with limited attention to how these transformations interact as components of a broader process. This review therefore identifies an integrative research gap and argues for a more interconnected understanding of art as a conceptually contested, institutionally situated, socially embedded, therapeutically meaningful, and technologically mediated practice. Such an approach provides a broader framework for understanding how the boundaries of art are continuously reconstructed in contemporary cultural life.

Keywords: Art boundaries; Contemporary art; Art theory; Art criticism; Art education

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1. Introduction

The study of art is inherently interdisciplinary, encompassing questions concerning what constitutes art, who has the authority to define it, and how it is produced, taught, exhibited, exchanged, and experienced. These questions have been examined across philosophy, art history, education, therapy, sociology, and increasingly, digital and media studies. The scholarship reviewed in this paper, spanning five decades of research, converges on a fundamental observation: the boundaries of art are neither fixed nor self-evident but are continually renegotiated at conceptual, institutional, and technological levels. The scope of art itself has consequently expanded considerably, encompassing not only visual and digital practices but also embodied traditions such as Chinese martial arts. For example, Chengrui, Guobin, and Zhen (2025) examine the integration of literary and martial skills as an art form that develops from the physical toward the spiritual.

Against this background, this review synthesizes six major strands of scholarship concerning the contemporary transformation of art: definitional and philosophical debates, art history and criticism, art education, art therapy and well-being, art worlds and markets, and digital and technological transformation. Rather than treating these areas as isolated fields of inquiry, the review considers how they collectively illuminate the changing conceptual, social, institutional, and technological boundaries of art. It subsequently identifies an important interdisciplinary gap concerning the need to understand these transformations as interconnected processes rather than as separate developments.

2. Defining Art: Conceptual and Philosophical Contests

One of the most enduring debates in art scholarship concerns the fundamental question of what art is. Arthur Danto's influential thesis concerning the end of art, as reconstructed by Leung and Yiu (2010), argues that the traditional concept of art reached a point of exhaustion in the 1960s. Andy Warhol's *Brillo Box* is particularly significant in this account because its visual indistinguishability from an ordinary commercial object challenged the assumption that artworks could be identified through perceptual properties alone. The consequence, according to this interpretation, is a pluralistic conception of art in which no unified set of visible characteristics can adequately distinguish artworks from ordinary objects, thereby leaving philosophy with the task of clarifying the conceptual foundations of art (Leung and Yiu, 2010).

This argument has generated at least two important directions in subsequent philosophical inquiry. First, it has encouraged scholars to locate the defining properties of art in features that are not immediately perceptible, particularly intention-dependent properties. Uidhir (2010), for instance, argues that non-art objects can be understood as failed instances of art only when intention-directed action and the conditions for its successful realization are incorporated into an account of artistic status. Second, Danto's pluralistic diagnosis raises the more fundamental question of whether the concept of art remains theoretically meaningful when no single definition can encompass its diverse manifestations. Magnus and Uidhir (2024) address this issue directly by arguing that art pluralism—the proposition that there is no single correct account of art—does not necessarily entail eliminativism. Nevertheless, they suggest that general references to "art" may function primarily in a loose and conversational sense rather than as a theoretically unified concept.

A complementary body of scholarship seeks not to eliminate or radically restrict the concept of art but to reconsider its scope and classificatory boundaries. Osborne (2004) argues that contemporary art criticism must operate as a form of art history grounded in a historically reflective Romantic philosophy of art capable of addressing the post-conceptual and anti-aesthetic conditions of contemporary artistic practice. Similarly, Caldarola (2026) examines the meaning of "spatial art" and proposes criteria for classifying situated practices, installations, virtual-reality environments, and other forms as spatial arts. These efforts demonstrate that the expansion of artistic practices requires corresponding developments in the conceptual vocabulary through which they are classified and interpreted.

Technological transformation has further complicated these definitional questions. Bychkov and Mankovskaya (2011) examine how technocratic and digital civilization has reshaped artistic language and propose the concept of aesthetic virtual reality. Lukichev (2019), meanwhile, develops a taxonomy encompassing generative, computer, and interactive arts in an attempt to establish conceptual distinctions within artistic practices transformed by computational technologies. These debates extend beyond philosophical abstraction and have direct implications for art education. Contemporary art institutions frequently rely on institutional definitions when determining what qualifies as art, prompting sustained debate over whether alternative definitions remain credible and pedagogically useful (Cooper, 2021; Kamhi, 2021; Morris, 2021; Siegesmund, 2021).

3. Art History and Criticism: Canons, Media, and Audiences

Art historians and critics have likewise confronted the instability of the object they study. The boundaries of art history have been challenged by practices and objects that do not fit comfortably within established disciplinary canons. Lowish (2015), for example, investigates the position of rock art within art-historical discourse and demonstrates how European and Australian chronological narratives have frequently treated rock art—from Lascaux to Australian examples—as an origin point while simultaneously excluding it from established disciplinary canons. This tension raises broader questions about the relationship between different scholarly traditions and about what each can contribute to the interpretation of art.

Similar boundary questions arise in scholarship on Indigenous art. Keyser (1996) examines painted bison robes as a neglected component of the lexicon of Northern Plains biographic art, connecting rock art, hide paintings, and ledger drawings within a broader interpretive framework. Such research demonstrates that established art-historical categories are not neutral or exhaustive but are shaped by particular historical and disciplinary assumptions.

Technological innovation has repeatedly generated comparable challenges for art criticism. Orrghen (2020) examines how Swedish daily-press criticism negotiated the identity crisis surrounding video art between 1985 and 1991. The study draws parallels between the reception of video art, nineteenth-century photography, and twenty-first-century digital art, suggesting that newly emerging technological art forms often pass through periods of critical uncertainty before becoming conceptually and institutionally stabilized. This pattern indicates that technological novelty does not

merely introduce new artistic media; it also requires critics and institutions to renegotiate the categories through which artistic legitimacy is established.

The diversification of artistic practices has likewise challenged conventional boundaries. Piguet and Frecuret (2002) document the expansion of artistic practices during the 1970s, including minimalism, conceptual art, body art, land art, and Arte Povera. Oguz (2015) further examines the effects of globalization on artistic production and circulation, emphasizing how the international movement, commodification, and exchange of art contributed to the emergence of relational and appropriation art and to a broader post-art condition.

The institutions through which criticism is produced and circulated are themselves increasingly subject to scholarly scrutiny. Wang and Ho (2017), through a bibliometric analysis of art exhibition reviews indexed in the Arts and Humanities Citation Index, demonstrate that this literature is concentrated in a relatively small number of journals and among a limited group of prolific authors. Such concentration highlights the institutional structures that shape the production and dissemination of art criticism. Jakovljevic (2026) investigates the relationship between the art project and the art object through conversations with a curator and a critic, while Webster (2012) reflects on her own exhibition through the perspectives of conceptual, Dada, and narrative art and their associated processes and materials. Historical research also illustrates the interaction between criticism, curatorial practice, and broader cultural identities. Fowler (2015), for example, reconstructs the 1944 *Religious Art of Today* exhibition and demonstrates how modern art and religious identity intersected through curatorial selections involving Catholic, Jewish, and Navajo works.

4. Art Education: Heritage, Citizenship, and Critical Literacy

Art education represents another important domain in which artistic boundaries are inherited, negotiated, and reproduced. A substantial body of scholarship, particularly within Chinese art and design education, emphasizes the pedagogical significance of local, folk, and cultural traditions. Liu, Liu, and Huang (2017) argue that integrating local folk-art resources into art and design education can strengthen the localization of curricula while broadening their substantive content. Hu and Liu (2017) similarly demonstrate how the practical characteristics, spiritual aesthetics, and customary dimensions of folk art can inform contemporary art and design. Bin (2017) examines the integration of landscape art and digital art within modern design, illustrating the potential for traditional and technological forms to coexist within contemporary artistic education. Huang (2017) further argues that advanced art education should cultivate an understanding of people as a fundamental source of artistic creation, thereby linking artistic development with broader social values.

Beyond these culturally oriented approaches, scholarship has also addressed the broader educational legitimacy and social function of art. Cannatella (2024) challenges arguments that question the evidential or educational value of arts education, maintaining that the arts constitute a genuine educational necessity rather than an optional luxury. This perspective positions art education not simply as the transmission of technical skills but as an important component of broader intellectual and social development.

Other studies emphasize the cognitive and social functions of art education. Szekely (2008) investigates the aesthetics of purchasing art in commercial environments and argues that art students should be prepared to act as critical consumers rather than simply reproduce elite conceptions of taste. Mat (2017) identifies a crisis in the development of art knowledge within Malaysian contemporary visual art and associates artistic value with critical thinking and broader knowledge of the world. Jokela, Hiltunen, and Härkönen (2015) introduce art-based action research as a participatory methodology responsive to the situational and communal characteristics of contemporary art in northern university settings. They present this approach as a potential model for educating future generations of art and design researchers.

Taken together, this literature suggests that art education functions simultaneously as a mechanism of cultural transmission and as a site of critical negotiation. Educational institutions do not merely teach students what art is; they also participate in determining which traditions, practices, values, and modes of interpretation are considered artistically legitimate.

5. Art, Therapy, and Well-Being

A substantial and methodologically diverse literature conceptualizes art as a therapeutic and well-being-oriented practice. Early scholarship established the historical and professional foundations of the field. Feen-Calligan and Sands-Goldstein (1996), for example, surveyed pioneers in art therapy to reconstruct the development of the field and to examine the role of personal artmaking within therapeutic practice.

More recent research has expanded this agenda by examining the relationship between artistic materials, digital technologies, therapeutic interaction, and psychological well-being. Choe (2014), using a participatory design approach, identifies characteristics of digital art applications considered useful by art therapists. The study highlights both the opportunities created by digital media and the limitations that must be considered when incorporating such technologies into therapeutic contexts. Pénzes, van Hooren, Dokter, Smeijsters, and Hutschemaekers (2014) develop a grounded-theory framework demonstrating that clients' interactions with the properties of art materials can reflect dimensions of mental health, thereby establishing connections among material properties, artmaking processes, and clinical interpretation.

The relationship between participation in artistic activity and well-being has also received empirical attention. Jue (2023) reports a positive association between art practice and the subjective well-being of art therapy students, while emphasizing that actual engagement in artistic activity is more consequential than simply holding a favorable attitude toward art. Rosa (2023), from a humanistic perspective, argues that therapists' participation in artmaking alongside clients may strengthen the therapeutic relationship. At the same time, the study identifies therapist well-being and cultural variation as areas requiring further investigation.

Art and well-being have also been examined at institutional and environmental levels. Bordonaro, Galliart, Van Steenhuyse, Huang, and Tamzin (2025) present an Arts in Medicine partnership as an example of interdisciplinary collaboration supporting behavioral health across medical environments. Fudickar, Konetzka, Nielsen, and Hathorn (2022) review evidence concerning the use of art in hospitals and find support for natural scenes and figurative art in patient rooms, although they also note that findings across studies remain contested. Solvang (2018) situates art therapy within the broader sociology of disability and distinguishes among art therapy, outsider art, disability art, and disability aesthetics as different conceptual frameworks for understanding the relationship between artistic practice and disability.

This literature consequently expands the significance of art beyond aesthetic or cultural production. Art is also understood as an embodied and relational practice capable of influencing therapeutic processes, social participation, and subjective well-being. At the same time, the diversity of these perspectives reinforces the need to consider artistic practice within its broader social and institutional contexts.

6. Art Worlds, Markets, and Institutional Support

A fourth major research stream examines the social and economic institutions through which art is produced, valued, exchanged, and supported. Alexander and Bowler (2014) argue that the arts and the sociology of art are situated at a critical juncture shaped by the international expansion of art markets, neoliberal institutional models, and changing understandings of artistic work and audiences. Their analysis underscores the importance of examining art not solely as a cultural product but also as an activity embedded within wider institutional and economic structures.

The relationship between art and markets has consequently attracted sustained scholarly attention. Kharchenkova (2024) demonstrates that the merchandising of contemporary art in China—including the reproduction of high-art imagery on everyday consumer products such as mugs—is regarded as a legitimate practice that can generate income and promote artists in a context characterized by limited state support. Tratnik (2019), by contrast, argues that art institutions increasingly serve market-oriented functions, with aesthetic appreciation being displaced by collecting and investment and marketing increasingly substituting for conceptual justification.

The social relationships underlying art markets are more complex than a purely economic interpretation might suggest. Rojas and de la Torre (2023) challenge the representation of art dealers as exclusively status-oriented gatekeepers, showing that dealing can also involve communal logics based on friendship and community building. Similarly, Castellote and Okwuosa (2020) document the emergence of the Lagos art world as a global hub supported by galleries, fairs, festivals, and a critical mass of collectors. This case illustrates how globalization can reshape the geographical organization of artistic production, circulation, and consumption.

The influence of art also extends beyond dedicated art institutions into broader consumer markets. Zhang and Yan (2025) find that the art infusion effect in product evaluation is conditioned by repeated exposure: although initial exposure can generate positive effects, excessive repetition may produce art fatigue and reduce these benefits. This finding highlights the importance of considering how artistic value interacts with commercial contexts and consumer responses.

Public and governmental support constitutes another important institutional dimension. Cohen (2002) examines local government support for arts and culture, while Filicko and Lafferty (2002) address the methodological challenge of

defining the arts and cultural universe for measurement purposes. Wysomirski (2002) proposes a four-part model of support for the arts, and Smith (2017) finds that many municipal arts administrators lack formal training in public art and arts management. Gould (2018), meanwhile, examines street art and situates its production and display within broader institutional and public contexts.

Collectively, this literature demonstrates that the meaning and value of art are shaped not only by artists and audiences but also by markets, governments, cultural institutions, professional networks, and systems of public support. Artistic boundaries are therefore inseparable from the institutional structures through which artistic practices acquire visibility, legitimacy, and economic value.

7. Digital and Technological Transformation

The most recent transformation of artistic practice has emerged from the increasing integration of digital technologies and computational systems. Wilke (2014) conceptualizes mediatization as having multiple relationships with art: media can function as the subject matter and material of art, as the institutional infrastructure through which art is disseminated, and as a mechanism through which reception becomes digitized. This transformation changes the position of the spectator by moving beyond passive observation toward more interactive forms of participation.

Generative and computational art further complicate established understandings of artistic production. Lukichev (2019) positions generative art as a transitional phenomenon linking twentieth- and twenty-first-century artistic practices and combining traditional artistic media with computational processes. Such developments challenge conventional distinctions between artist, tool, process, and artwork because computational systems increasingly participate in the production of artistic outcomes.

The emergence of artificial intelligence has intensified these debates. Wang, She, Lin, and Zhang (2025) trace the development of AI visual art and its social reception and argue that artificial intelligence is likely to challenge established criteria of artistic evaluation, contribute to the emergence of a new artist archetype based on human-computer symbiosis, and facilitate broader democratization of artistic production. These developments can be considered alongside Bychkov and Mankovskaya's (2011) earlier discussion of aesthetic virtual reality, which anticipated the growing importance of technologically mediated artistic experiences.

Taken together, this scholarship indicates that digital technologies do more than provide artists with new tools. They alter the material conditions of artistic production, reshape relationships among creators and audiences, transform modes of dissemination and reception, and challenge established criteria of artistic authorship and evaluation. As a result, the boundary between art and technology is being renegotiated at a pace that may exceed the capacity of existing conceptual and critical vocabularies to accommodate these developments.

Research Streams and Representative Scholarship

Table 1 summarizes the principal research streams identified in this review and the representative scholarship associated with each stream.

Table 1 Research Streams Summarization

Research stream	Representative scholarship
Defining art (philosophy)	Leung and Yiu (2010); Uidhir (2010); Magnus and Uidhir (2024); Osborne (2004); Caldarola (2026); Bychkov and Mankovskaya (2011); Lukichev (2019); Cooper (2021); Kamhi (2021); Morris (2021); Siegesmund (2021)
Art history and criticism	Lowish (2015); Keyser (1996); Orrghen (2020); Piguet and Frecuret (2002); Oguz (2015); Wang and Ho (2017); Jakovljevic (2026); Webster (2012); Fowler (2015)
Art education	Liu, Liu, and Huang (2017); Hu and Liu (2017); Bin (2017); Huang (2017); Cannatella (2024); Szekely (2008); Mat (2017); Jokela, Hiltunen, and Härkönen (2015); Chengrui, Guobin, and Zhen (2025)

Art therapy and well-being	Feen-Calligan and Sands-Goldstein (1996); Choe (2014); Pénzes et al. (2014); Jue (2023); Rosa (2023); Bordonaro et al. (2025); Fudickar et al. (2022); Solvang (2018)
Art worlds, markets, and institutions	Alexander and Bowler (2014); Kharchenkova (2024); Tratnik (2019); Rojas and de la Torre (2023); Castellote and Okwuosa (2020); Zhang and Yan (2025); Cohen (2002); Filicko and Lafferty (2002); Wysomirski (2002); Smith (2017); Gould (2018)
Digital and technological transformation	Wilke (2014); Lukichev (2019); Wang, She, Lin, and Zhang (2025); Bychkov and Mankovskaya (2011)

8. Integration and Research Gap

Across these six research streams, a broad and consistent conclusion can be identified: the boundaries of art are being contested and reconstructed across multiple dimensions simultaneously. At the conceptual level, scholars debate what constitutes art and whether a unified definition remains possible. At the historical and critical level, researchers examine how particular practices enter, remain outside, or challenge established canons. At the pedagogical level, art education determines which forms of knowledge and artistic practice are transmitted to future generations. At the therapeutic level, artistic engagement is examined in relation to well-being, disability, and interpersonal relationships. At the institutional and market levels, artistic value is shaped by cultural organizations, markets, governments, and networks of exchange. Finally, at the technological level, digital and computational systems are transforming artistic materials, production processes, authorship, dissemination, and spectatorship.

Despite these shared concerns, the existing literature remains substantially fragmented across disciplinary boundaries. Philosophers primarily address the conceptual status of art; art historians and critics focus on canons, interpretation, and reception; educators examine pedagogy and cultural transmission; therapists investigate art's relationship with well-being; sociologists and cultural economists analyze institutions and markets; and media scholars focus on technological transformation. Although these perspectives address different manifestations of the same broader phenomenon, they rarely engage with one another in a systematic and integrated manner.

This fragmentation becomes particularly significant in the context of contemporary digital transformation. Computational technologies simultaneously challenge conventional understandings of authorship, alter the material and institutional conditions of artistic production, and reshape the value and organization of artistic labor across educational, therapeutic, and commercial contexts. Wang et al. (2025), for example, identify the emergence of human-computer symbiosis as a potential transformation of the artist's role, while Wilke (2014) demonstrates how digital mediation changes both the materiality of art and the relationship between artworks and audiences. Similarly, Bychkov and Mankovskaya (2011) and Lukichev (2019) demonstrate that technological transformation has implications not only for artistic production but also for the conceptual categories used to classify and interpret art.

The central research gap therefore concerns the limited integration of these otherwise interconnected literatures. Existing scholarship provides substantial insights into individual dimensions of artistic transformation, but comparatively little attention has been devoted to examining conceptual, institutional, pedagogical, therapeutic, market, and technological changes as components of a single, interconnected process of renegotiating the boundaries of art. The present review addresses this gap by bringing these research traditions into dialogue and examining how developments in one domain influence and interact with developments in others.

Such an integrative perspective is particularly important because contemporary art cannot be adequately understood through a single dimension of analysis. Changes in technology may alter artistic authorship and production; these changes may subsequently influence critical evaluation, educational practices, institutional recognition, market valuation, and even therapeutic applications. Conversely, institutional and cultural expectations can shape how new technologies are adopted and how technologically mediated artistic practices are interpreted. The boundaries of art should therefore be understood as dynamic and relational rather than as independently evolving categories.

Accordingly, this review establishes an interdisciplinary framework in which the contemporary transformation of art is understood as a multidimensional process involving conceptual, historical, pedagogical, therapeutic, institutional, economic, and technological change. By connecting these previously fragmented research streams, the review provides

a broader foundation for understanding how the meaning, value, production, and social function of art are being renegotiated in contemporary society.

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