WRITING

Art as Engineered or Designed Experience

Process, Performance, Remnants, and Cultural Modeling Across Human History

A theoretical essay proposing art as experiential configuration across performance, ritual, prehistory, and cultural modeling syste

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Abstract

This essay proposes a pragmatic model for understanding art as the deliberate configuration of experiential conditions rather than as a stable class of objects. Across ritual, performance, archaeological environments, and contemporary cultural systems, it argues that art operates through structured encounters that can produce transformation, leave reactivatable remnants, and distribute authorship across participants, contexts, and time.

Keywords

art theory; aesthetics; performance; ritual; liminality; cultural modeling systems; experiential design; archaeology; artistic research

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Introduction

The question “what is art?” has long resisted stable answers. Attempts to define art through intrinsic properties—beauty, representation, expression, or form—have repeatedly encountered counterexamples. At the same time, abandoning the term entirely risks losing a useful way of describing a recurring domain of human activity. This text proposes a different approach: rather than defining art by what it is, it examines what art does.

Across historical periods and cultural contexts, humans repeatedly construct situations designed to shape experience. These situations may involve objects, but they also include time, movement, sound, space, narrative, and social relation. They organize attention, modulate perception, and sometimes produce lasting transformations in those who participate. From ritual and performance to contemporary participatory systems, these configurations suggest that art operates less as a category of objects and more as a practice of structuring encounters.

This essay develops that hypothesis. It traces how object-centered definitions obscure experiential practices, examines time-based and performative forms, explores ritual and liminal environments, and considers how traces persist as remnants that enable reactivation. It also extends the model to distributed authorship and cultural modeling systems, where experience is structured at larger scales. Throughout, the aim is not to provide a rigid definition, but to propose a flexible framework for understanding art as the deliberate configuration of experiential conditions.

Such an approach carries risks. If art is understood too broadly as engineered experience, it overlaps with design, propaganda, and other instrumental practices. The later sections therefore examine tensions and boundary cases, suggesting that art often operates through openness, ambiguity, and reflexivity rather than through predetermined outcomes. The resulting model does not isolate art from other domains, but situates it within a continuum of practices that shape how experience unfolds.

The problem of defining art without reifying it

Any serious attempt to define art begins by admitting that the word is unstable. The category “art” names a shifting field of practices, institutions, and expectations rather than a timeless natural kind. Modern Euro-American usage often presumes a differentiated social domain—museums, galleries, professional artists, critics, and a

discourse of aesthetic value. Yet historically, “art” has also meant skilled making in general, as in the art of medicine, with no clear boundary separating craft, ritual, and technique. The now-familiar constellation of the “fine arts” is widely argued to have crystallized relatively late, especially in the long eighteenth century, rather than existing as an ancient universal taxonomy.

This historical instability helps explain why definitional projects in aesthetics often oscillate between two temptations: either treating “art” as a stable essence that can be extracted from all cultures and eras, or abandoning the term entirely as too contingent to be useful. A third route is to treat art as a problem of framing—a label used to identify a cluster of practices that, in many contexts, operate by shaping experience rather than merely producing objects. This strategy recalls Nelson Goodman’s shift from what is art? to when is art?—a move that relocates inquiry from intrinsic properties to conditions of functioning, attention, and use.

A closely related warning appears in Arthur Danto’s claim that seeing something as art depends on an artworld—a background of theory, history, and interpretive practice that enables an object or event to be apprehended in a certain way. This is not simply institutional skepticism; it is a reminder that “art” is partly an achievement of social coordination. In deep time, where direct access to prehistoric categories and discourse is unavailable, this caution becomes methodological: we can study markings, spaces, tools, and residues of action, but we should be wary of projecting modern expectations—representation, aesthetic autonomy, collectible objects—onto contexts that may have organized making around different ends.

An alternative starting point, then, is to shift attention away from objects and toward situations. Instead of asking whether something qualifies as art according to modern criteria, we can ask whether humans recurrently construct experiential configurations—combinations of material, time, movement, sound, light, narrative, and social arrangement—capable of acting on attention, emotion, memory, identity, and relations among participants. Under this view, art becomes not a category defined by objects but a way of describing practices that configure conditions for experience. This is not proposed as a universal definition, but as a research hypothesis: a framework capable of connecting caves, rituals, performances, installations, and participatory systems without forcing them into an object-centered model.

Object bias and the case for encounter

One of the strongest assumptions embedded in modern discussions of art is what might be called object bias: the tendency to treat the artwork as a discrete artifact that can be owned, preserved, circulated, and evaluated independently of the circumstances in which it is encountered. This bias is not merely philosophical; it is historically tied to institutions, markets, and display architectures that privilege durable things. Museums

collect objects, markets trade objects, and critical discourse often stabilizes meaning around objects. The artwork becomes anchored in what persists.

This anchoring, however, obscures a broader range of practices in which what matters is not the object but the experience structured around it—or even the experience without any stable artifact at all. Performance, ritual, music, choreography, improvisation, and participatory events all foreground temporal encounters rather than durable things. In these cases, the “work” is not reducible to an object because it exists primarily as a configured episode of attention, perception, and relation.

This shift aligns with John Dewey’s argument in Art as Experience that aesthetics must recover the continuity between art and lived experience. The artwork, in this view, is not merely an object but a structured event in which doing and undergoing form a meaningful unity. What persists materially may support the experience, but it does not exhaust it. The decisive moment occurs in the encounter.

Seen from this perspective, what is often called a “work” can be understood as a remnant—a fragment of a broader process that once included actions, contexts, and relations no longer fully accessible. The object survives, but the original configuration has partially disappeared. Yet the remnant can still operate. When encountered, it can reorganize perception, provoke affect, or reframe understanding. The experience is reconstructed in the present, not recovered in full from the past.

This understanding reverses the usual hierarchy. Instead of treating objects as primary and experience as secondary, experience becomes primary and objects become one among several possible supports. A painting can function as an artwork because it structures attention and perception, not because it is inherently privileged as a material artifact. The same logic applies to ephemeral practices: a performance, a story, or a ritual may leave little or no durable trace, yet still produce transformations in those who encounter them.

Under this view, artistic practice shifts from the production of objects to the configuration of conditions. The creator does not fully determine meaning or effect; rather, they arrange materials, time, space, and participation in ways that make certain experiences possible. Interpretation, response, and transformation remain distributed across participants and contexts. The artwork is therefore not fixed but enacted—emerging in the meeting between configuration and encounter.

Engineering experience: conditions, layers, and transformation

To describe art as “engineered experience” risks sounding metaphorical unless the term engineering is clarified. The concept used here does not refer to technical optimization or predictable outputs, but to the deliberate configuration of conditions—spatial,

temporal, sensory, symbolic, and social—that shape what can be perceived, felt, and enacted. This includes choices about materials and form, but also about pacing, participation, constraint, and context. It involves structuring attention as much as constructing objects, and designing encounters as much as producing artifacts.

Under this perspective, artworks operate across multiple experiential layers that may reinforce or conflict with one another:

- sensory: color, sound, rhythm, texture, scale, resonance
- symbolic: iconography, narrative cues, cultural references, genre expectations
- emotional: tension, release, discomfort, intimacy, curiosity
- social: co-presence, roles, spectatorship, participation, power relations
- temporal: duration, repetition, anticipation, sequencing, aftereffects
- cognitive: pattern detection, ambiguity management, interpretation, re-framing

These layers do not necessarily align. A work may present a pleasant sensory surface while generating social discomfort, or offer clear symbolic content without producing emotional engagement. Such misalignments are not failures but part of how experience can be reconfigured. The effectiveness of an artwork often lies precisely in the friction between layers, where expectations are destabilized and perception reorganized.

This emphasis on layered experience also shifts the role of meaning. Interpretation becomes one possible dimension among others rather than the defining core. An encounter may transform perception, mood, or relational awareness without yielding a stable propositional message. In this sense, transformation precedes meaning: the experience alters the conditions under which meaning might later be constructed.

Sound-based practices illustrate this clearly. Listening unfolds in time and situates the listener within a shared temporal field rather than at a distance. Salomé Voegelin emphasizes that auditory experience does not provide an external vantage point; one is immersed within it. Similarly, Brandon LaBelle describes sound as organizing spatial and social relations, shaping proximity, attention, and collective presence. These accounts highlight how artistic configurations operate not only through representation but through embodied participation in structured sensory conditions.

Transformation, in this framework, does not require dramatic change. It may consist of subtle shifts: noticing previously ignored details, experiencing altered temporal pacing, reconsidering relational distance, or adopting new interpretive habits. Such effects can be temporary or persistent, conscious or implicit. What matters is that the configured encounter modifies the field of perception or action, even if only slightly.

Crucially, configuring conditions does not guarantee transformation. The arrangement may fail, be ignored, or produce unintended responses. This uncertainty distinguishes

artistic configuration from technical engineering in the narrow sense. The aim is not reliable output but the creation of a field in which transformation becomes possible. The artwork, therefore, is less a fixed object than a structured possibility—an arrangement designed to be activated through encounter.

Art, design, and engineering: configuration without fixed outcomes

Describing art as the configuration of experiential conditions invites comparison with design and engineering. All three involve shaping materials, environments, and interactions. Yet the goals and constraints of these practices differ in important ways, and clarifying these differences helps avoid collapsing art into purely instrumental activity.

Design typically operates under functional constraints. A designer works toward a defined objective—usability, communication, efficiency, or aesthetic coherence—often within explicit requirements. Even when open-ended, design usually aims at improving or optimizing a specific outcome. The success of design is therefore measured by how effectively it fulfills a purpose, whether practical, communicative, or experiential.

Engineering, in a narrower sense, emphasizes reliability and predictability. Engineering seeks to produce systems that behave consistently under known conditions. While creativity is involved, the goal is stable performance rather than open transformation. The value of engineering lies in reducing uncertainty and ensuring that a configuration produces expected results.

Art, by contrast, may employ similar tools—structuring environments, guiding perception, orchestrating interaction—but it does not necessarily operate under fixed objectives. Instead of optimizing for a defined outcome, artistic practice often configures conditions in which transformation may occur without being predetermined. The experience is shaped, but its effects remain open. Ambiguity, contradiction, and even failure become part of the field rather than problems to eliminate.

This distinction does not imply that art lacks intention or structure. Artistic practices frequently involve careful construction of spatial, temporal, and sensory conditions. However, the aim is not to guarantee a specific response but to create a situation in which multiple responses remain possible. Where design tends toward clarity of purpose, and engineering toward reliability of function, art tends toward exploratory transformation.

These boundaries are porous. Design can incorporate open-ended experiential elements, and art can pursue functional goals. Architecture, performance, installation, and interactive systems often inhabit hybrid territories where design, engineering, and art overlap. Rather than treating them as mutually exclusive domains, it may be more

accurate to understand them as differing orientations toward the configuration of experience.

Under this perspective, art can be understood as a form of open-ended experiential configuration. It shares with design and engineering the act of structuring conditions, yet differs in its tolerance for ambiguity, its openness to unintended outcomes, and its willingness to foreground the experience itself rather than a predefined function. The emphasis shifts from solving problems to exploring possibilities, from delivering results to enabling transformations.

This distinction also helps clarify why artistic practices frequently emerge in uncertain or liminal contexts. When outcomes are not fixed, the configuration of experience becomes a site of experimentation. Art operates not only within stable systems but at their edges, where meanings are fluid and new forms of perception can arise.

Performance and Time-Based Arts

Time-based practices provide some of the clearest examples of art as configured experience rather than object production. In performance, theater, music, and choreography, the primary medium is not a durable artifact but a structured unfolding in time. What is encountered is a sequence of relations—between bodies, sounds, gestures, and attention—rather than a fixed object.

Theater makes this especially visible. A theatrical performance organizes space, movement, voice, and timing to guide perception and emotional response. Lighting, staging, and pacing shape how events are experienced, but the work itself exists only during execution. Scripts, costumes, and stage designs function as supports, yet none of these elements alone constitute the performance. The encounter emerges through their coordinated activation in time.

Music similarly constructs temporal architectures. Rhythm, repetition, variation, and silence organize expectation and release, shaping how listeners inhabit duration. A musical work does not simply present content; it structures attention across time. Even when notated, music becomes perceptible only in performance or listening. Scores and recordings act as stabilizing devices, but the experience itself unfolds dynamically, contingent on interpretation, acoustics, and context.

Choreography extends this logic into embodied space. Movement sequences configure relations between bodies, orientation, and proximity. The choreography is not merely a set of positions but a pattern of transitions. Participants and observers experience shifting alignments, tensions, and gestures that cannot be reduced to static forms. The artwork lies in the transformation of spatial perception and bodily awareness as

movement unfolds.

These practices share a reliance on co-presence and temporality. They shape encounters through duration, sequencing, and participation. Unlike object-centered art, they cannot be fully preserved as artifacts. Documentation—recordings, scores, notes—captures traces, but each activation produces a new instance. The performance is not reproduced identically but reconfigured through interpretation and circumstance.

This emphasis on time also foregrounds uncertainty. Because performances unfold in real conditions, they remain sensitive to variation: performer decisions, audience response, acoustics, and environment all influence the outcome. Rather than undermining the work, this variability is often integral to it. The experience is not fixed but contingent, emerging through interaction.

Time-based arts therefore illustrate how art can function as experiential configuration without relying on stable objects. They demonstrate that transformation can occur through structured temporal encounters, where the artwork is not something held but something lived.

Art as Transformative Practice

If art is understood as the configuration of experiential conditions, then its effects are not limited to perception alone. Artistic encounters may also reshape behavior, social awareness, and modes of interaction. In this sense, art can function as a form of transformative practice: a structured environment in which participants experiment with perception, embodiment, and relation.

Performance-based practices illustrate this clearly. Theater, improvisation, and movement exercises often place participants within simulated or heightened social situations. These environments allow experimentation with gesture, voice, posture, timing, and interpersonal distance. Because the conditions are framed as performance, participants may explore behaviors that would otherwise feel constrained by everyday expectations. The encounter becomes a space for testing and reconfiguring social perception.

Such transformations do not require explicit interpretation. A participant may develop new sensitivities to body language, rhythm of conversation, or spatial awareness simply through repeated engagement. These shifts emerge from embodied experience rather than conceptual instruction. The practice reorganizes perception by placing participants in structured situations where new responses become possible.

This does not reduce art to therapy, nor does it require therapeutic intent. Therapy typically operates within defined goals—healing, adaptation, or behavioral change—while

artistic practice often remains open-ended. However, both involve the configuration of conditions capable of producing transformation. The difference lies less in mechanism than in orientation: therapy aims at specific outcomes, whereas art may allow transformation to remain ambiguous, exploratory, or even unintended.

Improvisation provides a particularly clear example. In improvisational settings, participants respond in real time to unpredictable stimuli. Attention shifts toward listening, timing, and relational awareness. The structure encourages adaptability rather than control. Through this process, participants may develop new forms of coordination, responsiveness, and presence. The transformation is not imposed but emerges from the encounter itself.

These effects extend beyond participants to observers. Watching performance can also reorganize perception, allowing audiences to experience alternative modes of interaction, pacing, or embodiment. The encounter reshapes expectations about communication and behavior, even when no explicit message is conveyed.

Understanding art as transformative practice therefore expands its scope. Art does not merely represent experiences; it can create situations in which new forms of experience are rehearsed. These rehearsals may be subtle—adjustments in attention, posture, or relational awareness—but they accumulate. The artwork becomes a field of experimentation in which perception and behavior are reorganized through lived encounter rather than instruction.

Ritual and liminality

Ritual practices provide another important model for understanding art as configured experience. Unlike object-centered traditions, rituals typically unfold as structured sequences of actions in which participants move through altered perceptual and social conditions. The emphasis lies not on producing artifacts but on orchestrating transitions—between states, roles, or modes of awareness.

Anthropological discussions of ritual often describe these transitions in terms of liminality: a temporary suspension of ordinary classifications and expectations. During liminal phases, participants occupy positions that are neither fully inside nor outside established structures. This ambiguity creates a space in which perception and relation can be reorganized. The experience is neither entirely fictional nor entirely ordinary, but situated in between.

Ritual environments frequently reinforce this liminal quality through spatial, temporal, and sensory means. Changes in lighting, sound, movement, and participation signal that different rules apply. Entry into a ritual space may involve thresholds, processions, or coordinated gestures that mark separation from everyday activity. These configurations

shape attention and expectation, preparing participants for transformation.

Such transformations need not be dramatic. Rituals may reorganize social relations, reinforce shared identity, or recalibrate emotional states. They may also produce subtle shifts in perception: heightened awareness of rhythm, collective presence, or symbolic association. The structure of the event guides participants through these changes, not by delivering information but by staging experience.

Rituals also highlight the importance of repetition. Unlike singular performances, rituals often recur across time, allowing transformations to accumulate. Repetition stabilizes certain experiential patterns while still permitting variation. Each iteration reactivates the structure, producing encounters that are similar but never identical. The ritual becomes a framework for ongoing experiential modulation.

This emphasis on liminality and transformation aligns closely with the broader hypothesis that art operates through the configuration of conditions. Ritual practices demonstrate how structured environments—temporal, spatial, and social—can produce shifts in perception and relation without relying on durable objects. The artwork, in this sense, resembles a passage: a guided movement through altered experiential terrain.

Ritual therefore occupies a boundary between art, social practice, and symbolic system. It organizes perception while also structuring collective behavior. Rather than treating ritual as separate from art, it can be understood as one domain in which experiential configuration becomes explicit. The focus shifts from representation to transition, from artifact to transformation.

Such liminal configurations may also become stabilized through repetition, eventually forming shared cultural structures.

Liminal art and exploration

If ritual demonstrates how structured environments can produce transformation, artistic practice often pushes this logic further by deliberately operating in liminal zones. Rather than reinforcing established transitions, art frequently explores spaces where categories are unstable, meanings uncertain, and expectations unsettled. In these contexts, the configuration of experience becomes a form of exploration.

Liminal artistic practices often arise at boundaries: between disciplines, between social roles, between representation and action, or between everyday behavior and staged encounter. Performance art, experimental music, participatory installations, and hybrid forms frequently inhabit such thresholds. These works do not merely present content; they test how perception and relation can be reorganized under unfamiliar conditions.

This exploratory orientation distinguishes art from practices that aim primarily at stability. Where design often clarifies function and engineering seeks predictable behavior, art may intentionally introduce ambiguity. The configured situation does not resolve uncertainty but foregrounds it. Participants must navigate shifting cues, incomplete information, or conflicting signals. The experience becomes an open field rather than a solved problem.

Such practices often involve risk. Because outcomes are not predetermined, the encounter may fail, produce unintended effects, or resist interpretation. Yet this uncertainty is integral to exploration. The artwork functions less as a finished statement and more as an experiment in perception and relation. Each activation tests the boundaries of what can be experienced.

This liminal orientation also helps explain why artistic innovation often emerges at cultural margins. When established frameworks become too stable, experiences may no longer produce transformation. Artistic practice then moves toward zones where expectations are less fixed—new media, unconventional spaces, hybrid forms, or unfamiliar social configurations. These shifts are not merely stylistic; they reconfigure the conditions under which encounters occur.

Exploration does not necessarily imply novelty for its own sake. It may involve revisiting familiar forms under altered conditions, combining existing elements in new ways, or revealing overlooked dimensions of ordinary experience. The key is that the configuration invites participants to move beyond habitual perception. The encounter becomes a site of inquiry rather than confirmation.

Understanding art as liminal exploration therefore extends the concept of experiential configuration. Art not only structures transformation; it probes the boundaries of how transformation can occur. By operating at thresholds—between stability and uncertainty, structure and openness—art creates environments where new modes of perception and relation can emerge.

Experience Environments in Deep time: caves as multisensory choreography

Prehistoric cave contexts provide a compelling example of experiential configuration operating long before the emergence of object-centered art traditions. When considered primarily as collections of images, caves risk being interpreted as early galleries. Yet their physical and sensory properties suggest a different understanding: caves function as structured environments in which perception unfolds through movement, light, and sound.

Darkness is the defining condition. Deep cave spaces require artificial illumination, meaning that visibility is actively constructed rather than given. Torches, portable

lamps, or controlled fires produce localized and unstable light, revealing surfaces gradually as participants move. Perception becomes sequential rather than instantaneous. Figures emerge, disappear, and transform depending on position and illumination. The encounter is shaped not by static viewing but by guided exploration.

Firelight introduces further dynamism. Flickering illumination interacts with irregular rock surfaces, relief, and overlapping markings, generating shifting shadows and apparent motion. Under such conditions, images are not fixed entities but components of a changing perceptual field. The environment itself participates in the experience, producing effects that depend on timing, movement, and collective presence.

Acoustic properties reinforce this multisensory structure. Many cave spaces produce resonance, echoes, or localized amplification. Sound generated by speech, footsteps, or rhythmic activity interacts with spatial geometry, creating fluctuating auditory environments. Participants experience not only visual discovery but also shifting soundscapes. The combination of sound and darkness emphasizes co-presence and shared attention.

Movement through caves further organizes experience. Narrow passages, chambers, and thresholds guide participants along particular routes. Visibility changes gradually, and encounters occur in sequence. This spatial progression resembles choreography: entering, adjusting, discovering, and transitioning. The environment becomes a temporal structure rather than a neutral container.

Within this framework, markings and images operate as cues embedded in a larger experiential system. They do not function solely as representations but as elements encountered under specific conditions of light, sound, and movement. The artwork is not reducible to the image itself; it includes the process of discovering and perceiving it within the configured environment.

This perspective aligns with the broader hypothesis that art emerges through the deliberate shaping of experiential conditions. Caves demonstrate how light, sound, and spatial progression can be organized to produce transformations in perception and relation. The emphasis shifts from objects to encounters, from static viewing to lived exploration. Prehistoric practices thus appear less as early object production and more as early forms of multisensory experiential design.

The Remnant Theory: objects, memory, and secondary materials

If art is understood as the configuration of experiential conditions, a central question follows: what remains once the encounter has ended? Many artistic practices—performance, ritual, improvisation, and time-based works—leave little or no durable artifact. Yet their effects may persist. This suggests that what survives is not the artwork itself

but a set of remnants: traces that carry or reactivate aspects of the original experiential configuration.

Remnants can take multiple forms. Some are material: objects, images, instruments, or spatial modifications. Others are documentary: recordings, photographs, notation, or written descriptions. Still others are mnemonic or social: memories, altered habits, shared narratives, or transformed relationships. These forms differ in durability and fidelity, but all function as traces of an encounter rather than the encounter itself.

Understanding artworks as remnants reverses a common assumption. Instead of treating the object as the artwork and experience as secondary, experience becomes primary and remnants become secondary supports. A painting, for example, can be understood as a material trace capable of triggering encounters across time. Its meaning and effect are not fixed but reactivated each time it is perceived. Similarly, a musical recording is not identical with a performance but a trace that enables new listening situations. The artwork lies in the encounter, not in the trace.

Memory plays a particularly important role within this framework. Participants in a performance or ritual may carry forward transformed perceptions, emotional responses, or relational shifts without any physical record. These transformations themselves become remnants. They persist in behavior, interpretation, and shared understanding. The artwork survives not as an object but as a change in experiential orientation.

Documentation introduces another layer. Photographs, recordings, and written accounts stabilize aspects of an event, but they also reconfigure it. A recording transforms a live encounter into a repeatable one, altering scale, context, and duration. Documentation therefore does not simply preserve an artwork; it generates new encounters derived from the original configuration. Each reactivation becomes a distinct experiential instance.

Remnants thus function less as static residues and more as reactivation devices. They allow experiential configurations to persist across time, though always in modified form. The original conditions cannot be fully reconstructed, yet traces can still produce transformation. This explains how artworks separated from their initial context continue to operate: the remnant invites new encounters rather than preserving a fixed meaning.

The remnant theory therefore reframes artistic persistence. Art does not endure primarily through objects but through the capacity of traces to generate new experiences. Whether material, documentary, or mnemonic, remnants extend the life of experiential configurations while allowing them to evolve. The artwork becomes a lineage of encounters rather than a single stable artifact.

Reconstruction, and the paradox of recording performance

If artworks are understood as experiential configurations, recording introduces a conceptual tension. When a performance is documented—through audio, video, notation, or description—what exactly is preserved? The original encounter cannot be fully reproduced, yet the recording clearly enables new experiences derived from it. This raises a fundamental question: is the artwork the live event, the recording, the score, or the series of encounters that follow?

Time-based practices make this ambiguity unavoidable. A theatrical performance exists only during execution, yet recordings allow later audiences to engage with it. Similarly, a musical performance may be documented, edited, and distributed, becoming widely known through its recording rather than its original event. The recording stabilizes aspects of the performance while simultaneously transforming them. Timing, acoustics, audience presence, and spatial relations are altered. What remains is not the same experience but a new configuration derived from the original.

Notation systems complicate the issue further. Musical scores, choreography instructions, or performance scripts function as rule sets rather than direct representations. They specify conditions under which new instances can be generated. Each performance becomes a realization rather than a reproduction. The artwork therefore exists not as a single event but as a family of related encounters connected through shared constraints.

Reconstruction introduces another layer. When a past performance is re-staged from documentation, participants reinterpret fragments—notes, images, descriptions—and generate a new encounter. The reconstruction is neither identical to the original nor entirely independent. It inherits structure from remnants while producing new experiential conditions. This process highlights how artworks persist through transformation rather than preservation.

Memory also participates in this dynamic. Participants and observers retain partial impressions that influence later interpretations and reconstructions. Memory is selective and evolving, yet it can guide new configurations. In this sense, recollection functions as a living remnant, shaping subsequent encounters without stabilizing them.

The recording paradox therefore suggests that artworks may not exist as singular entities but as networks of encounters. The live event, recording, notation, reconstruction, and memory each generate distinct experiences linked by lineage rather than identity. No single element exhausts the artwork; instead, the work unfolds across successive activations.

This perspective dissolves the opposition between original and copy. A recording is not

merely a degraded substitute but a different experiential configuration. A reconstruction is not simply a repetition but a new instance shaped by inherited constraints. The artwork becomes a process distributed across time, sustained through traces that continually produce new encounters.

Distributed authorship

If art is understood as the configuration of experiential conditions, authorship becomes less centralized. Rather than originating solely from a single creator, many artworks emerge from interactions among multiple participants, materials, and contexts. The final experience depends not only on intention but on how these elements converge during activation.

Performance-based practices make this distributed structure explicit. Theater involves actors, directors, designers, technicians, and audiences, each contributing to the encounter. Music often emerges from ensembles, producers, engineers, and improvisational exchanges. Choreography evolves through collaboration between movement and interpretation. In each case, no single contributor fully determines the outcome. The artwork arises through coordination rather than individual authorship.

This distribution also appears in processes where the credited author may not be the primary source of transformation. A project initiated for practical or commercial purposes may generate profound experiential effects through the contributions of collaborators, performers, or unforeseen interactions. Artistic value can emerge from collective dynamics even when individual intention is limited. The configuration, rather than the author, becomes decisive.

Accidental or emergent art further illustrates this point. Situations not originally conceived as artworks—improvised performances, social events, or unintended juxtapositions—can produce transformative encounters. Participants recognize these experiences retrospectively as artistic, even though no single agent planned them. The artwork emerges from conditions rather than from authorship alone.

This perspective does not eliminate the role of the artist. Instead, it reframes it. The artist becomes a configurator—someone who shapes conditions under which encounters may occur. However, once activated, the experience depends on participants, environment, and interpretation. Control is partial, and authorship becomes distributed across the system.

Distributed authorship also explains why artworks evolve over time. Performances change with new participants, reinterpretations alter meaning, and contexts reshape perception. Each activation modifies the experiential configuration. The artwork persists not as a fixed expression of individual intention but as an evolving field of encounters.

Understanding authorship as distributed therefore aligns with the broader framework of art as experiential configuration. Art emerges from the interaction of multiple agents and conditions, rather than from a single origin. The creator initiates possibilities, but the encounter is co-produced.

From Engineered Experience to Cultural Systems

If art is understood as the configuration of experiential conditions rather than the production of objects, then what is being engineered is not a thing but a structured encounter. Such encounters operate across multiple layers simultaneously: perceptual, temporal, affective, cognitive, social, and mnemonic. These layers do not function independently; they form a stacked field of experience within which transformation may occur.

An engineered experience may alter perception, redirect attention, modulate emotion, reframe interpretation, reorganize social relations, or persist through memory. These effects are not mutually exclusive but cumulative. What varies is not the mechanism but the intensity. At lower intensities, such configurations produce orientation. At intermediate intensities, they produce reframing. At higher intensities, they may produce transformation. A museum may orient perception, a concert may reframe attention, a ritual may restructure identity, and an initiation may reorganize social belonging. These are differences of degree within a shared structure.

A key condition enabling such shifts is liminality. Rather than treating liminality as a discrete category, it may be understood as a configuration of conditions that suspend ordinary frameworks and introduce temporary ones. These conditions may include separation, threshold, altered rules, ambiguity, preparation, and modified perception. Liminality is not a location but a relational state emerging at boundaries between stable structures. It may be spatial, temporal, social, or psychological, and these dimensions often overlap.

In this sense, caves, rituals, performances, and certain contemporary art environments can be understood as engineered liminal configurations. They do not eliminate rules but replace ordinary ones with temporary structures. Within such conditions, identity becomes flexible, perception becomes unstable, and transformation becomes possible. However, liminal configurations alone do not yet produce culture. They generate singular encounters whose effects may dissipate unless stabilized through repetition.

Culture emerges when such experiential configurations become repeatable, shared, and transmittable. This occurs when encounters are remembered, imitated, taught, and expected. Through repetition and transmission, singular events stabilize into patterned structures. Culture can therefore be understood both as the sedimentation of repeated

experiential configurations and as the framework that preserves and reactivates them. What was once a singular encounter becomes a shared structure for organizing perception and relation.

Ritual provides a clear example of this stabilization. A ritual may be understood as a socially stabilized, repeatable configuration of liminal conditions designed to guide participants through transformation. Over time, such configurations become embedded within shared expectations and transmitted across generations, forming cultural structures. The transformation is no longer singular but patterned, no longer accidental but anticipated.

A further shift occurs when some of these shared experiential patterns undergo symbolic compression. Cultural practices that once required full embodied participation may become formalized into portable interpretive frameworks: myths, diagrams, typologies, calendars, symbolic vocabularies. These compressed structures do not reproduce the full experience but preserve orientation within it. They function as condensed cultural experiences, allowing participants to navigate meaning without requiring the original conditions.

In this form, such structures operate as Cultural Modeling Systems: culturally produced symbolic frameworks that help organize interpretation, identity, and action. These systems emerge gradually from repeated experiential configurations, becoming portable orientation structures derived from lived practice.

This suggests a gradual sequence:

engineered experience -> liminal configuration -> transformation -> repetition -> shared expectation -> culture -> symbolic compression -> cultural modeling systems

In this sense, experience is singular, ritual is repeatable experience, culture is shared transmitted pattern, and Cultural Modeling Systems are compressed and portable forms of culture.

Systems instead of works: Cultural Modeling Systems (CMS) and the artist as designer

Some of these stabilized cultural patterns can become symbolically compressed beyond individual artworks to larger symbolic infrastructures that shape perception and interpretation. Some of these stabilized cultural patterns can become symbolically compressed: Cultural modeling systems (CMS) function as orientation frameworks: structured symbolic configurations that help participants interpret, compress, and navigate complex realities where the goal is less precise prediction than actionable meaning—timing, identity, relationships, and possible next steps. Such systems do not merely describe reality; they organize how it is encountered.

One useful way to understand CMS is in terms of compression: a compressed cultural experience. These frameworks reduce the complexity of experience into manageable vocabularies of types, relations, and interpretive moves. By stabilizing patterns, they make coordination possible under uncertainty. Shared symbolic structures allow participants to recognize correspondences, anticipate outcomes, and align interpretations without requiring full agreement. In this sense, CMS function as distributed cognitive scaffolding rather than purely conceptual models.

Because they provide shared reference points, cultural modeling systems are also socially transmissible. They persist across communities while remaining flexible enough to adapt to new contexts. Mythic structures, cosmological diagrams, ritual calendars, typologies, and symbolic taxonomies all operate in this way. Their effectiveness lies not primarily in evidentiary accuracy but in their capacity to structure perception and guide action. Participants engage them as orientation devices embedded in practice rather than as abstract theories.

This perspective clarifies the relationship between CMS and art. Both can be understood as condition-systems rather than static contents. A cultural modeling system configures interpretive conditions: it shapes what counts as salient, how relationships are perceived, and what actions appear meaningful. An artwork configures experiential conditions: it shapes attention, affect, perception, and social relation within an encounter. In both cases, meaning emerges through structured experience rather than being delivered as fixed content.

However, the overlap is not complete. Cultural modeling systems often aim at stabilization—reducing ambiguity by providing coherent interpretive frameworks. Artistic practices, by contrast, may stabilize or destabilize. Art can function as orientation technology, but it can also operate as disorientation technology, interrupting habitual perception and exposing the contingency of meaning. Where CMS often compress complexity, art may expand it.

This distinction becomes especially relevant when considering the role of the artist. In many contemporary practices—generative systems, participatory environments, rule-based compositions, and interactive installations—the primary act is not producing objects but configuring procedures and constraints from which encounters emerge. The artist functions less as a maker of artifacts and more as a designer of conditions. Once activated, these systems operate through participants, contexts, and interpretations, distributing authorship across the encounter.

At this level, the engineered-experience hypothesis reaches its broadest scope—and its greatest risk. If art is understood as experiential configuration, then advertising, propaganda, interface design, ritual, and political spectacle also engineer experience.

This is not a refutation but a limit condition requiring refinement. One possible distinction lies in reflexivity. Artistic configurations often invite attention to the framing itself, foregrounding the fact that experience is being structured. Instrumental configurations, by contrast, tend to conceal their own mechanisms.

Under this view, art-like experiential configuration often involves tendencies such as:

- an invitation to intensified attention rather than purely instrumental response
- openness to multiple interpretations and layered conflict
- reflexivity toward the conditions of experience
- tolerance for ambiguity and unintended outcomes
- a value structure not reducible to immediate utility

These are not strict criteria but overlapping tendencies that distinguish art-like practices from purely instrumental ones without imposing rigid boundaries.

With these distinctions in place, the broader model can be summarized as a sequence:

configuration — conditions are arranged
activation — participants encounter the configuration
transformation — perception or relation shifts
remnants — traces persist
reactivation — new encounters emerge from traces

This model preserves the core concepts—process, conditions, encounter, transformation, remnant—while allowing for both stabilization and disruption. Art, ritual, symbolic systems, and performance become different configurations of experiential design rather than separate categories. The history of art, in this sense, becomes part of a larger history of how humans configure experiences that matter, and how those experiences continue to operate through time.

Limits and tensions

As the concept of art expands from objects to experiential configuration, a natural difficulty emerges: the scope of the theory begins to overlap with many other practices. Advertising, propaganda, religious ceremony, political spectacle, architecture, interface design, and education all configure experiential conditions. If art is defined simply as engineered experience, the category risks dissolving into nearly any form of structured interaction.

This is not necessarily a flaw, but it introduces a tension that requires clarification. Experiential configuration alone does not distinguish art from other domains. What differentiates artistic practice may lie less in mechanism than in orientation. Many

non-artistic systems engineer experience toward specific outcomes: persuasion, compliance, efficiency, or behavioral control. Their success depends on reducing ambiguity and directing participants toward predetermined responses.

Artistic configurations, by contrast, often tolerate or even cultivate ambiguity. Rather than guiding participants toward a single conclusion, they may invite multiple interpretations, layered responses, or unresolved tensions. The encounter becomes exploratory rather than directive. This distinction is not absolute—art can persuade, and propaganda can be aesthetically complex—but it highlights a difference in emphasis between open transformation and instrumental control.

A second distinction concerns reflexivity. Artistic practices frequently draw attention to their own framing conditions. They reveal that perception is being structured, that roles are being staged, or that interpretation is being guided. This reflexive dimension allows participants to become aware of the constructed nature of the experience. In contrast, purely instrumental configurations often attempt to conceal their mechanisms, presenting outcomes as natural or inevitable. Art, in this sense, may foreground the act of configuration itself.

Another tension arises between stabilization and disruption. Cultural modeling systems often aim to stabilize interpretation, providing shared frameworks that reduce uncertainty. Artistic practices may instead destabilize such frameworks, exposing their contingency. Yet art can also create new stabilizations, becoming orientation structures in its own right. The boundary therefore remains fluid. Art may function as either orientation or disorientation, depending on context.

These tensions suggest that art is not defined by a single property but by a cluster of tendencies. Artistic experiential configurations often:

- invite intensified attention beyond immediate utility
- allow multiple interpretations rather than fixed directives
- foreground or reveal their own framing conditions
- tolerate ambiguity, uncertainty, or failure
- produce transformation without guaranteeing specific outcomes

These tendencies do not form strict criteria. They overlap with other domains and may appear in varying degrees. The aim is not to draw rigid boundaries but to describe a region of practices where experiential configuration becomes exploratory, reflexive, and open-ended.

Recognizing these limits also preserves the usefulness of the concept. Art remains distinguishable not by isolating it completely from other practices, but by identifying how it navigates tensions between control and openness, stabilization and disruption,

instruction and exploration. The category retains flexibility while avoiding collapse into total generality.

A unified model: configuration, encounter, transformation

Across the preceding sections, a consistent structure emerges. Whether in performance, ritual, caves, symbolic systems, or participatory practices, art operates through the configuration of experiential conditions rather than through the production of isolated objects. These configurations organize attention, perception, relation, and meaning within encounters that unfold over time.

This structure can be summarized as a sequence:

Configuration — conditions are arranged: materials, space, time, roles, and symbolic cues are organized into a system capable of shaping experience. The configurator may be an individual or a collective, and the system may be stable or open-ended.

Encounter — participants engage with the configuration. Attention is guided, sensory and social relations unfold, and perception becomes structured by the conditions provided. The artwork exists in this activation rather than in any single component.

Transformation — perceptual, emotional, cognitive, or relational shifts may occur. These transformations can be subtle or pronounced, temporary or lasting. They are not guaranteed but remain possible within the configured field.

Remnants — traces persist after the encounter. These may include objects, recordings, documentation, memories, or altered practices. The remnant does not preserve the original experience but carries elements capable of reactivation.

Reactivation — remnants enter new contexts, producing further encounters. Each activation differs from the previous one while remaining genealogically linked. The artwork unfolds across time as a lineage of experiences.

This model accommodates both object-based and ephemeral practices. A painting functions as a remnant capable of triggering encounters; a performance may leave only memory; a symbolic system may stabilize interpretive frameworks across generations. In each case, the artwork lies not in the artifact alone but in the experiential process it enables.

The model also incorporates distributed authorship. Configuration may be initiated by a creator, but encounter and transformation depend on participants, context, and interpretation. The artwork emerges through interaction rather than unilateral control. Variability and uncertainty are structural features rather than deviations.

Seen in this way, art becomes one domain within a broader human tendency to shape experience deliberately. From prehistoric caves to contemporary participatory systems, humans repeatedly arrange environments—light and darkness, rhythm and movement, symbol and relation—to produce memorable transformations. These configurations differ in purpose and form, but they share a common logic: experience is structured, activated, and extended through traces.

Understanding art through this model does not eliminate ambiguity. Instead, it provides a flexible framework for analyzing practices that operate beyond object-centered definitions. Art becomes neither a fixed category nor an entirely dissolved one, but a region of activity characterized by the deliberate configuration of experiential conditions and the transformations that follow.

Conclusion

Viewed through this lens, art appears less as a category of objects and more as a recurring human strategy: the deliberate configuration of conditions that structure encounter and enable transformation. Across performance, ritual, symbolic systems, and participatory environments, the artwork emerges not as a fixed artifact but as a dynamic relation between configuration and experience. Objects, when present, function as remnants—traces capable of reactivating encounters across time.

This perspective also reframes authorship and persistence. Artistic practice becomes distributed across participants, contexts, and interpretations, while works endure through lineages of reactivation rather than through stable identity. Cultural modeling systems extend this logic further, showing how symbolic frameworks can orient perception at collective scales. In each case, art operates by shaping how experience is organized rather than by delivering fixed meanings.

The model proposed here—configuration, encounter, transformation, remnants, and reactivation—does not claim to define art universally. Instead, it offers a way of connecting practices often treated as separate: caves and performance, ritual and installation, symbolic systems and participatory environments. What unites them is not medium or style, but the deliberate shaping of experiential conditions.

Under this view, the history of art becomes part of a broader history of how humans design experiences that matter. From deep-time environments illuminated by firelight to contemporary systems shaped by code and participation, these configurations continue to generate encounters that reorganize perception, relation, and meaning. Art persists not primarily as objects, but as processes that structure how experience unfolds.

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