LOPES, DOMINIC MCIVER. *Beyond Art*. Oxford University Press 2014, 224 pp., $35 hardcover.

Reviewed by Gerard Gentry

In this work, Dominic Lopes defends a theory of art that shifts its focus away from the question “what is art?” to questions about particular works and the kinds of art that they are. Lopes argues that theories of art that inquire into the nature of art result in empty accounts that add little to our understanding of works of art themselves. His own theory, ‘the buck passing theory of art’, takes something of the reverse approach. Instead of looking for a general unified answer to the question of what art is, it takes up particular questions like: to what kind of art does this work belong? This approach allows for a kind of fluidity that is responsive to the phenomena of individual works and the practices of which they are products instead of approaching art via a top-down theory (79, 82). The upshot is that this theory invites a richer investigation into art criticism, since it is at the level of individual works of art that we come to an understanding of art. One particular strength of this theory over other general theories is its ability to account for hard cases (or outliers) in art, such as Marcel Duchamp’s *Fountain*. When assessing a specific hard case we are free through close criticism to draw the particular work into the context of a standard kind of art (i.e. ceramics, painting, etc.) or, if it doesn’t fit within a pre-established kind, then to see the work as contributing to a new kind of art. Moreover, the buck passing theory of art allows a theory of sculpture, for example, to be distinct from a theory of film, without forcing the two to find common ground. The theories are engaged with particular works of their kind instead of deriving from some unifying standard of art in general.

What follows is a brief sketch of the ten chapters. Chapter 1 redirects the questions appropriate to a philosophy of art away from the traditional question, “what is art?” Chapter 2 argues that a crucial criterion for evaluating the buck passing theory of art is its ability to deal effectively with hard cases. Dealing adequately with the hard cases is important because, Lopes argues, the hard cases have driven philosophical dissatisfaction with theories of art (and this dissatisfaction has in turn driven the development of new theories of art). It’s here that we’re met with a puzzling move in his argument. Lopes is not merely arguing that a theory’s ability to account for the hard cases is important, but rather that philosophical interest in theories of art is “spurred” by the hard cases of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries (33). It isn’t clear why he needs to make this stronger claim (which he terms a “hypothesis”) about the centrality of these outliers to the historical development of the philosophy of art. In an effort to defend this hypothesis, Lopes turns to a brief historical sketch. Unfortunately, he
offers caricatures of Kant and Hegel in an effort to show that they are not developing a theory of art and hence that it wasn’t until the twentieth century and the rise of hard cases that philosophers strove for a theory of art (33-4). However, if the historical sketch is simply skipped and the “weaker” claim to the importance of hard cases is held in view, then Lopes can insist on the importance of effectively handling the hard cases.

Chapter 3 argues that buck stopping theories (as opposed to Lopes’s buck passing theory) fail to account for the hard cases. Lopes here takes up theories of philosophers ranging from Monroe Beardsley to George Dickie and argues that their theories are too resistant to the hard cases and so fail where his own theory is effective (55-8). Chapter 4 shows how “empirical art studies,” such as musicology, dance anthropology, and art history, do not require an answer to the question of what art is (76-8, 82). Chapter 5 argues that we can better understand the values of art when we disassociate them from the question of the nature of art (92).

Chapter 6 makes the case that helpful answers to questions about what counts as art are only given by individual theories of the arts (e.g. a theory of abstract expressionism in painting), not by some general theory of art as a whole (123-4). Following on this argument for the informative nature of individual theories of the arts, Chapter 7 contends that the buck passing theory of art is “indirectly informative” by giving us an account of how to relate works to the kind of which they are a part and in light of which a given theory of that particular kind of art becomes applicable. The method whereby we determine adequate theories for individual art kinds is a bottom-up process beginning with the works themselves (129-30). Chapter 8 argues that theories of art kinds are informative in part by making the work visible as a product of a particular practice (152, 154, 161). Chapter 9 develops an account of the nature of aesthetic appreciation as a kind of experience of a work within the context of its practice (181). Chapter 10 nicely returns to a closer look at the hard cases in an effort to show that the buck passing theory of art effectively engages with these cases without relying on an answer to the question of what art is.

Although focused on a few easily comprehensible insights that will contribute to current debate, this book is not well suited to undergraduate students either at the introductory or more advanced level. The method by which Lopes progresses between points is somewhat hard to follow, not because of density of content, but because he leaves a good deal too much to the reader to infer. More than this, the analytic approach that he takes is not readily accessible. For example, his definition of a judgment with inseparable aesthetic content is “R represents x as F inseparably from its representing x as B = R represents x as F by and only by representing x as B, where x’s being B would seem to make it F” (180). However, philosophers of art and art theorists following in the analytic tradition from Beardsley forward are likely to find this book thought-provoking.

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1 For example, Lopes simply repeats a long-standing caricature among critics of Hegel: “for Hegel, art came to an end when it handed over its historical role to philosophy” (34). This is a caricature that is defensible only when a couple of sentences are taken out of context from Hegel’s broader argument, namely, that art is sublated (aufgehoben) into thought. Moreover, this reading has been widely and soundly rejected by most of the leading Hegelians. More than this, Lopes goes on to suggest that Hegel’s theory of art is in essence nothing but the view that “a work of art is an artefact made for sensuous apprehension, to serve an ‘end and aim in itself’”’ (34). One finds no reference to Hegel’s complex theory of art in which art is the sensuous manifestation of an idea, where these terms are further expounded in light of a complex dialectic of configuration, apprehension, and sublation.