

A DEFENCE OF AN INSTITUTIONAL ANALYSIS OF ART

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I.

An institutional analysis of art posits the theory that works of art are classified as such not by virtue of their exhibited properties, but rather by virtue of their relational ones, and more specifically by virtue of their place within an institutional framework, the *'artworld'*. The most thorough and compelling account of an institutional theory is provided by George Dickie in his book *'The Art Circle'*. As such, it is on the institutional definition of art presented therein that I shall focus this essay.

Dickie's Institutional Theory has received a great deal of attention, and has faced numerous diverse objections, many of which Dickie himself has responded to.¹ These dialogues are well-documented elsewhere, so rather than retread familiar ground I want to focus here on a number of objections to which Dickie did not supply an adequate response, and which I believe reveal the need for an amendment that Dickie has never explicitly made, but is nonetheless in keeping with the spirit of his theory.

First, though, it is necessary to provide a summary of Dickie's account, and demonstrate the appeal of the theory in itself. Stephen Davies summarises the requirements of an institutional theory of art as being to demonstrate; a) 'that art-making is institutionalised (and not merely a social practice)' and b) 'that art-making

¹ See Weitz (1956), Scholz (1994), Beardlsey (1976), Dickie (1984a), Dickie (1984b), Stecker (1986).

is essentially (and not merely contingently) institutional.’² For the remainder of this section then I shall set out Dickie’s institutional theory of art by way of demonstrating how an art theory can meet the requirements of a) and b), above.

The institutional framework consists in a relationship between artists, artworks and an artworld public. Of these Dickie offers the following definitions; ‘1) An artist is a person who participates with understanding in making an artwork. 2) A work of art is an artefact 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 artwork which is presented to them. 4) The artworld is the totality of all artworld systems. 5) An artworld system is a framework for the presentation of an artwork by an artist to an artworld public.’³ An *artworld* public then, might contain anyone from an art critic to a Saturday-night cinema-goer, provided they are prepared to understand as intended an artwork which is presented to them. This could involve going to see a play and being prepared to understand the props and actors on stage as telling a story. This understanding, of the conventions of the ‘artworld system’ of theatre, can come only from one’s immersion within a culture of which such artworks and artworld systems are a part, and are thereby recognised and understood - namely the artworld. Dickie acknowledges here that ‘the final definition, that of *artworld system*, simply reaches back and employs all the previous focal terms’⁴, but he does not see this circularity as problematic. This is a point of discussion I shall return to in the final section. Dickie’s definitions are traditionally taken as intending to; a) provide the necessary and sufficient conditions for the creation of artworks, and b) demonstrate that one such necessary feature is the place of art-making within an institutional framework. While I have come across alternative interpretations of Dickie’s definitions, it is the above aims that I shall attribute to him. According to Dickie, the individually necessary and jointly sufficient conditions for some object being classed as an artwork are that it be a) an artefact, b) of a kind created to be presented to an artworld public. Provided an artefact is presented within the framework of an artworld system then, i.e. by an artist, to an artworld public, it will be an artwork. Thus we have seen how Dickie sets out art-making as essentially involved in an institutional

² Davies, S. (1991), p. 98.

³ Dickie, G. (1984a), p. 82.

⁴ Dickie, G. (1984a), p. 82.

framework. However, this theory is not without problems and objections, so it is to these that I shall now turn, in a bid to convince the reader that they can be avoided.

II.

The claim that art is only contingently institutional was initially a response to Dickie's earlier definition of an artwork in *'Art and the Aesthetic'*, which Beardsley claimed did not demonstrate its *necessary* relationship with an artworld institution. This definition was; 'an artwork is a) an artefact, b) a set of aspects which has had conferred upon it the candidate for appreciation by some person or persons acting on behalf of a certain social institution (the artworld)'.⁵ Beardsley's complaint centred around a distinction, echoed by Jeffrey Weiland, between *practices*, for example 'marriage or the like' and *organisations*, like 'the Roman Catholic Church.'⁶ Practices, Beardsley referred to as 'institution-types', and organisations as 'institution-tokens'.⁷ This distinction refers to the levels of formality with which institutions are organised. An institution-type is an informally structured institution, within which rules or conditions are generally un-enforced. They exist as 'established practices' rather than strict rules. Conversely, an institution-token has a much more formal and official structure, and will exist as an official body, having members who act on its behalf to enforce rules, or to bestow upon others rights, privilege, or status. Dickie sets the artworld out as an 'established practice', or an 'institution-type', but then is required to imply a formalised capability of those who are members of this 'institution-type', to 'act on its behalf' and 'confer status' onto potential artworks. The artworld is not so organised a body, it is not a body with any official capacity, ie an 'institution-token', and so surely cannot have the power to confer status, nor the formal structure to have representatives acting on its behalf. The ultimate point of Beardsley's complaint was that the artworld as Dickie posits it, does not have the formal structure required to confer status, but without it, art-making becomes no more than a social practice. Dickie accepts this criticism, and reiterates in his response that he wishes the artworld to be understood as an 'institution-type', conceding to remove the notion of status conferral from his account of an institutional theory. However, Dickie fails to respond adequately to the charge that art-making becomes merely a

⁵ Dickie, G. (1974), p. 34.

⁶ Dickie, G. (1984a), p. 51.

⁷ Beardsley, M. (1976), p. 195.

social practice as a result of this removal of status conferral. Without the notion of status conferral, and a formalised structure of roles within the artworld, anyone is able to confer status, simply by creating an artefact of a kind to be presented, and thus the institution of the artworld becomes surplus to the creation of artworks. If the artworld has no official capacity by dint of which it confers artwork status, then it has no power that everyday people do not have, as far as conferring art-status, it becomes redundant. It is here that an amendment to Dickie's definitions, originally suggested by Stephen Davies, can be introduced as providing an explanation of and solution to this problem.

Davies identifies the cause of the above problem as stemming from a feature of Dickie's theory that need not necessarily arise in a formulation of the institutional analysis, namely its 'ahistoricism'. It is Davies' point that in neglecting to discuss the artworld in terms of anything besides the relational framework it consists in, and with no reference to anything outside the circle of definitions introduced in section 1, Dickie provides only a 'time-slice' analysis of the artworld, as it exists at present. Given that Dickie has acknowledged that the artworld is not formally structured, it becomes difficult for him to suggest authoritative roles within it, the artworld Dickie postulates is one in which anyone can create an artwork by simply fulfilling the correct relational conditions. Davies' point is that while it may be true of today's artworld that anyone can create an artwork, this has not always been the case. To quote Davies example, Michelangelo could not have turned a urinal into an artwork, as Duchamp did. It was only through Duchamp's understanding of the state of the artworld at that time that he was able to create an artwork outside the conventions of any pre-existing artworld system. Similarly it cannot be the case that anyone can create a new artistic medium like that created by *Fountain*. That person would have needed to be someone recognised by the artworld, in order for the piece presented to be understood in the context of an artwork. This is not made clear in Dickie's definitions. What his theory neglect is a crucial point of reference, and one that occurs outwith the circle of definitions, this being the *history* of the artworld. Dickie would be able to avoid the circularity with which he is charged if he built into his definitions some acknowledgment of the 'nature and limits of the role of artist, *without* appealing directly to artworks.'⁸ This would involve making mention of how one becomes

⁸ Davies, S. (1991), p. 112.

authorised to act in the role of artist, rather than simply presupposing the role in the act of art-making. This would also allow Dickie to escape the accusation that the artworld has no essential role in art-making, being an unofficial body.

Dickie claims that the circularity of his definitions reflects the inflected nature of the artworld, but the crucial point by Davies is that the artworld has not always had this inflected nature. An account of the history of the artworld would provide reference to how the limits on the role of artists have been diluted, as it were, by various movements in the history of art, so as to culminate in the present day 'democratisation' of the artworld. Dickie's failure to include in his definitions an account of art history, allows for the criticism that since anyone can be an artist, the artworld institution is redundant. This is a mistake however, since it is in fact by *virtue* of this artworld institution and its contributing history that anyone can, in theory, become an artist. The artworld has reached the point in its history in which art is self-conscious.

The idea that art-making was once subject to stricter conditions reflects the nature of the art world's more conservative past, in which the artworld public were less open to unfamiliar artistic mediums. While Dickie makes no express mention of this artworld history in his writing, I would like to suggest that he intended to make a tacit reference to it in his definitions. In his definition of an artist Dickie states 'an artist is a person who participates *with understanding* in making an artwork.' How are we to interpret his incorporation of 'understanding' into his definitions? If it refers simply to an understanding of the network of relationships occurring between an artwork, artist and artworld public, then it seems curious that Dickie has chosen to *include* an expression of it within his very definitions of these relations. For example, if an artist creates 'with understanding' an object to be presented to an artworld public, and this understanding translates simply as an understanding *that* the object being created is one for presentation to an artworld public, then it seems Dickie could just as easily have said that an artist is someone who *consciously* creates an artwork, ie consciously creates something of a kind for the presentation to a public. My suggestion is that Dickie is referring, albeit implicitly, to an understanding of the wider historical context within which the current artworld occurs. When an artist participates with *understanding*, this is understanding of the current state of the artworld, and of what is likely to be accepted as an artwork in such an artworld. Such an understanding will yield different results depending upon the present climate of the artworld. Today, this

understanding allows artists to push the boundaries of existing artworld systems, and even to create new ones, but there will have been a time when this was not the case.

Such an understanding of the artworld exists on two, hierarchical levels. At the basic level is the understanding the Saturday night cinema-goer and other everyday members of the artworld have, of the conventions of the established artworld systems of their culture. Anyone possessing this basic understanding can become an artist, crucially, *within* one of these established artworld systems. At the higher level, 'understanding' may refer to the understanding of those educated in and highly aware of the artworld *and* its history, for example art critics, art historians, and established artists. Such an understanding will equip an artist to forge a new medium for artistic expression, a new artworld system. Only with such an understanding of the historical context of the artworld and the important movements within it could one anticipate what the artworld is 'ready for'. Equally, only could one with enough influence in the higher realms of the artworld expect that something they present outwith an established medium of recognition, be understood as art. To torture the example further, a urinal salesman presenting *Fountain* could not have expected for it to have it been received in the context of an artwork. If we can accept that Dickie intended an implicit reference to the historical nature and evolution of the artworld, then his definitions, in their emphasis upon the *understanding* of the artist and the artworld public, do refer outside the circle of relations, to acknowledge the existence of an institution with its own history. Understanding of this history and how it has contributed to the present state of the artworld becomes the crucial point of the definition, so that an artist, as someone who 'participates with understanding in making an artwork', relies ultimately for classification as an artist upon the fact that s/he understands the artworld, and the concept of art, as something with a history beyond the present state it exists in.

A final putative problem that is also addressed by the inclusion of an artworld history in Dickie's theory, is the accusation that Dickie equips us with no means for distinguishing 'artworld systems' from any other systems in which objects are presented for a public. Scholz summarises the problem thus; 'the theory merely describes a structure that relates positions or roles to each other and is silent on the unique intrinsic properties of the individual objects that fill those roles.'⁹ As such,

⁹ Scholz, B. (1994), p. 314.

there is nothing by which an artworld system can be recognised that is *unique* to it, as a system of relations. A reference to the unique history of the artworld however, would facilitate a distinction between the artworld and any other non-artworld system satisfying the same relational properties, since the artworld would possess a *unique* history by reference to which it could be defined.

Admittedly to read the inclusion of an artworld history into Dickie's definitions is to make a charitable reading of his theory, and may not be how he intended it to be interpreted. However, even if this reference to the artworld and its history was not something Dickie had in mind at the time of writing his definitions, it still exists as an amendment to his theory which is able to answer those problems outlined in this section, without compromising the claims of his institutional account. This paper has set out to demonstrate that those problems discussed above can be remedied by the inclusion in Dickie's definition of the artworld, some acknowledgement of its prior conditions and the previously existing limits on the roles therein. That such an inclusion would remedy the circularity charge and circumvent that of art-making being only contingently institutional, has been demonstrated. Further it is evident that it would provide a unique feature of the artworld which would set it apart from other networks of relations. I hope to have persuaded the reader that such an amendment to the Institutional Theory is necessary, and further that amending it in this way is sufficient to deal with the problems discussed here.

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