



WILEY

Lord, Lewis, and the Institutional Theory of Art

Author(s): Peggy Zeglin Brand

Source: *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 40, No. 3 (Spring, 1982), pp. 309-314

Published by: Wiley on behalf of The American Society for Aesthetics

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/429688>

Accessed: 09-08-2017 22:42 UTC

REFERENCES

Linked references are available on JSTOR for this article:

http://www.jstor.org/stable/429688?seq=1&cid=pdf-reference#references_tab_contents

You may need to log in to JSTOR to access the linked references.

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

The American Society for Aesthetics, Wiley are collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*

PEGGY ZEGLIN BRAND

Lord, Lewis, and the Institutional Theory of Art

IN "Convention and Dickie's Institutional Theory," Catherine Lord maintains the following thesis:

- (L) If a work of art is defined as institutional and conventional, then the definition precludes the freedom and creativity associated with art.¹

Lord also maintains that the antecedent of this conditional is false. In this note, I will argue that (i) certain confusions and assumptions prevent Lord from showing the antecedent is false, and (ii) even if the antecedent is assumed to be true, there are counterexamples to the entire conditional. With regard to (ii), I will suggest that conventionality is necessary for creativity.

I.

Let us consider Lord's discussion of the antecedent in which the two concepts "institution" and "convention" are brought together to jointly justify the Institutional definition's "loss of flexibility."² Lord paraphrases George Dickie's aims in *Art and the Aesthetic* as providing an institutional definition of "work of art" that allows for flexibility or creativity, and the specification of conventions governing the creation, presentation, and appreciation of the aesthetic features of art objects. With regard to these aims, Lord adds, "Convention so crucial to the second aim may undermine the first, the attainment of flexibility which Dickie claims for his definition."³ This

PEGGY ZEGLIN BRAND is an artist and instructor in the Humanities Department at the University of Arizona.

lack of spontaneity in artworks, i.e., the loss of flexibility espoused by Dickie's definition, is established by Lord via two routes: a) arguing that being a work of art is incompatible with institutionality (Incompatibility Argument), and b) arguing that the creation, presentation, and appreciation of a work of art is not governed by conventions (Nonconventionality Argument.) (In order to remain consistent with Lord's emphasis, analysis (a) will mainly discuss the freedom, originality and conventions involved in the *creation* of a work of art; other conventions of *presentation* and *appreciation* will play a more important role later in argument (b).)

The following reformulates Lord's Incompatibility Argument (a):

- (1) If a work of art is defined as institutional, then the practice of making works of art is essentially conservative.
- (2) If the institution is conservative, then the institutional definition precludes creativity.
- ∴ (3) If a work of art is defined as institutional, then the institutional definition precludes creativity.
- (4) The making of a work of art involves freedom, creativity, originality and spontaneity.
- ∴ (5) A work of art is not to be defined as institutional.

Dickie defines "institution" as an established, continuing, traditional practice, perhaps complete with a unique history, e.g., the institution of theater.⁴ The particular institution of art encompasses a bundle of systems, comprised of persons with learned roles and patterns of behavior. Although the definition he proposes is comprised of necessary and sufficient conditions, he holds

that his definition does not preclude the actual creative activity of artists. Rather, it allows for the constant expansion of the boundaries of art by its very looseness: its informal character does not preclude experimentation in which subsystems become new art forms, and subsequently, almost anything is allowed to become art.

Lord's contention that an institution is essentially conservative, self-perpetuating, and at times punitive, leads her to conclude that the practice of creating works of art, as an institution, is similarly constituted. An objection must be made, however, to the unsubstantiated assumptions underlying premises (1) and (2); Lord provides no evidence for an institution's essential conservatism, premise (1), nor an explanation of such conservatism precluding creativity within the institution of art-making, premise (2). Weitz characterizes the Institutional Theory as "establishmentarian," but Lord's mention of this fact does not constitute evidence for (2).

Even granting, for a moment, that the art-making institution runs the risk of becoming "ultraconservative,"⁵ it does not follow that normal artistic activity would necessarily suffer any ill effects. For suppose the established practice or continuing tradition of creating artworks is novelty itself: every work of art is enmeshed in an art historical context and builds upon the past, in a manner of speaking, but most importantly, every work of art is also original in some way. (This might explain why almost no one wants to accept fakes, forgeries, and copies as works of art.) If so, then the charge of ultraconservatism would simply reflect an increase in the practice of making and viewing works that flaunt this novelty. Such a state of affairs would certainly not yield a loss of creativity. Thus, with the possibility that both (1) and (2) of the Incompatibility Argument are false, i.e., Lord has not shown that the institution of art-making is conservative nor that the institution's conservatism precludes creativity, premise (3) is also suspect; viz., Lord has not shown that Dickie's institutional definition of a work of art does in fact preclude creativity. Thus the Incompatibility Argument (a) fails.

Let us now consider Lord's discussion of the Nonconventionality Argument (b) which states that works of art are not governed by conventions. In keeping with Lord's account, I will also make reference to David Lewis's definition of "convention," but will cite a more recent, and perhaps, clearer version of the definition. Lord utilizes Lewis's definition in order to contrast an "independent" account of convention with that provided by Dickie. The definition offered by Lewis is as follows:

- (C) A regularity R , in action or in action and belief, is a convention in a population P if and only if, within P , the following six conditions hold. (Or at least they almost hold. A few exceptions to the 'everyone's' can be tolerated.)
- (i) Everyone conforms to R .
 - (ii) Everyone believes that the others conform to R .
 - (iii) This belief that the others conform to R gives everyone a good and decisive reason to conform to R himself.
 - (iv) There is a general preference for general conformity to R rather than slightly-less-than-general conformity—in particular, rather than conformity by all but any one.
 - (v) R is not the only possible regularity meeting the last two conditions . . . There is at least one alternative R' . . . (that) could have perpetuated itself as a convention instead of R .
 - (vi) . . . the various facts listed in conditions (i) to (v) are matters of *common* (or *mutual*) knowledge.⁶

Using (C), Lord's Nonconventionality Argument (b) can be reformulated as:

- (6) Let R^* = the conventions governing the creation, presentation and appreciation of artworks and let P^* = the members of the art institution or the artworld. Then conditions of (i) through (vi) of (C) hold.
- (7) But for R^* and P^* , (iv), (v), and (vi) of (C) do not hold.
- ∴ (8) R^* is not a convention, i.e., works of art are not conventional.

One initial problem with this argument is that Lord fails to be clear about conventions R^* in (6). It is not clear whether the argument depends upon R^* as representing Dickie's notion of the one primary convention in art, or secondary conventions, or both. My assumption is that R^* repre-

sents any and all conventions in the art-world, since (8) is intended to show that works of art are not conventional at all. But in order to show (8), Lord must show that neither the primary convention nor any secondary conventions are really conventions.

Despite Dickie's use of several descriptions, the primary conventions in art can best be characterized as the essential understanding (or knowledge) between artist(s) and viewer(s) that regulates their corresponding roles, that is, governs the behavior and expectations involved in the creation, presentation, and appreciation of the aesthetic object of a work of art.⁷ The primary convention of theater, for example, is the understanding between actors and audience that they are engaged in a certain kind of formal activity. This convention is common to all types of theater, such as traditional theater as we know it, Chinese theater, and avant-garde performances.

Secondary conventions, however, are the many nonessential yet traditional ways of creation, presentation, and appreciation; these can vary greatly, e.g., the Chinese prop man who is not hidden by a curtain, the hidden prop man in most traditional theater, the arrangement of seats and stage, the distribution of programs, and the curtain's rising and falling.

Lord misinterprets this dichotomy by broadening the range of the primary convention to include two aspects: understanding *plus* the practices of program distribution, seating, the curtain's rising, and the like. In other words, she defines primary convention in terms of Dickie's primary *plus* secondary conventions. Then she defines secondary conventions by restricting them to "the hiding of the non-aesthetic aspects of the performance such as the wiring and the stage hands."⁸ Herein lies the confusion of stipulating conventions R^* in (6): the respective conventions are not correctly individuated and Lord allows secondary conventions to govern only the non-aesthetic features of a work of art.

The consequences of this confusion, however, can be avoided by considering each type of convention in (6) in turn. First, let R_1^* = the primary convention of the art-

world. Lord's criticism of Dickie's notion of a primary convention would merit considerable consideration *if* indeed her main contention in (8) of the Nonconventionality Argument was that this so-called convention is simply a regularity, due to (7). Premise (7) states that conditions (iv) through (vi) of Lewis' (C) are violated, i.e., the conditions stipulating general preference for conformity (iv), an alternative R' (v), and mutual knowledge (vi). But Lord does not stipulate R_1^* so precisely. And even if she had, Dickie now concedes (in a forthcoming work) that what he previously called a primary convention is not a convention at all, in Lewis's sense, but can be best characterized in another way.⁹ The major reason, incidentally, seemed to be the difficulty in posing an alternative to the primary convention, Lewis' condition (v).

Second, let R_2^* = the secondary conventions of the art-world. Again, premise (7) is true just in case Lord has shown these conventions to violate conditions (iv) through (vi) of Lewis's (C). A new problem arises concerning the definition of "convention." In *Convention: A Philosophical Study*, Lewis proposes several versions of his definition, the main two versions being the final and quantitative definitions.¹⁰ The conditions of the final version are written in terms of "almost everyone conforms . . ." while the quantitative version reads "everyone in a fraction of some degree of all those involved conforms. . . ." But Lord unaccountably analyzes the notion of conventions in art according to an earlier formulation which is written without the qualification "almost everyone." She then adds without justification that her proposed counterexample holds up in light of the final version of the definition as well.

Consider Lord's definitive statement intended to support the important premise (7):

. . . most of the members [of the art institution] do not know of an alternative except against the background of the history of a given art after the alternative is introduced. It is the artist who envisions R^1 [R' : a possible alternative] and introduces it in violation of Condition (4) [(iv) of (C)] . . .¹¹

In other words, in violation of (iv), it is the creative artist who is the one exception (or

at least one) who disrupts general preference for general conformity by introducing an alternative, in violation of (v), which is not prior common knowledge, in violation of (vi).

Concerning condition (iv), Lewis anticipates the problem of tolerable exceptions to the given conditions of definition (C) by stipulating degrees of conventionality. (All three versions, viz., the final, quantitative, and (C) bear this out.) Actual conventions aspire to the ideal of general preference for general conformity to a greater or lesser degree. Granting this view, Lord's creative artist does not constitute a counterinstance to general preference for general conformity. Nor do a few "mavericks," as she calls them. Condition (iv) is intended to explain the self-perpetuation of a convention; it does not presume to guide human behavior by means of rules or sanctions. Thus the creative artist is not an exception to the regularity by introducing a possible alternative regularity, for in terms of secondary conventions, each is as acceptable as the other. And if, in fact, the few mavericks become more and more welcome in the artworld, this signals only a change in the general preference of a particular convention, not an end to secondary conventions altogether.

Regarding (v), which is intended to insure the arbitrary nature of conventions, one can object that the artist need not be the sole member of the population to envision an alternative. Perhaps the artist's position is unique in the artworld (Dickie never really does promote an egalitarian view) but this does not preclude other members, e.g., critics or historians, from envisioning alternatives although they do not actually introduce them.

Lastly, condition (vi) is not violated if we consider Lewis's notion of *potential* knowledge with regard to conditions (i) through (v) of (C).¹² The population may not have bothered to think seriously about other members' preferences and reasons for conforming to the regularity or possible alternative regularity, but it seems certain that they could provide accounts (or at least possess the knowledge) of artworld regulari-

ties and alternatives, etc., *prior* to the introduction of an alternative. An art historical context is not inconsistent with mutual knowledge, and most members of the artworld population *do* know of alternative conventions to a given regularity before they are introduced, e.g., dispensing with theater programs or hanging paintings upside down.

For the above reasons, (7) which asserts that conditions (iv) through (vi) of Lewis's (C) are violated, is false. Thus Lord's conclusion (8) is not justified with respect to R_2^* ; Lord has not shown art to be devoid of secondary conventions. The total picture then, is that Lord's conclusion (8) of the Nonconventionality Argument (b) is not justified with respect to either primary or secondary conventions.

Combining (8) of the Nonconventionality Argument with (5) of the Incompatibility Argument, i.e., a work of art is not to be defined as institutional, yields the conjunction: a work of art is not to be defined as institutional or conventional. In relation to Lord's original thesis (L),

- (L) If a work of art is defined as institutional and conventional, then the definition precludes the freedom and creativity associated with art,

this conjunction was intended to show the antecedent of (L) to be false. But neither of Lord's conclusions, (5) nor (8), has been sufficiently justified. Therefore Lord does not succeed in showing the antecedent of (L) to be false.

II.

This section will discuss two main types of counterexamples to Lord's conditional thesis (L): Type I) disregarding Section I momentarily and granting the truth of the antecedent of (L), examples can be provided that show the consequent of (L) to be false, i.e., within Dickie's Institutional framework, Lord has not shown the definition to preclude creativity. And Type II) stepping outside the framework of the Institutional Theory, counterexamples can be proposed to one segment of the original antecedent, let's call it (L₁), which deals

only with the *conventionality* of art:

- (L₁) If a work of art is defined as *conventional*, then the definition precludes the freedom and creativity which we associate with art.

The analysis in Type II will make use of an original contention that provides an interesting contrast to Lord's intuitions about creativity.

Regarding Type I, counterexamples to (L) within the framework of the Institutional Theory, it is unfortunate that Lord offers no original examples of creative, spontaneous works of art that are unacceptable by definition. She suggests that avant-garde art, e.g. Duchamp's *Fountain*, "expressly flouts" the very institutions essential to Dickie's analysis. But to assume that such flouting is necessarily inconsistent with the viability of artworld institutions is to misunderstand the relation of the work to the institution of art. For to scorn or mock an established practice presupposes that practice; Duchamp's act of revolting against current aesthetic standards still perpetuated the practices he externally scorned. His piece was titled, signed, submitted, and exhibited in an art museum. Yet the piece also exemplifies originality and freedom. The creative act, previously restricted to choice of medium, color, form, etc., now consisted solely of the choice of readymade. Given Dickie's definition, *Fountain* is a work of art. Lord's assumption that an institution is conservative, and when opposed, punitive, is unfounded in this case. Thus *Fountain*, as a counterexample, shows (L) to be false.

Perhaps Marxist art, called Socialist Realism, comes closer to Lord's intuitions of the possibility of an ultraconservative institution restricting creativity. Widespread in Russia, such works of art portray the humanism indigenous to Communism; it denounces Modern Art as bourgeois, formally sterile and dehumanized. It is a style restricted to realistic representations as inspired (or dictated) by political ideology. In the sense that such a style is opposed to change, it is conservative. But the same claim can be made for any movement or style whatsoever: for instance, Minimal Art-

ists sought to preserve only certain traditions in their works according to predetermined guiding principles. Even strong preferences for conformity cannot preclude originality: movements die out, Russian artists dissent. Sometimes the different practices of creating and appreciating works of art are temporary, but in all cases of artworks, such practices or conventions are present and open to change.

In order to point out counterexamples to (L₁), the conditional restricted to conventionality, which are of Type II, let us consider (L₁) in light of the following claim, which preserves Lewis's definition of convention as outlined in (C):

- (N) (Secondary) conventions are necessary for the originality, freedom and spontaneity associated with works of art.

Evidence for (N) can be found in many places. Current writings in art criticism frequently refer to conventions. E. H. Gombrich explains the history of illusion in pictorial representation as partially dependent upon conventions: the artist is constantly presented with a choice between alternative methods of technique and style, based upon knowledge of past and present traditions. Art history categorizes artworks in terms of common characteristics, e.g., Neo-Classical works blatantly revert to former conventions.

The creation of all art—the main concern here is *creation* and not presentation or appreciation, although conventions govern these aspects as well—is governed by conventions which can be artistic but not necessarily so.¹³ Such conventions can also be functional, religious, magical, decorative, etc. The artist's knowledge of art history can be extensive or null; the originality in the work created is an outgrowth of his knowledge of certain conventions, artistic or otherwise. Granted, a cataloging of such conventions would help to clarify (N), as would an accounting of the role of conventions in the creative process, how they originate, change, and die out, but such a project cannot be accomplished here.

Perhaps one example will provide some focus. Critics claim that the last decade of

architecture reveals the gradual emergence of a style that introduces and adheres to the principles of Post-Modernism.¹⁴ Such newly established conventions are in direct reaction to the major tenets of Modernism, a style prevalent earlier in the century. Whereas Modernism advocated nonspecific spatial "zones" instead of rooms, abstract forms, and materials associated with machine production, and exterior design determined by a specific site or environment, Post-Modernism revises and/or abandons these tenets. The conventions of Post-Modernism include such things as a return to a historical and figurative approach to fashioning rooms out of nondescript architectural space and a change to vertical surfaces, both interior and exterior, bedecked with imagery. The originality of Post-Modernism is an outgrowth of past conventions; in other words, conventions were necessary for the creativity or newness exhibited by these latter works.

Thus Post-Modernism constitutes a counterexample to (L₁). Also Lord's reservations about the role of conventions in art stand challenged by (N).

¹ Catherine Lord, "Convention and Dickie's Institutional Theory of Art," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 20 (1980), 322-28. Hereafter, author and page number.

² Lord, p. 327.

³ Lord, p. 323.

⁴ George Dickie, *Art and the Aesthetic: An Institutional Analysis* (Cornell University Press, 1974), p. 31.

⁵ Lord, p. 323.

⁶ David K. Lewis, "Languages and Language," reprinted in: *Minnesota Studies in the Philosophy of Science*, Vol. VII, ed. Keith Gunderson (University of Minnesota Press, 1975), pp. 3-35. Definition on pp. 5-6.

⁷ Dickie, pp. 30, 173-176.

⁸ Lord, p. 324.

⁹ George Dickie, *The Art Circle*, forthcoming.

¹⁰ David K. Lewis, *Convention: A Philosophical Study* (Harvard University Press, 1969); the final definition, p. 78; the quantitative definition, p. 79; the tentative definition used by Lord, p. 76.

¹¹ Lord, p. 327.

¹² Lewis, "Languages and Language," p. 6.

¹³ This is not to say that art-making is governed by rules, conventional or nonconventional (forthcoming in Dickie) or by specifying or indexing conventions as suggested by Timothy Binkley, "Deciding About Art," *Culture and Art*, ed. Lars Aagaard-Mogensen (Atlantic Highland, 1976), pp. 90-109.

¹⁴ Ellen K. Morris, "Architecture: News from the Academies," *Art in America* (November 1980), 55-59.