

Book Review:

The Philosophy of Art: The Question of Definition – From Hegel to Post-Dantian Theories by Tiziana Andina

by Michel-Antoine Xhignesse

michelxhignesse@capilanou.ca

Penultimate draft. Please cite the final version: [Review of Tiziana Andina, *The Philosophy of Art: The Question of Definition*](#) (Bloomsbury, 2013), *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 74.1 (Winter 2016), p. 106-8.

ANDINA, TIZIANA, The Philosophy of Art: The Question of Definition – From Hegel to Post-Dantian Theories, Natalia Iacobelli (tr.), Bloomsbury, 2013, 190 pp., 5 b&w illus., \$37.95 paperback, \$120 hardback.

The Philosophy of Art: The Question of Definition argues that artworks are essentially social objects, and that they "embod[y] a representation, in the form of an inscribed trace upon a medium that is not transparent" (p. 166). Much like words, Andina thinks, artworks are physical structures that transmit a meaning which does not necessarily correspond to the work's physical vehicle (p. 25-6). Andina's strategy is to proceed negatively by exploring what she takes to be the 20th century's main theories of art and showing that her theory avoids the problems they encounter. The result is a work more exegetical than argumentative; readers are left to gather up the threads of Andina's argument for themselves, with mixed success.

Strangely, given her thesis, Andina limits her survey to theories of art and never explores the rich and relevant tradition of work on illocutionary and other speech acts in the philosophy of language. Moreover, it is not always clear why Andina chooses to focus on the theories and authors she does, or how exactly her account proposes to overcome the difficulties they face. Consider the introduction, which features an extended discussion of the historical relationship between truth and the ontology of art. The interlocutors here are Plato and Aristotle, arguing that art imperfectly imitates reality, Gadamer, arguing that artworks succeed in revealing a thing's essence (p. 19), and Heidegger, who distinguishes between natural objects and 'things' in terms of the latter's artifactuality and useability. Insofar as they are 'things,' Heidegger thinks that artworks point to uses and concepts beyond their material form (p. 17). While all four thinkers seem to agree with Andina that artworks can communicate, it is not clear what their reflections on art and truth contribute to her argument. Unfortunately, Andina never returns to the subject.

The book's remaining four chapters are primarily concerned with explaining various attempts to define art. The first focuses on the imitation theory of art, and it is here that Andina introduces her thesis. She tells us that "The theory that we hope to develop is this: the category of works of art exhibits the same metaphysical structure, insofar as they are objects that communicate 'something' (a meaning) that does not necessarily correspond to the material body in which this something is contained" (p. 26). The introduction of Danto's indiscernibles reaffirms the Platonic point that artworks can and do refer to more than just their physical medium or immediate utility. It must be said, however, that Andina never explains why this was in doubt, or who doubted it—in fact, as her exegeses show, it is a position that is already widely acknowledged in the philosophy of art.

Chapter 2 surveys the institutional, aesthetic, disinterested, and expression theories of art, and features extended reflections on the nature of artifacts and 17th-century tulip-mania. Absent from this discussion is the aesthetic attitude theory, which introduced key features of the aesthetic and disinterested theories to the artworld of the 20th century, as well as the many important—especially feminist—critiques of these theories. It must also be observed at this juncture that Andina's characterizations of these positions suffers at times from small inaccuracies. While some of these errors are likely attributable to slips of translation (which abound throughout), they present pitfalls for unwary newcomers to the field. Her explanation of Dickie's version of the institutional theory, for example, conflates his early talk of candidacy for appreciation (which he later dropped) with candidacy for *aesthetic* appreciation (see, e.g., pages 44, 46, and 51). A similar slip befalls Andina's description of Gaut's cluster theory in Ch. 3,

where she suggests that all ten of Gaut's criteria—rather than some unspecified subset—are jointly necessary for art (p. 121).

The key moment in Ch. 2 comes after a lengthy discussion of the institutional theory, when Andina observes that "The art world [...] has 'imposed a function' upon a material object—a bottle rack, for instance—transforming it into another object" (p. 44). This leads her to develop what is perhaps the most interesting aspect of her book, which is an account of 17th-century tulip-mania as a model of the genesis of a social 'world' (like the artworld) that makes it possible for objects to refer to things beyond their physical limits. The lesson Andina draws from this analogy is that "The tulip world arises from a thing called a 'tulip'. It does not create its own object. Instead, it creates the ways in which that object can determine a speculation. The same conclusions hold true for the art world" (p. 60).

Yet 'art', unlike 'tulip', is not a natural kind; it is a *social* kind. It is not obvious, then, that the artworld *doesn't* create its own objects. Here, another major omission makes itself felt: Andina does not take the time to delve into the wealth of recent literature on artifacts and social kinds. (e.g. Amie Thomasson's *Ordinary Objects*, New York: OUP, 2007, and Eric Margolis & Stephen Laurence's *Creations of the Mind: Theories of Artifacts and their Representation*, New York: OUP, 2007). Andina also takes for granted the idea that the artworld's development parallels that of the tulip-world, rather than offering a similar explanation of the genesis of artworlds out of prehistoric artistic practices. Thus, while the analogy between artworld and tulip-world is fascinating, its presentation feels like a missed opportunity to bring to bear exciting work from other philosophical subfields. Readers may also have reservations concerning Andina's identification of 'worlds' with markets and market forces. For one thing, the development of a market seems a contingent rather than a necessary consequence of the establishment of 'worlds' (consider, e.g., the 'legal world'). For another, causation may well sometimes run the other way, such that markets drive the development of 'worlds'.

Chapter 3 takes us on a whirlwind tour of skepticism about definitions of art, focusing on Weitz's neo-Wittgensteinian account of art and touching briefly on cluster theories and Carroll's historical narrativism. Absent from this discussion, however, are more recent motivations for skepticism such as Lopes's (*Nobody needs a theory of art*, *Journal of Philosophy* 105.3, 2008, pp.109-27, and *Beyond Art*, New York: OUP, 2013). Andina focuses much of her attention on Maurizio Ferraris's 'documental' account of ontology and its 'normalist' or 'exceptionalist' aesthetics, although this theory appears to have more in common with investigations of social ontology than skepticism about definitions. As Andina presents it, 'normalist' aesthetics treats artworks as wholly physical objects whose social nature does not result from collective intentionality, as Searle would have it, but from their non-reciprocated provocation of sentiments in the viewer. Although Andina endorses the bulk of Ferraris's theory, she does not offer any positive arguments for why the reader ought to follow her in doing so. This is especially important since Ferraris's emphasis on the physical nature of all artworks stands at odds with Andina's own criticism of Dickie, and with the prevailing philosophical opinion about musical works, literature, and performances. While readers will doubtless be interested to contrast this take on the ontology of social objects with recent work in analytic philosophy, and while they might reasonably expect such a contrast in the next chapter, no such discussion is forthcoming.

The fourth and final chapter purports to be about artworks as social and historical objects, but in fact gives us a brief overview of contextualism about art and a half-chapter discussion of Meinong's ontology of abstract objects and fictional entities. Here again, there is no discussion of recent work on abstract and fictional entities, such as Amie Thomasson's prominent work on the

subject. Andina eventually explains that "This is our first point. When dealing with vehicles of representations that are works of art, it makes no difference if the object that is represented exists or not" (p. 161). What matters is that an object's status as art rests on its relational properties, which relate the work's communicative content to an audience that recognizes it as such. While this seems right, there is no obvious need to adopt a Meinongian ontology to make the point. In fact, the brief explanation of Danto's notion of artworks as semantic vehicles that follows is sufficient, although it results in a further digression on Descartes, dualism, and the possibility of knowledge. It is only at the close of her book that Andina offers us a full statement of her theory of art: "[a work of art is] a social object, an artefact, that embodies a representation, in the form of an inscribed trace upon a medium that is not transparent" (p. 166). The book's remaining two pages are occupied by art criticism; readers looking for explanations of 'inscription,' 'traces,' or 'transparency' (and its negation), along with arguments for the theory's significance and explanatory power, are left to reconstruct them from the previous chapters.

Before closing this review, a few notes on structural issues and editorial practices are in order. While the bibliography boasts an impressive 129 distinct authors, only six of these are women and they are only mentioned in passing—despite the fact that the book deals prominently with issues in aesthetics and ontology to which women have made major contributions. The index likewise disappoints; given how much ground this book covers, a list of proper names is not particularly helpful. Finally, virtually every page of this book contains obvious typographical or translation errors: e.g., Plato's *Gorgias* is consistently rendered as 'Gorgia' or 'Gorgia's,' 'IBM' is referred to as 'IMB,' 'themselves' and 'him/herself' are given as 'themselves,' etc. The copy editors ought to be thoroughly ashamed of themselves.

All told, *The Philosophy of Art: The Question of Definition* struggles to find its audience. Experts are bound to be frustrated by its broad strokes, murky thesis, and sketchy argumentation. At the same time, its frequent digressions, prominent omissions, and occasional inaccuracies do little to recommend it as an introductory text. Newcomers to the philosophy of art would do better to read the relevant texts for themselves.

XHIGNESSE, MICHEL-ANTOINE. Department of Philosophy, McGill University