

RECOGNITION AND RECONCILIATION: THE NEW ROLE OF THEORY IN AESTHETICS

by

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Abstract

George Dickie's institutional theory of art has been subject to extensive debate over the past 30 years. It has been both revered and deplored, garnering such attention for the seemingly controversial way in which Dickie answers the question, "What is art?" In Dickie's view, an object derives its existence as a work of art in the context of the informal institution of the "artworld," a concept which was borrowed from Arthur Danto's earlier work on the theoretical context surrounding works of art. Whether one finds the idea appealing or appalling, it is one that quite simply cannot be ignored, since the empirical validity of the institutional structure of art and the sorts of problems it can cause, especially in our particular time, are so remarkably clear.

Another significant feature of Dickie's institutional theory is that it provides a definition of art, a problem that philosophers of art have attempted to solve for the past few centuries. Dickie's theory inclines one to dismiss other candidates for definitions as implausible, such as those put forth by R.G. Collingwood and Leo Tolstoy, since, as Dickie insists, an acceptable definition of art must be able to account for the many different kinds of practices that are all referred to as "art." Both Collingwood and Tolstoy advance restricted conceptions of art that are meant to confine the use of the term "art" to a specific kind of creative activity. These conceptions do not provide plausible definitions, since we have entered an era of pluralism in the arts, and thus the definition must accurately reflect the practice.

In 1956, Morris Weitz argued that the proper role of theory in aesthetics is not to provide a definition, since the concept of art is one in which no essence can be discerned. Instead, the role of theory is to single out features of works of art that are worthy of attention and that may have been missed by previous theories. Recently, Peter Kivy has also suggested that a meaningful definition of art cannot be provided, given the very diverse and irreconcilable activities that are all thought to be works of art, and that what philosophers of art should do instead is develop *philosophies* of art. Although I do not wish to conclude that the task of

defining “art” is no longer a viable option for philosophers, I will provide an alternative way of philosophizing about art that is similar to the methods Weitz and Kivy have proposed. I will illuminate a new way of interpreting the theories of Collingwood, Tolstoy, and Danto which is different from those that have been proposed in the past, one that highlights their normative and institutional features. On the foundations of this new interpretation, I will propose a new role for the philosopher of art, one that takes into consideration the significance of the institutional structure of the artworld and how it can be normatively constrained.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Certainly one of the most elusive and obscure concepts philosophers have sought to define is “art.” While it is relatively easy to detect philosophical interest in the arts as far back as Plato, complications which are faced today in providing a definition have their origins in what Paul Kristeller has referred to as the “modern system of the arts,”¹ where painting, sculpture, architecture, music, and poetry all came to be classified as “fine arts” in the eighteenth century. After the arts were so aggregated, the philosophical obligation arose as to understanding how this aggregation was even possible. The task of the philosopher of art became a matter of attempting to uncover the essence of art by putting forth a real definition of the concept.² Indeed, even a brief glimpse at the history of aesthetic theory since this time would reveal how preoccupied philosophers of art have been with this task, and while there certainly have been other philosophical agendas, the pursuit of a real definition has always been one of the foremost concerns.

However, despite the historical salience of this particular task, some have argued that it is not a fruitful endeavor for philosophers of art. In 1956, Morris Weitz suggested along Wittgensteinian lines that there is likely no essence of art, and even if there is one, it should not

¹ Paul Oskar Kristeller, “The Modern System of the Arts: A Study in the History of Aesthetics Part I,” in *Journal of the History of Ideas* 12.4 (1951): 496-527, and “The Modern System of the Arts: A Study in the History of Aesthetics Part II,” in *Journal of the History of Ideas* 13.1 (1952): 17-46. Recently, the concept of “fine art” has been expected to include other art forms such as photography, novels, and theatre, to name a few, which only further complicates the defining task.

² A definition is *real* if the essential properties of the definiendum are outlined in the definiens. The essential properties are often delineated in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions. An example of a real definition would be, “A bachelor is an unmarried man.” The necessary and sufficient conditions for something to be a bachelor are that it needs to be both unmarried and a man.

be captured in terms of a real definition.³ Art is perhaps best understood as an “open concept,”⁴ and the pursuit of a real definition restricts the creative and self-revolutionizing capacity of art. Weitz argued that the more appropriate role of theory in aesthetics is to single out features of art that have not been given sufficient attention in previous theories. More recently, Peter Kivy has also drawn attention to the problematic pursuit of a real definition of art, contending that such theoretical attempts have consistently proven themselves to be unsuccessful due to the recurring problem case of absolute music.⁵ Kivy is disinclined to suggest that philosophically attending to similarities between the arts is a lost cause, instead showing how focusing on the differences between the arts is another valuable option for those disillusioned with the definitional task.

These sorts of objections are largely a result of recognizing the many different kinds of things to which the concept of art has been applied. But the definitional project is not necessarily doomed because of pluralism, and the jury is still out on whether or not it has been a wholly unsuccessful endeavor. While there certainly are theories that offer overly narrow conceptions of art that quite simply cannot account for artistic diversity, such as Leo Tolstoy’s moralist theory or R.G. Collingwood’s expressionist theory, there are others that attempt to accommodate it. One such definition has been provided by George Dickie. In response to Weitz’s objections, Dickie provided a real definition of art that he believed could account for both artistic creativity and

³ Morris Weitz, “The Role of Theory in Aesthetics,” in *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 15.1 (1956): 27-35.

⁴ An open concept is one of which a real definition cannot be provided. At best, the various things which the concept refers to may have overlapping similarities, but there are no essential properties that apply to all of the concept’s referents. See Ludwig Wittgenstein’s description of games in *Philosophical Investigations*, 2nd ed., trans. G.E.M Anscombe (Maldon MA: Blackwell Publishing, 1997).

⁵ Peter Kivy, *Philosophies of Arts: An Essay in Differences* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997). Absolute music, or pure music, is music that is non-representational and non-referential, unaccompanied by a program, lyrics, or any other extramusical idea. In Kivy’s view, philosophers of art have had a difficult time making sense of how absolute music is the same kind of thing as other art forms such as painting or poetry since it seems to have very little (if anything) in common with them, hence the need to focus on differences between the arts rather than the similarities.

variability, one that “absorbs all previous theories” into one single theoretical framework.⁶ In Dickie’s view, philosophers had been searching for the wrong kind of common property. The property that all works of art have in common is their existence within the institutional context of the “artworld.”

Dickie’s theory is important because it resuscitates the search for a real definition by reforming our understanding of the common property we are looking for. It is also important insofar as it draws explicit attention to the *institutional* context and character of art. In Dickie’s view, the “artworld” is responsible for conferring the status of art on specific objects. The artworld is described as an informal institution which embodies and encompasses the various formal and informal institutions within particular “artworld systems,” each of which fosters and supports the production and appreciation of a particular kind of art. Members of the artworld include artists, audiences, curators, museum directors, docents, Sotheby’s agents, collectors, art teachers, art professors, philosophers of art, critics, government funding agents, and quite generally anyone who is interested in art. An object’s location within some aspect of this vast network is what is necessary to transform it into a work of art, and this is the *only* property that is common to *all* works of art.

Dickie’s theory has been the subject of much debate, but there is one issue that is of particular interest to me. Dickie’s theory can be said to breathe new life into the problem of defining art, insofar as a different kind of common property is identified for the first time in the history of aesthetic theory, one that can quite possibly accommodate artistic diversity and creativity. But insofar as this property is *institutional*, it can encourage us to reform our understanding of the value of the history of aesthetic theory. While some theories can be

⁶ George Dickie, *The Art Circle* (New York: Haven, 1984): 110. Dickie’s institutional theory of art was first revealed in *Art and the Aesthetic* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1974), and later in revised form in *The Art Circle*.

dismissed for their definitional inapplicability in a pluralistic artworld, I will suggest that they have some pertinence to other aspects and effects of the institutional theory of art. I will agree with Weitz that one particular way in which we can reconstruct the history of aesthetic theory is to say that at least some philosophers were concerned with singling out features that had been missed by previous theories. But furthermore, I will argue that some philosophers are also identifying problems with the institutional structure of art and the artworld, insofar as the artworld is not facilitating the creation and appreciation of art as well as it should. Such theories have a normative bearing on the institutional structure of art, and I will show how these kinds of theories can work together with some contemporary theories of art that are meant to account for pluralism. I will then show how Dickie's distinction between the artworld and artworld systems can be used to reconcile the normative aspects of these theories with a broader commitment to pluralism. But in order to make this argument, I will have to begin by taking a journey into the more recent history of aesthetic theory, the course of which I will explain momentarily.

Two things should be noted at this point. First, while I will be arguing along similar lines to Kivy by recommending that one option for philosophers of art is to attend to the nature of particular kinds of art rather than art broadly construed, my project is different. It is different in the sense that the alternative I propose is institutionally charged and the approach I describe is meant to apply to the artworld as an entity that can be normatively constrained. Thus, while we might come to similar conclusions, the steps towards those conclusions and the particular motivations guiding our arguments are quite different. While I can agree with Kivy that the time has come for philosophers to consider differences in addition to similarities, my reasons for thinking so are based not only on the nature of the different arts, but also on the significance this has for their success at flourishing in the institutional context of the artworld. But even though our theories have their differences, they can still complement one another in supporting the idea

that philosophers have an alternative course to take aside from defining “art.”

Second, I will sometimes be referring to philosophical theories or definitions of art as “aesthetic theories.” “Aesthetic theory” might have connotations of formalist or aestheticist theories of art such as those of Clive Bell and Clement Greenberg,⁷ but I will be using the concept in a broader sense to delineate the kinds of theories that are at least somehow related to the pursuit of a real definition of art. “Art theory” is too broad for my purposes here, since I am strictly referring to a *philosophical* approach to art. Furthermore, the subtitle of this thesis is an allusion to Weitz’s seminal “The Role of Theory in Aesthetics,” where “aesthetics” is being used in the broad sense to denote “philosophy of art.”

I will develop my argument in the following way. In chapter 2, I will describe Weitz’s objections to the pursuit of a real definition of art and the alternative theoretical approach he proposes. I will then explain Dickie’s response to Weitz’s objections and the general details of the institutional theory of art. Dickie has suggested that the theories of Collingwood and Tolstoy are irrelevant to his theory of evaluation, and in general, he tends to take an almost a-historical approach to aesthetic theory. I will show how the theories of Collingwood and Tolstoy can be interpreted as normative institutional theories, and in this way their contributions are relevant to the future of the institutional theory of art. I will suggest that what Tolstoy and Collingwood are implicitly interested in is both singling out features of art that are worthy of attention, as Weitz indicated, and identifying institutional problems with the artworlds of their respective times.

In Chapter 3, I will attempt to colour in the details of the esoteric “artworld” as it has appeared in philosophical discourse on the nature of art. The first philosopher to explicitly recognize or lay claim to its significance in theorizing about art was Arthur Danto, and I will

⁷ See Clive Bell, *Art* (1914; reprint, London: Chatto and Windus, 1934), and Clement Greenberg, “Towards a Newer Laocoon,” in *Partisan Review* 7 (1940): 299-300.

spend a significant portion of the chapter unpacking some of the more substantial details of his theory of art. Danto's conception of the artworld will then be compared to Dickie's; I will suggest that, insofar as Dickie offers an attractive and empirically accurate conception of the artworld as an informal aggregation of multiple artworld systems, Danto's theory is rather restricted in comparison, and as a result, his artworld might be better described as a particular artworld system.⁸ Danto's theory is also normative since he describes the way in which the artworld can and should be normatively constrained. I will also meet Anita Silvers' objection that the artworld Dickie and Danto refer to does not exist. In doing so, the empirical details of the artworld behind these philosophical conceptions will become more concrete, and the reasons for attending to its structure when philosophizing about art will also become more apparent.

In Chapter 4, I will explain why I think my particular interpretation of the history of aesthetic theory, as a series of normative institutional theories, is an attractive alternative to consider if one is concerned with the institutional structure of art but wary about pursuing a real definition. I will describe the pluralistic character of the artworld today and show how the alternative I propose is suited to these conditions, as well as outlining how such an approach can complement rather than challenge some recent attempts at clarifying the structure the artworld and its proper function. I will show how Dickie's distinction between the artworld and artworld systems serves as a means by which these normative institutional theories can become compatible with a commitment to pluralism. I will then meet two possible objections to my model, one advanced by Danto and the other by sociologist Howard Becker. If my rebuttal is successful, I will then have shown how philosophers have a viable alternative to pursuing a real definition of

⁸ Dickie usefully distinguishes between the artworld and an artworld system, where an artworld system is "a framework for the presentation of a work of art by an artist to an artworld public," and the artworld is "the totality of all artworld systems" (Dickie, *The Art Circle*, 80-3). An example of an artworld system might be the practices and corresponding institutions of a particular art form such as music. For instance,

art, an alternative that has an important normative bearing on the institutional structure of art, even in a pluralistic artworld. I will have illuminated the philosopher's role in normatively guiding artistic practices, which in effect shows the philosophy of art to be a kind of applied philosophy and thus very much a practically significant theoretical activity.

music has its own "world" insofar as it has its own institutions and conventions. This distinction will be discussed in detail in Chapters 2, 3, and 4.

Chapter 2

The Institutional Structure of Art and the Problem of Aesthetic Theory

1. Introduction

In an article that has become a classic in the recent history of the philosophy of art, Morris Weitz challenged the relentless pursuit of a definition of art, arguing that the search for a real definition of art is futile given the peculiar nature of the concept.¹ Classic theories of art such as formalism or expressionism focus on certain defining features of art at the cost of excluding some others, and are thus challenged by other theories which maintain that an important feature of art has been missed. For instance, a formalist theory excludes what an emotionalist theory takes to be a defining feature of art, and vice versa. Aesthetic theory in general, although valuable for securing a basis for criticism and appreciation, has been misguided, Weitz argued, insofar as real definitions are thought to be the only way to afford such a result. According to Weitz, “knowing what art is is not apprehending some manifest or latent essence but being able to recognize, describe, and explain these things we call ‘art’ in virtue of [these] similarities.”² Furthermore, a real definition of art “forecloses on the very condition of creativity in the arts.”³ Thus, aesthetic theories are only capable of drawing attention to features of art which have not yet been given proper recognition.

Weitz’s Wittgensteinian conclusion about the nature of art persuaded many philosophers of art to rethink their role in clarifying artistic practices. But for a philosopher such as George Dickie, the definitional route could not be so easily abandoned. Dickie maintains that there is in

¹ Morris Weitz, “The Role of Theory in Aesthetics,” in *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 15.1 (1956): 27-35.

² *Ibid.*, 31.

³ *Ibid.*, 32.

fact an essential feature of art, and on its basis a real definition of art can be formulated. This feature is art's *institutional* character. The definition that follows is: "works of art are art as a result of the position they occupy within an institutional framework or context."⁴ This framework or context is the "artworld." Against Weitz, Dickie argues that a real definition of art is not only possible, but that it is also necessary in that the classification of art is more primary and foundational than evaluative or honorific senses of the term (or at least ought to be). We use the term, "art," to refer to a number of different objects that have a variety of ends and values, and the theory of art we are looking for as analytic philosophers ought, Dickie argues, to reveal what the common features of these objects are in spite of their differences. The classificatory approach is thought to satisfy the conditions expected of a real definition and to secure evaluative practices, acting as the condition by which evaluation can be better understood and clarified for the kind of practice it really is.

For Dickie, classic theories of art – including those such as R.G. Collingwood's expressionist theory and Leo Tolstoy's moralist theory – function as honorific or evaluative theories and as such offer a standard template of what not to do when philosophizing about art, since they appear to conflate the distinction between classification and evaluation. In my view, it is unreasonable move on Dickie's part to slot these theories into such broad categories without considering some of the details that may lead us to conclude otherwise. Keeping in mind both Weitz's and Dickie's remarks on the nature of art and aesthetic theory, a closer look at these two classic theories reveals that they have something more to offer to the debate on the institutional structure of art than Dickie is inclined to think. In this chapter, I will show that, while Dickie's institutional theory of art might solve one particular problem of aesthetic theory (that of providing a real definition), it transposes another into an institutional one. By this I mean that insofar as his

⁴ George Dickie, *The Art Circle* (New York: Haven, 1984): 7.

theory draws attention to the *institutional* features of art, it inadvertently highlights some features of certain aesthetic theories that may have been previously missed, features that problematize the institutional structure of art. Rereading the two classic aesthetic theories of Collingwood and Tolstoy through an institutional lens highlights a different way in which we can interpret these theories, one that is influenced by Weitz's view of the role of aesthetic theory. Hastily dismissing these theories as irrelevant to contemporary issues because of their failure to provide acceptable real definitions of art is not the only interpretive option. I will argue that we can interpret the theories of Collingwood and Tolstoy as normative institutional theories which have a significant role to play in clarifying our understanding of the artworld and the philosopher's role in it.

2. Weitz on Theory

According to Weitz, aesthetic theorists have been traditionally concerned with capturing the elusive nature of art in terms of a real definition. Aesthetic theory serves as the foundation for both appreciation and criticism, and has conventionally been a means by which theorists draw attention to certain features of art which have not been included in prior definitions or theories. The general problem with all aesthetic theories is that they "conceive of the concept of art as closed when its very use reveals and demands its openness."⁵ The concept of art is such that it must remain open to allow for creativity, and the similarity between works of art is more like a family resemblance rather than essential identification. In asking "What is art?", theorists are initially assuming that an answer can be provided by using the traditional analytic tools of necessary and sufficient conditions, or by uncovering some latent essence. But for Weitz, there is no such condition, and the fundamental question of aesthetics ought instead to be framed as "What sort of concept is 'art'?"

Although understanding artistic evaluation might appear to be a different issue from determining how the concept of art is used, Weitz maintains that there is still an important connection here in our common use of the concept, for “in every instance of ‘This is a work of art’ (used to praise), what happens is that the criterion of evaluation...for the employment of the concept of art is converted into a criterion for recognition.”⁶ Thus, when looking at how exactly such a phrase is used, we are likely to come to see that it is being used in both a classificatory and an evaluative sense almost simultaneously. Most real definitions are disguising themselves as classifications when what they are really doing is offering *honorific* definitions of art.⁷ This means that theorists are singling out features that they believe are worthy of aesthetic or critical attention, but this alone is not a sufficient reason why such features are the only ones to include in a real definition. Recognizing this problem has significant consequences for how we ought to think of aesthetic theory in general:

In each of the great theories of art, whether correctly understood as honorific definitions or incorrectly accepted as real definitions, what is of the utmost importance are the reasons proffered in the argument for the respective theory, that is, the reasons given for the chosen or preferred criterion of excellence and evaluation. It is this perennial debate over these criteria of evaluation which makes the history of aesthetic theory the important study it is. The value of each of the theories resides in its attempt to state and to justify certain criteria which are either neglected or distorted by previous theories.⁸

Drawing from these considerations, we can say that there are two ways in which we can understand the problem of conflating classification and evaluation. On the one hand, we can conceive of theories in a negative way by viewing them as unsuccessful real definitions. Or, we can positively emphasize their honorific definitional function in attempting to draw our attention to features of art that have been missed or neglected in previous theories. There is no need to

⁵ Weitz, 30.

⁶ Ibid., 34.

⁷ Ibid., 35.

⁸ Ibid.

disguise a theory as a real definition in order for it to be taken seriously, because this is not the sort of theoretical method that is suited to the open concept of art. A criticism of a previous definition of art can be successful without offering a new real definition to take its place. As Weitz suggests, “To understand the role of aesthetic theory is not to conceive it as a definition, logically doomed to failure, but to read it as summaries of seriously made recommendations to attend in certain ways to certain features of art.”⁹ Normative recommendations are being made to attend to certain features of art in particular kinds of ways, and this is the proper function of aesthetic theory in clarifying our understanding of criticism and appreciation. The pursuit of a real definition of art is not only a philosophical dead end, but it also distorts our conception of the value of aesthetic theory and its important role in clarifying artistic practices.

3. Dickie’s Institutional Theory of Art

Responding to Weitz’s reflections on the nature of art and the problem of defining it, Dickie suggests that not only is a real definition of art possible, but it is also a necessary philosophical problem to solve. It is necessary to provide a real definition of art in order to clarify the distinction between classification and evaluation. This distinction is important because all of the ways in which we employ the term, “art,” are not necessarily consistent with the honorific or evaluative sense that Weitz detects in the history of aesthetic theory. For instance, it is important to understand what we mean when we say things like, “This is a bad work of art,” and how “art” is functioning in such instances if it is not used as a term of praise.¹⁰ It appears as though there is a class of objects, all of which are referred to as works of art, from which we determine some to be better than others. All of the members of this class are still works of art

⁹ Weitz, 35.

regardless of how they might be evaluated, and in Dickie's view, the essential property that is common to them all is their existence within the institutional context of the "artworld."

Dickie's institutional theory of art in its most recent formulation is an assemblage of the following features: (1) "An artist is a person who participates with understanding in the making of a work of art," (2) "A work of art is an artifact of a kind created to be presented to an artworld public," (3) "A public is a set of persons the members of which are prepared in some degree to understand an object which is presented to them," (4) "The artworld is the totality of all artworld systems," and (5) "An artworld system is a framework for the presentation of a work of art by an artist to an artworld public."¹¹ Art by its very nature is sustained and understood against a background of social conventions and rules that are similar in terms of their structure rather than the particular values they perpetuate or facilitate. What all works of art have in common is their existence in and dependence upon the structure of an artworld system. What is interesting as a result of this formulation is that the artworld as an institutional framework now becomes the center of philosophical attention rather than the nature or value of particular works of art.

In an earlier formulation of his theory, Dickie stated that "a work of art in the classificatory sense is (1) an artifact (2) a set of aspects of which has had conferred upon it the status of candidate for appreciation by some person or persons acting on behalf of a certain social institution (the artworld)."¹² It is the latter condition that Richard Wollheim has criticized. Wollheim maintains that there is something amiss with the idea that the status of art depends upon conferral by an artworld member, since some sort of reasoning must be behind this conferral. In avoiding the issue of reasoning or in seeing it as irrelevant, Wollheim argues,

¹⁰ It might be hard for us to understand when we might use a phrase such as "This is a bad work of art," it is somewhat easier for us to recall saying such things as "That was a really bad movie," and that the movie is still a movie even though it was bad.

¹¹ Dickie, *The Art Circle*, 80-83.

¹² Dickie, *Introduction to Aesthetics*, 83.

Dickie is indirectly making less of a case for the institutional theory of art. With or without reasons, if some sort of official conferral of status is necessary, then “some independent evidence is required for what the representatives of the artworld allegedly do,”¹³ and such evidence is necessary for understanding the particularly *institutional* aspects of the theory:

A theory that calls itself ‘institutional’ can ill afford to confirm the social facts that it postulates by appeal to mere explanatory force – even if this force were stronger than seems to be the case. Additionally the theory, to deserve the name, must point to positive practices, conventions, or rules, which are all explicit in the society (the artworld), even if they are merely implicit in the mind of the actual agent (the representative of the artworld).¹⁴

What is missing, Wollheim claims, in Dickie’s theory is an explanation as to *why* certain objects are afforded the status of a work of art by certain members of the artworld. And given the fact that the theory is an “institutional” one, it ought to provide a better elucidation of the structural complexities and idiosyncratic practices of the particular kind of institution that it is.

In Dickie’s view, the mere presence of reasons does not imply that something is necessarily a work of art. With or without reasons, the status still needs to be conferred by the appropriate members of an artworld public.¹⁵ And furthermore, reasons are not essential to the existence of a work of art, since other things can have similar reasons and yet not be works of art in virtue of them.¹⁶ For example, a painting hidden in my basement might be a work of art according to the dictates or principles of some aesthetic theory, but yet it is not really a work of art because it has no role in the artworld and its status has not been conferred by an actual “public,” since I myself cannot fulfill such a role. It is still necessary that we can talk about bad art, and it is equally as important that we understand the necessity of institutional conferral in making something a work of art, or at the very least a candidate for appreciation. There very well

¹³ Richard Wollheim, “The Institutional Theory of Art,” in *Art and Its Objects: With Six Supplementary Essays* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1980): 162.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ George Dickie, *Art and Value* (Maldon, MA: Blackwell, 2001): 65.

may be a certain level of arbitrariness to the conferral of status, since the artworld is ultimately a social construction and thus is amenable to change and variability dependent upon the ways in which members of various artworld publics fill their roles.¹⁷

4. Value and Institutional Implications

Dickie suggests that “it is not clear...that a human culture must have art.”¹⁸

Nevertheless, the institutional theory of art places no restrictions on what art can do. In fact, it not only allows for artistic freedom, but it is perhaps better at facilitating such freedom than other aesthetic theories have been:

Art has been the bearer of a myriad of things, ranging from those of the greatest importance to the trivial. The institutional theory allows the freedom for art which Weitz quite correctly is so anxious to preserve in his attack on traditional theories of art. There is a sense in which the institutional theory absorbs all of the earlier theories, each of which has caught a glimpse of something art can do.¹⁹

While the classificatory approach might be appealing in the sense of acting as a precondition for evaluation, there are important implications in referring to the artworld as an institution that need to be given more consideration. On the one hand, it has significant consequences for how we are to understand the role of aesthetic theory, and evaluative theories more specifically, in clarifying artistic practices. On the other hand, as Wollheim points out, referring to the practice of art as an institutional one requires us to understand the structure of the

¹⁶ Dickie, *Art and Value*, 26.

¹⁷ On the arbitrariness of art, Dickie says the following: “The artworld is a collection of different systems – painting, literature, theater, and the like. The collection is not a tidy one but is rather one that has been drawn together over time in a somewhat arbitrary way. Why does it include literature, theater, and ballet but not dog shows, horse shows, and circuses? The answer is that the artworld is a cultural construction – something that members of society have collectively made into what it is over time...There is a strong chance of there being an element of arbitrariness in every cultural construction simply because they come about as a result of people’s behaviour over time” (Ibid., 60).

¹⁸ Dickie, *The Art Circle*, 85.

¹⁹ Ibid., 110.

institution in terms of both how it does function and perhaps even how it ought to function according to the demands of artistic creativity and freedom which both Weitz and Dickie acknowledge as important to preserve.

First, let us look at what impact the institutional theory has on our understanding of aesthetic theory. As Weitz suggests, aesthetic theories can point out features of works of art that have been missed by other theories and that ought to be singled out for attention. For instance, a moralist theory of art can be put forth with the intention of refuting a formalist definition that is considered to be too narrow. But is this really all that these theories are doing? If there is a more primary understanding of art in terms of its institutional structure, a structure that has always been there (at least in our more recent history) but was perhaps difficult to discern, might there be further evidence for this aspect in other aesthetic theories? Furthermore, might these theories have something to add to the debate on the institutional structure of art? Perhaps it is now worth looking at how can read some of these classic evaluative theories in a different way, a way that is consistent with the distinction between classification and evaluation, a way that supports the institutional theory of art, and a way that shows us where we as philosophers of art can go from here.

5. Revisiting Collingwood and Tolstoy

In *Art and Value*, Dickie insists that traditional theories of art are largely misleading in the sense that they conflate the distinction between classification and evaluation. Hence, countering Francis Sparshott's query as to why Collingwood and Tolstoy are not included in his discussion of evaluative theories, Dickie states that "There is no discussion of Collingwood and Tolstoy because I did not think that their views contribute anything to a modern theory of art

evaluation.”²⁰ While this may very well be the case, given that the theory of evaluation Dickie puts forth is built upon his views on classification and is meant to apply to evaluation as a practice rather than any one particular value, something still seems intuitively amiss here. While their particular insights might not be relevant to the kind of theory of evaluation Dickie is interested in, they still offer some support for the institutional theory itself, and they still point to a direction in which we can push Dickie’s considerations, a direction in which he himself is not yet prepared to go.

In *What is Art?*, Tolstoy presents his theory of art as a kind of religious and moral expression, and the work of art as a means by which the moral condition of society can be improved. Tolstoy describes the act of engaging with a work of art as a kind of “infection” whereby the audience comes to share the same moral sentiments and perspective as the artist, and the stronger the infection, the better the art is as art.²¹ Tolstoy maintains that this is the only art worthy of being referred to as such, and that art which does not fall into this category is a danger to society, “deserving not to be encouraged but to be driven out, denied, and despised as being art which does not unite, but divides people.”²² In Tolstoy’s view, art that is aimed exclusively at appealing to an elite upper class (a criticism which is directed towards Richard Wagner as an artist guilty of committing such an act), and art that is too ornamental and difficult to understand for the mere sake of being elusive, distances itself from the culture of the common folk who are just as able to appreciate *real* art as the elite. Art which severs communal ties and social harmony is not art at all, but is instead a negative force that is dividing society and thus is in need of being

²⁰ Dickie, *Art and Value*, 77.

²¹ Leo Tolstoy, *What is Art?*, Trans. Aylmer Maude (1897; reprint, Indianapolis: Hackett, 1996): 140: “*The stronger the infection, the better the art is as art...* And the degree of the infectiousness of art depends on three conditions: (1) On the greater or lesser individuality of the feeling transmitted; (2) on the greater or lesser clearness with which the feeling is transmitted; (3) on the sincerity of the artist, i.e. on the greater or lesser force with which the artist himself feels the emotion he transmits.”

²² *Ibid.*, 157.

censored or driven out. The features of the object which act as the means of expression are not as important as the expression itself (in fact the object itself is almost dispensable), and the easier the work is to understand, and the more people who are able to understand it, the better it is as art.

While these are the more salient features of Tolstoy's theory, features which have been given considerable attention by philosophers of art, there are several other aspects of his account that ought to be given more attention. First, Tolstoy spends a significant amount of time considering the general history of aesthetic theory before developing his own theory, and this is important because certain parallels can be drawn with respect to both Weitz's claims on the nature of aesthetic theory as well as Dickie's ideas on classification. On the nature of aesthetic theory, Tolstoy says the following:

All the existing aesthetic standards are built on this plan. Instead of giving a definition of true art and then deciding what is and is not good art by judging whether a work conforms or does not conform to the definition, a certain class of works which for some reason please a certain circle of people is accepted as being art, and the definition of art is devised to cover all these productions.²³

The remarks made in this passage bear a striking resemblance to Dickie's justification for taking a classificatory approach to art, insofar as definitions of art are put forth to serve particular interests or to support particular conceptions of value and not to clarify the concept of art itself. But whereas for Dickie the evaluative theories in question do not necessarily pose some sort of practical danger but are rather just theoretically mistaken, Tolstoy is more concerned with the worldly connection and moral influence of art, and the act of disguising immoral views as definitions of art (or as works of art) is "so highly dangerous in its power to infect people against their wills that mankind will lose far less by banishing all art than by tolerating each and every art."²⁴ Still, regardless of their differences here, Tolstoy and Dickie are at least on the same page

²³ Tolstoy: 44-5.

²⁴ Ibid., 53.

with respect to why these definitions are unacceptable, insofar as they are not necessarily intended to be definitions at all.

Second, Tolstoy also offers some interesting criticisms of the Russian art industry, criticisms that can be interpreted as being directed towards the institutional structure of art itself. Tolstoy's main contention with the art industry is that elitist "art" requires the extensive effort of lower class labourers to create something that is often of little or no value to them. Artists depend upon the lower classes "not only to produce art, but also for their own luxurious maintenance."²⁵ And in true Marxist fashion, the very workers who create such art are distanced from its meaning and effects, so the creation of this kind of "art" is a form of alienated labour, since "for the great majority of people, our art, besides being inaccessible on account of its costliness, is strange in its very nature, transmitting as it does the feelings of people far removed from those conditions of laborious life which are natural to the great body of humanity."²⁶ Thus, there is something terribly wrong with the art industry as it stands, which functions as a kind of capitalist regime exploiting the masses for its own gain, and art needs to be accessible and applicable to the people who create it.

Continuing on the topic of the capitalist exploitation of labourers at the hands of artists and the elite, Tolstoy compares art in his time to a prostitute. In his view, "this comparison holds even in minute details. Like her it is not limited to certain times, like her it is always adorned, like her it is always *salable*, and like her it is enticing and ravenous."²⁷ This function of art is inconsistent with what Tolstoy believes to be art's genuine function (as narrow as this conception may be) of infecting people with a particular moral spirit, regardless of class, and thus the artworld needs to be restructured to best facilitate this result. This leads to Tolstoy's conclusion

²⁵ Tolstoy, 15.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 70.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 172 (my italics).

regarding the future of art, where it “will not be produced by professional artists receiving payment for their work and engaged in nothing else besides their art...The artist of the future will live the common life of man, earning his subsistence by some kind of labour.”²⁸

Tolstoy’s theory of art, while certainly controversial and contentious in places, is important because it acts as a kind of struggle against the politics of the artworld of his time. Whereas Weitz suggests that aesthetic theories are directed towards insufficiencies in other theories, we can see here with Tolstoy that sometimes theories offer a critique of the practical and institutional structure of the artworld rather than focusing exclusively on the inadequacies of previous aesthetic theories. In challenging Weitz, Dickie shows that there is a basic classificatory sense of art, and that there is an institutional structure which sustains works of art as such. But in drawing attention to this structure, Dickie is also offering us a means by which we can reinterpret some classic theories. They may very well be perpetuating an evaluative criterion at the cost of attending to the primacy of classification. But they are also offering us a means of better understanding the salience, the function, and the *malfunction* of the institutional structure of art.

Collingwood’s theory of art has also been subject to extensive criticism and debate, much like Tolstoy’s theory albeit for different reasons, and it also shares similar institutional concerns such as those that can be found in the work of Tolstoy. Collingwood’s project in *The Principles of Art* is to discern certain conceptual errors in the history of aesthetic theory, errors he believes are a result of the technical theory of art and common conceptions of art as consisting of mere amusement or “magic.”²⁹ For Collingwood, art proper is what we are looking for, something which is connected to how we live our lives in the world. Art proper is a kind of expressive and

²⁸ Tolstoy, 175-6.

²⁹ R.G. Collingwood, *The Principles of Art* (London: Clarendon Press, 1938). An example of “magic” would be a war-dance or a similar sort of ritual, and a description of its nature is as follows: “Magic is a representation where the emotion evoked is an emotion valued on account of its function in practical life,

imaginative language of communication, and the artist acts as a representative of his or her community by evoking or representing a shared consciousness. Artistic creation is then a kind of communal collaboration between the artist and his or her audience or community. Similar to Tolstoy, Collingwood maintains that bad art is not art at all, and that it needs to be forbidden. According to Collingwood, “Art is not a luxury, and bad art is not a thing we can afford to tolerate,”³⁰ since “bad art, the corrupt consciousness, is the true *radix malorum*.”³¹ We can see here that Dickie might maintain that both Tolstoy and Collingwood are guilty of conflating classification and evaluation in saying that bad art is really not art at all, or it at least appears this way on the surface.

But again, this is a relatively shallow criticism, for there is more to the conflation than one might think. In the preface to *The Principles of Art*, Collingwood justifies his project in terms of a kind of institutional criticism when explaining why artists themselves have now come to be interested in aesthetic theory:

[Aesthetic theory ought to be] an attempt to reach, by thinking, the solution of certain problems arising out of the situation in which artists find themselves here and now. Everything written in this book has been written in the belief that it has a practical bearing, direct or indirect, upon the condition of art in England in 1937, and in the hope that artists primarily, and secondarily persons whose interest in art is lively and sympathetic, will find it of some use to them.³²

So the exercise here is not a merely theoretical one, but is meant to have practical bearing and significance. And since it is directed towards a particular historical epoch, we can say that it is likewise directed towards a particular institution or artworld, here the artworld of 1930s England. Collingwood’s reflections on the nature of art lead him to suggest that the artworld ought to be restructured so as to allow “art proper” to flourish. The role of the aesthetician is to

evoked in order that it may discharge that function, and fed by the generative or focusing activity into the practical life that needs it” (68). Magic is a valuable social activity, but it is not “art proper.”

³⁰ Collingwood, 284.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 285.

point out the features of the current artworld that are hindering such a conception from flourishing so that some sort of solution can be worked out.³³ Collingwood concludes his theoretical investigations by asking aestheticians the following question: “How does the theory advanced in this book bear upon the present situation, and illuminate the path to be taken by artists in the immediate future?”³⁴ The question is not so much how this theory relates to other theories, but instead asks what we can do with respect to bringing about practical changes in the current artworld which may not be allowing art to flourish as it ought to. Thus, we can interpret Collingwood as implying that the aesthetician’s task is to attempt to answer these questions, or to look more closely at the institutional structure of art rather than focusing exclusively on incidental theoretical details.

While both Collingwood and Tolstoy see no reason to reserve a space for bad art, they do so for good reasons, most of which revolve around the idea that bad art corrupts society.³⁵ But even if we disagree, thinking instead that bad art is not necessarily as detrimental to society as they might think, Collingwood and Tolstoy’s insights into the problems with the institutional structure of art are worth reflecting on. While these theorists may not see the need to sharply distinguish between classification and evaluation, they recognize the institutional structure of art to some extent, and they show that there might be problems with the way in which institutions of art are functioning and what bearing these considerations have on the direction of aesthetic theory. So instead of reading these theories as failures or mistakes, as Dickie would contend, we can read them as normative institutional theories. While they certainly do single out features of art that are worthy of attention, features which may have been missed by previous theories (as

³² Collingwood, vi.

³³ Ibid., 325.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Dickie does not make any assumptions about art’s particular value to society (or its negative effects on society, either), hence the distinction.

Weitz suggests), this is not the only thing that they are doing, since they also serve as practical manifestos with an institutional concern.³⁶ Thus, they have more relevance to Dickie's institutional theory than he might think. They may not work well as definitions, but they certainly do show us why the institution of art should be both recognized *and* criticized.

6. Conclusion

Dickie meets Weitz's definitional challenge by showing why we ought to still be concerned with the project, in the sense that classification acts as a precondition for evaluation regardless of how hard it might be for us to conceptualize this theoretical distinction.

Classification is important so as to offset restrictive evaluative theories, and thus to facilitate a freedom of artistic value and to better understand the complex activity of artistic evaluation.

Taking a classificatory approach to the problem of defining art reveals that its basic structure is institutional, which ends up transposing a theoretical problem into a practical one. As Weitz points out, theories are developed in response to other theories which have missed important features of art that ought to be given consideration. But theories might also be directed towards institutional problems with the artworld itself rather than being strictly oriented towards previous theories. As I have shown, there is evidence for this in the writings of both Collingwood and Tolstoy, evidence which suggests that there is more to their theories than mere definitional or evaluative concerns. And while they are concerned with definitions which might restrict our employment of the concept of art, they are also struggling against the delimiting institutional forces of their times.

³⁶ As Vincent Tomas says in the introduction to Tolstoy's *What is Art?*, it is difficult to understand what exactly Tolstoy is trying to do with his theory. Is he appealing to common use, is he defining art for a particular purpose, "or does he perhaps not want to find out anything at all, but rather issue a manifesto intended to influence the practice of artists and critics?" (Tolstoy, xi). Tolstoy may in fact be doing each of these things, but the latter consideration is the most interesting for my purposes here.

As Wollheim points out, one of the most important features of the institutional theory of art is that it draws our attention to how “the production of art is, for better or worse, surrounded by factions and coteries, and this is generally for worse though sometimes for better.”³⁷ If we take this to be one of the more important features of the institutional theory of art, or at least one of the salient offshoots, then both Tolstoy and Collingwood can be interpreted as lending support to the idea that there is perhaps something wrong with the practice of art in our society (or at least in their particular societies), and while they may not offer us a particularly useful definition of art, they still offer us a useful direction in which to take the institutional theory of art. If we find such a direction attractive, then the first step is to take a closer look at the nature of the artworld as the institution in question and attempt to discern why that structure might be somewhat unsuccessful in facilitating certain forms of art that some consider valuable.

³⁷ Wollheim, 166.

Chapter 3

The Artworld

1. Introduction

In the previous chapter, I argued that Dickie's institutional theory might correctly identify a problem with overly narrow definitions of art and their negative bearing on accurately understanding artistic practice, but that there is an alternative to consider that places these theories in a more positive light. With his theory, Dickie draws awareness to the institutional structure of art or the "artworld," offering us a means by which classic aesthetic theories can be reinterpreted as normative institutional theories rather than strictly as definitional failures. Controversial theories such as those of Collingwood and Tolstoy can be interpreted as offering criticisms of the artworld of their respective times and its failure in allowing for their particular conceptions of art to flourish.

But what is the "artworld"? When the concept is mentioned, what first comes to mind for many of us is the many artists and art enthusiasts who depend upon the production and appreciation of art to provide their own livelihood, as well as the various formal and informal institutions within which these people carry out their business. But there is more to the concept than the mere aggregation of its members. With the rise of the institutional theory of art, the artworld becomes the center of philosophical attention, but as will become clear in this chapter, there has been some debate as to what exactly the term refers to and how it functions in certain theories of art. Dickie offers one picture of the artworld, where it is described as the totality of all artworld systems, and an artworld system is quite generally "a framework for the presentation of

a work of art by an artist to an artworld public.”¹ But Dickie is not the only philosopher to explicitly utilize the concept in his theory, and while Dickie’s is certainly one of the most popular (or at least one of the most well known) variants of artworld theories, there are others.

Philosophical theories of the artworld, or “institutional theories of art,” generally arose in response to conditions involving publicly exhibited works of art that were confusing for artists and art connoisseurs alike, works of art that challenged conventional theories of art in a new and conceptually fascinating way. I will begin this chapter by reviewing some of the challenges these objects posed as well as Arthur Danto’s particular response to them. Danto has offered one of the most interesting and innovative interpretations of this peculiar period in art’s history, and he is widely considered to be the founding father of institutional theories of art. Although Dickie has repeatedly acknowledged Danto’s influence on his own theory,² there is some significant tension between his conception of the artworld and Danto’s. I will outline some of the more substantial similarities and differences between their theories in an effort to clarify how the concept is and perhaps ought to be employed in philosophical discourse on the nature of art. I will also attempt to meet an objection by Anita Silvers that the “artworld” Danto and Dickie refer to does not exist, and meeting this objection will reveal how critical it is that philosophers take this concept into careful consideration.

Through this analysis, I hope to draw attention to an important and somewhat neglected relationship between one’s efforts at defining art and one’s corresponding approach to the artworld. Simply put, when art is defined in certain sorts of ways, the artworld becomes problematized. A pattern of normativity with respect to the function of the artworld is revealed,

¹ George Dickie, *Introduction to Aesthetics: An Analytic Approach* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997): 71.

² For his acknowledgement of Danto’s influence on his own theory, see George Dickie, *Art and Value* (Maldon, MA: Blackwell, 2001): 7, George Dickie, *The Art Circle* (New York: Haven, 1984): 10-27, and

one that can be detected in the theories of Collingwood and Tolstoy and to a similar extent in Danto's theory as well. Recognizing this pattern can change the way we think of a substantial part of the history of aesthetic theory, as not necessarily a succession of definitional failures, but instead as a series of recommendations as to how the artworld ought to function. Following from this, we can change the way we think of the role of the philosopher of art, extending the bounds of what sort of problems they are able to identify and solve.³ The majority of the next chapter will be dedicated to fleshing out the implications of this argument, and the purpose of this chapter is to set the stage for that argument to take place.

2. Controversial Objects and Danto's Theory of Art⁴

Perhaps the first event which gave rise to an *explicit* philosophical identification of the artworld (seeing as I believe the concept was implicitly referred to even before this time)

George Dickie, "A Tale of Two Artworlds, in *Danto and His Critics*, ed. Mark Rollins (Cambridge MA: Blackwell Publishing, 1993): 74.

³ I should note that philosophers of art have not *only* been concerned with putting forth definitions of art, but this has certainly been one of the dominant themes. And despite the influence of Weitz on the work of many contemporary philosophers of art, it still continues to be an issue of much concern. For instance, see Stephen Davies, *Definitions of Art* (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 1991) and Berys Gaut, "'Art' as a Cluster Concept," in *Theories of Art Today*, ed. Noel Carroll (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2000): 25–44.

The alternative interpretation I propose of some theories that do put forward definitions, either implicitly or explicitly, is one that has not yet been considered, and one that shows some classic "definitions" to be much more than what they appear. What I do not wish to imply is that this is the *only* alternative philosophers of art have aside from putting forth definitions. Instead, this is one option that those who are interested in the nature of art can possibly take, provided they are convinced by my interpretation of the institutional theory of art and its significance.

⁴ Here I make explicit reference to Duchamp's *Fountain* (Fig. 1) and Warhol's Brillo boxes (Fig. 2), but there are many other works that arose during this period that have posed similar sorts of conceptual challenges. For the sake of clarity, I have avoided reference to the various subgenres within this period, which include Dada, Neo-Dada, Neo-Expressionism, Pop Art, and Conceptual Art, among others. A short list of some of the better known works from these genres includes the following: Marcel Duchamp, *In Advance of the Broken Arm*, 1915, Yale Center for British Art, New Haven, CT; Kasimir Malevich, *White on White*, 1918, The Museum of Modern Art, New York; Robert Rauschenberg, *Erased De Kooning Drawing*, 1953, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco, CA; Rauschenberg, *Bed*, 1955, The Museum of Modern Art, New York; Jasper Johns, *Flag*, 1954, The Museum of Modern Art, New York; Claes Oldenburg, *Bedroom Ensemble*, 1963, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, ON; Roy Lichtenstein,

occurred in 1917. Marcel Duchamp, Dada artist and board member of the Society of Independent Artists, purchased a urinal from a plumbing shop in New York with the intention of exhibiting it in an art show as it was, save for a dated signature (the alias “R. Mutt 1917”) and positioning it on its back in such a way that, to quote Arthur Danto, it appeared “like an immobilized turtle.”⁵

Duchamp submitted his *Fountain* anonymously, and the Hanging Committee of the Independents Exhibition of 1917 rejected the work as being unworthy of exhibition, perhaps due to both its lack of any artistic qualities and its existence as a metaphorical slap in the face to serious artists and art connoisseurs alike. Although it is difficult to determine what Duchamp’s intentions amounted to, some of his previous works, such as the infamous *Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2*, had also been refused exhibition in the past, so the submission of *Fountain* was likely influenced by these sorts of events. Furthermore, the Hanging Committee of the Independents Exhibition of 1917 had intended on accepting every submitted piece for exhibition, which may have both unsettled and inspired Duchamp into action.

Although it might have seemed intuitively obvious to some that such an object quite simply could not be a work of art, to others, *Fountain* was worthy of being singled out for artistic attention. And what made this debate particularly interesting, at least from a philosophical perspective, is that the object itself seems to have the issue of defining art as its very subject. *Fountain* finds its home on the borderline between art and non-art, asking the viewer to revisit and reflect on his assumptions as to what makes an object a work of art. *Fountain* is a “readymade” object, with no visible artistically imposed properties other than Duchamp’s signature and the physical act of placing it in a gallery. Furthermore, aside from the signature and its location in a foreign (and absurd) context, *Fountain* is identical to the urinals found in many

Brushstroke, Tate Britain Art Gallery, London, UK; and another famous Warhol piece, *Campbell’s Soup Cans*, 1968, The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

men's washrooms in New York and elsewhere, which seems to suggest that what makes something a work of art might extend beyond that which we are able to phenomenally discern in the object itself.

Similar features can be identified in pop artist Andy Warhol's Brillo boxes, a set of boxes visually and tactilely identical to the real Brillo boxes found in American supermarkets, save for the fact that Warhol's were silk-screened on wood. Like Duchamp's *Fountain*, Warhol's Brillo boxes were accepted as art by some and not by others, which again posed the problem of explicitly identifying what exactly it is that makes something a work of art. Seeing one of Warhol's Brillo boxes in a 1964 art show inspired Arthur Danto to attempt to solve the conceptual puzzle that he thought these sorts of objects posed:

It occurred to me that one had first of all to have some sense of the structure of art history...and then one needed some sense that it was with reference to an enfranchising theory that they derived their identity as works of art. It seemed to me that without both of these, one could not see the *Brillo Box* as a work of art, and hence that in order to do so one had to participate in a conceptual atmosphere, a "discourse of reasons," which one shared with the artists and with others who made up the art world.⁶

Before spelling out the various features of this theory, this puzzle needs to be examined more carefully. What marks these objects as peculiar for Danto is the fact that they are phenomenally indiscernible from regular objects which are not considered to be art; so, the issue, then, is not so much that they demand an answer to the question, "What is art?", but more specifically, they ask, "What *makes* [this particular object] art?"⁷ With Duchamp, the question is not only a matter of determining what art is, but furthermore, one must determine why *this*

⁵ Arthur C. Danto, "Appreciation and Interpretation," in *The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986): 32.

⁶ Arthur C. Danto, *Beyond the Brillo Box: The Visual Arts in Post-Historical Perspective* (New York: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 1992): 5.

⁷ Arthur Danto, "The Artworld," in *The Journal of Philosophy* 61.19, American Philosophical Association Eastern Division Sixty-First Annual Meeting (1964): 580 (my italics).

particular urinal is a work of art when others which are identical to it are not.⁸ There must be something other than the phenomenal features of the object that is responsible for its existence as a work of art. Danto suggests that it is the context in which these objects are ontologically located that is responsible for such an indiscernible difference:

To see something as art requires something the eye cannot descry – an atmosphere of artistic theory, a knowledge of the history of art: an artworld.⁹

According to Danto, then, what makes one object a work of art and another identical to it a mere thing is that the work of art is situated in some sort of theoretical atmosphere. For Danto, the theory enfranchises the object into the world of art, a world that “stands to the real world in something like the relationship in which the City of God stands to the Earthly City.”¹⁰ As simple and poetic an explanation as this may sound, things get rather complicated when one tries to understand what Danto means by “theory.” It appears as though it is the history of art theory that has been inadequate at meeting the challenge of incorporating such controversial objects into the canon of art. Since the inadequacy of prior theories of art is responsible for their apparent exclusion, what sort of “theory” is it that successfully enfranchises these objects?

Danto views the history of art as a succession from one theory to another, both of which have proven themselves to be in need of replacement (or radical revision) at some point in time. The first is the imitation theory of art, with its origins in Plato’s conception of art as mere mimesis. The reality theory, whereby art is not a mere imitation but is expressive of reality itself, came about as a result of Post-Impressionist art not being easily incorporated into the imitation canon.¹¹ But this displacement is not just a succession of one theory after another. Instead, it is

⁸ Danto, *The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art*: 14.

⁹ Danto, “The Artworld,” 580.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 582.

¹¹ This is a *very* brief summary of Danto’s extensively detailed and thorough interpretation of the history of art theory. See Arthur C. Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1981).

an internal progression of a much broader and encompassing theory of art. Both the imitation theory and the reality theory offer distorting pictures of the real nature of art, which involves a peculiar kind of metaphorical expression. A work of art is an act of rhetoric, infused by the particular style of an artist. It is the expression of some sort of thought or idea which is indicative of the artist's own perspective on the world. There is a peculiar kind of identification that occurs in a work of art, whereby we learn to see a regular object as something else, which in effect reveals and illuminates the artistic act of metaphorical expression; "acceptance of one identification rather than another is in effect to exchange one world for another,"¹² and the regular object, whether a urinal or a painted canvas, is transfigured into a work of art. Identifying a work of art, then, is a matter of recognizing the particular kind of artistic identification taking place within it.¹³

A critical feature of Danto's theory is the idea that, in conjunction with a work of art depending upon a theory for its very existence, some works of art are possible only at certain times in the history of art. Consider Danto's hypothetical example of *Le Cravat*. Imagine that Picasso very smoothly and carefully paints one of his old neckties bright blue as "a repudiation of painterliness (*le peinture*), of that apotheosis of paint-and-brushstroke (or drip) which defined New York painting of the 1950s as a movement."¹⁴ Now, imagine that an identical tie has been painted by Cezanne. According to Danto, Picasso's tie can quite possibly be conceived as a work of art, whereas Cezanne's cannot. The reason for this indiscernible distinction is a result of the artists' different positions in the history of art; Cezanne, although an original and innovative artist

¹² Danto, "The Artworld," 578.

¹³ For the sake of clarity, I should make this distinction a little clearer. Artistic identification is the process whereby one thing, be it paint on a canvas or a ceramic urinal, comes to represent or be identified as something else, as a work of art expressive of a particular thought or perspective. Identifying art is the act by which such identification is discerned via interpretation, an act that is facilitated by a proper understanding of the history of art theory.

¹⁴ Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, 40.

for his time, was not working in the same historical epoch where such rebellious artistic acts could be committed. Picasso's necktie, on the other hand, can be interpreted as a commentary on a trend in contemporary art, the kind of commentary that could only be possible in the recent history of art where art itself has become the subject of its own objects. Had *Le Cravat* been painted by Cezanne, it quite simply could not make the same statement and is therefore not a conceivable work of art.

Objects such as *Fountain* and the Brillo Boxes are similar to *Le Cravat* in the sense that they can only be considered as works of art in this particular historical era, one where the artworld becomes an increasingly important concept in unlocking the peculiarities of theory. These controversial contemporary objects play by the theoretical rules in a very distinctive way, by exposing them for what they are for the first time in the history of art. Such an exposure is only possible in an era where the nature of art has appeared to become increasingly arbitrary and thus has become subject to much debate. In this conceptual crisis in contemporary art, Danto sees the end of art history, since art reached the point where it must turn to philosophy (and outside of itself) for clarification. Influenced by Hegel's idea that art eventually turns into (and is subservient to) philosophy, Danto argues that the history of art is the internal development towards philosophical enlightenment, whereby the true nature of art (and the one defining theory) is finally revealed. But is this end point, which dates back to at least 1964, really the end of the practice of art? No, for "the liberation of art from the philosophical task it has set itself is the liberation of art to pursue its – or society's – individual ends...The joint narrative of philosophy and art is then a *Freiheitsroman* – the story of freedom gained or regained – as in *The Tempest*, when Ariel is set free at last."¹⁵ Free at last from the constraints of its own development towards philosophical illumination and clarification, art is now free to serve other purposes, such as

“[enhancing] human life.”¹⁶

By theory, then, Danto is referring to that which affords a means of identifying a work of art by being able to interpret it as such based on a substantial knowledge of the history of art and its progressive tendencies. Although concerned with defining art, Danto is not interested in classification, and instead sees interpretation as a more critical feature of the problem of identifying art. Not just any interpretation will do when discerning an object as a work of art. Interpretations “pivot on artistic identification,” and thus there is a standard of correctness insofar as the right interpretation must be consistent with the demands of theory (which help to reveal the particular kind of artistic identification taking place within the object).¹⁷ For Danto, the right interpretation is constitutive of art, and it is “not something outside the work: work and interpretation arise together in aesthetic consciousness. An interpretation is inseparable from the work, and it is inseparable from the artist if it is the artist’s work.”¹⁸ An adequate understanding of the history of art and a solid grasp on the real nature of aesthetic theory allows one to interpret an object as a work of art, insofar as the object can be interpreted in that way.

What, then, are we to make of the apparent identification between theory and the artworld? In several places in Danto’s work,¹⁹ the artworld appears to be either strictly theory-laden, or the mere aggregation of works of art, and such considerations tend to suggest that Danto’s employment of the term “world” is largely metaphorical. What is the distinction between theory and the artworld, if there is such a distinction to be drawn?

¹⁵ Arthur C. Danto, “The End of Art: A Philosophical Defense,” in *History and Theory* 37.4 (1998): 135.

¹⁶ Arthur C. Danto, “Approaching the End of Art,” in *The State of the Art* (New York: Prentice Hall Press, 1987): 218.

¹⁷ Danto, “Appreciation and Interpretation,” 41.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 45.

3. Danto's Artworld

While the Hegelian conclusion of Danto's theory of art is interestingly bold and subject to much scholarly debate, there are other features of his account that are more important for my purposes here. After having developed a better understanding of what Danto means by theory, I will now attempt to clarify his particular conception of the artworld. First, some questions: is Danto's artworld just an aggregation of works of art, or a loose conflation of "theory" and "world"? Is the "world" Danto refers to more metaphorical than institutional? Does Danto even have institutional concerns such as the ones we have seen in other theories of art? At this point, one might be vexed as to why Danto is even important for my purposes here, aside from his utilization of the concept of the artworld. But these anxieties should be put to rest, for Danto's artworld is not as vacuous or practically irrelevant as it might have appeared to be up to this point. First, it is important to look at what Danto says about the relationship between theory and world:

Perhaps one can speak of what the world is like independently of any theories we may have regarding the world, though I am not sure that it is even meaningful to raise such a question, since our divisions and articulations of things into orbits and constellations presupposes a theory of some sort. But it is plain that there could not be an artworld without theory, for the artworld is logically dependent upon theory. So it is essential to our study that we understand the nature of art theory, which is so powerful a thing as to detach objects from the real world and make them part of a different world, an *art* world, a world of *interpreted things*.²⁰

It is clear here that there is a distinction between theory and the artworld, insofar as theory is a precondition for the artworld, as well as the condition by which objects are transfigured and enfranchised into it. Still, the distinction Danto makes here is not sufficient to dispel the idea that his artworld is some abstract theoretical entity rather than a complex institutional framework such as the one Dickie describes. It still looks like some elusive and

¹⁹ See footnote 7.

heavenly world of transfigured objects, or at least a heavenly world in which such objects can be made sense of. What about the more practical elements of the artworld, or its institutional features, where something much more complicated than transfiguration and interpretation is taking place? Regardless of the distinction made here between theory and the artworld, it still appears as though these sorts of considerations have little bearing on Danto's theory. And this might be problematic, since one is left wondering how this theory works in practice and if Danto has given sufficient attention to describing the practice of art, rather than merely idealizing it.

In response to Dickie, Danto has clarified the structure of the artworld as he sees it. Although adhering to the notion that a work of art is such as a result of it being located in some sort of context referred to as the "artworld," Danto has shown himself to be disillusioned with the development of the institutional theory of art. In Danto's view, although Dickie's appropriation of the "artworld" is valuable in itself and "one's children do not always come out as intended,"²¹ there are still significant differences that need to be made clear. Danto objects to the seemingly arbitrary foundation of Dickie's institutional theory of art. Dickie's analysis of the structure of the artworld lacks depth, since he fails to recognize the underlying theory motivating operations in the artworld. While Dickie might be right in suggesting that, from a descriptive sociological standpoint, it appears as though it is the artworld as a particular social institution that makes an object into a work of art, he has missed something more essential to the process of conferring status, for, "He has emphasized how something gets to be a work of art, which may be institutional, and neglected in favor of aesthetic considerations what qualities constitute an artwork once something is one."²² Dickie correctly identifies the institutional aspects of the

²⁰ Danto, *Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, 135.

²¹ *Ibid.*, viii.

²² *Ibid.*, 94. By "neglected in favor of aesthetic considerations," Danto means that Dickie appears to conflate appreciation as such with a form of aesthetic appreciation, which distorts the real meaning behind

artworld, and he correctly points out that certain people are apparently in more of a position to confer status than certain others, but he neglects to consider the underlying motivation as to *why* status might be conferred, or at the very least, how it ought to be conferred in accordance with the nature of art and the theory responsible for its very existence.

These reasons might sound familiar, as they are the same sort of objection Richard Wollheim raised against Dickie's theory which I discussed in the previous chapter. There, I suggested that Dickie's classificatory motivations, his descriptive intentions, and his desire to remain consistent with both ordinary usage and multiple values provide a sort of immunity to this objection. Danto, on the other hand, is concerned not with classification broadly construed but a particular way of identifying art, and thus the reasons behind conferral are more important than the act of conferral itself. The act of saying or the institutional process of conferring that "X is a work of art" does not provide a way in which we can understand how a urinal can be transfigured into a work of art. While it might appear as though this is in fact what is happening on the surface, Danto argues that the underlying motivation for such an act is theoretical and not arbitrary (or at least it can or should be theoretically motivated).

Some concerns might arise as to where this leaves us with the artworld, and an objection could be phrased as follows: If we interpret the artworld as embodying the informal institution and institutional activity whereby decisions about art are made, it is difficult to imagine that *all* cases of exhibition, for instance, can clearly be understood in terms of their enfranchisement by legitimate theories of art. Thus, it might be even more difficult to understand the implications Danto's considerations have on an artworld where not every instance of exhibition might be such an example. Arguably, Danto appears to be too idealistic about the practice of art, and as a result

objects such as Duchamp's *Fountain*. *Fountain* was not meant to be appreciated for its aesthetic qualities, as Dickie seems to suggest in his discussion of the object.

his theory might have little or no practical bearing.

But this objection can be overcome, since Danto has more to say on the subject of the artworld which should ameliorate these sorts of concerns. On the more practical aspects of the artworld, Danto says that the theory of the artworld that he subscribes to is “that of a loose affiliation of individuals who know enough by way of theory and history that they are able to practice... ‘inferential art criticism.’”²³ Status-conferral can be and often is a matter of certain people making these decisions, but they ought to make them for reasons consistent with the nature of art (as Danto conceives of it), otherwise what they are conferring is not “art” at all. Danto enlists two conditions necessary for a legitimate conferral to take place: first, art is historical and the reasons for conferral ought to relate to one another historically. Second, in order to be a member of the artworld, one must be familiar with the history of art and participate in what is referred to as the “discourse of reasons.”²⁴ The discourse of reasons is the activity whereby members engage in the process of determining the correct interpretation of a given work of art. While there will be fallibility, and while it is empirically evident that “the art world does not respond as one,”²⁵ there is still a motivation and obligation to look for the right interpretation, and discourse thus remains open and is not to be a matter of arbitrarily dictating status. Oftentimes disagreement is simply a matter of practical difficulty, since “[finding the true narrative is] not easy to do when one has to write as many notices as the working journalist must to fulfill his or her contract.”²⁶

Instead of thinking of Danto’s artworld as a mystical world of objects, or an exclusive and elitist sect of the more wide-spread institution of art, it should be thought of as a normative

²³ Arthur C. Danto, “The Art World Revisited: Comedies of Similarity,” in *Beyond the Brillo Box: The Visual Arts in Post-Historical Perspective* (New York: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 1992): 42.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 40.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 43.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 48.

conception as to the correct way in which the practice of art ought to take place, a practice consistent with the true nature of art as its underlying motivation. This interpretive context is the one necessary for genuine art to reveal itself. Danto is not being quaint or overly idealistic, for he is also describing specific practices within the broader informal institution of art. Granted, there are or may be instances where conferral seems to be an issue of concern, where people seem to be making decisions that are not consistent with the discourse of reasons or the theory which motivates it. Such a case occurred in 1965, when Charles Comfort, then director of the National Art Gallery of Canada, sided with customs inspectors when they refused to exempt Warhol's Brillo boxes from duty charges since they did not appear to qualify as "original sculpture."²⁷ In Danto's view, as the director of a national art gallery, Comfort *should* have known that these objects were in fact works of art. There both is and ought to be some sort of normative function or shared ideal that acts as a constraint on the kind of activities that can take place. And insofar as one member of the artworld challenges or objects to another member's interpretation of a given object, this is acceptable in Danto's view so long as they are not challenging the underlying theory (his theory) which acts as the very condition by which *real* art is possible at all.

4. Dickie and Danto: Working Through the Differences

Although I touched on this in the previous section, more needs to be said about what these apparent differences amount to. First, in review of Dickie's theory: Dickie is not interested in adhering to any sort of normative or evaluative conception of art. Instead, Dickie focuses his attention on what he believes to be a more primary conception, that being the classificatory employment of the term, "art." He is committed to assuring that all of the various objects that the term is applied to can be accounted for by a single definition. His observations lead him to

²⁷ For discussion of this example, see Danto, "The Art World Revisited," 37-9.

conclude that the essential defining feature of art is its location in an institutional context, an artworld, in which the work is selected and presented as a candidate for appreciation. Furthermore, Dickie maintains that his theory can serve as a means by which a certain sense of artistic freedom can be maintained, something that is important to provide for given the variability of artistic value.²⁸ In order to both account for and facilitate this variability, Dickie makes the distinction between an artworld and an artworld system. An artworld system is defined as “a framework for the presentation of a work of art by an artist to an artworld public,”²⁹ and the aggregation of all of these various artworld systems forms the artworld. Given Dickie’s commitment to allowing for artistic diversity, I will suggest here that an artworld system should also be defined in terms of a group of individuals who adhere to the same art theory, art theory being thought of here as a particular definition of art.

Danto, on the other hand, does not have classificatory intentions, and he is not interested in preserving our ordinary and often loose employment of the term, “art.” Initially, Danto is concerned with attending to the nature of a certain class of art theories, the class applicable to the history of Western painting and sculpture. Danto attempts to determine how works of art are identified within this particular tradition, which leads him to conclude that the theoretical context of the artworld is responsible for determining the difference between mere objects and works of art. But the artworld Danto describes is neither a mystical realm of theory nor an impractical ideal. Danto is describing a particular kind of practice that he feels is consistent with and supportive of the *real* definition of art, and thus Danto’s artworld is both descriptively viable and normatively constrained.

While I think that it is fair to say that Danto and Dickie are referring to the same

²⁸ Recall the citation in footnote 23 in Chapter 1, where Dickie claims that “the institutional theory allows the freedom for art which Weitz quite correctly is so anxious to preserve.”

²⁹ Dickie, *Introduction to Aesthetics*, 71.

artworld, their perspectives on the appropriate boundaries of the informal institution differ. Compared to Dickie, the boundaries of Danto's artworld are quite restricted, and this is because Danto is referring to a particular kind of practice and a particular history and conventional canon, whereas Dickie is referring to *all* of the different practices in which "art" is utilized. Recall Dickie's description of the artworld as the aggregation of artworld systems. If we do not wish to commit ourselves to Danto's particular theory of art, and if we believe, as Dickie does, that there are many other forms of art that are not consistent with Danto's theory but that are still worthy of being considered as art, it is useful to describe Danto's artworld as an artworld system instead. Thus, it is possible that the two theories are in fact consistent with one another.

There is an important feature of Danto's account that needs to be stressed at this point. When practical considerations are brought to bear on one's understanding of the artworld, the underlying theory or definition of art one adheres to has important consequences for the practice of art and normatively structures and guides the practice. This connection can be observed in the theories of Collingwood and Tolstoy as well, insofar as they provide a critique of their current artworld and describe how things *ought* to operate within it. It might be tempting to suggest that since the artworld appears to be a rather loose informal aggregation, these sorts of normative theories are best thought of as bearing on the structure of artworld systems rather than the artworld as a whole. However, artworld systems are not immune to the potentially deleterious effects of aggregation, and while the artworld itself might be made up of a multiplicity of artworld systems, each of which is based on a different conception of artistic value, certain practices which apply to the whole have a significant impact on the success of individual systems within it. For instance, one such practice would be the institution of the National Endowment of the Arts, or the Canada Council for the Arts, both government sponsored institutions which hold the power to determine which artworld systems are perhaps more worthy of attention and funding

than others. While these institutions might be said to adhere to a pluralistic conception of artistic value, much like the idea that Dickie supports, pluralism itself is a standard of value that normatively guides the practice of determining which sorts of projects should be sponsored. Theories of art such as those of Collingwood, Tolstoy, and Danto can be useful in providing a solid theoretical foundation for a particular kind of practice (and a particular artworld system), but they are also useful insofar as they provide critical insight into how this practice can be maintained. I am not suggesting that definitions of art or conceptions of artistic value are necessarily prescriptive. Rather, I am simply pointing out that they *can* be, and that when they are, they can provide a useful service to the artworld.³⁰

Is this picture consistent with how these philosophers conceive of their own theories? Arguably not, since Collingwood and Tolstoy, at least, are adamant that their particular conceptions of art are the only ones worthy of such a name. But they had yet to live in as pluralistic an artworld such as the one we live in today, the one which is perhaps the result of the history of art having exhausted itself, as Danto suggests with his theory. A critical insight of Dickie's theory is the observation that there are a lot of different ways in which the concept of art is employed and a lot of different conceptions of artistic value, which vary both within and between particular cultures. Danto recognizes that with the apparent end of art, we are in a peculiar situation whereby art is free to pursue other ends, and hence it might be important for us to learn how to live with pluralism.³¹ Even if these philosophers would not like to think of their

³⁰ One could argue that what Dickie is putting forth as a definition of art really isn't that at all, and that instead, the real definition guiding his theory and his corresponding picture of the artworld is something like the idea that art is a kind of cultural activity with a wide variety of meanings and values. Still, even if this is so, I find it difficult to extract any sort of normative inclinations in Dickie's theory, so perhaps it is best to work with things as they are.

How the prescriptive elements of these theories can be emphasized and the defining interests delimited will be discussed in Chapter 4.

³¹ See Arthur C. Danto, "Learning to Live with Pluralism," in *Beyond the Brillo Box: The Visual Arts in Post-Historical Perspective* (New York: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 1992): 217-31.

own theories in this way, it might still be useful for us to do so, insofar as it is at least a practical and reasonable approach to drawing attention to a particular kind of art, given the almost fragmented state of the artworld today.

Before discussing the direction these insights will take with my argument in the next chapter, I would like to venture to meet an objection raised against the “artworld” by Anita Silvers, one that will serve to clarify several of the points I have been trying to make. Contrary to the above considerations, Silvers argues that the “artworld” Dickie and Danto refer to quite simply does not exist, and it is valuable to at least consider why she might think this is the case.

5. Silver’s Critique of the “Artworld”

In “The Artwork Discarded,”³² Silvers compares the Artworld, “a society created by Arthur Danto and adapted by George Dickie,”³³ to Samuel Butler’s Erehwon, a satirical mirror image of society. Both Dickie and Danto can be said to put forth “institutional” theories of art, but both are unsatisfactory in Silvers’ view. They are unsatisfactory because they do not sufficiently explain the institutional aspects of the artworld as well as they could, if the artworld is in fact such an “institution” in the first place. For instance, if Dickie’s theory is in fact to be understood as institutional, it ought to offer an account of the *regularizing* operations within that institution, which it does not. Danto’s regularizing operation, which is quite simply his theory of art, also turns out to be inadequate, since Silvers is unconvinced that Danto’s theory is anything other than one option amongst many other equally tenable theories of art. Silvers offers a complex and overlapping analysis of some of the more subtle and objectionable features of both of their accounts. Although she starts off by objecting to Danto’s and Dickie’s efforts at

³² Anita Silvers, “The Artwork Discarded,” in *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 34.4 (1976): 441-54.

³³ *Ibid.*, 441.

describing the institution of art, her main objection ends up turning on the fact that in defining art, there is no need to institutionalize the problem, since “our search for what the eye cannot descry should not be restricted to the cramped space of an Artworld.”³⁴ Dickie and Danto confuse a defining characteristic with an explanatory one. While our aesthetic perception might depend on culturally inculcated tastes and conceptions which are influenced by the institutions through which works of art are presented to us, the act of defining art itself (and thus of conferring status) is not necessarily institutional. To suggest so is akin to and as potentially dangerous as allowing the police to define “criminal” according to their own standards.

Silvers might be right to suggest that there is a potential danger in leaving conferral solely in the hands of those in charge of the institution. But even if Danto and Dickie are confusing explanations with definitions, the explanatory point is still a good reason as to why we should take consideration of the “artworld” and the institutional aspects of art. While we might like to think that an artworld *should* not be a necessary condition for defining art, this does not make the practical problems of the artworld go away, problems that have a bearing on the extent to which such a definition can be broadly (or at least publicly) accepted.³⁵

If cultural factors influence our artistic perception, it is important to reflect on the nature and function of cultural institutions so as to prevent this influence from wholly determining our tastes and conceptions. The first step towards critical reflection is the identification and description of the institutions in question, be they formal or informal. As a result, there is more danger in Silver’s proposal that the “Artworld” is not necessary and thus does not exist than there is in saying that, as unnecessary as it may be to formulating a definition of art, it still has a

³⁴ Silvers, 453.

³⁵ What would happen to Dickie if it turned out that the artworld really is unnecessary in defining art? This might have an adverse effect on the plausibility of the definitional aspects of his theory, but the idea that the institutional structure of the artworld has a significant bearing on the practice of art itself, *including* the practice of philosophizing about art, is a consequence of his theory that would not be affected.

significant impact on the development and reception of the definitions proposed. In other words, what would be the point in attempting to define art if the institutional structure of the artworld was such that theoretical definitions or aesthetic theories in general were given no consideration at all? There is a difference between saying that the institution defines art (or at least ought to) and that art is defined within the context of a particular institution. While Danto and Dickie are putting forth definitions of art, they are also describing the practice in which these definitions emerge. In an ideal world, perhaps a definition of art could be formulated without considering the complex network of relations within which works of art arise. But it is *this* world that does not exist, and the artworld Danto and Dickie describe is very much a real thing.

6. Conclusion

Danto suggests that there is no artworld without a theory, and while I think that he is right, I would like to offer an alternative way of interpreting this claim. If we take the artworld to be, broadly speaking, an informal institution made up of various artworld systems, we can say that there is an underlying assumption as to the nature and value of art guiding this conception. For instance, Dickie's characterization of the artworld in terms of an aggregation of artworld systems is a result of his assumption that all cases in which "art" is employed ought to be afforded a place in the contextual fabric of consideration, and that these various conceptions as to the nature and value of art need not necessarily be reconcilable, other than in the sense that the practices in which they arise form the same sort of structure. But there is another assumption regarding the nature of art – that it is not necessarily as loose of a concept as some such as Dickie seem to suggest, and common employments of the term are not necessarily indicative of how the term ought to be used. Theories based on this assumption also demonstrate the connection between an underlying definition or theory of art and the corresponding approach to the artworld.

With these sorts of theories, the boundaries of the artworld are much smaller and normative recommendations are made as to how the artworld ought to function.³⁶ But even if these theories can be best described as delineating the standards of a particular artworld system, their normative recommendations can be thought of as being directed towards both their own individual structure as well as the broader structure which encompasses it. We can see this latter trend in the theories of Collingwood, Tolstoy, and Danto. At this point, it might be difficult to understand how these normative theories can have such broad application. This is a legitimate concern, and it will be addressed in the next chapter.

Why might it be beneficial to think of these theories in these terms? There has been a tendency to conceive of the philosophy of art as an endless pursuit of a definition of art, definitions which often (if not always) turn out to be deficient in some sense. But there is more to it than this. While we can think of these theories as definitional failures, and that the history of philosophical theories of art is largely a series of errors, a more positive way of painting this picture would be to attempt to understand why these theories have been formulated and how they might be a useful means of pointing out and solving problems with the practice of art. While it might be difficult (if not impossible) to formulate a definition of art that satisfies everybody, we can still use these attempts in a different way, by focusing on their criticisms of the artworld and their recommendations as to how the practice of art ought to take place. In the next chapter, I will further clarify the theoretical distinctions I made in the previous paragraph in an effort to show the value and significance of approaching the recent history of aesthetic theory in this way. As a conclusion to this project, I will challenge both Arthur Danto's and Howard Becker's conceptions

³⁶ I do not wish to suggest that normative recommendations are not being implicitly made by those with a broader conception of artistic value. For instance, as will be discussed in the next chapter, there are those who both adhere to a pluralistic conception of the nature of art and advance normative theories of the artworld. However, it appears to me that stronger and more concrete normative recommendations are made

of the role of the aesthete in the practice of art, since my conception differs considerably from their own.

by those with a more narrow conception of art, and I will explain in the next chapter how these concerns can have a practical bearing in a pluralistic artworld.

Chapter 4

An Alternative Conception of Aesthetic Theory

1. Introduction

In the previous chapter, I attempted to clarify the concept of the artworld and how it functions in institutional theories of art, focusing my discussion on the theories of Danto and Dickie. While there are differences between their theories, particularly with respect to where the boundaries are drawn around the artworld, both lend support to the idea that there is a critical relationship between a theory regarding the nature and value of art and one's corresponding approach to the artworld. Danto's theory is normative in a way that Dickie's is not, and this can be explained by the very fact that Danto has a more restricted conception of art. Taking into account the value of Dickie's broader conception of art and the artworld, I suggested it might be useful to characterize Danto's theory as one which delineates the structure of one particular artworld system. Contra Anita Silvers' objection, I argued that the "artworld" Danto and Dickie refer to *does* exist and that it is important for philosophers to attend to the impact such a structure has on the practice of art. The theories of Collingwood and Tolstoy can also be interpreted as referring to the practices of particular artworld systems, and thus I have further fleshed out what exactly I meant when I indicated in Chapter 2 that their theories were institutional. Having suggested that this is an important alternative interpretation of these theories, I now need to show why this is such a useful approach, given the nature of the artworld today.

In this chapter, and in conclusion to this thesis, I will do two things. First, I will build upon some of the claims I made towards the end of the previous chapter, where I suggested that Dickie's distinction between the artworld and artworld systems is a useful way of approaching some fundamental points of contention amongst philosophers of art. Given the structure of the

current artworld, this approach proves to be a useful way of understanding the practice of art and helps to guide those practices in a normative fashion. I will begin by saying a little more about the current state of the artworld, utilizing both Arthur Danto's and Marx Wartofsky's valuable perspectives on what can be referred to as an era of pluralism. Given the current structure of the artworld, I will attest that philosophers of art interested in the institutional aspects of art and the bearing these features have on the possibility of formulating a real definition of art have two alternative approaches they can take towards this problem. One of these approaches turns out to be the one I have been implicitly advocating throughout the previous two chapters, an approach that I believe has been unjustifiably avoided. The two approaches I will describe complement one another in providing a clear picture of the artworld and its artworld systems as they both are and ought to be structured.

Second, I will meet two potential objections to my view, the first of which has been disclosed by Danto. Danto is dismissive of philosophical adherence to art of a particular style within a pluralistic artworld, arguing that philosophers ought to remain neutral with respect to variations in artistic style and value and should seek to define *all* works of art as such in spite of their differences. While I think Danto is right in some ways, I am not so convinced that philosophers must necessarily remain neutral (or that they even can). Some of the definitions that have been put forth can better be understood as definitions of specific *kinds* of art, and these definitions can act to secure the practices of particular artworld systems within the broader structure of the artworld. The second objection is attributed to sociologist Howard Becker, who maintains that the traditional role of the "aesthete" or philosopher of art as providing a logical basis upon which art can be definitively distinguished from non-art is essentially a futile one, given the sociologically variable structure of the artworld. I argue that this is not necessarily the case, and that admitting of pluralism or variability does not necessarily imply that the task of

defining art is over, nor that prior attempts at definitions are ultimately useless. The role of the philosopher of art is crucial in clarifying and guiding artistic practices in the two ways I will describe.

2. Making Sense of Plurality

The theories of art and the artworld I have discussed so far are all efforts at putting forth new definitions of art in response to circumstances and events in the artworld. For instance, Tolstoy wrote about art at a time in which he believed that the world of Russian literature was at risk of becoming unduly Westernized and unjustifiably elitist, conditions which were thought to encourage the perversion of aesthetic taste and accessibility. These critical observations inspired him to stress the significance of preserving his own particular artistic preferences, since they were at risk of being lost or hidden to those to whom they were most valuable. Collingwood responded to conditions in the early twentieth century which he believed marked a loss of expression in the arts, where artists and other members of the artworld had lost their sense of communal vision. Danto and Dickie reacted to problems arising from the development of conceptual art throughout the early to mid twentieth century.¹ But what does the artworld look like today? What sorts of theories, if any, have been put forth to respond to the peculiarities of our particular artistic generation, theories of the sort of structure where both a definition of art and a consequent conception of the function of the artworld is provided?

Recall Arthur Danto's historical theory of art and the idea that the advent of conceptual objects such as Duchamp's *Fountain* brings with it the end of art. According to Danto, the rise of certain conceptual works of art means that, following such a stage where it becomes self-aware, art will finally be free from the clutches of theory and thus able to serve other ends such as

“[enhancing] human life.”² But Danto is responding to a period in art that, although in our more recent history, is still very much in the past. In “Learning to Live with Pluralism,”³ Danto discusses the period of art arising after the end of art, a period where “pluralism” became a trendy explanatory concept, frequently and perhaps loosely tossed around in response to certain peculiarities in the artworld (and the philosophical world as well). The significance of this era was brought to Danto’s attention at a panel discussion at the School of Visual Arts in New York, where members were explicitly asked to address the notorious issue of pluralism in the arts. For Danto, what pluralism for artists and others immersed in the Western tradition amounted to was a sort of ambivalence towards committing to a single theoretical vision for the future of art. There appeared to be a loss of a special attitude towards making art, the kind of attitude that was perhaps last observed when, in 1913, the Russian painter Kazimir Malevich told his colleague Mikhail Matiushin that Cubo-Futurism was the only meaningful direction for painting.⁴ Artists no longer appeared to think in this way, no longer committing themselves so strongly to one single theoretical vision. The history of art was no longer seen as one unified linear entity with a future in one defining theory of art. Instead, “one option was as true as any other. It is not that everything was historically correct; historical correctness had stopped having application.”⁵

Prior to the advent of pluralism, Danto maintains that there were two key characteristics of art theory which are similar to Hegel’s conception of the relationship between philosophy and religion: art theory was “philosophical in its quest for the essence or real definition of art,

¹ I use “conceptual art” here to refer to a rather loose subset of artistic styles, including anti-art and pop art.

² Arthur C. Danto, “Approaching the End of Art,” in *The State of the Art* (New York: Prentice Hall Press, 1987): 218.

³ Arthur C. Danto, “Learning to Live with Pluralism,” in *Beyond the Brillo Box: The Visual Arts in Post-Historical Perspective* (New York: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 1992): 217-231.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 218.

⁵ *Ibid.*

religious in the accompanying intolerance and aesthetic Monism.”⁶ Whereas artists and art connoisseurs had previously committed themselves to one theoretical vision for art, the strength of this sort of commitment has waned with the growing suspicion that there might be more than one acceptable art theory. With this loss of traditional footing, some might be inclined to suggest that part of the meaning of art has been lost as well, and this is the sort of bleak and pessimistic attitude towards pluralism that Danto detected to be the motivation for the panel discussion.

Danto suggests that the real reason behind such disillusionment with pluralism is not only a result of the idea that there can be different kinds of art, but also that a certain standard of excellence appears to have been threatened or abandoned altogether. Danto draws a connection between these sorts of concerns and those of philosophers struggling to defend the superiority of the analytic method of philosophy, which has also recently been challenged by those who see the need for some sort of pluralistic approach in academic forums and institutions:

...[It] would be inconsistent with a concept of philosophical excellence to so arrange things that representatives of each of the contending schools should be appointed to the best departments, or that, as a matter of fairness, candidates for the presidency should be chosen in rotation from the different schools in order that there be diversity. *Diversity is a value that can be inimical to excellence.*⁷

Watering down the concept of art and opening it up in such a way can quite possibly lead to both a loss of artistic identity and the sabotage and corruption of artistic excellence, both of which can potentially be preserved by militantly defending one particular conception of art.

Describing the development of SoHo culture in New York and the corresponding attitude of artists at Yale at that time, Danto says that, “It was as though it was imperative upon young artists to discover the true nature of art,”⁸ and this culture of competition has started to dissolve. Artists had been known and expected to adhere to one particular conception or theoretical vision and

⁶ Danto, “Learning to Live with Pluralism,” 223.

⁷ Ibid., 220 (my italics).

⁸ Ibid., 224.

explanation of their art, and to critique others based on their apparent inadequacies. Such was the role of the artist qua philosopher, and now that the philosophical burden of theoretical justification and adherence is no longer viable, the artist is no longer expected to critically defend their own work to the same sort of extent that was previously necessary. While it might be a good thing that one can learn to appreciate a variety of different works as art in virtue of, rather than in spite of, the very different things they have to offer and express, there is a danger in suggesting that artists are pretty much free to do whatever they want without justification or explanation. “Art” is then at risk of losing all meaning.

Others have observed different problems resulting from the rise of pluralism in the artworld. Marx Wartofsky has argued that there is a crisis of style in the contemporary artworld,⁹ where style fetishism and the commodification of art have come to dominate the practice. In order to survive as an artist, one must put forth some sort of marketable product that satisfies the tastes of the consumers. The dominant way of creating marketable art is to revolutionize one’s style into an idiosyncratic, innovative, and original aesthetic, whereby idiosyncrasy, innovation, and originality become ends in themselves. Wartofsky observes this trend in the narcissistic art “of the bitter color, lines, and texture of Dubuffet’s paintings, or the crude, naïve images of Philip Guston’s late works, or the anguish and energy of the gigantic black and white hieroglyphs of Franz Kline.”¹⁰ Wartofsky explains this apparent style crisis in terms of the political economy of the artworld, where “ordinary ‘political’ categories are transformed and specified by the peculiar functions and interests of the artworld, so that aesthetic desiderata come to appear as the defining

⁹ Marx Wartofsky, “The Politics of Art: The Domination of Style and the Crisis in Contemporary Art,” in *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 51.2 (1993): 217-225.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 219. Here, Wartofsky is referring to Dubuffet’s work spanning the 1940s through to the 1980s, Guston’s post-Abstract Expressionist work from the 1960s, and Kline’s Abstract Expressionist paintings prior to 1959, before he started using colour more frequently.

terms for ‘power,’ ‘governance,’ and ‘interests.’”¹¹ The deception here is not a matter of mere semantics but instead marks an unlikely fusion of two worlds, one governed by the creative development and fostering of aesthetic norms, and the other immersed in the concrete practice of capitalist economics. The artworld spans both, and most recently, the ideals and standards of the former appear to have lost out to those of the latter.

When a work of art reflects upon its own nature as its content, it is “stripped of all reference to anything which lies beyond it.”¹² But this content is only an apparition, Wartofsky argues, for there is something deeper that must be discerned in such a creative act. As appearances can be deceiving, Wartofsky interprets these objects as displaying a kind of Marxist distortion of reality. The real motivation behind this particular kind of art must be extracted from the appearance. It is not *just* anti-art, conceptual art, or pop art, for these styles and trends are mere symptoms of an even deeper and more foundational problem. In Wartofsky’s view, “*this particular mode of stylistic innovation* is not, at root, an aesthetic question, but rather a question concerning the mode of production and exchange of the artworld as a commodity.”¹³ Capitalist economic practices have infiltrated and now dominate the political structure of the artworld, and the artist’s job as a producer of marketable “works of art” is a kind of alienated labour, fundamentally different from a more genuinely artistic creative activity. Wartofsky is either nostalgic for a time when the politics of the artworld were not so economically driven, or he may be suggesting along Marxist lines that this sort of era will eventually exhaust itself into something better and more authentic. In any event, there is more to pluralism than meets the eye, and the artist may not be as free in the pluralistic artworld as one is initially inclined to think.

¹¹ Wartofsky, 217.

¹² *Ibid.*, 219.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 220.

These theories do have their interpretive differences regarding this peculiar era in art, but they are both responding to the same sorts of conditions of disparity in the artworld. Both Danto and Wartofsky are right to suggest that the current state of affairs within the artworld is quite a peculiar one. One need only observe the very disparate works of art that are set beside one another in museums or galleries to see evidence of plurality and its institutionalization, however disillusioned some might be about it. Both might disagree as to the underlying theoretical motivation for plurality, but both seem to suggest that there might be something amiss with this situation, and that plurality for its own sake might not be something we ought to accept at face value in the artworld. A liberal “anything goes” sort of approach might be an attractive resolution in the sense of allowing for different conceptions of art to flourish, but this leaves a bad taste in some mouths, for “anything goes” might be taking things a little too far.¹⁴

I believe these sorts of concerns are not necessarily inconsistent with maintaining a pluralistic artworld. It is possible to accept a certain level of pluralism and its practical necessity without having to adhere to such a loose and potentially vacuous conception of art. One can still emphasize the value of one particular kind of art as dependent upon the structure of a particular artworld system, a system that sustains its existence within the greater boundaries of the artworld

¹⁴ In support of the idea that artistic freedom has potentially gone too far, an example that immediately comes to mind is the notorious banana over Texas, a 300-metre helium-filled balloon that is to be released in Mexico late next year by Montreal artist Cesar Saez. The estimated cost of the project is approximately \$1-million, a portion of which has been provided by both the Canada Council for the Arts and the Conseil des arts et des lettres du Québec. When asked for the reasons behind launching the banana, Saez replied, “Why? Because it’s possible. Why not a banana over Texas?” Some might be inclined to think that more of a reason should be provided to secure government funding for such a project, while others might think this is reason enough in our particular era. See “Why not a banana over Texas?” in *The Globe and Mail*, January 11, 2007.

Another contentious example is Damien Hirst’s “For the Love of God,” the most expensive work of art ever created, which consists of a life-size human skull covered in platinum and diamonds. It is estimated to be worth about £14-million in material and production costs alone, and was revealed at the White Cube gallery in London on June 1, 2007. When asked about the motivation for the work, Hirst said, “I just want to celebrate life by saying to hell with death.” If the reception is poor, “I’ll put it on a chain and hang it round my neck - or I’ll stick it on the mantelpiece.” See “Hirst’s diamond creation is art’s costliest work ever,” in *The Observer*, May 21, 2006.

which make this and other forms of creative activity possible. Conceiving of things in such a way does not necessarily imply that there would be an incessant and inordinate amount of theoretical opposition within the artworld. Rather, such a conception is likely to strengthen the particular practices within those boundaries, and afford them the successful means of moving to secure their role within the greater fabric of the surrounding artworld. Something is lost when some definitions or theories are expected to apply to all of the different things we would like to consider as works of art, whereas something is to be gained when we interpret such theories as applying to one particular kind of creative activity.

3. Recognition and Reconciliation

Pluralism is a defining feature of the Western artworld. One can see this in the very different kinds of objects exhibited together in any modern museum, gallery, or contemporary art magazine, as well as in many other informal “exhibits” such as government buildings and homes. There is a plurality of styles and genres, and there is also a plurality of forms, such as music, literature, film, and painting, which each tend to have their own respective “worlds” and theoretical histories that can often be difficult to reconcile with one another. Furthermore, there is a plurality of cultural approaches and perspectives within our artworld, so that it is certainly not unusual to see Native American sculpture housed under the same roof as modernist paintings. What we can quite fairly say in spite of all of these differences, following from Dickie, is that the artworld is the background condition against which works of art are created and sustained. It is also the informal institution which encompasses the many different formal and informal institutions which are dedicated to providing a space for many different kinds of art. While some might contest that it may not be possible to draw any sort of definitive or meaningful boundary around these practices, such a boundary has already been drawn, for the “arts” must often

collectively appeal to the same governing body for issues such as funding for projects, public spaces, education, and so on.¹⁵

Where does this conception of the artworld leave those interested in art today, keeping in mind the bearing that practical events in the artworld have (or at least ought to have) on philosophical reflections on the nature of art? One dominant approach is to focus on the artworld as a broad aggregation of creative activity, where pluralism is considered to be both a beneficial and a defining feature of the artworld itself. Influenced by Dickie's considerations on the diversity of art and the corresponding structure of the artworld, Susan Feagin and Gary Iseminger have put forth variants of the institutional theory of art that take up these themes in new directions.¹⁶ Feagin takes a functional approach to the artworld, suggesting that, given the variable nature of art, one possible function of the artworld could be to promote the capacity for "mental flexibility."¹⁷ This capacity is developed and fostered by engaging with a challenging, thought-provoking, and diverse array of objects. Through these considerations, Feagin shows pluralism itself to be a *desirable* feature of the artworld rather than something that we simply must learn to deal with. Furthermore, Feagin's insights are both descriptive and normative; it is possible that the function of the artworld is to promote mental flexibility, and if this proves to be desirable, then it is possible to determine whether or not it is functioning as well as it could.

¹⁵ For instance, the Canada Council for the Arts is the Canadian government agency responsible for allocating government and private funding to various organizations in the artworld in the form of grants, services, and awards. The Canada Council for the Arts in effect has a rather large role in determining which artworld systems are worthy of consideration in the broader context of the artworld, but it also acts as a collective entity in negotiations with the government on behalf of the "arts" broadly construed. Such was the case recently, when prominent members of the artworld such as Margaret Atwood lobbied on behalf of the Canada Council for the Arts for increased government expenditures, a previous Liberal government commitment that was finally honoured by the Conservatives this summer, along with the appointment of a new Minister of Canadian Heritage shortly to follow.

¹⁶ See Susan Feagin, "Valuing the Artworld," in *Institutions of Art: Reconsiderations of George Dickie's Philosophy* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994): 51-72, and Gary Iseminger, *The Aesthetic Function of Art* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004).

¹⁷ Feagin, 57.

Iseminger takes a similar sort of approach to the artworld, insofar as he is also concerned with determining its function. Iseminger moves for a revival of traditional aestheticism, suggesting that a work of art is such in virtue of its capacity to afford (or act as an instance of) “aesthetic appreciation,” which quite simply entails “finding the experiencing of a state of affairs to be valuable in itself.”¹⁸ The function of the artworld, then, is to afford instances of aesthetic appreciation. This is the function of the artworld both because it is consistent with the demands of art and also because the artworld, when empirically scrutinized, actually appears to be functioning in this sort of way. Determining the function of the artworld allows us to gauge the success of its components (i.e. the behaviour of particular members, such as that of Charles Comfort, for instance) in terms of how well they facilitate aesthetic communication and appreciation.

Feagin and Iseminger both offer functional accounts of the artworld that are compatible with pluralism, and both of their theories are interesting ways of conceiving of the very diversity we must accept within the artworld. I find these sorts of approaches an attractive option in dealing with the complicated affair of the artworld. But this is not the only approach to take towards the current artworld, nor do such approaches show that all previous institutional theories that did not attempt to account for pluralism are either inapplicable to our times or wholly misguided. While theories such as those of Feagin and Iseminger are useful in revealing the nature of the broader structure of the *artworld*, their conceptions of *art* are rather thin as compared to some of the previous theories we have looked at (aside from Dickie’s, of course), thin in the sense of not dealing extensively with any of the particular kinds of art that arise within

¹⁸ Iseminger, 36. As contentious or vague as this may appear, Iseminger does provide some lucid examples to support his position that have not been conventionally understood to belong in such a category, such as “Vita Sackville-West designing, planting, and tending the White Garden at Sissinghurst for her family and friends,” and “Richard Strauss climbing a mountain near Garmisch-Partenkirchen and watching the sun rise before a storm in the Alps” (59-61).

the artworld. While their reason for avoiding such commitments is well substantiated based on their philosophical objectives, there is an alternative course that can be taken, where one's commitments and biases towards a particular conception of art are not necessarily problematic or irrelevant.

There are theories where one particular conception of art is advocated at the expense of having to dismiss the value of others, and the theories of Collingwood, Tolstoy, and Danto are clearly of this kind. The definitions of art these theorists propose might not be acceptable, given the pluralism of the contemporary artworld and the many different kinds of activities its boundaries encompass. But as I have stressed, these theories are not just failures in the broad and ambitious sense of defining "art," for they are also normative institutional theories. I have emphasized the connection between a conception of art and the corresponding approach to the artworld, and here we can say that, given the rather narrow conceptions of art these theorists advocate, they are also working with a rather narrow conception of the artworld, which is perhaps better understood as an artworld system. Such theories do not necessarily need to be conceived of as real definitions of "art," and instead they refer to the nature of a particular *kind* of art. They can thus provide a solid basis for understanding why people might view such a practice as important enough of an activity to support, foster, and maintain within the larger boundaries of the artworld.¹⁹ This approach is potentially satisfying for those discontented with the apparent "anything-goes" attitude dominating the artworld today, insofar as a well-reasoned and philosophical basis can be provided in an effort to show why one particular artworld system is both valuable in its own right and consistent with the overall practice of art, thus deservedly in need of the recognition it might be lacking.

¹⁹ To make this distinction more clear: when I say these theorists are working to define a particular kind of art, this is similar to a taxonomist working to classify a particular kind of mammal as opposed to mammals

When I say that these sorts of theories refer to *kinds* of art, I do not necessarily mean that they refer to one of either music, literature, painting, and so on. These sorts of theories can also refer to an artistic approach or style that spans or incorporates more than one of these conventional categories. In fact, Tolstoy's theory can be considered as an example of such an approach, since he also has the same feelings about music as he does regarding literature.²⁰ One might be inclined to think that if each of these sorts of theories is afforded a space as an artworld system within the broader framework of the artworld, then the artworld itself becomes an almost unmanageable entity. I am inclined to think instead that affording each of these theories the potential to develop their own voice within the artworld makes these particular practices even more manageable than they could be otherwise. The overarching structure of the artworld itself can be expected to support each of these systems only insofar as they are not attempting to dominate the practice of art as a whole. It might be a very difficult problem to grant all of these different kinds of arts the support and recognition they deserve, but difficulty is not a sufficient reason as to why this problem should not be resolved in this way. Unfortunately it is a task that not only must be faced, but one that is already being faced, given the creation of such bodies as the Canada Council for the Arts and the National Endowment of the Arts. One can only hope that the decisions made by these sorts of bodies are made for the kinds of reasons I have singled out here.

I should stress that the two alternative approaches I discussed are not unrelated or opposed. Instead, they are very much dependent upon one another. The first approach towards the artworld and the general nature of art is important for drawing attention to the common

as such (which would be a different project altogether, but the two are of course related and dependent upon one another).

²⁰ For Tolstoy on music, see *What is Art?*, 155-159.

features of various works of art and artworld systems that cause them to be subsumed under the same broad category. It is also important to remain somewhat neutral with respect to the diversity of art at this more general level. The second alternative allows us to cater to the disillusionment some have with pluralism without falling into the practical dilemma that universalizing overly narrow theories might pose. Properly situating these theories within the context of the artworld shows them to be valuable in their own unique way, capable of making their own significant contribution to both philosophical clarification and practical policy decisions within the artworld. Distinguishing these two philosophical projects allows for further clarification of the concept of art and the amelioration of some common disputes. It also allows for some measure of reconciliation amongst theorists concerned with the politics of the artworld, whether pertaining to the preservation of a particular kind of art or art broadly construed.

4. Is Reconciliation Really Possible?

At this point, the relationship between the artworld and artworld systems should be re-examined for the sake of clarity and to further support the idea that there can be some level of reconciliation between these normative institutional theories and a commitment to pluralism. As I have shown, an aesthetic theory can act as the underlying support for the practices within a particular artworld system. If the function of the artworld, as opposed to an artworld system, is based on the idea that many different kinds of art are valuable for various reasons, then the artworld ought to foster and support the various artworld systems which are consistent with such a conception. The artworld is not merely a loose theoretical aggregation of artworld systems. It is also the institutional structure within which artworld systems exist. The interests of this institutional structure are represented by bodies such as the Canada Council for the Arts and the National Endowment for the Arts.

An aesthetic theory can draw attention to features of a particular kind of art that are valuable and worthy of recognition. It can also single out some of the practical elements that are needed to secure such a practice, such as Tolstoy's emphasis on the need for artists and art connoisseurs to be more sympathetic to lower class audiences, or Danto's identification of the necessity of participation in the discourse of reasons. If such practices are not taking place as they should within the artworld system, it might be a problem with the structure of the particular system, or it might be a matter of the artworld not giving the system the recognition and support it deserves. For instance, if it is deemed problematic that economic interests unduly influence artistic principles within a particular artworld system, then perhaps the artworld ought to provide some level of support that would offset such deleterious practices. Becoming aware of such conditions via a normative institutional theory of art, the artworld should then make some sort of effort to ameliorate these conditions if it is within its capacity to do so. Thus, normative institutional theories have a bearing on both the practices within the particular artworld systems they refer to as well as the broader artworld within which those systems exist.

How can such an approach solve the problem of an overly liberal artworld where "anything goes," since such a concern might very well be the motivation for developing a normative institutional theory in the first place? A plural conception of artistic value is a necessary foundation for the artworld given the very diverse and irreconcilable activities that have all come to be understood as art. The only way in which pluralism can reasonably be restricted is if the following two conditions are satisfied: (1) artworld systems must be based upon solid theoretical foundations that critically reflect on the institutional structure of art; and (2) these theoretical foundations must be recognized and considered by the artworld. Artworld officials have more of a responsibility than merely committing to pluralism. If they are really committed to facilitating a multiplicity of artistic values, as they should be, they must also

carefully attend to normative institutional theories of art that draw attention to problematic features of both artworld systems and the artworld.

Insofar as theorists such as Collingwood or Tolstoy would choose to remain committed to the idea that their particular conceptions are the only ones worthy of being referred to as “art,” their concerns cannot be ameliorated by the model I propose. But insofar as what they were *really* concerned with was the preservation and support of their particular conceptions of art, I believe that these concerns can be addressed within a pluralistic artworld. Perhaps they would say that this really was their concern, and that the task of defining art was merely a means to a more practical end. But even if they would not want us to conceive of their theories in this way, for those of us who think they are right about art in at least some other respects, then the model I propose is definitely an approach worth considering.

5. Objections: Danto and Becker

Some of the meta-philosophical insights I am putting forth might appear to be fairly contentious and controversial, so several objections should be met.

On the nature of the peculiar riddle this era of pluralism might pose for a philosopher of art, Danto says the following:

If there are in the required sense ‘other theories of art,’ then there cannot be truth or falsity. Truth and falsity are incompatible with Pluralism. But there is no truth or falsity in art, which means Pluralism is finally unavoidable. Variations in style may have historical explanation but no philosophical justification, for philosophy cannot discriminate between style and style. Critics of art, with their various agendas, have advanced them as if they were philosophies of art, which of course required them to denounce as not art whatever failed to meet those agendas. But philosophy can only discriminate between works of art and mere real things; it cannot discriminate among works of art, all of which must fit its theories if the theories are any good.²¹

²¹ Danto, “Learning to Live with Pluralism,” 231.

Here, Danto sounds a lot like Dickie by suggesting that perhaps classification ought to be the real concern for philosophers of art, assuming, of course, that pluralism is well-founded. A philosophy of art that promotes one value of art at the expense of another is perpetuating the very problem it seeks to solve. There is no philosophical justification for differences in style, and thus philosophy cannot be used to defend the production and appreciation of one art at the expense of another. Such a theoretical move would be a form of art criticism rather than philosophy, the latter of which is to remain neutral with respect to the value of various kinds of art.

Danto might be right that a philosophy of *art* might not be able to discriminate between various styles. But this does not imply that a philosophy of a particular *kind* of art cannot remain committed to unveiling the nature and value of a particular style *without* discriminating against others. A philosopher need not commit herself to unveiling the nature of art broadly construed, but instead might want to reflect on the nature of a particular kind of art and its contribution to the broader practice, revealing the structure of its own practice as peculiar and distinct, yet situated and dependent upon the overall structure of the artworld. The general nature of art ought to have some bearing on what sorts of candidates qualify as kinds of art or artworld systems, but once this is granted, a commitment to elucidating the practices surrounding one specific kind of art and its defining features might serve as a useful means of re-evaluating the successful functioning of the current artworld. Indeed, a desire for change and recognition appears to be what most classic theories have been motivated by, and it is unfortunate that the philosophers behind these theories thought the only way they could do so was by denigrating other artistic styles and putting forth overly narrow definitions of art.

A philosophy of art need not be motivated by a desire to have one particular conception of art dominate the artworld. Instead, a philosophy of art can be formulated so as to allow one particular conception to secure its rightful place within the artworld. If the only definition of art

we are able to come up with is as broad as some of the ones we have seen thus far, it might be more fruitful to think of creative ways to work within that structure and clarify the nature and value of particular kinds of art, in effect helping to solve some practical problems within the artworld by providing reasons for recognition, funding, and so on. In philosophizing about art, it is not necessary to abandon one's familiarity with a particular artworld system. So long as one recognizes the utility and practical feasibility of the distinction between an artworld and an artworld system, one's efforts at elucidating the value of one particular kind of art and the structure needed for its preservation will not be made in vain.²²

Another possible objection to my model has been put forth by Howard Becker. In *Art Worlds*,²³ Becker undertakes a thorough sociological exploration of the artworld, concluding that it is best to describe the practice of art in terms of a collection of associated artworlds with overlapping structural similarities. Becker is not interested in the theoretical justification of certain objects as works of art, instead concerning himself with the basic structure within which these objects are situated. Becker's objective is to show how this structural model can apply to any given "world" in society, concluding his study by stating the following: "What I have said about art worlds can be said about any kind of social world, when put more generally; ways of talking about art, generalized, are ways of talking about society and social process generally."²⁴

Within the structure of an artworld, elaborate resources and a vast social network are required to sustain a context of appreciation around a given work, form, or style. Each member of an

²² Noël Carroll has advanced a similar sort of patchwork theory of film studies, suggesting that not only ought there to be theories for different kinds of art, but there ought also to be different theoretical approaches for the various genres *within* different kinds of art, particularly with regards to film. See Noël Carroll, "Prospects for Film Theory: A Personal Assessment," in *Post-Theory: Reconstructing Film Theory*, eds. David Bordwell and Noël Carroll (Madison WI, The University of Wisconsin Press, 1996): 37-68. I am certainly not averse to such an idea, so long as such approaches can have both theoretical and practical bearing (that is, that differentiating between various genres within various kinds of art is a means by which these genres can be both clarified *and* recognized within the broader constraints of the artworld).

²³ Howard S. Becker, *Art Worlds* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982).

artworld, be it an artist, curator, or political figure in charge of dispensing funds, has a specific place in maintaining the cohesion of the social network and the proper functioning of that specific artworld, and one such role is that of the “aesthete” or the philosopher of art.

Historically, Becker sees the role of both critics and philosophers as that of creating “logically organized and philosophically defensible aesthetic systems,”²⁵ which in effect work to “stabilize values and thus to regularize the practice.”²⁶ Becker correctly observes that various artistic styles and schools compete for attention and resources, and that the defining features of these aesthetic systems ought to have some effect on how those sorts of decisions are made. Becker suggests that the underlying motivation for the seemingly endless definitional and theoretical debates in the philosophy of art is not mere conceptual clarification. Rather, definitions of art are put forth in order to resolve some of these practical conflicts, and thus the real role of the aesthete working within this practice of art is as follows:

Aestheticians do not simply intend to classify things into useful categories, as we might classify species of plants, but rather to separate the deserving from the undeserving, and to do it definitively...

...Aesthetics which declare that everything is art do not satisfy people who create or use them in the life of an art world.²⁷

Here it appears as though Becker and I might be in agreement since I also think that philosophers of art might have other, more practical, interests motivating their definitional pursuits, but there is a difference between our positions that I will explain momentarily. Becker is right to suggest that “when an existing aesthetic does not legitimate logically what is already

²⁴ Becker, 369.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 132.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 134. The distinction between critic and aesthete is a tricky one, especially considering the alternative view of the philosopher of art I am defending. In my view, the philosopher of art who seeks to elucidate and support the nature of a particular kind of art is doing so under the assumption that this particular conception is consistent with a pluralistic approach to art and the artworld. Critics need not follow this rule, and often their judgements are not oriented towards restructuring the artworld system or the artworld (although they can have that effect).

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 138.

legitimate in other ways, someone will construct a theory that does,”²⁸ and hence the development of institutional theories such as Dickie’s in response to controversial works of art arising in the Western art world. But given the development of seemingly arbitrary aesthetics in response to complicated actions and events that cannot always be reduced to consistent and well-reasoned analyses, Becker draws the following conclusion: “the aesthete’s desire for definitive criteria by which to distinguish art from non-art, criteria congruent with the actions of art world officials, cannot be satisfied.”²⁹ Therefore, the role of the aesthete in securing or even having a role in affecting artistic practice is essentially futile.

I think that what Becker is suggesting here is correct in some ways, but incorrect in others. While the aesthete may not be able to definitively distinguish art from non-art as well as Becker sees fit, he is still able to distinguish one particular kind of art, what sort of value it brings to society, and the specific sociological conditions needed for its preservation. Becker fails to recognize the other important role of the philosopher in clarifying the structure of the artworld, from which a normative basis can be derived in order to criticize certain practices within it. The definitional route and the search for definitive criteria is not necessarily a dead end if one is satisfied with the kind of pluralistic accounts that have been put forth by those such as Dickie, Feagin, and Iseminger. And even if pursuing a real definition of art is a lost cause, this does not mean that the role of the philosopher of art is as well.

We have returned to the theme of the first chapter, where I cited Weitz’s suggestion that “To understand the role of aesthetic theory is not to conceive it as a definition, logically doomed to failure, but to read it as summaries of seriously made recommendations to attend in certain

²⁸ Becker, 145.

²⁹ Ibid., 163.

ways to certain features of art.”³⁰ While some of our theorists may have been trapped in a time where definitional essentialism was the only legitimate path to take for a philosopher concerned with the practice of art, perhaps it no longer is. Regardless of the shortfalls of their theories, we might still find their perspectives on the value of art appealing and worth making a space for in our artworld, whether it be the moral significance of art, its value as an expressive medium capable of unifying society, or its ability to transfigure the commonplace. Philosophers are free to have their artistic preferences, and by drawing attention to the reasons behind their preferences, they can offer critical insights into the nature of art and show us the ways in which we can keep these different kinds of art alive today.

³⁰ Morris Weitz, “The Role of Theory in Aesthetics,” in *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 15.1 (1956): 35.

Conclusion

My objectives in this thesis are largely meta-philosophical, insofar as I propose a new interpretation of the history of aesthetic theory and a new role for the philosopher of art. But the feasibility of this new role depends upon such a theoretical approach being truly compatible with pluralism, and the extent to which a pluralistic artworld is capable of attending to the critical insights offered by normative institutional theories of art. I have tried to show how this new approach is compatible with a pluralistic artworld and why such theories ought to be taken into account. Now, we can only hope that the artworld will respond to these insights in practice.

In conclusion, let me review the stages of my argument. I began this thesis by describing a common misconception of two classic theories of art, Tolstoy's moralist theory and Collingwood's expressionist theory. The misconception is that they fail to provide an acceptable real definition of art and thus have little to offer to the debate on the institutional structure of art. I introduced the reader to the multiplicity of artistic values as espoused by Dickie and the apparent need to take an institutional approach to the problem of defining art. Such an approach involves focusing on the structure which works of art depend upon for their existence, that being the "artworld." I tried to show how these classic theories, although inadequate definitions of art, are institutional in the sense that they draw attention to features of art that may be neglected in the artworld of their times. These theories can be described as normative institutional theories, struggling against the delimiting forces of their times and delineating the conditions in need of improvement. This insight was influenced by Weitz's remarks on the real motivation of aesthetic theory, which is not so much a matter of putting forth a real definition, but is instead a tradition of singling out features of art that have been neglected by previous theories.

In Chapter 3, I attempted to deconstruct the elusive concept of the artworld. I described the way in which the artworld has been characterized by Danto and Dickie. Dickie remains committed to a broad understanding of artistic value, and thus his conception of the artworld is that of a rather loose aggregation of individual artworld systems, each with its own particular style of artistic communication. Danto, on the other hand, draws a more definitive boundary around his artworld, and given his adherence to a particular kind of art (that being the tradition of Western painting and sculpture), I suggested that his artworld looks more like an artworld system under Dickie's model. Similar to the theories of Collingwood and Tolstoy, Danto's theory is also normative insofar as he outlines certain conditions which must be satisfied in order for the artworld to function properly, considerations which can apply both to the structure of the artworld system as well as to the overall structure of the artworld and its role in supporting the systems of which it consists. I met Anita Silver's objection that the artworld Danto and Dickie describe does not exist, showing that it does, since Danto and Dickie are in fact describing critical features of the practice of art. Furthermore, the artworld and its impact on the nature of art is too important to ignore. We might think that its internal politics should not interfere with our attempts at defining art, but they still do and thus the artworld needs to be both recognized and critiqued.

In Chapter 4, I described the current state of the artworld and the concept of pluralism. There are a myriad of different things to which the concept of art has been applied, and thus Dickie's commitment to remaining consistent with the variability of artistic values is just as relevant today as it was when the institutional theory of art first arose. While there might be a fairly liberal approach to what sorts of activities count as art today, there are some reservations towards such an attitude, particularly on behalf of those who adhere to a narrow conception of art. While I do not think that pluralism is likely to go away, nor that it should, given the fact that the artworld encompasses such a broad range of valuable and irreconcilable activities, concerns as to

the potential threat of pluralism are well-founded insofar as an “anything goes” type of attitude might threaten artistic excellence and the continued existence of certain valuable practices. Philosophers interested in defining art or in clarifying the concept of the artworld should support some level of pluralism, but those who remain committed to one particular conception of art can still work towards securing its existence in the artworld. In recognizing the distinction between the artworld and an artworld system, a philosopher can work to secure the position of the particular artworld system she supports by limiting her discussion to a particular *kind* of art, drawing attention to why it is a valuable practice consistent with our broader conceptions of art and emphasizing the conditions needed to maintain it. Narrow conceptions of art can still have an impact on how we conceive of the institutional structure of the artworld, regardless of their apparent failures in accounting for all of art’s possible referents.

Through these efforts, I hoped to have done three things: First, I was largely concerned with dispelling a widely accepted and rather derogatory conception of some classic theorists by showing not only why their theories remain important today, but that the very reason their theories are important is because of their institutional significance. The institutional theory of art is too important to abandon, and thus if one wants to preserve some of the insights as to the nature of artistic value these philosophers draw our attention to, it is important to show how these insights can remain consistent with the institutional approach to art. Second, I have worked to show how there is more to the institutional theory of art and the philosopher’s “artworld” than might initially appear, working through some critical points of contention in an effort to show how they might in fact be reconciled and how they can be used to solve some significant theoretical and practical problems today. And third, I have always held the intuition that the philosophy of art is more than an attempt at conceptual clarification of yet another blanket term. Instead, I like to think of it as a kind of applied philosophy with practical import, much like we

think of ethics and political philosophy. At the very least, I hope that the alternative conception of aesthetic theory I propose makes this an attractive option for others as well.

Illustrations

Fig. 1. Marcel Duchamp, *Fountain* (1917). Photo by Alfred Stieglitz.



Fig. 2. Andy Warhol, *Brillo Box* (1968). © The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, Inc. / SODRAC 2007.



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