

**For What It's Worth:
Artistic Evaluation and the Institutional Theory of Art**

by
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B.A. – Trent University, 2009

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of the Requirements for the Degree of

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Abstract

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For most of its history art has been mimetic in nature; not surprisingly, mimetic theories of art held sway for a long time. By the middle of the twentieth century art had departed so radically from the mimetic traditions that philosophers were forced to shift their focus away from functional theories (which typically drew on the formal features of artworks) to procedural ones (which are concerned with the imperceptible, relational properties external to the work of art). This breakthrough would eventually culminate in the Institutional Theory of Art, a perspective that provides the most exhaustive classificatory definition of art available, and which (despite the objections of its critics) remains the most persuasive theory of art on offer. The same logic that makes the Institutional Theory of Art a satisfying classificatory theory can be applied, in a similar manner, to questions about the source of the terms by which we evaluate works of art. In other words: the Institutional Theory is capable of serving not only as a powerful *classificatory* theory, but also as a highly effective *evaluative* theory of art. Moreover, if the Institutional Theory can be shown to provide a satisfying account of artistic value, it may also be equipped to deal with the related problems of subjectivism (i.e., that artistic judgments are a matter of personal taste) and cultural relativism (i.e., that artistic judgments are culturally specific). Presently, no theory of art can explain away these difficulties; accordingly, an institutional account of artistic value might offer – as does the Institutional Theory of Art itself – an explanatory framework capable of dealing with seemingly intractable problems of subjectivism and relativism in artistic judgment.

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For Sam

“Every man is tabernacled in every other and he in exchange and so on in an endless complexity of being and witness to the uttermost edge of the world.”

Cormac McCarthy

“Well, art is art, isn’t it? Still, on the other hand, water is water. And east is east and west is west, and if you take cranberries and stew them like applesauce, they taste much more like prunes than rhubarb does. Now, uh... now you tell me what *you* know.”

Groucho Marx

Introduction

Getting More Out of the Institutional Theory of Art

The history of the philosophy of art can be characterized as the attempt, on the part of philosophers, to define ‘art’ as a concept. This search has been driven by two distinct questions: one concerns the nature of art itself (that is, the necessary and sufficient conditions that constitute a definition of art); the other, hidden within this question, concerns the value we attach not merely to the experience of art, but to works of art themselves. For most of its history, art was mimetic in nature – not surprisingly, then, mimetic theories of art held sway for a long time. A mimetic theory yields the rather simple explanation that if the *function* of art is to represent the world, any work that exhibits a high degree of *representational fidelity* is a good work of art. But by the end of the nineteenth century, and more specifically with the arrival of impressionism, the mimetic theory of art had lost most of its explanatory power.

In the wake of the mimetic, a number of theories were offered to account for the rapid succession of revolutionary movements in the arts. Art was thought to provide an experience unique to art: an aesthetic experience, or an emotional experience, or a cognitive experience, or to serve one of a number of instrumental functions. But every time thinkers were confident that they had discovered *the* theory, the one that explained it all, art would take yet another unexpected turn. It was not until the middle of the twentieth century that philosophers finally shifted focus, away from functional theories (which typically drew on the formal features of artworks) to procedural theories (which are concerned with the imperceptible, relational properties external to the work). This breakthrough would eventually culminate in the Institutional Theory of Art – the focus of this paper.

The Institutional Theory provides the most exhaustive classificatory definition of art available, and despite a number of objections having been leveled against it, it remains the most persuasive theory of art on offer. The same logic that makes the Institutional Theory of Art a satisfying classificatory theory can be applied, in a similar manner, to questions about the source of the terms by which we evaluate works of art. In other words, the Institutional Theory is capable of serving not only as a powerful *classificatory* theory, but also as a highly effective *evaluative* theory of art. Additionally, if the Institutional

Theory can be shown to provide a satisfying account of artistic value, it may also be equipped to deal with the related problems of subjectivism (that artistic judgments are a matter of personal taste) and cultural relativism (that artistic judgments are culturally specific).

This paper makes such a case in three distinct steps. Chapter One traces the genealogy of the Institutional Theory of Art, with a brief historical survey of various preceding theories (up to the 1960s). Chapter Two considers some of the objections leveled at the Institutional Theory and offers a defense against them. Having established the merits of the Institutional Theory, Chapter Three advances an argument for a modified Institutional Theory, equipped to explain not only the concept of art, but also the terms of its evaluation. It is clear that a *definition* of art cannot contain *evaluative* terms; however, the final chapter, drawing specifically on John Searle's theory of institutional facts, argues that the social framework constituting the Institutional Theory is capable of serving two distinct functions. One function sets out the concept of art itself; the other sets out the terms of its evaluation. Alternative accounts of artistic value are considered, but are revealed to face difficulties that an institutional account avoids.

In conclusion, an institutional account of artistic value offers – as does the Institutional Theory of Art itself – an explanatory framework unavailable on any other account. If art is essentially institutional, as George Dickie suggests, then the terms of an object's evaluation are just as much an institutional fact as is its arthood. The evaluative terms applicable to works of art are thus accountable in terms of an institutional theory – either precisely like, or else very similar to, the one advanced by Dickie. Ultimately, this paper offers not a framework for a theory of artistic evaluation, but a justification for advancing such a theoretical framework.

Chapter One

Defining Art

Introductory Remarks

Despite having had a number of objections leveled at it, George Dickie's Institutional Theory of Art continues to wield the most powerful explanatory force among contemporary theories, and thus provides the most satisfactory definition of art. Its utility is particularly evident in the face of the radical new forms of art that emerged at the start of the twentieth century, and the still more radical forms that much contemporary art takes today, which have frustrated virtually every alternative theory. Indeed, one of the great strengths of the Institutional Theory is that it is, in stark contrast to prior theoretical frameworks, remarkably well equipped to account for the kind of art we have been confronted with over the past century. Before elaborating the contours and merits of the Institutional Theory, it is worth reflecting upon the major theories of art offered in the past, and the ways in which the art of the modern period casts doubt on their explanatory power and exposed their theoretical shortcomings. The stage will then be set to explain the origins and development of the Institutional Theory of Art.

This chapter is divided into four sections. The first provides a brief summary of some of the past's leading definitions of art, including the mimetic, aesthetic-attitude, formalist, instrumentalist, emotivist, and symbolic accounts. Although this brief review establishes important points of contrast with the more satisfying institutional account, certain elements of these theories are actually consistent with (and in some cases even anticipate) characteristics of the Institutional Theory. The second section discusses the work of Morris Weitz and Maurice Mandelbaum, both important (if unintentional) contributors to the development of the Institutional Theory. In the third section, Stephen Davies' thoughts on functional and procedural definitions of art are presented. Davies' work sets out a broad, important distinction between functional (typically more traditional)

theories and procedural accounts, such as Dickie's. The stage thus set, an in-depth look at the Institutional Theory itself makes up the fourth and final section of this chapter.

Properties & Essences

Until very recently it was assumed that art must have some essential property which, once identified, would provide the necessary and sufficient conditions for a robust definition of 'art' itself. Ideally, this definition would be capable not only of accounting for all the forms that art takes, but might also (finally) overcome the intractably subjective nature of artistic judgment. It would not become apparent until the middle of the twentieth century – almost a hundred and fifty years after Immanuel Kant brought aesthetic questions to the fore – that philosophers had been looking for these elusive properties in the wrong places. It was this historical turning point that made possible the development of the Institutional Theory of Art. This threshold moment was preceded by the traditional theories of art, all of which tried to explain art in terms of its exhibited (in other words: functional) properties.

Mimesis

The present debate begins, like so much philosophy, in ancient Greece. Berys Gaut puts it succinctly: "Plato in the *Republic* argued that, although poetry purports to give knowledge, it in fact does no such thing, but produces a mere deceptive appearance of knowledge. In contrast, Aristotle in *The Poetics* argued for the capacity of poetry to give its audience knowledge of universals" (2003, p. 436). Plato saw the mimesis that characterized so much artwork as empty, while Aristotle saw much more potential in it. Throughout history mimesis (or imitation) has played a central role in aesthetics and art theory; indeed, representation has been – and in some respects continues to be – the defining feature of art. Most works of art exhibit straightforward representation, expressive representation, symbolic representation, or (as is often the case) a mixture of some or all of these qualities.

Books II, III and X of the *Republic* (2001) discuss art and poetry; however, like so much of Plato's thought, the arguments advanced in each Book are tightly bound up with his metaphysics. For any given object, there must exist an ideal, logically prior Form of

that object, which explains its similarity to other objects of the same type. Plato's theory gives rise to a threefold distinction in reality: there exists a realm of the Forms, where "truth" resides; there is a material imitation of Form; and lastly, there is art, which is an imitation of the material imitation of Form itself. Art, therefore, resides at the lowest level of the Platonic metaphysical hierarchy. A further charge Plato makes against art concerns its ill-effects on the human soul. The problem is that emotions (to which poetry and painting appeal) are inferior to reason, while reason alone allows mankind access to 'truth.' Moreover, art is mere imitation (*mimesis*), and as such is no different from a mirror held up to the world (596d). Plato thus urges that painters and poets be exiled from his ideal state, although he grants them one final appeal: "if poetry whose end is to please, and imitation, can give any reasons to show that they ought to exist in a well-ordered city, we for our part will gladly welcome them home again" (607c). This simple challenge arguably gave birth to the discipline of aesthetics, a field which has seen philosophers debate the merits of Plato's argument (and those of art itself) ever since. In particular, it is Plato's position on *mimesis* that has attracted the most attention, with a number of philosophers – most notably Aristotle – taking up arguments against his position.

At no point in his *Poetics* (1987) does Aristotle reply directly to Plato's charges against the poets, but his work nevertheless constitutes a powerful response to the position elaborated in *The Republic*. Aristotle took up Plato's theory of Forms but disagreed with him regarding their independent existence, arguing instead that Forms are embodied in material objects. This distinction is critical to understanding Aristotle's position on art, and on tragedy in particular. For Aristotle, tragedy is the imitation of an *action* designed to provide a catharsis ('cleansing awakening') for the viewer by eliciting pity and fear, emotions which Plato saw as obstacles to reason's pursuit of truth. For Aristotle, tragedy is more than *mimesis*, as it is "a representation of a serious, complete action" (Iiv49b25). This representation is "not of human beings but of action and life. Happiness and unhappiness lie in action, and the end [of life] is a sort of action, not a quality" (Iiv50a15). Aristotle recognized the active role that *mimesis* plays in dramatic performance, and saw that it thus represented a powerful emotional *and* cognitive experience for an audience.

For many centuries after Aristotle, *mimesis* would remain the defining feature of art; and indeed, the default theory of art. On a mimetic account, the degree to which a work

accurately depicted the world – whether in paint, sculpture, or even drama – determined its value as art. Mimesis thus offered a very tidy theory, more than adequately accounting for art in all its forms. Even if one does not subscribe to Plato’s metaphysics, though, the question remains: why is an imitation any more interesting than the thing being imitated? On Aristotle’s account, “art does not imitate reality as we find it, but presents an idealized version of the world, aiming to capture the universal in the particular” (Goldman, 2003, p. 208). For Aristotle, then, mimesis is imitation-plus – yet despite this qualifier, the mimetic account remains unsatisfying as a theory of art. Nevertheless, Aristotle’s *Poetics* would continue to be the authoritative text on aesthetic questions until at least the eighteenth century, when the problem of distinguishing the *imitation* from the *imitated* was taken up by Immanuel Kant and Francis Hutcheson, each of whom explained art in terms of an ‘aesthetic attitude.’

Aesthetic Attitude

Kant was among the first to suggest that there may be more to art than just mimesis, jump-starting the race to an explanation for why we *feel* the way we do about beauty in general, and about art in particular. He argues that, “we are not always forced to regard what we observe from the point of view of reason. Thus we can at least observe a purposiveness according to form, without basing it on a purpose” (1914, p. 68 §10). Explaining how this bears on the universal validity of aesthetic judgments, Kant suggests that “it is the mere form of purposiveness in the representation by which an object is *given* to us, so far as we are conscious of it, which constitutes the satisfaction that we without a concept judge to be universally communicable” (1914, pp. 69-70 §11). Defining the relationship between beauty and art in Kant’s work, Murdoch writes that,

[t]he beautiful is the experience of a conceptless harmony between the imagination and the understanding. Art, as the production of the beautiful, is not a matter of discovering or imparting truths – it is rather the production of a certain kind of quasi-thing [...]. What is constructed is a self-contained object, strictly purposeless, yet with an air of purpose, existing for its own sake. In art, we enjoy an immediate intuitive inexplicable understanding of a unique quasi-sensible object. (1997b, p. 263)

For Kant, we apply no concepts involving either interest or purpose when making aesthetic judgments, thus aesthetic judgments are an altogether different kind of cognitive activity. He further explains that, “the purposiveness in the product of beautiful art, although it is designed, must not seem to be designed, i.e. beautiful art must *look* like nature, although we are conscious of it as art. But a product of art appears like nature when, [...] it shows no trace of the rule having been before the eyes of the artist and having fettered his mental powers” (Kant, 1914, p. 188 §145). Even the artist himself, then, is engaged in a cognitive activity that is unlike normal reasoning.

Kant did not necessarily intend to advance a theory of art, but his account remains compelling, if for no other reason than that it appears so consistent with our intuitions about art and aesthetic experience. Significant, too, is that his work on aesthetics initiated an entirely new line of inquiry – what would become known as the ‘aesthetic attitude’ theory, varieties of which would continue to be offered well into the twentieth century. Kant’s most important contribution to theories of art, according to Dickie, is that he “severs the last remaining connection with the objective world” (1974, p. 71). By framing aesthetic judgment as necessarily disinterested, Kant can make the remarkable claim that such judgments are *subjective* yet *universal*. But this subjectivity, characteristic as it is of the aesthetic experience tradition, would create a theoretical dead-end. Dickie’s Institutional Theory, which places art firmly back in the objective world, represents an effort to resolve the problematic subjectivity of the Kant-initiated aesthetic attitude tradition.

Returning to the aesthetic attitude tradition, Francis Hutcheson observes that, “[m]any of our sensitive perceptions are pleasant, and many are painful, immediately, without any knowledge of the cause of their pleasure or pain, or the means by which the objects excite it or are the occasions of it, or our seeing to what further advantage or detriment the use of such objects might tend” (2008, p. 89). Here, Hutcheson appears to be very much in agreement with Kant, but departs in at least one significant way: he argues for a distinct internal sense responsible for our experiences of aesthetic objects. “It is of no consequence,” he notes, “whether we call these ideas of beauty and harmony perception of the external senses of seeing and hearing, or not. I should rather choose to call our power of perceiving these ideas an internal sense, were it only for the convenience of distinguishing them from other sensations of seeing and hearing which men may have

without perception of beauty and harmony” (2008, p. 91). So while Kant advocated a certain relationship between existing senses, Hutcheson asserts that another sense altogether accounts for our aesthetic judgments. This holds a degree of intuitive appeal, but the idea itself enjoys no empirical support. Of course, during Hutcheson’s time, little else could account for the fact that some individuals seemed to be possessed of what was, for lack of a better term, ‘good taste.’

In a sentiment that anticipates David Hume, Hutcheson observes that,

many men have, in the common meaning, the senses of seeing and hearing perfect enough; they perceive all the simple ideas separately and have their pleasure [...]. And yet, they shall find no pleasure in musical compositions, in painting, architecture, natural landscape or, perhaps, but a very weak one in comparison with what others enjoy from the same objects. This greater capacity of receiving such pleasant ideas we commonly call a fine genius or taste. (2008, p. 91)

Hume’s (2008) assertion – that we can (to a certain degree, anyway) rely on ‘experts’ in matters of taste – made an important contribution to the development of the Institutional Theory, inasmuch as those ‘experts’ occupy specific social roles. Yet it might be argued that Hutcheson makes an important (if indirect) contribution to the Institutional Theory in his own work, in trying to explain the source of expertise. He argues that there are those with heightened perceptive capacities for beauty and harmony, and that these capacities are due to an internal sense present in certain individuals. “This superior power of perception is justly called a sense,” Hutcheson claims, “because of its affinity to the other senses in that the pleasure neither arises from any knowledge of principles, proportions, causes, or of the usefulness of the object, but strikes us at first with the idea of beauty, nor does the most accurate knowledge increase this pleasure of beauty” (2008, p. 91). Yet an important difference sets this account apart from the more satisfying arguments that would be offered by later theorists. For Hutcheson the ‘sense’ is largely intuitive, whereas in Hume’s account – as well as in those of institutional theorists – the sense is cultivated, either intentionally (through training) or unintentionally (through social discourse), over time.

Hutcheson does attempt to rationalize his account by explaining that “what we call beautiful in objects, to speak in the mathematical style, seems to be in a compound ratio of uniformity and variety” (2008, p. 92). He further points out that, “bad music pleases rustics

who never heard any better, and the finest ear is not offended by the tuning of instruments if it is not too tedious and when no harmony is expected, whereas a much smaller dissonance shall offend amidst the performance when harmony is expected” (Hutcheson, 2008, p. 97). His speculations about ‘ideal ratios of uniformity and variety’ never found much purchase, but his thoughts on expectations hint at the importance of social conventions, which will play an important part in Dickie’s Institutional Theory. What Hutcheson is missing is the crucial *relational* dimension of art, the acknowledgement of which makes the institutional accounts so persuasive.

Hutcheson’s work should not be overlooked, though, as it speaks to a number of ideas that remain central to the philosophy of art and aesthetics in the ensuing centuries. Referring to a line of thinking that has its origins in Locke, Hutcheson observes that it is typically thought that, “all our relish for beauty and order is either from prospect of advantage, custom, or education” (2008, p. 99). Yet, according to him, despite all of the mediating influence habits, norms, education, and personal interest have on our senses (whether to increase pleasure or decrease pain), our senses themselves are prior. Thus, a natural sense of ‘beauty from uniformity’ would appear to be necessary if ‘custom’ is to trigger a refined appreciation of it in objects (2008, p. 101). Hutcheson’s aesthetic sense, then, must already be capable of seeing certain qualities in objects before custom can make us “more capable of retaining and comparing complex ideas so as to discern more complicated uniformity which escapes the observation of novices in any art” (2008, p. 101). This speaks to the still-open question of precisely how institutional norms and standards come to be part of those institutions to begin with. This important point, later advanced by Richard Wollheim (1980) (among others), is one of the most difficult objections the Institutional Theory faces.

Formalism

Clive Bell is, in some ways, sympathetic to the aesthetic attitude theory, claiming that “[a]ll sensitive people agree that there is a peculiar emotion provoked by works of art” (2008, p. 262). However, he departs from the tradition by suggesting that, “if we can discover some quality common and peculiar to all the objects that provoke it, we shall have solved [...] the central problem of aesthetics;” and he confidently proclaims that, “[o]nly one answer

seems possible – significant form” (2008, pp. 261-262). Bell talks about ‘aesthetic emotions,’ excited by certain combinations and permutations of lines, colours, and forms, which together constitute this ‘significant form’ – a quality shared by all visual artworks (2008, p. 262). In defending this position, he argues that, “[a]s a rule primitive art is good [...] for, as a rule, it is also free from descriptive qualities. In [it] you will find no accurate representation; you will find only significant form” (Bell, 2008, p. 266). According to Bell, once art begins to become more precisely representational, the significant form becomes obscured, so that “[f]ormal significance loses itself in reoccupation with exact representation and ostentatious cunning” (2008, p. 266). Significant form is still present – but not as representation, only as form (Bell, 2008, p. 266). Thus, Bell provides a kind of naturalistic account, suggesting that we have an inherent, shared response to visual forms. Contemporary anthropologists have found this claim to bear more than a grain of truth. What is significant about Bell’s account is that it provides a possible answer to Hutcheson’s troubling question about the origin of existing conventions; but as an explanation, it falls somewhat short. One of the strengths of the Institutional Theory is that it does not rely on physiological speculations like Bell’s, but instead on a simpler observation about human social relationships.

Instrumentalism

In one sense, Leo Tolstoy’s theory of art might be said to be at one with the aesthetic attitude tradition. It relies on the idea that art is principally concerned with the expression of emotion or, more specifically, with the experience of a feeling that only engagement with art can satisfy. On the other hand, Tolstoy’s (2008) account has significant (perhaps more significant) instrumental characteristics. Art, given its pronounced emotional efficacy, can motivate social change – and indeed the moral advancement of the human species itself. Tolstoy underwent a radical religious conversion late in his life, which included the rejection of all the literary and artistic achievements (including his own) that belonged to what he felt was a spiritually bankrupt civilization. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, existing systems of patronage, and public performance of art and music, were gradually replaced by a bourgeois-aristocratic demand for more sophisticated art forms. For the reborn Tolstoy, this ostensibly more sophisticated iteration was mere

counterfeit. He contrasted this counterfeit art with what he felt was 'true' art – that is, art which acts intentionally to unite individuals and move them from spiritual and personal isolation toward a more communal, religious feeling (Tolstoy, 2008).

Tolstoy's rejection of bourgeois art has certain parallels to Plato's rejection of art *per se* in the *Republic*; however, Tolstoy recognizes a potential in art that Plato does not. Indeed, he has more in common with Aristotle, given that each recognizes the instrumental power of art. Tolstoy argues that "[a]rt, like speech, is a means of communication, and therefore of progress, i.e., of the movement of humanity forward toward perfection" (2008, p. 240). This conspicuously Hegelian historical movement toward improvement was very important to Tolstoy, and he sincerely believed that art was not only an appropriate vehicle for it, but a highly effective one as well. Key to this is the uniquely 'infectious' nature of art (2008, p. 239). Tolstoy notes that, "however poetical, realistic, effectful, or interesting a work may be, it is not a work of art if it does not evoke that feeling (quite distinct from all other feelings) of joy and of spiritual union with another" (2008, p. 239). Thus *real* art creates feelings that animate a common emotional bond among members of a community (Townsend, 2001).

Tolstoy represents a significant departure from the aesthetic attitude theorists in that his theory is explicitly instrumentalist. For him, art is a means to an end. This presents several obvious problems, least of that if art can be said to be instrumental, there are arguably other, better means to Tolstoy's chosen ends. What is significant about his work, though, is that he removes art from the autonomous realm of aesthetic experience that dominated thinking in the nineteenth century, placing it squarely in a social and historical context. While Tolstoy almost certainly had no direct influence, Dickie might still be indebted to him for centering art in the realm of human social relations, where the Institutional Theory itself finds its home.

Emotivism

If Tolstoy placed art in its social and historical context, Benedetto Croce pulled it right back out again. Croce concerned himself principally with poetry, but it is not difficult to extrapolate an account of the visual arts from his theory. According to him, "[i]f we examine a poem in order to determine what it is that makes us feel it to be a poem, we at

once find two constant and necessary elements: a complex of *images*, and a *feeling* that animates them” (2008, p. 270). That feeling, for Croce, is not quite the special internal sense that Hutcheson tried to identify, but neither is it an easily recognizable emotional state. He argues that “poetry must be called neither feelings, nor image, nor yet the sum of the two, but ‘contemplation of feeling’ or ‘lyrical intuition’ or ‘pure intuition’ – pure, that is, of all historical and critical reference to the reality or unreality of the images of which it is woven” (Croce, 2008, pp. 270-271). There are elements of Kant’s disinterestedness in this account, but there are also elements of Hutcheson’s internal sense – with a twist. Echoing Hutcheson, Croce argues that “[b]y defining art as lyrical or pure intuition we have implicitly distinguished it from all other forms of mental production” (2008, p. 271). He thus adds the element of intuition, framing the aesthetic as an immediate emotional response. Although he shares something with Tolstoy in recognizing the emotional nature of art, Croce remains an aesthetic attitudinalist, and as such, vulnerable to the objections Dickie directs at this tradition while developing his institutional account.

Symbol & Cognition

Theory departs again from the aesthetic attitude tradition with the symbolist approach advocated by scholars such as Susanne Langer and Nelson Goodman. Langer observes that, “all drawings, utterances, gestures, or personal records of any sort express feelings, beliefs, social conditions, and interesting neuroses; ‘expression’ in any of these senses is not peculiar to art, and consequently is not what makes for artistic values” (2008, p. 318). For her, “[a]rtistic significance, or ‘expression of the Idea,’ is ‘expression’ in still a different sense and, indeed a radically different one” (2008, p. 318). This expression manifests in symbolism. “When we say that something is well expressed,” Langer tells us, “we do not necessarily believe the expressed idea to refer to our present situation, or even to be true, but only to be given clearly and objectively for contemplation. Such ‘expression’ is the function of symbols: articulation and presentation of *concepts*” (Langer, 2008, p. 318).

Langer offers a theory of music that she argues can be broadened into a theory of art *per se*, since

[t]he basic concept is the articulate but non-discursive form having import without conventional reference, and therefore presenting itself not as a symbol in the ordinary sense, but as a “significant form,” in which the factor of significance is not logically discriminated, but is felt as a quality rather than recognized as a function. If this basic concept be applicable to all products of what we call “the arts,” i.e. if all works of art may be regarded as significant forms in exactly the same sense as musical works, then all the essential propositions in the theory of music may be extended to the other arts, for they all define or elucidate the nature of the symbol and its import (2008, p. 321).

That an aesthetic response is a kind of emotion or special sense, for Langer, is implausible. “To recognize that something is right and necessary is a rational act, no matter how spontaneous and immediate the recognition may be; it points to an intellectual principle in artistic judgment, and a rational basis for the feeling Bell calls ‘the aesthetic emotion’” (Langer, 2008, p. 322). But if Langer is running from the emotivist theorists, she appears to be running in the direction of Hume. “People whose speech training has been very casual,” she points out, “are less sensitive to what is exact and fitting for the expression of an idea than those of cultivated habit; not only with regard to arbitrary rules of usage, but in respect of logical *rightness and necessity* of expression, i.e. saying what they mean and not something else” (Langer, 2008, p. 325). This, like some of Hutcheson’s conclusions, hints at the social conventions that underpin Dickie’s Institutional Theory – but Langer, like Hutcheson before her, never fully explores this possibility.

Langer offers a tentative definition of art: “Art is the creation of forms symbolic of human feeling” (2008, p. 325). While trying to articulate a more rational account, she wants to keep a toe in the aesthetic attitude tradition by retaining the idea that there is an element of ‘feeling’ in our response to aesthetically pleasing objects. Goodman, on the other hand, argues that, “[c]oming to understand a painting or a symphony in an unfamiliar style, to recognize the work of an artist or school, to see or hear in new ways, is as cognitive an achievement as learning to read or write or add” (1984, p. 147). We understand the world, whether that understanding comes from art or science, through the use of symbols; and in deploying symbols we are engaged in an unambiguously cognitive activity. “The claim that aesthetic pleasure is of a different and superior *quality* is,” according to Goodman, “too transparent a dodge to be taken seriously” (1976, pp. 242-243). The content of most

artworks – including painting, sculpture, music, and literature – is symbolic, and as such requires thoughtful, conscious interpretation. Interpretation, it might be said, is simply coming to understand that to which a given symbol refers; however, this depends wholly upon understanding the nature of the system that the symbol is expressed within, and not on the feeling we get from (or the emotional response we have to) a work of art. This claim constitutes one of Goodman’s greatest insights.

None of this implies that Goodman saw no place for emotion in contemplating art – indeed, in his work, there is an important relationship between cognition and emotion. As he points out,

[m]ost of the troubles that have been plaguing us can [...] be blamed on the domineering dichotomy between the cognitive and emotive. On the one side, we put sensation, perception, inference, conjecture, all nerveless inspection and investigation, fact, and truth; on the other, pleasure, pain, interest, satisfaction, disappointment, all brainless affective response, liking, and loathing. This pretty effectively keeps us from seeing that in aesthetic experience the emotions function cognitively. (1976, pp. 247-248)

Goodman argues that the situation might be better understood in such a way that “rather than aesthetic experience being here deprived of emotions, the understanding is being endowed with them” (1976, p. 248). Moreover, “emotions must be felt – that is, must occur, as sensations must – if they are to be used cognitively. Cognitive use involves discriminating and relating them in order to gauge and grasp the work and integrate it with the rest of our experience and the world” (Goodman, 1976, p. 248). This inextricable link between cognition, emotion, and our experience of the world echoes Dickie’s sentiments about the relational, inflected nature of art, as well as our experience of it.

Interestingly, Goodman argues that, “a representation or description, by virtue of how it classifies and is classified, may make or mark connections, analyze objects, and organize the world” (1976, p. 32). It seems clear that we do, in fact, comprehend the world around us in terms of symbols – whether those symbols are marks, words, or even simple gestures like nods or winks. Human societies have developed complex and diverse symbol systems to represent and express thoughts and emotions. “With representation and expression alike, certain relationships become firmly fixed for certain people by habit,” Goodman notes, “but in neither case are these relationships absolute, universal or

immutable” (1976, p. 50). The question of exactly how symbolic conventions come about is perhaps best left to anthropologists, but the point is that human societies have used (and continue to use) symbolic gestures to convey information and gain understanding. This much, at least, philosophers can take from their research. Letters and words are typically the most powerful communicative symbols; but things like flags, logos, and even colours are also capable of carrying information. Clearly symbols and their generative conventions are highly complex, yet this very complexity makes it possible, under the right conditions, to assign definite meaning to what might otherwise be taken as a hopelessly unintelligible glyph. It is from precisely this complexity – specifically, the complexity of aesthetic and artistic conventions – that Dickie’s account draws its strength.

Aesthetic Experience

Aesthetic experience arguments might be seen as a refinement of the aesthetic attitude tradition. They propose that aesthetic judgments are not merely a special kind of judgment, but a judgment based on a specific aim that art is uniquely qualified to serve. Two important theorists in this tradition are Monroe Beardsley (to whom Dickie acknowledges a great debt) and John Dewey (to whom Beardsley himself owes much). Beardsley’s work is among the more recent, and certainly the most thoughtful iterations of the aesthetic attitude theory. According to him, “[t]he aesthetic value of *X* is the value that *X* possesses in virtue of its capacity to provide aesthetic gratification *when correctly and completely experienced*” (Beardsley, 1970, p. 51). Stephen Davies (1991) pits Beardsley (as a paradigmatic functionalist) against Dickie (whose Institutional Theory is unambiguously proceduralist) in order to illuminate what he sees as a crucial distinction in the project of defining art. This functionalist/proceduralist distinction, and Beardsley’s position in particular, had a profound impact on the development of Dickie’s Institutional Theory.

The account of John Dewey – who had a profound influence on Beardsley – is noteworthy for being a theory of ‘aesthetic experience’ rather than one of ‘attitude.’ He points out that in Ancient Greece, “[t]he collective life that was manifested in war, worship, the forum, knew no division between what was characteristic of these places and operations, and the arts that brought color, grace, and dignity into them [...]. Not even in Athens can [the] arts be torn loose from this setting in direct experience and yet retain their

significant character” (2008, p. 298). For Dewey, the obsession with isolating the aesthetic and the resultant compartmental conception of fine art has caused more philosophical problems than it has solved. For him, the nature of the problem is “that of recovering the continuity of esthetic experience with normal processes of living” (Dewey, 2008, p. 300). Dewey comes close to Dickie’s sentiments when he argues that theory

can start with and from acknowledged works of art only when the esthetic is already compartmentalized, or when works of art are set in a niche apart instead of being celebration, recognized as such, of the things of ordinary experience. Even a crude experience, if authentically an experience, is more fit to give a clue to the intrinsic nature of esthetic experience than is an object already set apart from any other mode of experience. Following this clue we can discover how the work of art develops and accentuates what is characteristically valuable in things of everyday enjoyment. The art product will then be seen to issue from the latter, when the full meaning of ordinary experience is expressed. (2008, p. 300)

What Dewey is saying, contrary to aesthetic attitude theories, is that aesthetic experience (and our experience of art) is more like our ordinary experience of the world than not. For him, “the esthetic is no intruder in experience from without, whether by way of ideal luxury or transcendent ideality, but that it is the clarified and intensified development of traits that belong to every normally complete experience. This fact I take to be the only secure basis upon which esthetic theory can build” (Dewey, 2008, p. 310). It would be a mistake to say that this is the same conclusion Dickie reaches, but Dewey prompts us to take notice of the fact that art – and this is something that Tolstoy also recognized – is a social phenomenon. It is impossible to draw any conclusions about the nature of art without acknowledging its social, relational, and institutional character. One virtue of Dewey’s account is that it leans dramatically away from isolationism, and toward a more relational explanation of art. This point resonates strongly with Beardsley – and ultimately, with Dickie.

Summing Up Traditional Theory

The debate over the nature and definition of art would have concluded long ago were it as simple as pointing to some essential characteristic that all artworks share (such as their

capacity to accurately imitate objects in the world); or their ability to fulfill some function (be it the simple contemplation of form, the fulfillment of an emotional experience, or to satisfy a particular instrumental end). It would also be relatively straightforward, in each case, to account for artistic judgments – the right judgment would laud artworks that satisfied a role dictated by a given traditional theory. These traditional theories are helpful in establishing a comparison with various late twentieth-century developments in aesthetics and the philosophy of art. Such developments were, in part, a response to the inadequacies of traditional accounts – but they were also part of the broader project of accounting for the radical departures from tradition that art itself had begun to make at the turn of the twentieth century.

Weitz, Anti-Essentialism, and Mandelbaum's Response

Developments in aesthetics and the philosophy of art during the 1950s and 1960s represented a turning point in analyses and definitions. One theorist, Morris Weitz, has had perhaps the single greatest impact on the philosophy of art (at least in the analytic tradition) since Kant. His observations, and Maurice Mandelbaum's response to them, introduced an entirely new mode of thought about art and its definition; and indeed, whether art can be defined at all. The new direction taken by philosophers following Weitz, motivated at least in part by Mandelbaum's response, is what led ultimately to the development of the Institutional Theory.

The Role of Theory in Aesthetics

Morris Weitz's "The Role of Theory in Aesthetics" represents a turning point in aesthetics and art theory. This seminal work questioned the possibility of defining art, not only by scrutinizing traditional theory, but also by pointing out that the fundamental nature of art itself forecloses the project of definition – yet this by no means halted the definitional quest of philosophers and theorists. Indeed, "the attack on the possibility of the definition of art predictably provoked a heightened interest in the definition of art" (Davies, 1991, p. 9). Weitz is rightly credited with motivating philosophers to start thinking about art and its

definition in whole new terms. Rather than solving a long-standing problem in philosophy, then, what he did was initiate a new and important line of inquiry.

Weitz argues that “the inadequacies of [traditional] theories are not primarily occasioned by any legitimate difficulty such e.g., as the vast complexity of art, which might be corrected by further probing and research. Their basic inadequacies reside instead in a fundamental misconception of art” (2008, p. 410). He recognized that the very concept of art, logically, lacks the necessary and sufficient properties that make definition possible (2008, p. 410). In “The Role of Theory,” Weitz points out the shortcomings of several traditional theories. Formalist theories (like those of Bell) identify significant form as the defining feature of art; in the case of emotivist theories (like those of Tolstoy), the expression of emotion is said to be the defining feature of a work of art; and the intuitionist approach (taken by Croce) identifies art “not with some physical, public object but with a specific creative cognitive and spiritual act” (Weitz, 2008, p. 410). All of these theories seek explanation in terms of some essential feature or quality that was thought to be common to all works of art. Despite the fact that each account does explain certain works of art – indeed, even many works of art – none features the necessary *and* sufficient conditions of a generally applicable definition.

Robert Stecker argues that, “in speaking of necessary and sufficient conditions, Weitz should not be taken as requiring that a definition be expressed by a certain kind of sentence but as telling us what any sentence giving such a definition must assert or say” (1997, p. 14). He agrees with Weitz’s assertion that an adequate definition of art ought to elaborate necessary and sufficient conditions. He does so, firstly, because this seems a reasonable way to frame the project of defining art; but moreover, he does so because Weitz’s account finally makes it clear that traditional definitions have not, and indeed could never have identified such conditions. There is, however, a further and more pressing problem for Weitz. Because art is characteristically ‘open textured,’ it is impossible to identify the necessary and sufficient conditions by which it could be defined – further, if such conditions could be identified, the concept of art would then become ‘closed’ (Weitz, 1956; Stecker, 1997). Thus the problem Weitz poses for philosophers is: “[i]f we attempt to place boundaries on what constitutes art, we set ourselves up for refutation, because in attempting to install a boundary, we do nothing but construct something artificial and alien

to the nature of art” (Fenner, 2008, p. 145). It is simply not in the nature of art that it can be defined in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions.

That a definition requires the closure of a concept is a serious problem. “I can list some cases and some conditions,” Weitz points out, “under which I can apply correctly the concept of art but I cannot list all of them, for the all-important reason that unforeseeable or novel conditions are always forthcoming or envisageable” (1956, p. 31). Thus the very project of defining art involves a violation of the principle that makes art, as we ordinarily understand it, possible. Weitz notes that, “[i]f necessary and sufficient conditions for the application of a concept can be stated, the concept is a closed one. But this can happen only in logic or mathematics where concepts are constructed and completely defined. It cannot occur with empirically-descriptive and normative concepts unless we arbitrarily close them by stipulating the ranges of their uses” (1956, p. 31). He concludes that the mutability, novelty, expansiveness, and ‘adventurousness’ of art make clear articulation of a constant set of static properties impossible. “We can, of course, choose to close the concept,” Weitz points out, “[b]ut to do this with ‘art’ or ‘tragedy’ or ‘portraiture,’ etc., is ludicrous since it forecloses on the very conditions of creativity in the arts” (1956, p. 32).

Although Weitz argues that we may not be able to *define* art, he suggests that we may nevertheless be able to *identify* it. In attempting to address the shortcomings of traditional theories, he draws on Ludwig Wittgenstein’s (2009) answer to the question, “what is a game?” For Wittgenstein, this boils down to certain similarities, or a ‘family resemblance,’ rather than any common property. Weitz suggests that in the case of art, “[i]f we actually look and see what it is that we call ‘art,’ we will also find no common properties – only strands of similarities. Knowing what art *is* is not apprehending some manifest or latent essence but being able to recognize, describe, and explain those things we call ‘art’ in virtue of these similarities” (2008, p. 410).

Weitz makes a startling observation, in pointing out the futility of looking for essential properties in works of art, but his proposal for a solution suffers a number of shortcomings. Among other criticisms, he invites the well-travelled objection that ultimately everything (in one manner or another) resembles everything else, the consequences of which are that we are left unable to distinguish a work of art from any other object. Stephen Davies points out a further difficulty in Weitz’s account, noting that

“[i]f talk of resemblance is to have explanatory power, it must indicate what kinds and degrees of resemblance count toward something’s being an artwork. To do so, however, would be to move in the direction of supplying a definition” (2006, p. 33). Of course, Weitz’s anti-essentialism denies this possibility. Stecker (1997) similarly notes that if we reject the resemblance argument – as we surely must – then the only alternative is to specify relevant similarities. But this implies that we are acknowledging at least *sufficient* conditions; and it is a short leap from here to the conclusion that, if we can specify all the relevant similarities, we can specify the *necessary* ones as well.

Although Davies objects to the argument, he nevertheless acknowledges that Weitz’s work “dramatically reoriented the attention of theorists from a search for intrinsic, exhibited, defining characteristics toward a consideration of complex, nonexhibited relational features of art” (1991, p. 2). One of the more important observations Weitz makes is that traditional definitions of art are legislative rather than descriptive. Rather than identifying a particular essence that all artworks share, each definition (mimetic, emotivist, formalist, etc.) merely sets out a constellation of qualifications for ‘good art,’ according to some particular proponent (Davies, 1991). Thus, as Davies points out, “[w]hat is no more than a recommendation in favor of some particular school is given the appearance of respectability in being presented as a definition objectively applicable to all art” (1991, p. 6). Each definition, given the narrow parameters within which it is advanced, becomes a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy.

The insights of Weitz’s single paper have had an extraordinary impact, revealing key problems inherent in the pursuit of a definition of art, focusing on the “is it art?” question that has dogged philosophers since the beginning of the twentieth century. However, as Davies notes, there is more than one way to answer this question. For him,

in denying the possibility of an essential definition, Weitz is denying the possibility of an essential definition in terms of particular sorts of properties; that is, in terms of the perceptible properties intrinsic to artworks. Of course, he may be right in thinking that no internal, perceptible property is essential to something’s being an artwork, while being mistaken in the claim that he actually makes – that no essential definition of art is possible. (1991, p. 20)

The question remains, though, as to how this leap is made. Stecker (1997) explains that the conceptual perspective grounding Weitz's argument does, in fact, have its merits. Indeed, "some philosophers have been attracted to treating identity concepts, such as personal identity and artifact identity, in a similar way" (Stecker, 1997, p. 20). On this reading, "we can know all the 'facts' about a given case and still not resolve the question of identity (except with a decision). Weitz seems to have been impressed by something similar. He believes that no matter how much we now know (somehow) about some future object, it is possible that we are not in a position now to know whether it will turn out to be an artwork or not" (Stecker, 1997, p. 20). Stecker argues that, "[i]t is the intuitions about the indeterminacy of application of concepts (or predicates) in certain cases (absent certain decisions) that is driving Weitz's questions" (1997, p. 20). Weitz, convinced that artworks share no essential property and certain that the concept itself is necessarily indeterminate, draws the *seemingly* sound conclusion that no definition would ever be available to us.

As influential as his theory was, it was the subsequent objections that widened the discourse on aesthetics and art theory. Weitz appears to have been correct in arguing that the search for essential, internal properties was futile – but what if the essential property was not internal to the artwork at all? According to Davies, "Weitz cannot find an essential property for art only because he looks for that property in the wrong place" (1991, p. 21). Whether or not there is a 'right place' to look for these properties is a question taken up by a number of Weitz's critics, including Mandelbaum.

Mandelbaum's Relational Approach

Davies (1991) argues, against Weitz, that just because we cannot articulate a 'correct' definition of art that satisfies everyone, the idea of a correct definition is not rendered incoherent. Weitz may have given up on the search for essential properties, and a definition of art, too easily. In his defense, it might be said that he solved a crucial part of the puzzle by exposing a critical misconception in traditional theories of art – but if this is true, then Mandelbaum's (1965) contribution to the debate adds some important pieces to that same puzzle. Essentially, Mandelbaum argues that the fact that there is no easily identifiable *exhibited* essential property common to all artworks in no way suggests that there is *no*

essential property to be found. His is a simple enough argument, but it does require some elaboration.

Mandelbaum responds directly to Weitz, but his criticism extends to other thinkers, including Wittgenstein. “Wittgenstein’s concrete illustrations of the diversity among various types of games,” Mandelbaum writes, “may at first make his doctrine of family resemblances extremely plausible” (1965, p. 220). However, Mandelbaum is not prepared to “believe that his doctrine of family resemblances, as it stands, provides an adequate analysis of why a common name, such as ‘a game,’ is in all cases applied or withheld” (1965, p. 220). He offers an example involving an individual shuffling a pack of cards and arranging them on a table, and another individual who, noticing what the other is doing, assumes that this must be a game. What the individual with the cards is actually doing was fortune-telling – not a game at all. The ‘resemblance’ here is thus highly deceiving (Mandelbaum, 1965, p. 220). Because we are similarly deceived by, for example, the ‘resemblance’ between professional wrestling and a bar fight, resemblance cannot be the whole story. “What would seem to be crucial in our designation of an activity as a game,” Mandelbaum writes, “is therefore not merely a matter of noting a number of specific resemblances between it and other activities which we denote as games, but involves something further” (1965, p. 220).

Before elaborating on what this further ‘something’ is, Mandelbaum notes that, if “it is possible that the analogy of family resemblance could tell us something about how games may be related to one another, one should explore the possibility that, in spite of their great dissimilarities, games may possess a common attribute which, like biological connection, is not itself one among their directly exhibited characteristics” (1965, p. 221). On this account, even if there is a characteristic shared by all works of art, we have no reason to believe it must be some particular, obvious, external attribute. Instead – and this observation constitutes a major contribution to aesthetics and art theory – we might be talking about a *relational* feature (Mandelbaum, 1965, p. 222). It was Mandelbaum’s rather insightful response to Weitz (by way of Wittgenstein), and his suggestion that thinkers ought to look to the *relational* rather than the *exhibited* properties of art, that would set the stage for Dickie’s Institutional Theory. In a passage that might be said to presage some the insights Dickie would later offer, Mandelbaum argues that,

[t]he suggestion that the essential nature of art is to be found in such a relational attribute is surely not implausible when one recalls some of the many traditional theories of art. For example, art has sometimes been characterized as being one special form of communication or of expression, or as being a special form of wish-fulfillment, or as being a presentation of truth in sensuous form. Such theories do not assume that in each poem, painting, play, and sonata there is a specific ingredient which identifies it as a work of art; rather, that which is held to be common to these otherwise diverse objects is a relationship which is assumed to have existed, or is known to have existed, between certain of their characteristics and the activities and the intentions of those who made them. (1965, pp. 222-223)

Dickie's work draws upon this same sentiment – especially the language of 'activities and intentions.'

Mandelbaum (1965), speaking directly to the suggestion that 'art' must be treated as an open concept, asserts that Weitz's claim is lacking any robust defense:

to define a particular form of art and to define it truly and accurately is not necessarily to set one's self in opposition to whatever new creations may arise within that particular form. Consequently, it would be mistaken to suppose that all attempts to state the defining properties of various art forms are prescriptive in character and authoritarian in their effect. (1965, p. 226)

Art, contrary to what Weitz had to say, may yet be found to have some essential property. Further (and again contrary to Weitz), it may be that identifying necessary and sufficient conditions does not – if we are looking in the right place – foreclose the creativity and constant re-invention that are such important characteristics of art.

Dickie himself commends Mandelbaum for having pointed out that both Weitz's and Wittgenstein's analyses rely exclusively (and quite mistakenly) on exhibited properties, and that they consequently fail to recognize the importance of nonexhibited properties. He points out that, "[a]lthough he does not attempt a definition of 'art,' Mandelbaum does suggest that feature(s) common to all works of art may perhaps be discovered that will be a basis for the definition of 'art,' if the nonexhibited features of art are attended to" (1974, p. 24). This crucial insight had an immense influence on Dickie and the (proto-) institutional theorists who came before him. Arthur Danto, although he in no way identifies himself as an institutional theorist, was also greatly influenced by Mandelbaum. Dickie writes that, "in speaking of 'something the eye cannot decry' Danto

is agreeing with Mandelbaum that nonexhibited properties are of great importance in constituting something as art” (1974, p. 29). The thing ‘the eye cannot decry’ is, of course, the ‘artworld’ and the discourse that surrounds it, the postulation of which remain Danto’s (1964) greatest contributions to aesthetics.

Weitz’s paper generated a whole new discourse among philosophers, of which Mandelbaum’s contribution was merely the first. Instead of proclaiming the death of definition altogether, he finds it “as or more plausible to conclude that the essential property for art is some imperceptible property, such as a relational property between certain sorts of objects, practices, and people” (Davies, 1991, pp. 20-21). Mandelbaum arguably pulled aesthetics and art theory back from the brink, and although he does not actually spell out a definition, he does “indicate the direction in which one is to be sought” (Davies, 1991, p. 20). Davies is careful to point out, though, that as important as Mandelbaum’s paper is, it is far from the last word in aesthetics. The recognition that the essential property that binds all artworks is *relational* rather than *exhibited* changed the game; and as noted, the Institutional Theory would never have emerged without this crucial observation. As important as Mandelbaum’s contribution was, “[t]he shift of attention from perceptible to relational properties provides no guarantee that the difficulties that arise with respect to definitions citing the former will not recur with respect to definitions citing the later” (Davies, 1991, p. 20).

Functional & Procedural Approaches

Stephen Davies (1991) provides a detailed and informative account of the division between functional and procedural definitions of art – a division which puts the Weitzian juncture in aesthetic thought neatly in perspective. He presents the theoretical work of Monroe Beardsley as the paradigmatic example of a functional definition, and contrasts Beardsley’s position with that of George Dickie (whose Institutional Theory offers an exemplar of the procedural approach) (Davies, 1991). Although Davies is critical of each author’s case, he argues in favour of Dickie’s institutional approach which, although imperfect as a theory,

“might be revised [...] without compromising its approach to the definitional question” (1991, p. 3).

It is frequently held, as Davies points out, that a definition of art should address not only the question of what constitutes art, but why we find art valuable (2006, p. 45). In this respect, a functional account would appear preferable because it defines art in terms of the purpose that it serves (whether that purpose is figurative representation, emotional or intellectual satisfaction, or to advance an important social cause). If art could be explained in such terms, a functional account might provide a very tidy answer to the question of why we find art valuable. If a work of art serves function x , it is valuable to the extent that this function is *well* served – the problem, though, is not only that different works of art serve different functions, but that many contemporary works do not appear to serve any clear function at all. Therefore we should, as Davies urges, “ask if there are respects in which the project of supplying a theory of art’s *value* might be distinct from that of offering a *definition* of art” (2006, p. 45).¹ The apparent lack of consensus on art’s purpose exposes a significant vulnerability in the functional approach, and speaks to the need for the functional/procedural distinction that Davies discusses.

As Davies explains, if x is to be defined *functionally*, “it might be thought that what makes a thing an X is its serving (or, in some cases, its being intended to serve) the point of the concept of X ” (1991, p. 27). But, as he observes, “[i]t is as likely that one is to define an instance of that thing as much in terms of the procedures, rules, formulas, recipes, or whatever by which such things are generated as by the functional significance that gives point to the relevant concept and that the mode of production was instituted to serve” (Davies, 1991, p. 30). Thus, “where the things that have functional significance for us are made by us in accordance with stock procedures, it is perhaps likely that the concept is to be defined procedurally as well as, or instead of, functionally” (Davies, 1991, p. 31). The same might be said to be true of a concept like justice, which being so difficult to define *essentially*, is better understood in terms of social relationships and the institutional framework in which it is dispensed.

¹ This is a problem that will be taken up in more detail in the final chapter, where I will argue that it is no easy matter to exclude questions of value from art’s definition.

This in no way suggests that art, in the broadest sense, has no function, nor does it suggest that a procedural approach renders function irrelevant. As Davies points out, “[a] procedural approach to the definition of art is compatible with the view that art is functional (if not with the view that art is to be defined as functional) and that we have the concept, originally at least, in recognition of this fact” (1991, p. 51). Historically, it seems clear that most art has exhibited, to a lesser or greater degree, either some identifiable function or even several functions, and that only very recently has art’s function become more difficult to identify. It is, however, the procedural structure (or basic institutional framework) that emerged during the former period – that in which art’s function was more apparent – that remains in place today. Procedure and function may have effectively parted ways, but we can still rely on the procedures (or the social institutions in which artworks have *always* been created and exhibited) to provide us with an explanation for objects that do not constitute what we would, under any other circumstances, consider art.

Explaining this point, Davies (1991) observes that social norms and institutions may be created to serve certain specific functions, but this does not prevent them from falling away from said functions – in fact, they frequently develop a life of their own. Continuing, he explains that “[w]here the procedure and function come to be separated, it might be thought obvious that an interest in definition would be bound to focus on the point of the concept rather than on the procedures instituted to serve that point. If the procedure takes its own course, then the procedure could not be a defining part of the concept” (1991, p. 31). However, it may in some instances be the case that “[w]hen conventions and the point of the concept they were instituted to serve part company, it may be revealed that instances of the concept in question are to be characterized in terms of the conventions or procedures giving rise to them and not in terms of the concept’s point” (Davies, 1991, p. 33). Thus, for Davies,

sometimes that which falls under a concept is properly to be defined in procedural, rather than in functional, terms. Accordingly, although there is a point to our having a concept of such a thing, one cannot tell whether or not one is regarding an instance of the thing in question merely by observing if it might serve the relevant function, because not all things of that type will or could perform that function. (1991, p. 33)

The procedural approach, then, takes up the proverbial slack when a given artwork's function is too elusive to be readily understood.

In those instances where the function departs radically from historically established conventions and procedures – which is so often the case with contemporary art – we can rely upon a procedural account to at least inform us that what we are looking at, reading, or listening to, *is* a work of art. Noting the advantages that the procedural has over the functional approach, Davies explains that if the procedures and function are at odds,

then the definition must settle on one or the other as giving the essence of the concept's instances. If the two are in conflict and the concept is essentially functional, then only those things which meet the function instantiate the concept, and items produced in accordance with the standard procedures but which do not meet the function do not instantiate the concept. On the other hand, if the concept is essentially procedural, then all those things produced in accordance with the given procedure instantiate the concept, whether or not they also serve the function that those procedures originally were set up to meet. (1991, pp. 36-37)

The functional approach is thus highly limiting, allowing only those objects that fall under the most conservative understanding of art to qualify; while the procedural account (Dickie's Institutional Theory being the paradigm) can explain the 'arthood' of even the most unlikely objects.

Given the wide variety of works that are exhibited in the contemporary artworld, ranging from very conventional representational works to the most elaborate installations, Davies laments that "the otherwise attractive option of defining art in jointly functional and procedural terms seems not to be viable" (1991, p. 38). The only alternative would seem to be a 'disjunctive' definition that describes works as either fulfilling some specific function, or as the product of certain procedures (Davies, 1991). The latter approach ameliorates the classificatory tension by pretending it does not exist. Accordingly, definitional aesthetic theories bifurcate into functional and procedural approaches (Davies, 1991). Davies' account is compelling, favouring as it does a procedural approach (like Dickie's Institutional Theory), while his explanation of its opponent's merits makes the functional alternative appear quite unattractive. However, the contrast between the two approaches is not as cleanly binary as it might initially appear.

Davies (1991) points out that there is no consensus in the literature on whether ‘artwork,’ used as a classification, is an evaluative or a descriptive term. This disagreement, as I will argue in the final chapter of this paper, can be resolved within a procedural account – indeed, within an account that departs only modestly from Dickie’s Institutional Theory. Davies, however, argues that the disagreement comes down to the difference between functional approaches and procedural approaches to definition:

in either view artworks will be evaluated as such in terms of the point of art in that good artworks will be pieces that would serve that point. According to the view that art is to be defined procedurally, the proper classification of pieces as art will be purely descriptive. Once they are classified, artworks then will be evaluated with respect to their success or otherwise in serving the point of art. Works that qualify in meeting the descriptive criteria will then be subject to evaluation, and works that tend to function in a way that undermines the point of art in general will, thereby, be bad. (1991, p. 42)

Davies notes, though, that “in this respect, if not with respect to the definitional issue, the proceduralist nods in the direction of functionalism” (1991, p. 42). While this hardly resolves the disparity, it suggests that the barrier between the functional and the procedural is more porous than we might expect. Similarly, it appears that the functional account cannot help but incorporate elements of the procedural. Davies explains that,

in the view that art is to be defined functionally, the act of classification is itself evaluative, since only works that do not undermine the point of art will qualify as such. There is a threshold of merit, where merit is measured in terms of the efficiency of a piece in promoting the point of art, which a work must meet before it qualifies as an artwork. Then, within works so classified, a further evaluation might be attempted as a measure of the extent to which a particular artwork exceeds the threshold of merit that qualifies it in the first place for the classification. (1991, p. 42)

According to Davies, “the functionalist may be willing to concede that the appreciation of a particular artwork takes place under conditions that help us to identify the objects worthy of aesthetic attention and, in this respect, if not with respect to the definitional issue, nods toward proceduralism” (1991, pp. 42-43). Thus, while it is framed as an exclusively classificatory account, the procedural approach contains elements of a functional, and therefore evaluative approach; and the largely evaluative functional approach seems to need a procedural framework within which to make its evaluations. This does not mean,

though, that the functional/procedural distinction collapses, resolving the tensions. It remains an important and informative distinction. Davies' observations, moreover, have important implications for the Institutional Theory.²

Davies points out another important difference between the functionalist and proceduralist, one that is particularly relevant to understanding the development of the Institutional Theory:

A functionalist on the matter of the definition of art will judge a definition to be adequate only if it explains the point of our distinguishing art from other things. That is, even if artworks interest us as financial investments, a satisfactory definition must characterize the interests met by art which justify our classifying artworks as art and not merely as financial investments, doorstops, and the like. By contrast, a proceduralist on the matter of the definition of art will see no reason to expect that a successful definition should account for the place of art in our lives. She might concede that no adequate *theory* of art could leave that matter undiscussed, but would go on to deny that a definition must be substitutable for a complete theory if it is to be acceptable. (1991, pp. 44-45)

Dickie's Institutional Theory, as a procedural account, "has next to nothing to say about the point of art, and his proposed definition pays no heed to the role that gives art its significance in the cultural life of a community" (Davies, 1991, p. 45). Indeed, Dickie himself is absolutely clear on the exclusively classificatory nature of his Institutional Theory. Despite the fact that it tells us little about how we might evaluate art, in the final analysis the procedural account offers a more satisfactory *definition* of art. It does so least of all because it does not face the classificatory difficulties that bind the functionalist account (the function of art itself being so difficult to pin down). Even if we acknowledge that art might have multiple functions, at best we might get something like Berys Gaut's (2000) 'cluster theory' of art, or at worst, a rather messy list of often-conflicting functions that could hardly be said to serve as a definition.

Before handing the laurels to the proceduralists, though, it is worth looking briefly at what Davies has to say about Beardsley's functionalist account. According to Davies, this is the most detailed and sophisticated of any theories of its kind (1991). Additionally

² My own modifications to the theory (presented in the final chapter) will draw upon some of the very points Davies makes here.

(and as mentioned previously), Beardsley played an invaluable role in the development of Dickie's work. His argument, in its most highly distilled form, goes as follows:

to say that X has aesthetic value is to say that X has the capacity to afford, through the cognition of it, an experience that has value on account of its marked aesthetic character. And to say that X has greater aesthetic value than Y is to say that X has the capacity to afford an experience that is more valuable, on account of its more marked aesthetic character, than any experience that Y has the capacity to afford. (Beardsley, 1979, p. 728)

As should be clear from the language he uses, Beardsley's argument is unambiguously functionalist, yet he explicitly incorporates the evaluative dimensions missing from procedural accounts (like Dickie's Institutional Theory). And if his argument is the strongest of its kind, as Davies suggests, it may yet have a role to play in articulating a valuation-oriented institutional approach – which is, of course, the aim of this paper.

Broadly speaking, Beardsley's argument is an 'aesthetic experience' argument, but there are important cognitive dimensions to his approach, which distinguish it from traditional aesthetic experience accounts. Hutcheson held that we may respond 'naturally' to certain colours and forms, but "[i]t is common to overrate this 'natural' dimension of aesthetic experience" (Davies, 1991, p. 59). It would be equally mistaken, though, to deny that it is important. Indeed, as Davies notes, "the experience may be variously and complexly cognitive, and the pleasure that goes with the experience is the pleasure of understanding a pattern, of solving a puzzle, of grasping connections" (1991, p. 59). The 'aesthetic experience' in Beardsley's argument "is a thoughtful one rather than a mindless one, and [...] artworks are appropriately to be viewed as possessing significance (as do actions, utterances, thoughts, and the like) and, hence, as inviting understanding" (Davies, 1991, p. 59). It might thus be argued that, by qualifying the aesthetic experience as cognitive, Beardsley puts 'corners' on the otherwise ambiguous nature of his functionalist account.

Beardsley's account may be read as thinly veiled formalism – yet according to Davies, although Beardsley does recognize that the formal properties of a work bear upon its aesthetic value, he "accepts also that knowledge of an artwork's social and historical context is necessary for its proper interpretation" (1991, p. 64). Thus not only is Beardsley's position *not* strictly formalist, he also explicitly acknowledges that the social

and historical framework (which is to say, the institutional framework) must play an equally important role in any classificatory theory of art. The position he takes is a perfect example of how the functionalist ‘nods in the direction of the proceduralist,’ demonstrating that the two are not as estranged as might be imagined. It also suggests that the proceduralist – particularly the institutionalist – must equally ‘nod in the direction’ of the formalist.

This does not mean that Beardsley’s account somehow reconciles the procedural approach with the functional approach; indeed, there are a number of important objections to his functionalist position, one of which is that,

while a piece may display aesthetic properties prior to its becoming art, it does not merit elevation to art status on the strength of those properties. Rather, it has aesthetic properties that allow it to meet the point of art only because it has acquired art status, and not vice versa. The functional view of the definition of art, according to this objection, holds that aesthetic properties exist mainly prior to, and provide the basis for, a piece’s attaining the status of art. It is apparent, however, that it is art status that is prior to, and a determinant of those aesthetic properties of artworks by virtue of which they serve the function of art. (Davies, 1991, pp. 66-67)

Davies draws on Danto’s work to illustrate the power of this particular objection. “Danto,” he writes, “claims that artworks have aesthetic properties not displayed by their ‘real’ (possibly perceptually indiscernible) counterparts, and that it is only when artworks are rightly recognized as art that they take on these properties” (Davies, 1991, p. 67). The litmus test, here (and a favorite of philosophers of art since its appearance), is Duchamp’s *Fountain* (1917). As Danto explains, though, “the properties of the object deposited in the artworld it shares with most items of industrial *porcelainerie*, while the properties *Fountain* possesses as an artwork it shares with the *Julian Tomb* of Michelangelo and the *Great Perseus* of Cellini” (1981, p. 94). The only way to explain this is by taking a proceduralist position; indeed, the functionalist is mute in the face of Duchamp’s work (and for that matter, in the face of most contemporary art).³

It should be noted that, although Danto takes a proceduralist stance, he does not see his position as being at all congruent (or even sympathetic) with an institutional approach.

³ This bears heavily on the argument in the third chapter, where it will be argued that functionalist theories are poor candidates not only as classificatory theories, but as evaluative theories as well.

What is relevant here is the ways in which the functionalist defends himself from the criticisms of Danto, and those who take similar positions. As Davies notes, “a functionalist is likely to accept that various conditions must be met, beyond the mere possession of aesthetic merit, before a piece can attain the status of art” (1991, p. 70). The functionalist “can accept that the products of agents’ actions are bound to possess aesthetically relevant qualities, such as representational properties,” he continues, “[y]et further, a historically minded functionalist can allow that the fact that an agent acts within an art-historical tradition affects the aesthetically relevant qualities of her products” (Davies, 1991, p. 70). These ‘aesthetically relevant properties’ of an artwork may, and probably do depend on their author’s working within an ‘artworld;’ and because this world is institutional (albeit informally), the artwork is indeed produced within an *institutional* context. Even a functionalist might agree to this conclusion (Davies, 1991). It appears that unless one is a *radical* functionalist – which would be a difficult position to maintain – one would have to be at least sympathetic, if not wholly committed to an institutionalist approach.

A further difficulty the functionalist faces – whether he is a radical or not – is that there is a great deal of mediocre (and indeed, bad) art that is nevertheless art. “To insist that such works are poor works of art, as the functionalist does, avoids the problem of questioning their status,” according to Davies, “only at the cost of raising a serious doubt as to the feebleness of the minimum standard that, according to the functionalist, must be attained as a necessary condition of something’s being an artwork” (1991, p. 76). One can only conclude from this that the theory must set very low standards in order to provide an explanation of such works being ‘art’ (Davies, 1991). Davies expresses doubt “that the functionalist’s standard can be as low as the existence of very bad art indicates while also allowing an explanation of the importance attached to art within the life of the community” (Davies, 1991, p. 76). The proceduralist, by way of contrast, has no such difficulty, since his account of art has no ‘floor’ for artistic merit (Davies, 1991). Despite this, a procedural framework (such as Dickie’s Institutional Theory) may still be able to account for evaluative questions, even though value terms are not (and cannot be) part of a procedural

definition of art.⁴ An analysis of Dickie's Institutional Theory, as a paradigm procedural approach, fully exposes the deficits of the functionalist position.

A Short History of the Institutional Theory of Art

This section will map out the genealogy of the Institutional Theory, starting with Arthur Danto's thoughts on the social structures surrounding the arts. Although Danto can hardly be characterized as an institutional theorist, his work nevertheless wielded tremendous influence on institutionalism's progenitors. His furthering of the work of Wietz and Mandelbaum made significant contributions to art theory and aesthetics, particularly via his thoughts on the 'artworld.' Danto's work, although not specifically institutional, would nevertheless shape the development of the Institutional Theory. The seeds of this theory are planted by T.J. Diffey, though it is Dickie who brings them to flower.

Arthur Danto

Although Danto was not an institutional theorist – indeed, he was an outspoken critic of institutionalism – he did make an important contribution to its development. For him, the theoretical framework in which it is created and exhibited is critical to understanding the concept of art. Danto never discusses precisely what this framework should look like, but he does comment on what it should *not* look like. He notes that the mimetic theory, despite its obvious shortcomings, “is [...] an exceedingly powerful theory, explaining a great many phenomena connected with the causation and evaluation of artworks” (Danto, 1964, p. 572). Early in the twentieth-century, though, the works of a loosely affiliated group of artists – a group known as the post-impressionists – radically changed the game. The new style of painting they adopted required, as Danto observes, “a theoretical revision of rather considerable proportions, involving not only the artistic enfranchisement of these objects, but an emphasis upon newly significant features of accepted artworks” (1964, p. 573). What these artists were creating were not imitations or illusions, but rather independent, *real* objects (Danto, 1964). Thus the *imitation* theory, inadequate in the face of this new

⁴ This point will be argued in the final chapter.

development, was supplanted by the *reality* theory. Dickie would later point out that, “the imitation theory of the fine arts seems to have been adopted by those who held it without much serious thought and perhaps cannot be considered as a self-conscious theory of art” (1974, p. 20). Indeed, it was not until art divorced itself from its traditional mimetic function that anybody even thought a theory was necessary to explain it.

To show just how important a theoretical framework has become to our understanding of art, Danto draws upon the infamous ‘beds’ exhibited by Robert Rauschenberg (1955) and Claes Oldenburg (1963). In his thought experiment, a hypothetical Testadura cannot tell the difference between the beds *as art* and the beds *as beds*. “Except for the guard cautioning Testadura not to sleep on the artworks,” Danto suggests, “he might never have discovered that this was an artwork and not a bed; and since, after all, one cannot discover that a bed is not a bed, how is Testadura to realize that he has made an error?” (1964, p. 575). He offers that part of overcoming this error is recognizing that “[t]here is an *is* that figures prominently in statements concerning artworks which is not the *is* of either identity or predication; nor is it the *is* of existence, of identification, or some special *is* made up to serve a philosophic end” (1964, p. 576). For Danto, it is “the *is* of *artistic identification*” (1964, p. 577).

Confronted with a painting consisting of a white field with a black line painted across it, Danto’s Testadura “protests that *all he sees is paint*: a white oblong with a black line painted across it. And how right he really is: that is all he sees or that anybody can” (1964, p. 579). Testadura is beyond aid until such time as “he has mastered the *is of artistic identification*” (Danto, 1964, p. 579). This leads to what is perhaps Danto’s most important contribution: that “[t]o see something as art requires something the eye cannot decry – an atmosphere of artistic theory, a knowledge of the history of art: an artworld” (1964, p. 580). Referring to Andy Warhol’s infamous *Brillo Box* (1964), Danto argues that the difference between a Brillo Box in the supermarket and *Brillo Box* displayed as art is a particular aesthetic theory (1964, p. 580). Indeed, he concludes that the function of art theories is to make art itself – and the artworld more broadly – possible (Danto, 1964, p. 581). Although he does not advance a specific theory of art, it is clear in Danto’s account that our appreciation and understanding of art (and especially the sorts of art that arose in the wake of post-impressionism) requires that we be familiar with the theory that surrounds it. One

of the virtues of the Institutional Theory is that it gives us just such a theoretical framework: a framework within which we can meaningfully engage with works of contemporary art.

T.J. Diffey

T.J. Diffey was the first writer to use specifically institutional language, and although his account is thin when compared to Dickie's more fully developed theory, it both anticipates and differs from it in important ways. Diffey points out that, on one hand, it seems absurd to contemplate a theory or definition for artworks such as the *Last Judgment* (Michaelangelo, 1531-1541), "because the question of the status of the work [...] has already been settled, and because the means by which such questions are settled do not consist in an appeal to a definition" (1991b, p. 40). The arthood of the *Last Judgment* is uncontroversial. Diffey proposes, by way of contrast, an example in which an ordinary person is confronted with a contemporary, non-figurative painting. Despite the fact that the painting is widely held to be a work of art, the viewer refuses to recognize it as such, likely due to a deeply-rooted belief that paintings must represent something recognizable (Diffey, 1991b, p. 41). What is important is that "[a]n ideal of art is implied in the person's rejection of the claim made for the painting to be a work of art, but how can this claim be made for an object?" (Diffey, 1991b, p. 41). For Diffey, "what makes the claim is the institutionalized presentation of the object" (1991b, p. 41).

Diffey, drawing on the work of John Searle, argues that the proposition *x is a work of art* is not a brute fact but an *institutional* fact, as the status of 'work of art' must be granted by the public's judgment (1991b, p. 41). Applying this line of thinking, he concludes that works that have not been subjected to scrutiny by the public are not works of art at all, and that the status of 'artwork' is thus gained only through public exhibition (1991b, pp. 41-42). This is an important departure from Dickie, who holds that works need not be exhibited to qualify as art, rather they must be the sort of thing that *could* be exhibited. Diffey draws his conclusion because he feels that institutions are necessarily plural, thus the idea of an 'institution of one' is incoherent. For him, "[u]npublished art is art in some thin and bodiless sense, in some reduced sense of what the potential of art as art is" (Diffey, 1991a, p. 69). For Dickie, by way of contrast, *unexhibited* art is art in as full a sense as that which is exhibited.

Diffey frames what Danto calls ‘the artworld’ as a ‘republic,’ and on his account this republic consists of “[a]nyone involved with the arts whether as creator, performer, spectator, or critic of novels, plays, painting, music, poetry, etc.” (1991b, p. 45). ‘Citizenship’ is determined largely through self-election, Diffey notes “a complicating factor in that self-election may be recognized either by effectively elected members of the republic, that is, by those whose own self-election is recognized by other self-elected members, or by the public” (1991b, p. 45). Moreover, a republican metaphor carries with it a sense of deference to authority, yet precisely where determinative authority lies is unclear (Diffey, 1991b, p. 46). Dickie’s theory faces similar difficulties, not only with identifying the ‘authorities’ themselves, but also with justifying the influence that they mysteriously maintain.

Anticipating another objection (which continues to dog the Institutional Theory), Diffey admits that the questions of how the Republic’s collective mind is made up, and what reason that collective may have for granting a ‘work of art’ its status, remain unanswered (1991b, p. 49). He maintains, though, that “if a work of art is an intelligible concept its application is a matter of corporate judgment, and an examination of the idea of a republic of art would serve to show how the judgment that something is a work of art is not arbitrary or merely capricious” (1991b, p. 52). Dickie offers a more complete explanation, yet Diffey was the first to recognize that the judgment of the artworld is a non-arbitrary corporate action, despite the fact that there is often no clear reason for the conferral of ‘art’ status.

An important part of Diffey’s work, in terms of how it contributed to the development of the Institutional Theory, is his observation that ‘institutional facts’ (as distinguished from ‘brute facts’) are “true in virtue of human practices” (1991a, p. 66). The importance of the human practices surrounding art (again, a lesson drawn from Searle) is a point that will become very important in Dickie’s more fully developed Institutional Theory; however, it is still arguably the case that “[o]ne major issue facing institutional theories of art is the task of spelling out in convincing detail exactly what the human practices are which confer the status of art on something” (Diffey, 1991a, p. 66). Identifying these human practices may be asking too much of philosophers, though. It may have to suffice that the contours of the theory are consistent with what sociologists or art

historians observe in the world, or indeed what anthropologists discover about human societies of the past. This, arguably, is just what Dickie's Institutional Theory does.

George Dickie

In a passage that recalls Diffey's comments concerning the *Last Judgment*, Dickie observes that "we generally know immediately whether an object is a work of art, so that generally no one needs to say, by way of classification, 'That is a work of art' [...]. Even if we do not often talk about art in this classificatory sense, however, it is a basic concept that structures and guides our thinking about our world and its contents" (1974, p. 27). For Dickie, the concept that structures and guides our thinking is an institutional one. He notes that, "[s]ome persons have thought that an institution must be an established society or corporation and, consequently, have misunderstood my claim about the artworld" (1974, p. 31). Clarifying his position, Dickie writes that what he meant by 'the artworld being an institution' was that it is an established practice (1974, p. 31). This assertion relates directly to Diffey's observations about human practices – but Dickie goes further, applying the idea of institutional practice to the problem of art-status conferral.

Drawing on Duchamp's notorious *Fountain* (1917), Dickie notes that "Duchamp and friends conferred the status of art on 'ready-mades' and when we reflect on their deeds we can take note of a kind of human action which has until now gone unnoticed and unappreciated – the action of conferring the status of art" (1974, p. 32). But he is not arguing that Duchamp invented the idea that art status can simply be conferred; rather, he merely "used an existing institutional device in an unusual way. Duchamp did not invent the artworld, because it was there all along" (Dickie, 1974, p. 33). This is a key feature of the Institutional Theory and one its chief virtues: it faces neither the formal nor the temporal limitations that trouble so many traditional theories. The same institutional framework (that is, the same social practices) that make Egyptian or Byzantine art *art*, make abstract expressionist or minimalist art *art*. It does not matter that there is no common feature between any of these forms, it is only that there was (and continues to be) an institutional framework in place – or 'a body of human practices,' in Diffey's language – that explains their respective arthood.

The aesthetic qualities of a work of art constitute what is generally called an *aesthetic object*. Dickie points out, though, that there is a question of which features constitute the aesthetic object of a given work, and which are irrelevant (1974, pp. 86-87). For centuries, theorists have attempted to identify these characteristics, putting forth a host of proposals (some of which have already been discussed). For Dickie, the characteristics that constitute the aesthetic object are neither in the object itself, nor in our experience of it; rather, they are socially (or *institutionally*) determined. He uses the example of the property man in a traditional Chinese theatre performance, who appears on the stage during the performance but is not regarded as integral to the aesthetic appreciation of the play. His role is socially (or institutionally) determined, and everybody in the audience is aware of the convention that informs this distinction – they are part of the social/institutional structure of the aesthetic experience that is the performance. This example perfectly encapsulates the theoretical framework that Dickie is proposing in his Institutional Theory, as it demonstrates the degree to which we are unconscious of the rules and conventions surrounding our enjoyment of the arts.

Using this theoretical framework, Dickie offers the following (and his first) definition of art: “A work of art in a classificatory sense is (1) an artifact (2) a set of the 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) (1974, p. 34). He argues that the ‘artificiality’ condition is self-evident (although certain pieces of conceptual art suggest otherwise) and that it therefore needs no elaboration.⁵ Dickie goes on to offer a careful accounting of the second condition, breaking it down into four basic components. The first two parts of the second condition (acting on behalf of an institution and conferring of status) are commonly found outside the artworld, in such institutional activities as the conferring of knighthood, a grand jury’s indictment, or the pronouncement of marriage, among many other instances. “In such cases,” Dickie observes, “some social system or other must exist as the framework within which the conferring takes place” (1974, p. 35). Knighthood, for instance, may be conferred for any one of a number of reasons, but the framework within which that conferral takes place is always the same. An

⁵ There are obvious objections to this point, but they (and others, including the problematic circularity this definition seems to imply) will be taken up in the second chapter.

important difference, Dickie notes, is that “the artworld carries on its business at the level of customary practice. Still there *is* a practice and this defines a social institution” (1974, p. 35). The rules and conventions surrounding a practice, then, simply become part of the social fabric of a given culture. As such they remain quite invisible, even to those engaged in the practice.

Diffey’s insights on human practice resonate here, but where Dickie departs most significantly from this earlier work is in his insistence that art does not need public ratification. Dickie argues that, “a number of persons are required to make up the social institution of the artworld, but only one person is required to act on behalf of the artworld and to confer the status of candidate for appreciation. In fact, many works of art are seen only by one person – the one who creates them – but they are still art” (1974, p. 38). He insists that “[t]he status in question may be acquired by a single person’s acting on behalf of the artworld and *treating an artifact as a candidate for appreciation*” (Dickie, 1974, p. 38). Of course, this leads one to ask what it is that Dickie means in the third part of the second condition, when he refers to ‘appreciation.’ What he means, here, is that a work of art is institutionally recognized as the kind of thing whose features make it a *candidate* for appreciation. This definition does not rely on actual appreciation by even a single observer (1974, p. 39). Dickie notes that, “[i]t is important not to build into the definition of the classificatory sense of ‘work of art’ value properties such as actual appreciation: to do so would make it impossible to speak of unappreciated works of art” (1974, p. 40). This is perhaps one of the most difficult features of Dickie’s theory to understand, thus the fourth part of his second condition (appreciation itself) deserves special consideration.

Dickie (1974) maintains that there is no reason to think that there is a ‘special’ sort of aesthetic appreciation. “All that is meant by ‘appreciation’ in the definition is something like ‘in experiencing the qualities of a thing one finds them worthy or valuable,’ and this meaning applies quite generally both inside and outside the domain of art” (1974, pp. 40-41). For him, the only difference between appreciating art and appreciating nonart lies in the disparity of their objects – or more precisely, in the institutional structure in which the art object is embedded. Yet although we evaluate art objects and nonart objects on the same terms, according to Dickie at least, we often find ourselves faced with artworks that seem to demand a unique kind of experiential appreciation. In other words: it seems

counterintuitive to hold that a Mark Rothko painting provides a good experience in the same way that a hot bath provides a good experience. Indeed, the problem of identifying the object of appreciation, upon which members of the artworld base their judgments, underlies one of the most serious objections to the Institutional Theory.

In *The Art Circle*, Dickie responds to criticisms of his initial attempt by offering a radically revised, five-point definition of art:

- I) An artist is a person who participates with understanding in the making of a work of art.
- II) A work of art is an artifact of a kind created to be presented to an artworld public.
- III) 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.
- IV) The artworld is the totality of all artworld systems.
- V) An artworld system is a framework for the presentation of a work of art by an artist to an artworld public (1997, pp. 80-82).

Elaborating on these points, he explains that in (I), “[w]hat the artist understands is the general idea of art and the particular idea of the medium he is working with [...]. Participating with understanding implies that an artist is aware of what he is doing.” (p. 80). In (II), being a work of art “involves having a status or position within a structure [...]; however, the status in no way results from a conferral but rather is achieved through working in a medium within the artworld framework.” (p. 80). Further, Dickie points out that “[w]orks of art are artifacts of a primary kind in this domain, and playbills and the like which are *dependent* on works of art are artifacts of a secondary kind within this domain. The word ‘artifact’ in the definition should be understood to be referring to artifacts of the primary kind” (p. 81). Part (III) characterizes all ‘publics,’ not just those of Dickie’s artworld (p. 81). In part (IV), “the roles of artist and public and the structure of artworld systems are [...] conceived of as things which persist through time and have a history” (p. 81). Part (V) “simply reaches back and employs all the previous focal terms” (p. 82).

At first, the refined definition Dickie offers appears no less susceptible to the accusation of circularity than did his initial formulation. What Dickie does to overcome this objection is actually to embrace it, distinguishing *vicious* circularity from a more informative *virtuous* variety. For him, “art-making involves an intricate, co-relative structure which cannot be described in a straightforward, linear way” (1997, p. 82). Dickie

asserts that “what the definitions reveal and thereby inform us of is the inflected nature of art” (1997, p. 82). Providing a clue as to what ‘the inflected nature of art’ implies, he points out that we could not make any sense of what philosophers tell us about aesthetics if we did not already know about art (1997, p. 83). To illustrate this point, we might return to Dickie’s example of the property man in a traditional Chinese theatre performance. The property man contributes to the action of the performance, but is not himself a performer. He is clearly visible to every member of the audience, but they see him as neither a performer nor as interfering with the performance. His role is known to every member of the audience, although none of them has needed an explanation of that role. His part, again, is simply part of the social, institutional structure of the experience of the performance.

This example strongly illustrates the extent to which we are socially (and indeed, institutionally) conditioned to simply *know* what art is. One of the strengths of the Institutional Theory is that, in drawing upon the kinds of social frameworks in which art is produced and exhibited (which have developed and changed over time and across cultures), and in embracing the relational nature of art as it is practiced within those frameworks, it avoids all the shortcomings of traditional theories. Rather than simply positing that a work of art is, say, an object that provides an aesthetic experience, the Institutional Theory places that experience in the social and historical context in which such a claim makes sense. Rather than framing the definition of art as concerned with either subjective or objective characteristics, the Institutional Theory renders art a continually negotiated social phenomenon. It thus provides a robust explanatory tool, even in the face of the most controversial examples of contemporary art.

Dickie offers a very powerful classificatory theory of art – yet a number of critics have noted that, while it seems to succeed in telling us *what art is*, it says little about *why art is so important to us*. Dickie has always maintained that a theory of art evaluation has no connection with his institutional theory. “This lack of connection,” he argues, “should not be surprising, for the institutional theory of art is supposed to be a *classificatory* theory of art – a theory that explains why a work of art is a work of art. Why a work of art is valuable or disvaluable is an additional question” (Dickie, 1988, p. ix). Dickie is quite right that, if value is to enter into a definition of art, that definition must establish the criteria by which good art may be identified. Yet if we knew this, we would not need an institutional

theory to explain art at all (Wollheim, 1980). In a passage toward the end of *Art and Value*, Dickie points out that,

the practices of the traditional theories of art, which no one thinks correct anyway, could not insure that a work of art is aesthetically good. And institutional or historical practice would not even suggest any degree of value of any kind. Given the unacceptability of the traditional theories and the nature of the more recent theories, it does not look as if a practice envisaged by a theory of art can inject being evaluatively good into the ordinary concept of *art*. (2001, p. 104)

The above-mentioned problems – together with the fact that even the most recent theories do not provide a sufficient evaluative schema, and that traditional theories (although they might account for the value of some artworks) are not plausible – lead Dickie to conclude that art is simply not an evaluative concept (2001, p. 105).

If neither recent nor traditional theories can account for the value of art, and if the Institutional Theory is value-neutral, we appear to be left without any means of distinguishing good artwork from bad – yet we routinely make exactly this distinction. Given the unique classificatory power of the Institutional Theory, we can only make this distinction (that is, render artistic judgments) within the very same institutional framework in which we distinguish art from nonart (which is to say, the framework in which we *classify* art). Further, the institutional framework in which the classification of artworks takes place must be capable of performing a distinct, but related, evaluative function.

Summary

The mimetic theory of art was in trouble almost from the start, not least of all due to Plato's famous remarks. But it would not be until the eighteenth century – a period during which thinkers recognized the need to identify what distinguished 'art' from ordinary objects – that the mimetic theory was seriously called into question. The centuries that followed were dominated by aesthetic attitude theories, which postulated some subjective aesthetic sense as responsible for the recognition and appreciation of objects of beauty and artistic merit. By the turn of the twentieth century, and in particular with the emergence of the avant-

garde, beauty all but disappeared from art, leaving the aesthetic attitude theories themselves in doubt. By mid-century, the quest for some remaining, yet-unidentified, essential artistic property was called off by Weitz – but the theorists who followed would continue to struggle with his skepticism about the possibility of definition. Mandelbaum’s suggestion that the essential, definitional property of art might be relational rather than intrinsic had a tremendous impact on philosophers, and would eventually give rise to Dickie’s Institutional Theory. As a theory of art, Dickie’s institutional account is thoroughly relational and uniquely satisfying, not only in comparison to traditional theories, but also with respect to contemporary offerings – yet as a singularly *classificatory* theory, it provides only half an explanation. Objections to the Institutional Theory include the important observation that a theory of art must explain not only what constitutes art itself, but what constitutes *good* art – something that Dickie’s Institutional Theory does not.⁶

⁶ In the final chapter I will argue that a modified Institutional theory might be suitably equipped to answer these objections.

Chapter Two

Facing the Critics

Introductory Remarks

The Institutional Theory, as Dickie has framed it, faces the following five difficulties: it may be perceived as viciously circular; several of its key points may be read as vague or ambiguous; it may appear to render the conferral of art status an arbitrary matter; at points, it may appear to make itself redundant; and finally, it may be seen as vacuous (in that even if it is accepted, it is not terribly informative as a definition of art). Nevertheless, the institutionalist can withstand these objections. Recognizing some of these difficulties, Dickie himself made significant revisions to his original argument, following up *Art and the Aesthetic* (1974) with *The Art Circle* (1997). However, a number of critics remained steadfastly opposed to Dickie's position, some going so far as to argue that he had not significantly improved the theory at all. According to these sources the Institutional Theory remains vulnerable to the same, and indeed further objections. Dickie's theory, in the face of some of these objections, would benefit from some revision and elaboration – for instance, in dispensing with the artifactuality condition and offering a fuller account of the 'inflected' nature of art. At the same time, there are several points on which the theory's opponents are simply mistaken – for example, in objecting to Dickie's assertion that art cannot be made in social isolation, as well as rejections of his claim that art's function needs to be identified in order to articulate an adequate definition. Despite the criticisms leveled at Dickie's institutionalism, as the paradigm procedural theory it remains a highly compelling account of the necessary and sufficient conditions that make even the most unlikely object a work of art.

Circularity

Dickie, in *Art and the Aesthetic*, offered the following two-part definition of art: “A work of art in a classificatory sense is (1) an artifact (2) a set of the 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) (1974, p. 34). The circularity of Dickie’s description is striking, and by most philosophical standards highly problematic, in that it appears singularly uninformative as a definition. A number of philosophers have attacked Dickie on this very issue, many of them noting that the circularity is only the beginning of the theory’s problems, since the circularity of his definition renders the entire theory vacuous. Dickie reflected on critics’ reactions to *Art and the Aesthetic* (1974), and responded to (at least some of) them in *The Art Circle* (1997). In that subsequent work, he offered the following, revised, five part definition:

- I) An artist is a person who participates with understanding in the making of a work of art.
- II) A work of art is an artifact of a kind created to be presented to an artworld public.
- III) 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.
- IV) The artworld is the totality of all artworld systems.
- V) An artworld system is a framework for the presentation of a work of art by an artist to an artworld public. (1997, pp. 80-82)

In its simplest form, Dickie’s five-point definition can be expressed thusly: an artist creates a work of art for an artworld public. Both are situated within an *artworld system*; a number of which systems constitute the *artworld*; which itself constitutes the *institutional framework* in which a work of *art*, created by an *artist*, is presented to an *artworld public*. “What,” Dickie asks, with tongue firmly in cheek, “is to be made of this blatant circularity?” (1997, p. 82). But rather than arguing against it, Dickie (1997) fully embraces the circularity as part of his definition – indeed, he admits to flaunting it.

Recalling Diffey’s observation that institutional facts (as distinguished from ‘brute facts’) are “true in virtue of human practices” (1991a, p. 66), Dickie notes that “[t]here is a philosophical ideal which underlies the noncircularity norm of definition” (1997, p. 77).

According to this ideal, which arguably has its origins in Locke's (1824) *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, "[t]here are basic or primitive terms which are unanalyzable and, hence, undefinable. One can learn the meaning of these primitive terms only in some nonlinguistic way: sensory experience, rational intuition, or whatever" (Dickie, 1997, p. 77). According to conventional wisdom, these primitive terms – brute facts – are the foundations of knowledge, and beyond them we can know nothing. But what of *institutional* facts, which are (as Diffey (1991b) noted), true simply by virtue of being established human practices?

More than just a circular justification, both Diffey and Dickie are making what might appear to be a radical epistemological claim – yet there is nothing radical about it. There are a number of concepts, for instance 'game' or 'crime,' which defy straight-forward, reductive definition; similarly, the concept of art defies straight-forward, reductive definition. The reductive epistemology, upon which the above-noted philosophical ideal is built, exhibits a simplicity that makes it very appealing, especially in terms of defining material objects. But even if it were possible to show that this ideal applies to material objects, "it does not follow from this that such an achievement is possible for definition in any other domain" (Dickie, 1997, p. 78). Dickie thus obliges his opponents to prove that his circular framing provides no meaningful insight into the nature of art. The only way to accomplish this is to demonstrate either that the brute-fact ideal is generally true, or that a non-circular definition of art has been (or could ever be) advanced. "Since neither of these two has been accomplished," Dickie observes, "the way is at least open for an exploration of a circular account of art" (1997, p. 78).

Non-circular accounts typically inform us of the meaning of a term we do not yet understand by appealing to a term (or a set of terms) that we do (Dickie, 1997). And down the line we go until we reach a brute fact – a *simple idea*, in Lockean terms – that is (though not *a priori* true) true in some obvious and uncontroversial way. But art is an odd creature in this respect, since virtually everyone (even a small child) appears to have at least some understanding of the concept, whether or not he is cognizant of the fact that 'art' is the concept he actually has in mind. And certainly, as Dickie points out, "anyone who has gotten to the point of reading documents on the philosophy of art will already know what the expression 'work of art' means" (1997, p. 79). The question of where this knowledge

comes from is difficult to answer, though. If our understanding of the concept of art is in place by childhood, a lack of temporally prior memory makes it difficult to precisely identify its cognitive origins. We are left with the problem of figuring out how our parents or teachers, from whom we learned the concept, came to understand it themselves – and this regress could continue *ad infinitum*. This is one of the chief difficulties confronting historicist accounts. Despite assertions to the contrary,⁷ there does not appear to be any identifiable brute fact upon which our understanding of ‘art’ could have been built, and if this is the case, little other than Dickie’s circular, ‘inflected’ account could provide an answer.

Given that we typically come to understand what art is at a very young age, Dickie argues that philosophical definitions are actually attempting “to make clear to us in a self-conscious and explicit way what we already in some sense know” (1997, p. 79). Indeed, it would be quite impossible to explain the concept ‘art’ to someone for whom the concept is unknown. A linear, reductive explanation would be of little help in such a case, because art is a relational concept. An individual who is not engaged in the relationships that constitute the social practice of art (that is, in one or several of the five constituents of Dickie’s definition) simply would not understand the concept. Moreover, because our engagement in the complex relationship that is the social practice of art begins at such a young age, the concept becomes known to us not by understanding the nature of art-objects, but through exposure to and participation in the social, institutionalized practice of art. Explaining the concept of art is thus a matter of understanding the relational dimensions of the practice, not the objective qualities of the art-object. Dickie concludes that “if a definition of ‘work of art’ is circular, it may just be so because of the very nature of what the definition is about” (1997, p. 79). But he qualifies this circularity by arguing that art is an ‘inflected concept,’ and as such, the circularity of its definition becomes more informative than the typical (and notoriously *uninformative*) circular argument.

Circular reasoning typically involves either presupposing the conclusion one’s argument is meant to demonstrate, or using the very term one is seeking to define in the definition itself. Dickie avoids both of these pitfalls through ‘inflecting’ his second,

⁷⁷ See, for example, Levinson (1979).

revised, five-part definition. The several elements of this account, he explains, “bend in on, presuppose, and support one another,” and this is what is meant by ‘inflection’ (Dickie, 1997, p. 79). Explaining this idea further, Dickie writes that “[n]o member of such a set can be understood apart from all the other concepts in the set. Consequently, in coming to understand a concept which is a member of such a set, one must in some degree come to understand all the other member concepts as well” (1997, p. 83). But more than that, it is the *relationship* between each member of the set that provides the substance of the definition. The inflected nature of art (and the circularity apparently entailed), understood within the context of the relationships that obtain within an established human practice, provide if not a very tidy definition of art, then at least a definition that overcomes the inadequacies of a reductive account.

There are still some who object to the unorthodox epistemic strategy upon which Dickie builds his theory. Jerrold Levinson, perhaps rightly, observes that Dickie “tries to defuse the charge of circularity [...] by suggesting that we rethink our standards for what philosophical definition should be doing” (1987, p. 144). According to Levinson, Dickie would apparently have us believe that “a philosophical definition does not attempt to *inform* or *instruct* you about a term you do not understand, but rather *clarifies* for you the meaning of a concept you already possess” (1987, pp. 144-145). Levinson sees this strategy as “a bootless evasion” (1987, p. 145), but Dickie’s point is that his Institutional Theory has to be circular if it is to explain how it is that we all understand what art is, yet find ourselves unable to define it in concrete, objective terms. For Levinson, though, “[a] circular definition, however segmented, no more clarifies anything than it informs or instructs – one simply cannot *elucidate* the content of a concept by *using* and *presupposing* it in the course of the elucidation” (1987, p. 145). Levinson is right – but only if one adheres to the more orthodox, reductive, epistemology that Dickie argues is insufficient. The question, then, is whether or not Dickie’s apparently unorthodox epistemology is acceptable – but again, our coming to understand concepts like ‘crime’ or ‘game’ in similarly non-reductive terms strongly indicates that there is actually nothing unorthodox about it.

Art *looks* like the sort of thing that would be an object of empirical inquiry, but as Weitz capably demonstrates, it is not. Art-objects (like paintings and sculptures) appear to

have their own identity, but if the history of the philosophy of art has taught us anything, it is that the identity of art-objects is profoundly unclear. The concept of art itself – the concept that covers these sorts of objects – is better understood if seen as a relational concept, and for Dickie this entails embracing its circularity. Dickie might have benefited from avoiding the use of the word ‘circularity’ in his account, since it opens the door to some very serious criticisms; however, his actual position is not ‘circular’ in any problematic sense. It is properly relational, necessarily complex, and ‘inflected,’ but it does not suffer from the ‘vicious circularity’ that his critics have identified. What Dickie’s revised account does is describe a network of social relationships, the product of which is the art-object. It might be better to describe those relationships as a ‘network’ or a ‘web’ rather than a circle, since circles make philosophers so uneasy.

We might build a defense of the circularity in Dickie’s account by applying a variety Ernest Sosa’s (2009) notions of epistemic circularity and reflective knowledge. It might also be possible to defend it by appealing to the distinction between justificatory and definitional circularity, Dickie’s being a case of the latter. It might similarly be argued that the circularity in his account is a consequence of it being a coherentist, rather than a foundationalist explanation, and that the former is more satisfying. Each of these alternatives, though, would require a treatment that is beyond the scope of this paper. Thus a great deal turns then on whether or not one is prepared to accept Dickie’s argument that the circularity in his account is not vicious, and that it is sufficiently complex to explain the social networks that constitute the institutional structure of the artworld.

Clarity

Some have said that key points in Dickie’s theory are unclear, vague, or ambiguous. According to Joseph Margolis (1975), Dickie never adequately sorts out the differences between conferring the status of artifactuality, the status of candidate for appreciation, and the status of art itself. He further notes that there is some equivocation on precisely what Dickie means when he speaks of ‘aesthetic experience,’ and makes a further comment that warrants a closer look: Dickie, he writes, has “confused the *social* and the *cultural*: the

term ‘institutional’ may be equivocal as between the social and the cultural, though his intention obviously favors the latter. We must note, however, that he has not yet told us what constitutes the cultural or the institutional (and he never does)” (1975, p. 343). It might be granted that Dickie was not very clear on the relationship between the social, the cultural, and the institutional in the first formulation of his theory; however, he has since responded to this criticism and made his position more clear. The terms of this relationship are thoroughly elaborated in Dickie’s revised definition, which describes artists, publics, systems, and the roles that artists and publics play within the institutional framework of the artworld.

Beardsley (1976) similarly notes an ambiguity in Dickie’s original account, specifically concerning what is meant by the term ‘institutions.’ He suggests that it may be helpful to make a distinction between institution-*tokens* (a collective entity that exhibits a continuity in its practices overseen by an identifiable authority) and institution-*types* (what we might identify with social and cultural practices like marriage) (Beardsley, 1976, p. 195). Beardsley notes that “merely because an action is an action of a certain sort by virtue of some social convention (including those conventions, if they are properly so called, that govern the use of language in communication), that is no basis for designating the action itself as institutional” (1976, p. 195). There are social practices that, although conventionalized, are not necessarily institutional – and for Beardsley, art is one such practice.

Beardsley offers an example of an individual (“Jones”) who deposits his paycheque in the bank and another individual (“Smith”) who hides gems behind the bricks in his chimney (1976, p. 196). Although Smith is not engaging in any sort of institutional operation in hiding the gems, what Beardsley’s example misses is that the value of *both* the gems *and* the paycheque is institutionally determined (even though the former, at least while ensconced in a chimney, are not institutionally recognized). The only reason to keep and hide the gems is precisely that they possess an institutionally vouchsafed value, redeemable at some later date. Social relationships and practices surround the collection and exchange of gems no less than they do the earning and cashing of a paycheque. Depositing currency in a bank is a directly institutional act, while hiding gems in a chimney is an *indirectly* institutional act – though they differ, each is *essentially* institutional.

Beardsley equates Smith with the reclusive artist who shuns public approbation and produces his works in seclusion. “Withdrawn into his ivory tower,” he writes of his artist,

shunning all contact with the business, governmental, educational, and other institutions of his society – or perhaps just hidden in his lonely bohemian garret – he works away on his canvas, carves his stone, polishes the rhymes and meters of his precious lyric. Later, of course, he may decide to compromise with reality, to sell, publish, exhibit, or whatever. But until he does so (according to this account) his action is not institutional, nor is what he produces. (1976, p. 196)

Beardsley grants that

the Romantic artist may be supplied electricity by an institution, that his paper or canvas has to be manufactured, that his very thoughts will be to some extent “moulded” by his acquired language and previous acculturation. But that is all beside the point, which is (on this account) that he can make a work of art, and validate it as such, by his own free originative power. And it is this claim that has in recent years been explicitly challenged by those who hold that art is (in my words) essentially institutional. (1976, p. 196)

But it is not “beside the point” at all – the careful wording of Dickie’s (1974) original account makes this clear, and when he speaks of a work being a “candidate for appreciation” he is anticipating precisely this objection. An artwork need not be exhibited in (or even submitted to) an artworld institution to acquire its status. The artworld institutions that Dickie has in mind are much less formal than this; they are institutions that we are all engaged with, often unselfconsciously, almost from the day we are born. It is simply not possible for an individual to engage in art-making outside of the institutions that render ‘art’ the sort of thing that it *is*. Further, in the later (revised) definition in *The Art Circle*, Dickie makes this still more explicit. There, he points out that “[a]n artist is a person who participates with understanding in the making of a work of art” (Dickie, 1997, pp. 80-82). The artist, even withdrawn from the world, is still acting within an institutional framework, as evidenced by the fact that he *understands* what he is doing when he engages in art-making. The artist can only understand that he is engaged in art-making because the institutional framework of the artworld lends meaning to what he is doing. The artist’s ‘originative power,’ however ‘free’ it might appear, is necessarily institutional.

Beardsley, like Margolis, also takes issue with the language of ‘conferring’ that Dickie uses. Dickie adequately address the questions of (1) on what is the conferring done; (2) what is conferred; and (3) who does the conferring – but a fourth question, *what constitutes conferring*, receives no satisfactory answer. Beardsley is more specifically troubled by Dickie’s language of “acting on behalf of...” For Beardsley, it is clear how one acts as a representative of an institution-token (such as a university) to bestow status upon an individual within that institution’s framework – but “the artworld is not made up of institution-tokens – it’s not *that* well-organized” (1976, p. 202). Of course Dickie argues that he is not talking about a well-organized institution at all, rather he is talking about a broad, highly informal network of social practices that are nevertheless institutional. Beardsley goes on to argue, though, that “if we then switch, as Dickie does, to the broader sense of “institution,” and include general (artistic?) practices, then does it make sense to speak of acting on behalf of a *practice*? Status-awarding authority can center in an institution-token, but practices, as such, seem to lack the requisite source of authority” (1976, p. 202). Beardsley seems to have in mind the singular, identifiable authority that is typical of his institution-*types*. Yet there is no reason to suppose that representatives of artworld institutions (that is, representatives of institution-*tokens*) could not themselves enjoy a measure of authority, due to their respective skills and knowledge, even if they are not appointed or elected as are representatives of institution-*types*.

Dickie admits that, having used expressions like ‘conferred upon’ and ‘acting on behalf of’ in his original definition of “work of art,’ it is not surprising that so many of his critics thought he was speaking of official bodies making and carrying out policy decisions (1997). “It would have been far better,” he writes, “for me to have written of artists working with the artworld as background rather than of artists acting on behalf of the artworld” (1997, p. 9). Indeed, in his 1997 revision, Dickie abandons the language of ‘conferred status of candidate for appreciation’ altogether. This was a response not only to Beardsley’s (correct) assertion that the artworld is simply not the sort of institution which confers status, but also to the difficulties that Margolis identified. “In the new version,” Dickie writes, “it is the work done in creating an object against the background of the artworld which establishes that object as a work of art. Consequently, there is no need for the conferring of status of any kind, whether it be of candidacy for appreciation or artifactuality” (1997,

p. 12). Dickie overcomes Margolis' and Beardsley's criticisms by limiting the act of conferral to art alone, and framing that conferral in such a way that it is done *against the background* of the institutions of the artworld, rather than being done *by* those institutions. This also resolves the confusion between institution-types and institution-tokens. "The expressions in question from the [original] definition," Dickie admits, "are much too formal and appropriate only for groups of the kind Beardsley calls institution-tokens" (1997, p. 52). In *The Art Circle*, when Dickie speaks of an institutional approach, he is referring to "the view that a work of art is art because of the position it occupies within a cultural practice, which is of course in Beardsley's terminology an institution-type" (1997, p. 52). Dickie, then, does a good deal to shore up the difficulties his critics identified with his first definition's (1) nature of conferral, and (2) equivocation on the cultural, the social, and the institutional.

Dickie (1997) concedes that his use of the expression 'the artworld' in *Art and the Aesthetic* was inherently ambiguous, and needed to be dealt with. In his review of *The Art Circle*, Jeffrey Wieand (1985), building on Beardsley's remarks about *types* and *tokens*, distinguishes between Action-institutions and Person-institutions. According to Dickie, "art-making is an Action-institution and does not involve any Person-institution in any essential way. Of course, many Person-institutions – museums, foundations, churches, and the like – have relations with art-making, but no particular Person-institution is essential to art-making" (1997, p. 52). In *Art and the Aesthetic* Dickie wrote of the 'core personnel' of the artworld, which admittedly suggests that he "was talking about a particular group of people involved in a Person-institution" (1997, p. 75). Instead, it is the roles (and not the specific personnel) that Dickie wanted to emphasize. In *The Art Circle*, he argues that any use of 'personnel' is purely metaphorical, referring to persons fulfilling roles in an *action-institution* (in other words, roles rather than the persons who play them). This also addresses the difficulty Beardsley identified with authority in Dickie's account, since his revised definition is concerned with action/roles, rather than persons/authority.

Arbitrariness

A number of critics have worried about the arbitrariness implicit in Dickie's framing of the Institutional Theory of Art. Danto, concerned with the distinction between the art-object and its indistinguishable real-world counterpart, writes that if this distinction is to be understood as a matter of institutional conferral, then objects earn the designation 'art' at the caprice of the various individuals who constitute the artworld (1981, p. 144). Since we are not provided with any reasons for why the personnel of Dickie's artworld institutions confer art status on one object rather than another, the institutional conferral of art status might indeed appear arbitrary. Wollheim voices similar concern when he asks, "[i]s it to be presumed that those who confer status upon some artifact do so for good reasons, or is there no such presumption? Might they have no reason, or bad reasons, and yet their action be efficacious given that they themselves have the right status?" (1980, p. 160). We need to know more about (1) how those who make up the artworld come to have the authority to make the decisions they do; and (2) why they make those decisions, rather than others. For these critics it is not enough to simply say that these are institutional determinations.

Without knowing how the personnel of the artworld come to have their authority, it might appear as though everyone is equally entitled to said authority. Davies points out that, "[i]f everyone is equally 'authorised' to confer art-status, then the notion of authorisation is empty, as is the claim that such 'authority' marks the limits of an institutionally defined role" (1988, p. 308). While Dickie dispensed with the problematic 'conferral' language in his second definition (1997, pp. 80-82), and although his new definition contains no mention of 'authority,' the roles implied ('artist' and 'artworld public') nevertheless suggest a framework in which decisions are made by one party and accepted by another. If this relationship does obtain, then it might be said that the decision process implicit in Dickie's second iteration (1997) is no less arbitrary than the 'conferral' that troubled so many critics of the original (1974) theory.

Dickie's theory being proceduralist (rather than functionalist) may explain its drawing the charge of arbitrariness; but it is also precisely its proceduralism that renders it immune to that charge. If Dickie's critics want him to provide *reasons* for why artworld personnel confer art status on one object rather than another, they are asking Dickie to

provide something that his theory is neither equipped, nor was ever meant, to provide: an account of the *function* of art. (Indeed, a compelling account of art's function would negate the need for any other theoretical framework, institutional or otherwise.) The lack of consensus about the function(s) of art exposes a significant vulnerability in the functional approach: although most art exhibits either some identifiable function or even several functions, those functions are often unclear (and in many instances conflict with one another). If we cannot identify a single function (or even a consistently adhered-to set of functions) that art serves, then those functions cannot play any meaningful role in a definition of art. If we cannot rely on the function of art to provide a definition, then we are left with only its procedural aspects in that pursuit.

When critics claim that Dickie's theory implies that art status is a matter of arbitrary decisions on the part of artworld personnel, what they are saying is that the Institutional Theory is not equipped to say anything about the function of art – but this is only a consequence of Dickie's definition being proceduralist. No tenable functionalist theory has as yet been offered. Until one is put forward, *no* theoretical framework – institutional or otherwise – will be able to account for why members of the artworld make the decisions they do. All we can know with any certainty is that those decisions are made in an institutional setting, and although they *appear* arbitrary, they are always subject to the particular dynamics of the 'artworld systems' of Dickie's (1997) theory. "What has to be accepted," he writes, "is the 'arbitrariness' of being an artworld system – the lack of a 'crucial similarity' of the kind sought by traditional theories which would easily and obviously distinguish it from nonartworld systems. If there were such 'crucial similarities' there would be no need for an institutional approach – the traditional approach would suffice" (1997, p. 77). The social forces that shape 'artworld systems' are another question; it remains that the decisions made *within* those systems – decisions about what qualifies as art (and what qualifies as *good* art) – are anything but arbitrary.

Redundancy

There are those who hold that the Institutional Theory of Art is redundant – that is, it tells us nothing about art that we cannot learn by other, more direct means. This objection shares a great deal with the ‘arbitrariness’ criticism, in that critics maintain the need for reasons underlying the actions of members of the artworld, and that those reasons ought to be the substance of a definition of art. The response to this objection also shares something with the ‘arbitrariness’ criticism in that these reasons are notoriously elusive. It is important to consider this objection on its own merits, because it actually adds force to the argument that the Institutional Theory of Art provides us with a more informative description of the concept of art than do any of its contemporary alternatives.

On one reading of this objection, it is supposed that representatives of the artworld have good reasons for what they do, and that their decisions are not simply a consequence of their status as artworld representatives. If this is the case, Wollheim writes,

then the requirement should have been made explicit in [Dickie’s] definition. However, it might also seem that we are owed, over and above an acknowledgment of these reasons, an account of what they are likely to be, and, specifically, of what would make them good reasons. For, once we had such an account, then we might find that we had the materials out of which, without further assistance, a definition of art could be formed. (1980, p. 160)

While this may appear to render Dickie’s institutions redundant, Wollheim mistakenly assumes that the role of artworld representatives is to discover and confirm the art-relevant properties that an object already possesses (i.e., its art status). In fact, they recognize an object which, although it may previously have enjoyed no such status, merits that status because of its position within the procedural framework of the artworld. Because Wollheim thinks that the role of artworld representatives is to discover existing art-relevant properties, he incorrectly concludes that “reference to their action ought to drop out of the definition of art as at best inessential” (1980, p. 161). Again, Duchamp’s *Fountain* (1917) is the paradigmatic example, as it clearly demonstrates that art status is *not* something inherent in the object; rather, an object only enjoys art status once it is granted by representatives of the artworld (or in other words, once that status is granted by those

engaged in the social relationships that constitute the artworld). Thus the institutions of the artworld are not redundant, but essential.

Voicing another threat of redundancy against the Institutional Theory, Davies argues that “[i]t is counterintuitive to deny that art might be produced by a socially isolated artist” (1991, p. 100). However, there is nothing counterintuitive here – in fact, the term ‘socially isolated artist’ is an oxymoron. Art is social in many of the same ways that marriage is social, while to think of a socially isolated individual engaged in the institution of marriage is obviously absurd. It is no more logically possible to be a socially isolated artist than it is to be a socially isolated spouse. This is not simply a problem of language, either, since art (like marriage) is relational, procedural, and moreover, institutional. Davies nevertheless goes on to say that “if institutions presuppose a social context, the possibility of an artwork’s being created outside of any social context cuts the ground from under an institutional definition of art,” rendering it redundant (1991, p. 100). But the institutionalist has nothing to worry about, here, since it is not remotely possible for an artwork to be created outside of its social context. While it is conceivable that human beings might be found to have a natural inclination to make images, and that a socially isolated individual might be naturally inclined to engage in such practices, it would be wrong to call that activity ‘art.’

Davies (1991) asserts that some art arises in a context of social isolation; however, no example of art produced in such a context immediately presents itself, nor is a *possible* scenario easily imagined. Outsider artists are typically untrained, seemingly spontaneously productive, and are often either socially reclusive or even under psychiatric care, and thus *appear* to engage in art-making literally ‘outside’ the institutions of the artworld (Rhodes, 2000). While it might be true that these individuals (most of whom have never attended an art college or exhibited their work) are not self-consciously part of the artworld, they are nevertheless conscious that they are making *art*. This is attributable not to some quality their work possesses, but rather to it having earned its status as art within the institutional context of the artworld. We could not discuss ‘Outsider Art’ at all if this were not the case. It is classified as art because it fits within the web of institutional relationships that constitute the artworld: an artist who understands what he or she is doing; a public who

understand what is presented; and an artworld system within which the transaction between these two parties takes place.

The now well-known work of Henry Darger (1892-1973), a deeply reclusive Chicago artist, is a perfect example of this phenomenon. Darger's epic work, *The Realms of the Unreal* (See MacGregor & Darger, 2002), consists of more than 15,000 pages of text accompanied by hundreds of intricate hand drawn illustrations, and remained unknown until Darger's death in 1973 (Rhodes, 2000). Upon its discovery, the work was immediately recognized by the artworld as a masterpiece. Now, while Wollheim might maintain that *The Realms of the Unreal* was a masterpiece whether it was recognized by the artworld or not, it was no more so a masterpiece *all along* than was Duchamp's *Fountain*. And while Davies might identify Darger's work as an example of art "produced in a context of social isolation," it is hard to imagine anybody (including Darger) who is so socially isolated that the concepts of storytelling and representational expression are unknown to him. It is the institutional framework of the artworld that on the one hand gives these art forms meaning, and on the other makes them conceptually intelligible to both artists and audiences.

One possible objection comes to mind. Suppose Darger had worked his whole life on producing an exact replica of a bed – call it *Bed* – rather than his elaborately illustrated texts. It is exceedingly unlikely that anybody discovering Darger's *Bed* would have recognized it as a work of art. This is a very old problem in the philosophy of art – but one the Institutional Theory is well-equipped to handle. Both *Realms of the Unreal* and *Bed* are art, by virtue of institutional designation. But while Darger's *The Realms of the Unreal* is an example of a much older and much more widely-practiced (and thus well-established) tradition, his hypothetical *Bed* would exemplify a much more recent addition to artworld conventions. If Darger's *Bed* were discovered by somebody familiar with the artworld conventions that render that sort of thing a work of art, it would have been received as such; equally, if Darger's books had been discovered by somebody *unfamiliar* with *that* tradition (however unlikely that might be), then *The Realms of the Unreal* may never have been received by the artworld at all. A great deal depends on the degree to which an individual is engaged with a particular artworld system, but it remains the case that the institutional dynamics of the system, alone, determines the art status of an object.

Davies proposes three possible responses to the ‘isolated artist’ problem: that the individual in question might himself constitute an artworld; that a socially isolated individual cannot make art at all; and that “we cannot but view such works as art because we cannot help but see them from the location of the artworld in which we operate” (1991, p. 103). He feels that of these replies, “the first is the strongest in that it concedes without qualification the intuition that a socially isolated individual might create artworks” (1991, p. 103). Yet the second response seems more satisfying – as Dickie notes. While Davies naturally argues that the second response is counterintuitive because it denies that a socially isolated individual could create art (1991, p. 103), there is nothing counterintuitive about it. The second line of defense is effective because it is incoherent to talk about art produced outside the institutional framework of the artworld, in total social isolation.

Dickie himself offers the following in support of his position: “Suppose that a person totally ignorant of the concept of art [...] and unacquainted with any representations were to fashion a representation of something out of clay. Without trying to diminish the significance of the creation of an unprecedented representation, such a creation would not be a work of art” (1997, p. 55). Explaining why this is the case, Dickie writes that “[w]hile the creator of the representation would certainly recognize the object as a representation, he would not have any cognitive structures into which he could fit it so as to understand it as art” (1997, p. 55). Thus, even when a representation appears perfectly consistent with our concept of art, that representation either has to have been made with the concept of art in mind in the first place, or if it was not, it has to have that status assigned to it by representatives of the artworld who have that concept in mind. In either case, because there is nothing inherent in a representation that makes it art (since there are many ‘representations’ that are not art), an individual ignorant of the concept of art (i.e., an individual who does not have access to the institutionally-defined cognitive structures that make the concept of art intelligible) *cannot* make art.

Wollheim’s argument, noted at the beginning of this section, depends on the existence of *a priori* reasons for art status, discoverable by representatives of the artworld. The Institutional Theory would indeed be redundant if this were the case. However, no specific reason has as yet been identified that makes something a work of art. The ‘reasons’ that Wollheim feels are the true substance of a definition of art are actually the product of

the institutional dynamics of the artworld – in other words, he has it quite backwards. The institutions are primary, the reasons are secondary. Davies faces a similar problem. Even if we grant his hypothetical isolated artist, the product of his labour needs to exhibit some discoverable property to which representatives of the artworld can point and say, “that is the reason this object is art.” But representatives of the artworld are not in the business of ‘discovering’ anything; there is nothing to discover. Because there is no discoverable ‘artistic’ quality *in* things – a well-established fact – the essential feature of art must be the particular institutional framework within which the social practice of art-making occurs. The redundancy objection is thus interesting by virtue of its ‘backfiring.’ Rather than raising a problem, it actually strengthens the argument that the Institutional Theory provides a more informative description of the concept of art than do any of its contemporary rivals.

Vacuity

If it is granted that the Institutional Theory of Art meets all of the objections raised so far, and thus appears to be a sound foundation for a definition, one might still ask what the theory actually tells us about *art*. It appears to offer a compelling general account of the context in which art is made and exhibited, but it might be accused of failing to tell us much about the nature of the work of art itself. If the theory tells us nothing about art except for the fact that it exists within an institutional context, it cannot help us understand what distinguishes art from other social practices that exist within an institutional context (for instance, marriage). If it cannot, then it is in jeopardy of being vacuous.

Danto (1981) was concerned with how we distinguish art objects from their otherwise identical non-art counterparts, and he rather famously found Dickie’s Institutional Theory an unsatisfying explanation of how we make this distinction. Drawing on the comparison to the institution of marriage, he makes the following observation:

just as someone is a husband by virtue of satisfying certain institutionally defined conditions, though he may outwardly appear no different from any other man, so something is an artwork if *it* satisfies certain institutionally defined conditions, though outwardly it may appear no different from an

object that is not an artwork [...]. But this puts us back where we started, and clarity on the nature of the boundary evades us still. (1981, pp. 28-29)

The fact that the social practice of marriage is institutional does not help us distinguish between a man who is a husband and a man who is not. We need to know more about the man in question in order to determine his status as a husband (beyond that status being institutionally conferred). Similarly Dickie, according to Danto, “has emphasized how something gets to be a work of art, which may be institutional, and neglected in favor of aesthetic consideration the question of what qualities constitute an artwork once something is one” (1981, p. 94).

The short answer is that the institution of marriage and the institution that is the artworld are not relevantly similar. The former is a fairly rigid legal entity, while the latter is a far less formal social framework – yet each is equally ‘institutional’ in that it sets out the relationships and conventions that make a practice what it is. Danto’s last remark, quoted in the passage above, raises a problem with which the Institutional Theory is, once again, fairly well-equipped to cope. When he argues that Dickie has neglected the question of what qualities constitute an artwork, Danto is asking of a *procedural* theory something that only a *functional* theory can offer. And if it is true that functional theories are largely untenable, relying on notoriously elusive formal features, then a procedural theory (like Dickie’s) cannot help but offer a better theoretical framework for understanding the essential nature of art. Thus it may have to be granted that the theory really cannot tell us anything about the art-object itself, because the qualities an artwork exhibits are simply not essential to an adequate definition of art. Although this point has been well-travelled in the last half-century’s philosophical literature on art and aesthetics, there are still those who feel the Institutional Theory needs to tell us more.

Danto observes that “[w]e may treat the object differently, as we may treat differently what we took to be an old derelict upon discovering him to be the pretender to the throne, or treat with respect a piece of wood described as from the true cross when we were about to use it for kindling. These changes indeed are ‘institutional’ and social in character” (1981, p. 99). However, as Danto further notes, “learning it is a work of art means that it has *qualities to attend to* which its untransfigured counterpart lacks, and that our aesthetic responses will be different. And this is not institutional, it is ontological. We

are dealing with an altogether different order of things” (1981, p. 99, emphasis added). But two things stand out here: one, in a given artwork, there are no *qualities to attend to* that contribute to our understanding of the concept of art; and two, an artwork need not elicit an aesthetic response to be classified as a work of art. Once these two factors drop out of the picture, as they must, all we are left with is the institutional framework within which the practice of art-making is conducted.

Levinson is concerned that, in Dickie’s account, “we are not told enough about what the art-maker must envisage must be done with his object by potential spectators” (1979, p. 233). He argues that such a ‘specification’ is essential to the task of distinguishing the making of art from the making of non-art. For Levinson, an adequate definition of art must “specify what the art object must be *intended for*, what sort of *regard* the spectator must be asked to extend to the object – rather than designate an *institution* on behalf of which some such request can be made” (1979, p. 233). He is not asking that Dickie apply his procedural theory to questions only a functional theory is equipped to handle (as Danto was), rather he is rejecting the idea that it is the institutional character of art that is essential to its nature. Levinson is clearly less sympathetic to a procedural approach than he is to a functional approach; however, an exclusively functional approach faces many more difficulties than does one like Dickie’s, least of all that nobody has yet identified a specific function that *only* art can be said to serve.

While not entirely sympathetic to Levinson’s position, Davies notes that Levinson’s observations raise an important issue. “Dickie’s theory,” he writes, “is ahistorical, and his lack of concern with the history of the artworld reflects [...] the seriousness of his failure to characterize the roles that generate the structure of that institution – their boundaries, their limitations, the circumstances under which they change, the conditions for their occupancy, and so on” (1991, p. 94). Davies is not alone, here, either. Margolis notes that “Dickie has given us no more than the barest hint of what an institution is” (1975, p. 345). Wollheim (1980) similarly argues that the Institutional Theory needs to do more than simply say that art is essentially institutional. It “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)” (1980, p. 162). And Levinson himself notes that, “[f]or all that Dickie’s

is an institutional theory of art, there is vanishingly little of the analysis of the social structure in which art is practiced that such an appellation would appear to promise” (1987, p. 145). At several points in *The Art Circle*, Dickie refers to an artwork as a kind of object to be presented to a public (1997), but Levinson is unsure what is meant by this. He argues,

[i]f by kind Dickie means some antecedently established art category, then it is easy to imagine counterexamples deriving from radically original artists. If, as he seems to imply, Dickie means the kind: *object to be presented...*, then when is something of such a kind? Isn't an object of kind: *to be presented...* just an object which is to be presented... and isn't that just an object intended for presentation...? To invoke kinds in this definition would seem to be either too restrictive, on one reading, or completely otiose, on the other. (1987, p. 145)

The Institutional Theory, according to these critics, fails to tell us enough about either the historical or social dimensions of the artworld – and in failing to do so, it provides us with very little understanding of what it is that actually constitutes the essential nature of art. Davies urges that such an account, if it is to be convincing, must attend to the “historical dynamism of that institution” – something the Institutional Theory does not (1991, p. 96). More than simply tell us that there *is* an artworld, Dickie needs to “describe the structure of the artworld, showing how different roles within the institution attract to themselves different amounts or kinds of authority. To that story he should add an account of the organic, historical nature of the institution in order to explain how it might come to have its present ‘democratic’ structure” (Davies, 1991, p. 97). But all of this might be asking too much of Dickie, or indeed any philosopher. Suppose we were to criticize Saul Kripke (1980), for instance, for failing to give an exhaustive account of the history and origin of language, and claim that his failure to do so threatens the cogency of his theory of meaning. Since they are philosophers, it hardly seems fair to hold Dickie and Kripke accountable for not being good historians. It is similarly to ask too much of Dickie that he account for the practices, conventions, or rules that obtain in the artworld, or that he provide an analysis of the social structure in which art is practiced. What these critics seem to be seeking are sociological rather than philosophical insights; with this in mind, the work of a thinker like Pierre Bourdieu (1993) might provide the kind of sociological specificity being sought, but Bourdieu is rather famously *not* an analytic philosopher.

Beardsley (1976) also identifies what he feels is a vacuity problem in the Institutional Theory, specifically with Dickie's account of the conferral of art-status. He offers as an example an individual who is not a professional poet, who writes and then appreciates his own work. Now, Beardsley asks, "does the poem become an artwork only after he shows it to some poet, critic, or constant reader of poetry who can perform the act of conferral?" (1976, pp. 202-203). Whether the answer is yes or no, an insoluble dilemma ensues. An answer in the affirmative summons the problematic requirement that threatened Diffey's (1991b) theory: that art needs to be publicly exhibited before it can be called art. On the other hand, a response in the negative breaches the very definition Dickie offers (Beardsley, 1976). The source of the dilemma is, for Beardsley, that the Institutional Theory simply does not tell us enough. As he points out, "when we know what things are called, or not called, 'art' by artistic establishments we still do not know whether there are basic and pervasive human needs that it is the peculiar role of art to serve" (1976, p. 209). This is Beardsley at his functionalist best, again asking a proceduralist theory to answer an inquiry well beyond its ambit. As has been noted, no theory has as yet been advanced that is capable of providing an adequate answer to this question.

Facing Beardsley's dilemma head on, it is easy enough to offer a conditional 'yes' to his proposed scenario. He seems to be advancing a species of the 'isolated artist' problem. His poet, although not a 'professional' writer, is surely familiar with the institutional practices of the artworld (and in very likely the same way that Henry Darger, also not a 'professional' artist, was familiar with those same practices). Both Darger and Beardsley's poet produced work recognizable as art by virtue of it being consistent with the institutionally defined norms of the artworld. In other words: only once seen to exhibit qualities consistent with what the artworld recognizes as 'art' do they become art. Note that it is consistency with artworld procedures, not artistic qualities themselves, which are germane to the question of art status. It also is not that any particular act of conferral takes place, nor is it that their work is granted art status by a committee of artworld representatives. Rather, the decision about whether an object is a work of art is part of an ongoing social discourse that enjoys an informal (but nevertheless binding) institutional endorsement. We can answer 'yes' to Beardsley's dilemma not because his poet's work needs expert consent to gain art status (which is obviously problematic), but because it has

properties that are consistent with what an artworld public (whose expectations are institutionally shaped) has come to expect. Beardsley's conclusion – that the institutional theory is vacuous – is thus false.

Most of the aforementioned objections can be nullified by recognizing that Dickie is neither a historian nor a sociologist, and that his proceduralist theory is not equipped to answer functionalist questions. Davies, however, raises some issues that seem troublingly reasonable. He argues, for instance, that an Institutional Theory like Dickie's should show that artworld practices are not only defined in terms of specific rules, but "that the rules followed by members of the artworld necessarily are such as to define the roles that structure an institution" (1991, p. 98). For Davies, "[t]hese arguments are required in order to demonstrate both that art making is institutionalized (and not merely a social practice) and that art making is essentially (and not merely contingently) institutional" (1991, p. 98). The most serious problem with the Institutional Theory is, along this line of reasoning, that it offers an explanation for how something *becomes art* without explaining why it *is artwork*. The issues that Davies raises are important because, unlike those already discussed, they genuinely seem to threaten Dickie's theory with vacuity.

In a probing article on the Institutional Theory, Weiland (1981) argues that art, being the sort of thing that it is, cannot be institutional at all. In order to show that this is true, he distinguishes two different sorts of institutions: Action-institutions and Person-institutions. An Action-institution, for example the act of promising, is "an action-type whose tokens are particular performances of that type of action" (1981, p. 409). These are "distinguished from other kinds of acts and social practices because they are rule-governed" (1981, p. 409). Person-institutions, on the other hand, "function as quasi-persons or agents; they perform actions and may be held responsible for them" (1981, p. 409). The Catholic Church, for instance, might be said to be a Person-institution. The sort of institution that Dickie has in mind does not seem to fit comfortably in either category. Responding directly to Weiland's remarks, Dickie says the sort of institution he has in mind is an Action-institution rather than a Person-institution (1997, p. 52). Given this position, Dickie needs to say more about the ways in which art is rule-governed.

Dickie admits that in his first text, he "did nothing to call attention to the rule-governed nature of art-making" (1997, p. 67). He has argued, though, that "[a]rt-making

rules are implicit in *Art and the Aesthetic*'s account of the creation of art, in that the account makes claims about the necessary conditions of art-making. To state a necessary condition for an activity is one way of stating a rule for engaging in that activity" (1997, pp. 66-67). At least one rule is implied in his controversial⁸ 'artifactuality' condition (that being an artifact is a necessary condition for being an artwork). Even if Dickie's assumption is granted, it tells us little about why such a rule obtains in the artworld – he has only told us that this *is* a rule that obtains in the artworld. Another rule of art-making emerges in Dickie's assertion that "being a thing of a kind which is presented to an artworld public is a necessary condition for being a work of art" (1997, p. 67). Because the artifactuality and presentation conditions operate within a specific cultural context (the artworld), they are "jointly sufficient for making works of art" (1997, p. 67). But even if these two rules are features of the artworld, and even if it is granted that they are jointly sufficient for making works of art, Dickie has still not demonstrated that the rules followed by members of the artworld necessarily define their respective roles as institutional.

Some clues about the rule-governed nature of art emerge from Dickie's discussion of roles and conventions. He argues that "the art enterprise can be seen to be a complex of interrelated roles governed by conventional and nonconventional rules" (1997, p. 74). There are roles for artists and there are roles for the art-public, each of whom adheres to certain established conventions as they respectively create and enjoy artworks. On the one hand, the role of the artist consists in the awareness that what he or she creates is art; on the other, in his or her ability to draw upon a wide variety of techniques in the creation of a particular kind of art (Dickie, 1997, p. 72). Members of the art-public, similarly, share an awareness that what is presented to them is art – but they also share particular sensitivities which enable them to perceive and understand the particular kind of art presented (Dickie, 1997, p. 72). Dickie argues that if "artists create and publics perceive and understand, there is a function which lies between them and brings them together" (1997, p. 72). This function, according to him, must be institutional.

In *Art and the Aesthetic*, Dickie wrote of the primary convention of theater as "the understanding shared by the actors and the audience that they are engaged in a certain kind

⁸ See Davies, 1991, for a detailed discussion of the artifactuality issue.

of formal activity” (1974, p. 174). Of painting, he wrote that “[t]he *display* of a painting is the public aspect of the primary convention of presentation” (1974, p. 177). In this same work, Dickie distinguished these *primary* conventions from more specific *secondary* conventions that apply to particular artforms – but he has since reconsidered his position. In *The Art Circle*, Dickie points out that “[t]he various arts employ many different conventions to do many different things, but there is no *primary* convention in the arts” (1997, p. 73). Although there is no primary convention, there is still a “primary *something*” within which conventions have a place. “What is primary,” Dickie writes, “is the understanding shared by all involved that they are engaged in an established activity or practice within which there is a variety of different roles: creator roles, presenter roles, and consumer roles” (1997, p. 74). Thus individuals acting within the institutions of the artworld are not the arbiters of the rules and conventions that surround art practices; rather, the institutions themselves act as a site where roles (and our understanding of who is to play those roles) are negotiated. Without the institutional setting where those roles play out there would be no artworld, and accordingly, no art.

The insights Dickie provides here are illuminating but they still do not tell us enough about the rule-governed nature of the artworld as an Action-institution. Indeed, the unresolved issue of the rule-governed nature of art is perhaps one of the most serious challenges to Dickie’s Institutional Theory. Moreover, there is no escape from this particular objection via the non-functionalist nature of proceduralist theory – it is perfectly reasonable to ask that Dickie elaborate on the relationship between the institutions of the artworld and the rules that obtain within those institutions. He can hardly be expected to provide a detailed account of all the rules that apply to the arts – that, again, would be asking too much. But Dickie could have said more about the ways in which those rules are institutionalized, and what it is that makes them specific to the artworld.

Art is certainly a social practice, but so are handshakes and prison sentences. There is obviously no handshake-world that can be said to govern the practice of handshakes, even though there are rules and conventions surrounding the practice that everybody recognizes. Handshakes, as a social practice, are thus *not* institutional, at least not in the way that Dickie proposes. Prison sentences, on the other hand, *are* clearly both institutional in nature and firmly rule-governed. But Dickie’s artworld is not institutional in the same

way prison sentences are institutional, either. Art is somehow a *more* institutionalized social practice than handshakes but a *less* institutionalized social practice than prison sentences. Accordingly, if Dickie cannot explain how the conventions of the artworld are rule-governed in such a way that they are *more institutionalized* than handshakes but *less institutionalized* than prison sentences, then his theory might indeed risk vacuity. Even if we were to grant that the artworld is institutional, we would still have no way to distinguish artworld institutions from other social institutions. This would leave us no closer to understanding what it is that distinguishes an art-object from a non-art-object.

At points Dickie seems to suggest that his theory represents the limits of our knowledge about the essential nature of art. One of the virtues of the Institutional Theory, he writes, is that it “places virtually no restrictions on what art may do, it seeks only to catch its essential nature. The institutional nature of art does not prevent art from serving moral, political, romantic, expressive, aesthetic, or a host of other needs” (Dickie, 1997, p. 86). The institutions of the artworld, then, provide a foundation upon which art can take on different, even conflicting roles. By systematizing a specific kind of social practice, it is those institutions alone that constitute the *essential* nature of art. Dickie recognizes that “there is more to art than the institutional theory talks about, but there is no reason to think that the more is peculiar to art and, hence, an essential aspect of art” (1997, p. 86). All that is left, when you strip away the incidental features of art, is its institutional nature. In the end, perhaps this is all that we *can* say about the essential nature of art.

Summary

This chapter considered five important objections facing Institutional Theory: that it is viciously circular; that it is vague or ambiguous; that it is arbitrary; that it is redundant; and that it is vacuous. The institutionalist can withstand most of these objections with little difficulty. Although Dickie’s theory would benefit from some revision and elaboration, most of these objections are simply mistaken. Despite ominous-sounding criticisms, Dickie’s Institutional Theory (as the paradigm procedural theory) remains a highly

compelling account of the necessary and sufficient conditions that make even the most unlikely object a work of art.

There is, however, a further objection that needs to be considered. Richard Wollheim noted that “it seems a well-entrenched thought that reflection upon the nature of art has an important part to play in determining the standards by which works of art are evaluated” (1980, p. 163). For him, a theory of art has to explain not only what kind of thing art is, but also the terms of its evaluation. Dickie’s Institutional Theory, being strictly classificatory, is not equipped to provide an account of either how we evaluate works, or even why art is valuable at all. Moreover, the institutional definition that Dickie offers cannot accommodate evaluative terms without doing violence to the theory as it stands. The next chapter offers that the social framework constituting the Institutional Theory is capable of serving two distinct functions: one that sets out the concept of art itself, and another that sets out the terms of its evaluation. An institutional account of artistic evaluation offers – as does the Institutional Theory of Art itself – an explanatory framework that is unavailable on any other account. Having shown that an institutional theory can be applied to questions of artistic evaluation, Wollheim’s above-noted concern will have been addressed.

Chapter Three

The Institutional Theory and the Evaluation of Art

Introductory Remarks

Richard Wollheim notes that the Institutional Theory violates two powerful intuitions we have about art. “The first,” he writes, “is that there is an interesting connection between being a work of art and being a good work of art – a connection, in other words, over and above that of the former being a presupposition of the latter” (1980, p. 163). The second violated intuition is the sense of something significant in the status, ‘work of art.’ Wollheim points out that, “if works of art derive their status from conferment, and the status may be conferred for no good reason, the importance of the status is placed in serious doubt” (1980, p. 164). He then asks why it is that a theory of art should “give priority to the definition of art if at the same time it holds that little of aesthetic interest hangs on the question whether something does or does not satisfy this definition” (1980, p. 164). Wollheim further observes that, “it seems a well-entrenched thought that reflection upon the nature of art has an important part to play in determining the standards by which works of art are evaluated” (1980, p. 163). This is perhaps the single most difficult question the institutionalist must face, and uncovers a potentially very serious shortcoming in Dickie’s Institutional Theory. However, if Wollheim’s objection can be overcome – if it can be shown that the Institutional theory is equipped to handle both classificatory *and* evaluative questions – then the Institutional Theory of Art actually offers the tools needed to dispel the spectres of subjectivism and relativism that loom over the task of artistic evaluation.

Wollheim’s objection can be overcome by simply recognizing that, just as art is defined institutionally, the terms of its evaluation are defined institutionally. Just as there is no need for elaborate formal or functional theories when it comes to defining art itself, there is no need for such theories when it comes to defining the criteria for its evaluation. Dickie has, of course, provided very good reasons to think an institutional definition of art ought to be strictly classificatory. Although he included reference to ‘candidacy for appreciation’ in the theory of *Art and the Aesthetic*, he did not intend to imply that his

institutional definition ought to describe the terms of that appreciation. Indeed, Dickie (1988) proposes an altogether separate, non-institutional, formalist framework for the evaluation of artworks. For him, the institution that is the artworld performs one action only, and that is classification; our appreciation of the objects granted art status is a different matter entirely. Yet although an institution (such as the artworld) ought to be defined in terms of the action it undertakes, there is no reason to suppose (as Dickie seems to) that a single institution should not undertake more than one action. In other words: there is no reason to believe that the same institutional framework in which classificatory determinations are made would not play a significant role in shaping the terms of art's evaluation.

We may better understand why certain qualities (rather than others) are valued in artworks once it is recognized that such determinations are made within the very same institutional framework in which objects are classified as artworks. The social relationships and institutional frameworks that determine an object's art status are the same social relationships and institutional frameworks in which determinations of value are made. And just as there is nothing in an object itself that determines its status as art, there is nothing in an object itself that determines its value as art. Each of these determinations (the classificatory *and* the evaluative) is made in a context external to the object; each of them is relational in character; and moreover, each of them is institutional in nature.

Dickie (2001) himself argues that the Institutional theory, being strictly classificatory on his account, is not equipped to address evaluative questions – in fact, he attempts to formulate an explicitly *non*-institutional theory of artistic evaluation. Dickie proposes that we need such a non-institutional framework to evaluate works of art because classification and evaluation are distinct (and unrelated) activities. The former is an institutional determination, while the latter is a matter of attention to the formal properties of a work. However, when we evaluate a work of art, it is the institutional framework in which the object exists (rather than the formal and/or historic qualities that *appear* to be the object of our evaluation) that is actually setting the criteria for evaluation. This case draws at length on John Searle's (1995) work on the nature of institutional facts – although it was not intended to address artistic or aesthetic questions, Searle's work can nevertheless be applied effectively to the present argument. The thrust of the claim here is: there is a

certain concordance between Dickie's classificatory theory and Searle's theory of institutional facts, each using as they do the language of social relationships. Therefore, if it can be shown that arthood is an institutional fact (in Searle's sense), then it is possible to say that the evaluative criteria we apply to works of art are also a species of institutional fact.

Dickie's Account of Artistic Evaluation

Dickie's Institutional Theory stands in sharp contrast to the argument, advanced recently by Denis Dutton (2009), that there is a natural or biological element to the production and appreciation of art. Dickie's approach is cultural rather than natural, and conforms to the central insight that "art is a collective *invention* of human beings and not something that an artist produces simply out of his or her biological nature" (2001, p. 10). It is in the unseen properties of works of art, in their relational properties, that we are likely to find a more satisfying account – and for Dickie this means the cultural practices that surround the work itself. He notes that it "takes some observing, inferring, and theorizing to arrive at an understanding of the cultural practice but the practice in a way is transparent" (2001, p. 21). Dickie has argued, however, that all the observing, inferring, and theorizing that has led us to the institutional definition of art has yielded no insights into the terms of its evaluation. Maintaining this position, he subsequently offers a non-institutional evaluative scheme. Even if we grant Dickie's approach, though, at its core such a scheme still requires the institutional structure of the artworld, if it is to be maintained that the evaluative terms in question are specifically relevant to works of art.

Davies (1991) argues that an institutional account (like Dickie's) must necessarily involve the conferral of art status by some member or members of the artworld, who have the requisite authority to confer art status. Dickie, however, denies that any individual or group of individuals (including the artist) ever consciously confers such status, let alone has the authority to do so. Speaking to Davies' concerns, he argues that while the artist may be said to be the one making the determination that she has created a work of art, "having the authority to determine when one's own work is completed is not at all the kind

of authority Davies has in mind. For Davies, the relevant authority is the authority to exercise an entitlement to employ art making conventions” (2001, p. 39). For Dickie, then, it is not a question of authority, but rather of having the knowledge and skill to determine when one has created a work of art. Surely this same, highly specialized knowledge and skill bears on both the classification and the evaluation of artworks.

While it may seem that having knowledge and skill places one (at least potentially) in a position of authority, there is a subtle but important difference. Indeed, understanding the difference between *having authority* and *having knowledge and skill* is crucial to understanding the Institutional Theory itself. When Dickie speaks of ‘institutions’ he is not referring to the formal variety, in which individuals are invested with titles and the authority that comes with those titles. Rather, he is referring to a more informal set of social relationships, in which the rules that govern the practice of art-making, and those that frame the knowledge and skill necessary for both artists and members of the artworld public to engage in that practice, are not codified at all, but simply understood. It is the same informal nature of these sorts of social relationships that animates Searle’s account.

Artists and members of the artworld public come to understand these rules not through study and certification, as would a pharmacist or a judge, but through constant exposure to the social norms particular to the artworld. These norms derive from a specific set of social relationships in which neither the artist nor any specific member of the artworld is invested with authority – at least not in the way that a pharmacist is invested with the authority to dispense, or a judge is invested with the authority to sentence. If an individual within the artworld has any authority at all, it is a result of the role he plays within the complex social network that constitutes the artworld, a role which is itself a product of the skills and knowledge that the individual possesses. It is therefore reasonable to suppose that these same skills and this same knowledge must provide members of the artworld public with the evaluative tools necessary to meaningfully engage with artworks. Given that it is an extreme minority who possess advanced degrees in art and art history, it is unclear where such skills and knowledge would be acquired.

Dickie’s theory describes artists, publics, systems, and the roles that artists and publics play within the institutional framework (i.e., the systems) of the artworld. These roles, in turn, shape the rules that determine what is and is not art. We get some clues about

what Dickie might have in mind, regarding the rule-governed nature of art, from his discussion of roles and conventions. He argues that “the art enterprise can be seen to be a complex of interrelated roles governed by conventional and nonconventional rules” (1997, p. 74). There are roles for artists and there are roles for the art-public, each of whom adheres to certain established conventions as they engage with the artworld. The role of the artist consists, in part, in the awareness that what he creates is art, as well as in his ability to draw upon a wide variety of techniques in the creation of a particular kind of art (Dickie, 1997, p. 72). Similarly, members of the art-public share an awareness that what is shown to them is art, but they also share certain sensitivities that enable them to perceive and understand the particular kind of art presented (Dickie, 1997, p. 72). These are important insights, but they leave the more interesting questions unaddressed. Why would the art-public engage with art at all? And why do they enjoy some works rather than others?

According to the Institutional Theory, an object is granted art status not because of any qualities it possesses, nor because anybody has the authority to grant that status on the object, but because the specific roles played by members of the artworld collectively shape artistic norms and conventions. (These roles, again, are shaped by the respective skills and knowledge of the members of the artworld.) It is within the same informal institutional relationships described by Dickie’s theory that evaluative *as well as* classificatory determinations are made. Rather than an account of aesthetic value, though, he insists that “[t]he institutional theory is an account of the cultural structure within which works of art are produced and function” (2001, p. 28). The suggestion that there is a relationship between *institutional structures* and the *function of the objects that are a product of those structures* has implications for how we define the (typically functional) terms by which we evaluate artworks. So why does Dickie think that classification and evaluation are independent activities?

Dickie made a number of important changes to his theory in *The Art Circle* (1997). Perhaps the most striking is that any reference to evaluation – that a work is granted the ‘status of candidate for appreciation’ – was removed. He explains that “[c]andidacy for appreciation had originally been included in order to distinguish between those aspects of a work of art to which appreciation and/or criticism ought to be directed [...] and those aspects of an artwork to which appreciation and/or criticism ought not to be directed”

(2001, p. 56). But this seems a needless distinction to make. No critic is going to concern himself with the kind of wood a canvas is stretched on, or any other incidental feature of the work; it is usually obvious which characteristics are to be evaluated and which are not. Although Dickie is quite clear (even in earlier versions) that the Institutional Theory is strictly classificatory, the inclusion of evaluative language – ‘appreciation’ in particular – suggests that the classification and the evaluation of artworks are not easy to separate. Our intuitions about art suggest the same. Thus there must be some role to be played by artworld institutions in setting the terms of evaluation of the objects it submits to its public.

Careful to distinguish classification from evaluation, Dickie identifies three qualities that an effective evaluative theory must have: it must show how art has value; it must grapple with relativism; and it must have some account of evaluational principles (2001, p. 74). Drawing on the work of Bruce Vermazen,⁹ whose systematic approach to evaluation prompted Dickie (2001) to develop what he calls ‘comparison matrices,’ Dickie constructs a similarly methodical scheme for evaluating artistic merit. Explaining this scheme, he writes that “for any actual work, a matrix consisting of actual or imagined works can be constructed,” so that “when someone accurately says that a work is excellent that person is saying that it sits atop its matrix. When a work is good, it is high in its matrix. When a work is poor, it is low in its matrix” (2001, p. 80). Dickie even suggests that a numerical scale can be applied to an artistic evaluation. In his scheme, numbers between 5 and -5 (integers kept small to keep the scheme from getting out of control) are assigned to independently evaluable properties of a given work of art, which is compared with another work (either real or imagined) to determine the degree of its value.

Cynthia Freeland (1992) is critical of Dickie’s evaluative scheme, suggesting his matrices are ‘byzantine-looking,’ but in response Dickie claims that the point is “to have the complete range of possible works with the same independently valued properties of a certain sort represented” (2001, p. 82). These matrices should thus be seen as purely representative, as tools for apprehending features in works that would otherwise be difficult to grasp, and which would be still more difficult to analyze. Francis Sparshott (1991) finds it difficult to see the value of what he calls Dickie’s ‘global rankings’ of works of art. But

⁹ See Bruce Vermazen, “Comparing Evaluations of Works of Art.” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 34(1), 1975: 7-14.

Dickie insists that these are “an attempt to give an account of the logic of what is involved in the application of evaluational terms to works of art” (2001, p. 85). It is not as though Dickie is proposing that we consciously *measure* paintings and poems when we evaluate them, as his critics imply (or outright accuse). His comparison matrices are properly seen as tools to aid in our apprehension of the evaluable properties of works, not a means to assign a ‘score.’ What Dickie omits, though, is an explanation of how one quality (rather than another) comes to be included in a work’s evaluation matrix. This determination is made within the confines of the institutional setting of the artworld.

In the final chapter of *Art and Value*, Dickie takes up the question of whether a *theory of art* is necessarily a *theory of value*. He draws upon two writers in exploring this question: Bill Tilghman (1999) and Sebastian Gardner (2003), for each of whom it is a given that the concept of art itself is evaluative – further, each author finds a serious shortcoming in both historical and institutional theories that they overlook said connection. Tilghman, in his review of Alan Goldman’s *Aesthetic Value* (1995), agrees with Goldman’s claim that a theory of art must recognize that the evaluative nature of art cannot be divorced from its definition; while Gardner argues that “[w]e do not first classify objects as art, and then discover that they happen to be aesthetically rewarding: conceptually, there is only one move here” (2003, p. 238). Dickie, though, wants to maintain the value-neutrality of the Institutional Theory, keeping it strictly classificatory. He maintains, following Weitz (1956, 2008), that a theory must remain value-neutral if it is to account for artworks that are excellent, good, mediocre, or bad. Thus, for Dickie, the classification of artworks is a matter entirely divorced from their evaluation.

Dickie is correct that we are likely to encounter difficulties if we build evaluative language into a definition of art itself. His earlier attempts at definition made reference to a work of art necessarily being a ‘candidate for appreciation’ – a term subsequently removed. Dickie’s explanation for this removal is that it was meant to set the art-relevant properties of a work apart from its non-art-relevant properties – but there is a further, and more important, reason. If part of the definition of an artwork is that it be appreciated, or indeed evaluated, it would presuppose a degree of quality that would deny the arthood of mediocre (or bad) art. Yet it is clear that there *is* mediocre and bad art that is nevertheless art. It thus makes perfect sense for Dickie to have omitted this language from his definition:

a theory cannot, in “one move” (using Gardner’s words), render something evaluable *and* set the terms of that evaluation. Further complicating matters, there are actually two different questions here: why something is valuable, and how it is evaluated. If the *why* is built into the definition, it already sets the terms of the *how*, thereby severely limiting the parameters of evaluation.

Recognizing that one needs a theory to distinguish art from other aesthetically evaluable objects, Dickie tries to imagine how an institutional theory would look if it incorporated an evaluative element, like the one Gardner proposes. According to Dickie, a tentative definition would read something like, “[a] work of art in the classificatory sense is *an aesthetically good* thing that is an artifact of a kind created to be presented to an artworld public” (2001, p. 96, original italics). But such a theory provides no way of speaking of mediocre or bad art. Certainly a definition of art cannot accommodate the terms of its evaluation – but it is possible that if an artwork is so classified by the artworld (i.e., if the arthood of an object is recognized by individuals engaged in the set of social relationships that obtain within the artworld), there is good reason to think that the terms of its evaluation are set within that same set of social relationships. Dickie’s theory presupposes an institution in which only one action can take place: the action of classification. But the same institutional framework is capable of doing more. He is correct that art needs to be *defined* in value-neutral terms. But if the institutional framework in which art is defined is the same institutional framework in which the terms of its evaluation are set, it might explain not only why an object such as a blank canvas is *art*, but also why it is *good art*.

At the close of *Art and Value*, Dickie declares: “I think a promising way in which being a work of art and being a good work of art could be related is of the following sort – a work of art is not *necessarily* valuable in any particular degree but it is the *kind* of thing that is subject to evaluation” (2001, p. 106). He goes on to say that “I can reformulate the institutional definition of ‘art’ in the following way to accommodate the evaluative element – A work of art in the classificatory sense is an evaluable artifact of a kind created to be presented to an artworld public” (2001, p. 107). Dickie even recognizes that this language is consistent with that of his first attempts at definition, pointing out that it “harks back to my use of ‘candidate for appreciation’ in the earlier incarnations of the institutional theory”

(2001, p. 107). He adds, though, that “[t]his reformulation does not [...] really add anything new because everyone has always regarded works of art – however they are defined – as evaluable; the definition just makes it explicit” (2001, p. 107). And so it should. A number of writers (including Wollheim, Goldman, and the critics Dickie takes to task) have looked on a theory of art as something that, if it is to have any explanatory power at all, must account for the terms of its evaluation. We cannot talk meaningfully about art without talking about the terms in which we evaluate it (that is, about its being excellent or good, mediocre or bad). To understand what art *is* is precisely to understand how and why it is evaluated. Therefore, not only is value an indispensable component of any theory of art, it can and should be a component of the Institutional Theory. It may be that we are talking about two different theoretical projects, but it remains that each theory will draw on the same social framework in defining its respective terms.

The Case for an Institutional Theory of Artistic Evaluation

We typically evaluate things in terms of how well they fulfill their respective functions; further, function tends to be an important component of any definition. A good chainsaw will be one that is durable, easy to use, and capable of making a clean cut through a tree trunk. A good winter coat is one that is comfortable and provides protection from the elements. But things are not always this straightforward. A pair of shoes, for instance, might be both defined and positively evaluated because they are waterproof, supportive, and comfortable; however, many people will happily endure extreme discomfort wearing what they nevertheless feel is a *good* pair of shoes. Some will forgo the convenience of gears and the safety of brakes to ride what they feel is a *good* bicycle. And given the choice, most drivers would prefer a Lamborghini to a Kia, despite the fact that the former has almost none of the virtues we expect of an automobile.

Status and style obviously have a great deal to do with the sacrifices made in utility and comfort, but even when practical concerns take a back seat to status and style, our definitions and evaluations of objects like shoes, bikes, and automobiles are still based on function. Each of these objects fulfills a very clear function: they project an image of how

we see ourselves, and how we prefer to be perceived by others. Art can, and often does fulfill this same function, but when it comes to art (and its evaluation) as a social practice, significantly more is at stake than the needs of an image-conscious consumer.

The challenge presented to contemporary philosophers of aesthetics is that art appears to serve many functions – and at the same time, to serve no functions at all. The Institutional Theory represents a very tidy solution to this quandary, at least in terms of defining art, but the lack of an easily identifiable function continues to pose serious difficulties for us when accounting for our judgments of artworks. The cynic will say that artistic judgments are nothing more than a matter of status and style, just like high-heeled shoes or sports cars. Art, according to the cynic, is just something that rich people collect to impress other rich people – but there is clearly more to art than this. A less cynical response might be that artistic judgment is a matter of personal preference or aesthetic taste and that it is thus entirely (and unavoidably) subjective. If this were actually the case, we could not speak of ‘good taste’ and ‘bad taste,’ nor of ‘good art’ and ‘bad art’ – yet we can, and often do speak about just these things, and frequently do so as though they were matters of fact. In fact, if artistic judgments were a matter of personal taste, and thus entirely subjective, there would hardly be a need for art galleries or museums – indeed, in such a case we could hardly talk of an artworld at all. Yet not only *is* there an artworld, there is an artworld within which artistic judgements seem to adhere to specific, fact-like rules and conventions. It remains to be shown exactly what kind of ‘fact’ we are referring to when we say, for instance, that Picasso’s *Les Femmes d’Alger* (1911) is a masterpiece.

Suppose Mary’s aunt is an artist who specializes in painting cat’s faces on smooth stones, and Mary sincerely believes that her aunt’s art is the finest she has ever seen – finer than Picasso’s *Les Femmes d’Alger*. Can it be said that Mary’s judgement here, *qua* art, is wrong, and that the judgement of the artworld is right? There *is* an artworld. It is the institutions of this artworld that determine whether or not a given object is a work of art, and the fact that both *Les Femmes d’Alger* and the maternal-executed cats are works of art implies, as we have seen, a complex social network within which there exists a broad consensus about such matters. Although there are no identifiable qualities within an artwork that make it a work of art, we *do* seem to be able to point to the qualities that make it a *good* work of art. We might say that its formal properties are pleasing, or we

might say that it has a powerful cognitive effect, or that it is emotionally engaging. A work of art can be any or all of these things. But if the function (whether formal, cognitive, or emotional) is no part of the definition of a work of art, then we need to know how it comes to be part of its evaluation. Each of these determinations – the classificatory and the evaluative – is made within the institutional framework of the artworld. It must be the same framework that establishes not only the criteria for arthood itself, but the specific function that a work of art is to fulfill, and upon which it is to be evaluated. In other words: the same mechanisms that classify a work of art are those which determine the criteria for its evaluation. Again, there is no reason to suppose that each of these determinations cannot be made within the same social framework.

Taking Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger (O.J.)* once more, we might be tempted to say that we *can* identify the qualities that make that work the masterpiece it is commonly thought to be. We might point to the bold new style in which Picasso painted, or to his use of colour, or the radical way he chose to represent the female form, or (as is often attributed to this work) Picasso's pioneering use of traditional sub-Saharan African motifs. But if these were among the qualities that made *Les Femmes d'Alger (O.J.)* valuable as a work of art, then it would surely be these same qualities that constituted the definition of art itself. These would be the "good reasons" that Wollheim (1980) suggested are the real substance of a definition. This must be what art does, this must be its function, and *Les Femmes d'Alger (O.J.)* must be valuable because it fulfills this function particularly well. But it has been shown that functional theories give us a classification of art that is quite impossible to sustain, and that procedural theories (like Dickie's Institutional Theory) are much more likely to yield a satisfactory definition. It may be that it is a specific function that *Les Femmes d'Alger (O.J.)* fulfills that makes it a great work of art, but we still need to know why it is *this* function, rather than another, that makes it so.

It might be argued that once an object is classified as art within the institutional framework of the artworld, we can then unproblematically talk about its functional properties, and make evaluations based on those properties even if those properties played no part in the classification of the object. It might be said that if *Les Femmes d'Alger (O.J.)* has been determined to be an artwork by the institutions of the artworld, then its style, colour, form, and content are valuable attributes of the work *as an artwork*. Now that the

procedural institutional theory has done the classifying, a functional evaluative theory can explain why the work is valuable. But one of the greatest problems that functional theories of art face is that there are just too many functions to say that one (or even several) is essential to the art status of a work of art. If we are forced to narrow the functions of art down to one (or even several) the concept becomes closed and, as Weitz (1956) rightly points out, no new art can ever be produced. Similarly, if we are to evaluate works of art based on functional criteria, these criteria must either be finite and known (which closes the concept) or infinite and unknown (which leaves it hopelessly indeterminate). We need a theory that is sufficiently flexible, yet definite, in order to explain the criteria for evaluating a very broad spectrum of works of art. The only existing approach with such flexibility is the Institutional Theory of Art.

Another example – and every philosopher of art’s favorite – is Duchamp’s *Fountain* (1917). Prior to the point that Duchamp presented this object to the artworld, it was never the case that among the possible functions a work of art could serve was ‘having been mass produced as a plumbing fixture.’ *Fountain* defies every intuition we have, not only about what a work of art should do, but about what makes an artwork great. Yet, not only was *Fountain* received as a work of art by the artworld, it was also (and continues to be) highly praised. It was (and continues to be) a *good* work of art. But if in 1917, *Fountain* served no pre-existing art-relevant function, then we need to know how its function as an artwork came to be known – especially if we are to say that it is a *good* work of art. The fact that *Fountain* is a work of art, and that it is a good work of art, are each a special kind of fact: an *institutional* fact.

Returning to *Les Femmes d’Alger* and stepping past the function problem, we might say that the work is esteemed because it represents an important juncture in the history of art. This seems a very attractive alternative, since *Les Femmes d’Alger* obviously represents a radical departure from its predecessors. But Picasso could have done any number of things that would have departed no less radically from existing art traditions. He might have ‘painted’ a blank canvas, placed a urinal on a plinth, or erased another artist’s work (all of which would be recognized by the artworld as important works over the course of the twentieth century). But the artworld of 1907 was not the sort of place where any of these objects would have been recognized as valuable, or recognized as art at

all. That is, the social relationships that need to be in place for blank canvases, urinals, or erased drawings to be regarded as works of art did not yet exist. *Les Femmes d'Alger* was, and continues to be, recognized and valued by the artworld principally because the complex social relations that obtained within the institutions of the artworld *at the time* made it so. It is only within those relationships that the history of art, as an autonomous social practice, makes any sense. Just as the qualities that constitute a given work of art presuppose an institutional framework, the history of art (and the junctures along its path that are considered important) are a matter of institutional determination. It is therefore ultimately (and essentially) the institutions of the artworld, and not the history of art itself, that place value on the stylistic and historical departures from (or consistency with) the existing artistic traditions exhibited in a given work of art.¹⁰

But Mary will have none of this. Her aunt's art is *good*. It is technically accomplished, pleasant to look at, and by all accounts quite popular. *Les Femmes d'Alger*, by way of contrast, is an ugly mess. Picasso has not even taken the time to render the human form accurately! Indeed, as far as Mary is concerned, the artworld was grossly mistaken in declaring *Les Femmes d'Alger* a masterpiece. Yet from the perspective of the artworld, Mary is the one who is mistaken – and not only is she wrong, her aunt's painted stones belong to another, altogether *lower* category. They are kitsch. While this seems to be a species of cultural relativism – *Les Femmes d'Alger* simply belongs to a culture that realistically rendered, feline-faced rocks do not – there is something fact-like about the claim that Picasso's piece is a great work of art, and something equally fact-like about the claim that Mary's aunt's painted stones are not (though both are artworks).

There are two distinct sorts of evaluation at issue here. One is bound up with classification, while the other involves the evaluation of specific works. There are strata that works occupy within the broader Artworld, and those strata are typically distinguished in terms of value. Even the most well-crafted bird house will never be as valuable as a

¹⁰ Of course, there are non-institutional forces at work in the ways we respond to artworks. There is strong evolutionary evidence for a propensity among our ancestors for pattern recognition and response. Michael Shermer (2011) suggests that pattern recognition played an important part in evolution, and that we have a propensity (called 'paternity') to create meaning out of patterns. This phenomenon may play a role in the ways that we respond to artworks, but without the social structure afforded by artworld institutions, this raw data would mean little.

Kandinsky painting. Bodies of works are classified not only in terms of medium, but also in terms of social worth. On the other hand, we tend to evaluate artworks in terms of specific functions. We might find a work pleasing for its formal properties, its emotional effect on us, or because of its cognitive content (among other reasons). Dickie would argue that both the criteria that differentiate the strata that works occupy, and the criteria that make individual works valuable, are independent of the institutional structure of the artworld (which classifies artworks more generally). Yet while it may be the case that the norms and conventions that obtain within the artworld – the norms and conventions that determine what constitutes *great* art – draw upon broader social and cultural values, there are several reasons to think that there is more to the evaluation of art than just consistency with those values.

One reason is that if it were true that art was simply an expression of social and cultural values, there would be nothing to distinguish art from other forms of social and cultural expression (such as costume or cooking). A second reason is that there are too many works of art (for example, Pier Paolo Pasolini's (1975) *Salò, or the 120 Days of Sodom* (1975) or Cormac McCarthy's (1985) *Blood Meridian*) whose content is so contrary to broader social and cultural values that their attainment of high status would have been impossible under a system so mediated. A third reason is that even if it were granted that good art was good in virtue of its exhibiting broader social and cultural values, we would still be no closer to knowing why good art *ought* to do this rather than something else. And finally, if art were an expression of social and cultural values, *this* would be our definition of art, and we would have no need of an Institutional Theory of Art at all. The terms by which we evaluate artworks cannot, therefore, be a product of broader social and cultural values.

The fact-like nature of artistic judgments – like “*Les Femmes d’Alger* is a great work of art” – has a great deal to do with the categories and strata into which the artworld is divided. But there is nothing natural about this stratification, and therefore nothing inherently or naturally inferior in Mary’s aunt’s painted stones (indeed, Jeff Koons rose to prominence in the 1980s by celebrating the very kitsch that the artworld had previously derided). There is no quality that we can point to, either in *Les Femmes d’Alger* or the motherfucking cats, that makes one a better work of art than the

other. They serve different functions, certainly, but it is not entirely clear why the function of one makes it less valuable as an artwork than does the function of the other. Because we cannot draw this distinction from broader social and cultural values, the question remains: how does it come to be a *fact* that Picasso is a great artist, and Mary's aunt is not? Since function does not appear to enter into either the definition or the evaluation of art in any essential way, we are obliged to conclude that the values placed on objects within the artworld, and the stratification of the various systems that constitute that artworld, must be a matter of institutional determination. Thus the apparent fact that that cats-painted-on-stones are simply not, as good artworks, as *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* must be an institutional fact.

Institutional Facts & Artistic Judgment

Very early on in the development of the Institutional Theory of Art, Diffey made use of an important concept in making the case for his 'republic of art.' He argued that it is an institutional fact that a given object is a work of art, and that such 'institutional facts' (as distinguished from 'brute facts') are "true in virtue of human practices" (1991a, p. 66). Diffey was here making use of John Searle's (1995) account of the relationship between social reality and the facts that constitute said reality. Diffey did apply this concept very effectively in his own work, but he never made very extensive use of Searle's argument – even though it provides a handy explanation of why, when confronted with a piece like *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* (1907), we know not only that we are witnessing a work of art, but that it is a great work of art. We take both of these statements to be true not because each is a brute fact about *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*, nor because there is anything natural about our response to Picasso's work, but because each of these statements is an institutional fact.

Searle's (1995) account describes the imposition of status-function on objects that do not, in themselves, possess it. This involves the collective, social, imposition of function that continues to be recognized across a culture, and across time. The normative status of the function of an object or practice derives from constitutive rules, which themselves derive from what Searle calls 'Background abilities.' He makes no specific reference to art

objects or artworld practices in his work, but Searle's position is consistent with not only Dickie's account of artworld institutions, but also with the idea that artworld conventions and the evaluation of artworks are equally matters of the collective, social, imposition of status-function on objects that do not naturally have this status-function.

Searle's proposition takes the form 'X counts as Y in C' (1995, p. 80). Explaining this formula, he writes, "the status expressions admit of two definitions, one in terms of the constitution (the X term) and one in terms of the imposed agentive function (the Y term)" (1995, p. 87). Searle offers the following example: "A touchdown is when you break the plane of the goal line with the ball in your possession while the play is in progress (X term), and a touchdown is six points (Y term)" (Searle, 1995, p. 87). The formula, then, accounts for the nature of the phenomenon *and* its value in that context. Searle further explains that the 'counts as' term suggests intentionality, thus, "[t]he possibilities of creating institutional facts by the use of this formula are limited by the possibilities of imposing new features on entities just by collectively agreeing that they have those features" (1995, p. 95). The Y term gives the X term a power that it would not otherwise have, so X can be used in a way that its 'X structure' would not, under any other conditions, allow. But in order for the Y term to be accepted at all, there must be some power at work, some authority that enables or grants permission – but this power is subtle, and in no way involves a 'decider' (as might be imagined). Put succinctly: "the Y term must assign some new status that the entities named by the X term do not already have, and this new status must be such that human agreement, acceptance, and other forms of collective intentionality are necessary and sufficient to create it" (Searle, 1995, p. 51). "The function," according to Searle, "requires the status in order that it be performed and the status requires collective intentionality" (1995, p. 114). The idea of collective intentionality – perhaps the most important term in Searle's scheme – bears closer examination.

Searle suggests that "logically more primitive arrangements have evolved into institutional structures with collectively recognized status-functions" (1995, p. 81). By collective intentionality, we thus impose, "new status-functions on things that cannot perform those functions without that collective imposition" (Searle, 1995, p. 81). Further, "[w]e create a new institutional fact, such as a marriage, by using an object (or objects) with an existing status-function [...] to perform a certain type of speech act, the fact of

whose performance is yet another institutional fact” (Searle, 1995, p. 84). Therefore, a fact that gains social consent within one institutional context can affect the status-function of an object in another institutional context. This explains how the social, economic, or political climate we live in, or our religious or moral convictions, can influence how we respond works of art – without compromising the integrity or autonomy of the artworld institutions that house those artworks. These forces might influence our judgments, but they are not an essential part of the terms by which artworks are judged.

Institutional facts also presuppose systems of constitutive rules, but there must be a stable system of expectations if we are to make any sense of the objects and practices that obtain, under those rules, in a given institutional setting (Searle, 1995, p. 81). We might test an institutional fact, Searle suggests, by seeing if it is possible to explicitly codify the rules (Searle, 1995, p. 87). He points out that many institutional facts (for example, property, marriage, and money) have been codified, and are now governed by explicit laws, while others (such as friendships, dates, and parties) have not been so codified – but could be. An institutional fact, then, is not necessarily something that *is* codified in law, but is the sort of thing that *could* be so codified. This has echoes of Dickie’s original argument that a work of art is not the sort of thing that *has to* be appreciated, but is the sort of thing that *could* be appreciated (1974). Searle (1995) further points out that informal institutions can be explicitly codified, but at the price of the flexibility and spontaneity of the informal, uncoded form of practice. Flexibility is an important attribute of Dickie’s Institutional Theory: it provides a description of necessary and sufficient conditions for arthood, while at the same time leaving the concept sufficiently ‘open’ to allow for departures from art-making traditions.

Because status-functions are matters of power, “the structure of institutional facts is a structure of power relations” (Searle, 1995, p. 94). Searle points out that everything civilizationally valuable hinges on creating and sustaining institutional power relations, processes that occur via collectively-imposed status-functions (1995, p. 94). “We cannot impose an electrical charge,” Searle observes, “just by deciding to count something as an electrical charge, but we can impose the office of the Presidency just by deciding what we will count as becoming President, and then making those people President who meet the conditions we have decided on” (1995, pp. 94-95). If the creation of an institutional fact is

a matter of imposing status and function on X (which on its own has neither that status nor that function), then creating its status-function entails conferring a new power (Searle, 1995, p. 95). But it is important to note that this does not imply just *any* authority. The power does not derive from a seat, but from the collective intentionality of those engaged with the institution. Related to power is the issue of the degree to which agents are conscious of the institutional structure in which they operate. Searle (1995) argues that people, objects, and events exist and interact in systematic relationships, so that the mechanism is not dependent on the system-awareness of the participants. Indeed, as he points out, “the category of people, including groups, is fundamental in the sense that the imposition of status-functions on objects and events works only in relation to people” (Searle, 1995, p. 97). Searle’s theory is in every sense *relational*, and as such it is perfectly consistent with the relational character of Dickie’s Institutional Theory. Further, if Diffey recognized the merits of applying Searle’s theory of institutional facts to his theory of art, and this same idea is at least implicit in Dickie’s formulation, the idea of institutional facts might help explain how we seem to *know* how to evaluate artworks.

Searle’s theory, like Dickie’s, involves relationships between agents in a given context – in Dickie’s case, that context is the artworld. But how is it that an agent can play a role in an institutional structure without (as Searle suggests is the case) being aware of her place in that structure? Searle offers an example that answers this question. “The anthropologist from outside the institution,” he writes, “may see the potlatch [...] as performing functions of which the Kwakiutl participants are totally unaware, but the whole feast is a potlatch in the first place only because of the collective intentionality and the imposition of status-functions by the participants” (1995, p. 98). Agents take up roles in an institutional structure, and those agents can (and often do) remain unaware of how their actions shape the structure of which they are a part. A member of the artworld public may feel as though she is responding in a natural (even biological) way, or she may feel as though she is acting in accordance with a set of rules that she played no part in shaping; but on Searle’s account she plays an instrumental, rather than a merely adjunctive role in the institutional structure of the artworld. It is thus possible that, even though no individual is consciously aware of it, the relationships that constitute the artworld not only influence the classification of art, but also shape the standards by which art is evaluated. Two distinct

actions – the classificatory and the evaluative – are carried out within the confines of a single institutional framework: the artworld. Each is equally a product of Searle’s collective intentionality.

A further, and equally important dimension of Searle’s (1995) account is his ‘Background abilities.’ Indeed, it is these that lend force to the collective intentionality that gives institutional facts their substance. For Searle, “the structure of human institutions is a structure of constitutive rules” (1995, p. 127). However, as agents we are typically not conscious of these rules, even though we do (strictly speaking) follow them. To make this point, Searle offers the simple example of shopping, noting that it is implausible to suggest that when we shop we are conscious of the rules surrounding currency regulation, or the rules surrounding the regulation of the purchase and sale of produce (1995, pp. 137-138). We act in accordance with these rules not because we are aware of them, but because we are equipped with the requisite ‘Background’ knowledge, itself consistent with socially established rules. The ‘Background’ that Searle is talking about is “the set of nonintentional or preintentional capacities that enable intentional states of function” (1995, p. 129). So when we stand impressed before *Les Demoiselles d’Avignon*, we are responding – equipped with certain Background abilities – to a set of rules that we at once (unconsciously) shape and respond to.

Searle offers another helpful example to clarify the nature of institutional facts: “the literal meaning of any sentence can only determine its truth conditions or other conditions of satisfaction against a Background of capacities, dispositions, know-how, etc., which are not themselves part of the semantic content of the sentence” (1995, p. 130). For the sentence, “She gave him her key and he opened the door” there is “an indefinite range of ridiculous but still literal interpretations” (Searle, 1995, p. 131). For Searle “the only thing that blocks those interpretations is not the semantic content but simply the fact that you have a certain sort of knowledge about how the world works, you have a certain set of abilities for coping with the world (Searle, 1995, p. 131). In other words, by constant exposure and social engagement, we simply have the knowledge and skills required to engage meaningfully in a given activity – including engaging with artworks.

If we want to know the role that the rule structure plays in accounting for human behaviours (such as evaluating artworks), we need to recognize that institutions are systems

of constitutive rules (Searle, 1995, p. 140). “The key to understanding the causal relations between the structure of the Background and the structure of social institutions,” he writes, “is to see that the Background can be causally sensitive to the specific forms of the constitutive rules of the institutions without actually containing any beliefs or desires or representations of those rules” (Searle, 1995, p. 141). It is for this reason that the rules, and the structures that maintain them, remain invisible to us. The Background is nothing more than our abilities and know-how, or our skills and knowledge. And according to Searle, those sorts of abilities, those sorts of skills and knowledge, “that become ingrained are in fact a reflection of the sets of constitutive rules whereby we impose functions on entities that do not have those functions in virtue of their physical structure, but acquire the function only through collective agreement or acceptance” (1995, p. 142). Suppose it is said that a particular artwork is intended to move viewers emotionally (that is, that its function is to move viewers emotionally) – that the work fulfills this function makes it valuable as a work of art. Whatever it is that makes such an artwork valuable, it has to be more than the *fact* that things that move us emotionally are valuable – otherwise everything that moves us emotionally would be a work of art. It has to be established that works of art that accomplish this emotional impact are valuable *as works of art*. The missing piece, here, is the institutional fact that emotionally moving artworks provide a valuable experience.

To give another example: suppose an individual visits an art gallery and, without having been told the difference explicitly, somehow ‘knows’ that the paintings hung on the walls and the sculptures exhibited in the halls are works of art, and that the desk at the coat check and the skylights in the mezzanine are not. He also ‘knows’ that the Renoir is a great artwork, and that the paintings in the gallery containing the work of ‘local artists’ are lesser. How does he *know* these things? For Searle, “he doesn’t need to know the rules of the institution and to follow them in order to conform to the rules; rather, he is just disposed to behave in a certain way, but he has acquired those unconscious dispositions and capacities in a way that is sensitive to the rule structure of the institution” (1995, p. 144). Thus, “in learning to cope with social reality,” he writes, “we acquire a set of cognitive abilities that are everywhere sensitive to an intentional structure, and in particular to the rule structures of complex institutions, without necessarily everywhere containing representations of the rules of those institutions” (1995, p. 145).

Finally, there is an important normative dimension to Searle's conclusions. He points out that, "where human institutions are concerned, we accept a socially created normative component. We accept that there is something wrong with the person who when the baseball is pitched at him simply eats it" (1995, p. 146). Searle argues the existence of "a socially created normative component in the institutional structure, [...] accounted for only by the fact that the institutional structure is a structure of rules, and the actual rules that we specify in describing the institution will determine those aspects under which the system is normative" (1995, pp. 146-147). Thus, more than simply a stage upon which a specific social activity is carried out, it is plausible that the artworld is an institutional structure in which the collective intentionality of constituent agents shape outcomes not only in terms of classification, but also in terms of evaluation. If there is a normative dimension to institutional facts, there is no reason to suppose that evaluative criteria would not be among those facts.

Summary

Wollheim noted that "it seems a well-entrenched thought that reflection upon the nature of art has an important part to play in determining the standards by which works of art are evaluated" (1980, p. 163). Of course, there remain a number of interesting questions surrounding the nature of art and its definition; however, following Wollheim, this chapter has explored the equally interesting question of what constitutes its value. A definition of art, as Dickie and others have pointed out, cannot include evaluative terms. We tend, rather, to turn to formal features or historical context when evaluating artworks. But the issue at hand is not which among these (or other) features of a work of art are the source of a work's value, but *why* these features (and not others) are the source of a work's value. When we evaluate a work of art, it is the institutional framework in which the object exists, rather than the formal and/or historic qualities that *appear* to be the object of our evaluation, that is actually setting the terms of our evaluation. This is not to say that the Institutional Theory of Art should be both a classificatory *and* an evaluative theory. It is clear that a single theory of art cannot simultaneously define art and set the terms of its evaluation. The

problems that Dickie's proposed evaluative scheme faces, however, indicate that it is just as difficult to identify evaluative criteria *in* a work as it is to identify classificatory criteria *in* a work. Searle's argument for the normative consequences of institutional facts suggests that the sought-for criteria for evaluation may actually be a product of the social relations that constitute the artworld. In other words: it may be that the collective intentionality of agents acting in specific roles within institutional structures – whose Background abilities (i.e., skills and knowledge) shape the roles they play – influences the normative scaffolding of the artworld, including the evaluative criteria we apply to artworks.

On this account, what we have is a single institutional structure (the artworld) performing two distinct but related functions. On one hand, it is within the web of social relationships constituting the artworld that the determination, “[a] work of art is an artifact of a kind created to be presented to an artworld public” is made (Dickie, 1997, pp. 80-82). On the other hand, if it is supposed that good art is that which exhibits broader social and cultural values, it must be within this same web of social relationships (i.e., the artworld) that those broader social and cultural values are incorporated into the evaluative terms that we apply to artworks. If this is not the case, and art is merely a form of cultural expression, we face a number of vexing problems. First, there would be nothing to distinguish art from other forms of cultural expression; second, there are too many great works of art whose content runs contrary to broader social and cultural values; third, even if it were granted that good art is that which exhibits broader social and cultural values (which is often the case), we still need to know why good art ought to do this rather than something else; and finally, if art were an expression of social and cultural values, *this* would be our definition of art, and we would have no need of an Institutional Theory. Therefore, if art is an autonomous social practice – and surely it is – then the evaluative criteria that we apply specifically to artworks must be a product of the same institutional framework in which classificatory determinations are made. While it is clear that art ought to be *defined* in value-neutral terms, there is no reason to suppose that the institutional framework from which Dickie draws his definition could not also be the institutional framework in which the terms of artistic evaluations are made.

Conclusion

Towards an Institutional Theory of Artistic Value

Mathew Kieran suggests that “sound reflection will show not merely that there is necessarily an evaluative aspect to art criticism, but that ‘art’ as a concept has a constitutive evaluative aspect that is irreducible and inseparable” (1994, p. 96). Richard Wollheim expressed a similar sentiment, but his concern was directed specifically at the Institutional Theory advanced by George Dickie. This thesis has argued that the Institutional Theory represents as sound a framework as has yet been advanced for identifying the necessary and sufficient conditions that define the concept of art. In support of this argument, the genealogy of the Institutional Theory has been traced, a defense of the theory against a number of highly salient objections has been offered. However, as strong a theoretical framework as the Institutional Theory represents, the observations made by Kieran and Wollheim (among others) expose what appears to be a very serious shortcoming. This thesis stands as an effort to address this potential flaw.

Recall Dickie’s observation that, “we generally know immediately whether an object is a work of art, so that generally no one needs to say, by way of classification, ‘That is a work of art’ [...]. Even if we do not often talk about art in this classificatory sense, however, it is a basic concept that structures and guides our thinking about our world and its contents” (1974, p. 27). Recall, too, Davies’ observation that the Institutional Theory, being a procedural account, describes the concept of art in terms of the procedures and rules that surround the practice (1991, p. 30). According to Searle, we act in accordance with these procedures and rules not because we are consciously aware of them, but because we are equipped with a certain nonintentional (or preintentional) ‘Background’ knowledge (1995). We seem to make judgments in artistic matters without any conscious thought for the procedures and rules that surround the practice of artmaking. The Institutional Theory of Art, which offers a powerful classificatory framework, is capable of accounting for this phenomenon.

Searle (1995) argued that “where human institutions are concerned, we accept a socially created normative component” (1995, p. 146). If art is essentially institutional (as

Dickie capably demonstrated), and the arthood of an object is thus an institutional fact, there is no reason to suppose that the terms of its evaluation would not similarly be institutional facts. The evaluative terms we apply to works of art could thus be accounted for in terms of an institutional theory – either precisely like or very similar to that which Dickie advances. Additionally, if the Institutional Theory can be shown to provide a satisfying account of artistic value, it may also be equipped to deal with the related problems of subjectivism (that artistic judgments are a matter of personal taste) and cultural relativism (that artistic judgments are always culturally specific). If the appreciation of art is entirely subjective, we could not discuss art at all; if it were culturally relevant, we could not enjoy the work of artists from unfamiliar cultures. Clearly, though, we do discuss art, and we do enjoy the work of foreign artists. Therefore there must be something normative about artistic judgments, and the only theoretical framework equipped to explain this would be an Institutional Theory of Artistic Evaluation. Such a theoretical framework remains to be fully mapped out; but what has herein been offered is a justification for advancing precisely such a theoretical framework.

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