

History of the Institutional Theory of Art

Prologue

In response to a variety of criticisms, I have made four tries over the years to formulate an institutional definition of 'art'. By an institutional account I mean the idea that works of art are art because of the position they occupy within an institutional context. My first try was in 1969 in a journal article.¹ The next two tries – in 1971² and 1974³ – were rather minor attempts at revision. In 1984, I attempted a major overhaul of the theory.⁴ I shall call the first three formulations 'the earlier version' of the institutional theory. I shall call the fourth and last formulation 'the later version of the institutional theory'. In the first try (of the earlier version), I specified the definition of 'art' as follows:

A work of art in the descriptive sense is (1) an artifact (2) upon which society or some sub-group of a society has conferred the status of candidate for appreciation.⁵

I soon realized that speaking of society or some subgroup of society conferring candidacy for appreciation gave the wrong impression that works of art are created by society or a subgroup of society acting as whole, an impression I had not intended. Here and in all subsequent discussions of the institutional theory, I have been trying to capture what goes on when art is created by artists, whether it be a single person painting a picture or a group making a movie. Even in this very first article and despite the perhaps misleading language of the definition, I explicitly stated that the status of candidate for appreciation "must be conferable by a single

person's treating an artifact as a candidate for appreciation...."⁶ This quote makes it clear then that even at this early date the theory focuses on the actions of artists when they create art.

In 1971, with a eye to removing this possible wrong impression about who creates art, I reformulated the definition to read:

A work of art in the classificatory sense is (1) an artifact (2) upon which some person or persons acting on behalf of a certain social institution (the artworld) has conferred the status of candidate for appreciation.⁷

In 1974, I formulated the definition in virtually the same way.

A work of art in the 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).⁸

In both of these slightly later formulations, I spoke of "some person or persons," that is, artist or artists, conferring the status of candidate for appreciation in order to avoid the impression that society acted as a whole to make art.

Despite the conscious care I have employed after the first formulation to avoid the misunderstanding about how art is created according to the institutional theory, a misinterpretation of my view on just this point has become widely accepted. Richard Wollheim in his 1987 book, *Painting As An Art*, focusing only on the earlier version of the theory, attributes to me the view I had taken such pains to avoid. Specifically, Wollheim attributes to me the view that, according to the earlier version of the theory, art is made by representatives of the artworld who meet and jointly act as a group to confer status on certain objects. Wollheim then ridicules this absurd view:

Does the art-world really nominate representatives? If it does, when, where, and how, do these nominations take place? Do the representatives, if they exist, pass in review all candidates for the status of art, and do they then, while conferring this status on some, deny it to others? What record is kept of these conferrals, and is the status itself subject to revision? If so, at what intervals, how, and by whom? And, last but not least, is there really such a thing as the art-world, with the coherence of a social group, capable of having representatives, who are in turn capable of carrying out acts that society is bound to endorse?⁹

(Notice that according to Wollheim the institutional theory is about the conferring of the status of *art*, whereas my three earlier definitions speak of the conferring of the status of candidacy for appreciation, but I shall ignore this detail.)¹⁰

Arthur Danto picked up Wollheim's version of what my earlier view is and incorporated it into a paper on which I was a commentator. I informed Danto that this was a gross misinterpretation my earlier view, but when his paper was published, he still attributed this view to me. Subsequently, Danto attributed this same view to me in one of his columns in *The Nation*.¹¹ I wrote a letter of protest to the editor which was published along with Danto's reply to my letter. In his reply, Danto calls Wollheim's account the *core* of the institutional theory and says, "Nor can there be great doubt that this core plays a central role though George Dickie's various formulations of the [Institutional] T[heory of] A[rt]..." Danto then asserts that Dickie "has lately come to specify that 'some person or persons' must be an artist (or some artists), but in my [Danto's] view this is a step backwards from the robust form in which the [institutional theory of art] is best understood."¹² Danto is saying that the version of the institutional theory that Wollheim ridicules is the best way to understand the earlier version of the theory.

First, the so-called core had never been my understanding of the earlier version. Second, it is not *lately* that I have specified artists to be the creators of art. I put "person or persons" into the definition in 1971 for this purpose. And when I made this change so long ago I also wrote:

A number of persons are required to make up the social institution of the artwork, but only one person is required to act on behalf of or as agent of the artwork and confer the status of candidate for appreciation. Many works of art are never seen by anyone but the persons who create them, but they are still works of art. The status in question may be acquired by a single person's treating an artifact as a candidate for appreciation. Of course nothing prevents a group of persons conferring the status, but it is usually conferred by a single person, the artist who creates the artifact.¹³

When I spoke of a group conferring the status of candidate for appreciation, I had in mind, not the whole artwork or a group of its nominated representatives, but a group that makes a movie, puts on a play, or the like. Furthermore, in the original article of 1969, although I did not give many examples of art-making, I did speak of Duchamp's artistic act of creating "Fountain." I wrote, "Duchamp's act took place within a certain institu-

tional setting..." but I did not say that some group of artworld representatives had to also act or concur in Duchamp's act.¹⁴

By the way, Wollheim was not the first one to attribute what Danto calls the "robust" version of the institutional theory of art to me, but he was, I think, the first to attribute it and to criticize it. As for this "robust" form of the theory, I believe that it is best embraced by aestheticians of the species *Paranthropus robustus*.¹⁵ Unfortunately, the "robust" view has now even been attributed to me in the recently published *Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*.¹⁶

An article by Monroe Beardsley convinced me that there was a kind of inconsistency between each of the first three definitions and the texts with which I had surrounded them.¹⁷ In the texts, I had spoken of the institution of art as an informal institution, but in the definitions which purport to encapsulate and describe the institution, I used the very formal language "conferred upon" and "acting on behalf."¹⁸

Consequently, in *The Art Circle*¹⁸ (the 1984 formulation and the later version of the theory), I dropped the formal language. Also, in this fourth attempt, I specified five definitions — definitions of what I regard as the core notions of the institutional theory of art.

- An artist is a person who participates with understanding in the making of a work of art.
- A work of art is an artifact of a kind created to be presented to an art-world public.
- 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.
- The artworld is the totality of all artworld systems.
- An artworld system is a framework for the presentation of a work of art by an artist to an artworld public.¹⁹

There is absolutely no element in any of these five definitions that gives the slightest impression that anything other than artists, as everyone ordinarily understands artists, create art. The fact that I specify a definition of 'artist' as one of the five definitions makes it clear how I understand art to be created. Both Wollheim and Danto published their comments well after the appearance of the later version (Wollheim even refers to the later version). It is unfortunate that Wollheim did not take sufficient notice of the later version or that Danto did not take any notice of the later version

because either would have provided a better basis for a more accurate interpretation of the earlier version. In the later version, at the beginning of *The Art Circle*, I discussed at considerable length the misinterpretation of my earlier view that had already been made by some, which is exactly the same misinterpretation that Wollheim and Danto made later.²⁰

Notice also that in the later version that reference to candidacy for appreciation is also dropped. Candidacy 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 — for example, the representation and spatial organization visible on the surface of a painting — and those aspects of an artwork to which appreciation and/or criticism ought not to be directed, for example, the color of the back of a painting. This distinction is still important, but I decided that it was not one that needed to be addressed within the institutional theory of art.

At this point I want to take note of an argument invented and used by Danto that I have adopted. Danto envisions visually indistinguishable pairs of objects: "Fountain" and a urinal that looks just like it, the painting "The Polish Rider" and an accidentally produced paint and canvas object that looks just like it, Warhol's "Brillo Box" and a real brillo box that looks just like it. Danto notes that the first member of each of the pairs is a work of art while the second member is not. He concludes that there is a context that the eye cannot discern that accounts for the first member's being a work of art and the second not. That is, the first member of each pair is embedded in a context that the second member of each pair is not. Danto then gives his account of what this context is. I accept Danto's argument but I give a different account of what the context is, namely, the institutional account embodied in the definitions I have given. The visually-indistinguishable-objects argument of course applies, with suitable adjustments, to artworks outside the domain of visual art.

The Two Versions of the Institutional Theory

In all formulations of the theory, I have tried to formulate what I first called a 'descriptive' and subsequently called a 'classificatory' sense of 'work of art.' That is, I have always sought to define a value-neutral sense of 'work of art.' I believe this is necessary because we sometimes speak of bad art and worthless art. If works of art are defined as necessarily valuable, it would

make it difficult or impossible to speak of bad or worthless art. Thus, I believe that the basic theory of art is about a value-neutral sense of art. Notice that this basic theory is about the members of the class of works of art: some members are excellent, some members are mediocre, and some members are bad. The general activity of creating artworks is of course a valuable activity, but it is the members of the class of works of art that the institutional theory is focused on. By the way, not all the products of a valuable activity need to be valuable, although a certain percentage of them would have to be. Furthermore, I do not deny that the expression 'work of art' can be used in an evaluative way. Thus, there is an evaluative sense of 'work of art.' My definition of 'work of art,' however, is supposed to capture a basic, nonevaluative sense of the expression, which of course includes all the works of art to which the evaluative sense applies as well as all the mediocre and bad works.

Both the earlier and the later versions of the theory are responses to the view that 'art' is an open concept that cannot be defined in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions.²¹ The general claim of the institutional theory is that if we stop looking for exhibited (easily-noticed) characteristics of artworks such as representationality, emotional expressivity, and the others that the traditional theorists focused on, and instead look for characteristics that artworks have as a result of their relation to their cultural context, then we can find defining properties.²² The theories of art formulated by the traditional theorists are easily refuted by counterexamples because the immense diversity of artworks furnishes many examples of works of art that lack the properties specified as defining by the traditional theories. On the other hand, no artwork, no matter how unusual, can escape its relations to its cultural context. The problem is to find the defining relational properties of artworks to their culture and to characterize them correctly.

One problem of my three earlier attempts at definition already noted is the formal language used in the formulations of the definitions; the changes in the definitions of the later version are aimed at arriving at an overall account that is consistently informal. Another problem of the earlier account is that it claimed that the artifactuality of artworks could be achieved in two ways: (1) by being crafted in one traditional way or another, or (2) by being conferred. The conferring of artifactuality in the earlier version was supposed to account for the artistic artifactuality of found art, Dadaist art, and the like, cases in which no traditional crafting occurs. I subsequently came to believe that artifactuality is not something that can be conferred, but is a characteristic that must be achieved in some

way. In the later version, I tried to show that found art, Dadaist art, and the like possess a minimal artistic artificiality as the result of artists using found objects, manufactured objects (Dada), and such as media within the artwork. Thus, for example, Duchamp used a plumbing artifact (a urinal) to produce the sculpture-like artwork "Fountain." "Fountain" is a manufactured artifact as the result of what happened in a factory and an artistic artifact as the result of what Duchamp did with a factory-manufactured object — it is a double artifact. Of course, ordinary paintings are double artifacts too, since artists construct them using manufactured items: paints, canvas, and the like. *Fountain* is like what anthropologists have in mind when they speak of unaltered stones found in conjunction with human or human-like fossils as artifacts. The used object is a complex thing made up of a simpler thing and its use — the urinal and its use, a rock and its use, and so on.

The Later Version of the Institutional Theory

I now move to the remainder of the content of the later version of institutional theory, and I shall do so by commenting on the five definitions in the order that I listed them above.

An artist is a person who participates with understanding in the making of a work of art.

The notion of *understanding* is very important here. There are two things to be understood. First, there is the general idea of art that must be understood so that an individual knows what kind of activity he or she is involved in. Being an artist is a mode of behavior that is learned in one way or another from one's culture. Second, there is the understanding of the particular artistic medium or media that an individual is using. Such understanding need not involve great mastery of a medium for even beginners can create art. On the other hand, a person can have understanding of both of the above things, participate in the making of a work of art, and still not participate as an artist. Stage carpenters and primers of canvases participate in a way in the making of artworks and in almost all cases no doubt have the requisite understandings, but they do not participate in the artist role because what they do can be done without the requisite understandings. A primer of canvases has a very different role from that of an assistant who helps a master with a painting.

The definition of 'artist' depends on the notion of work of art and naturally leads on to a definition of 'work of art.'

A work of art is an artifact of a kind created to be presented to an art-world public.

In the first three formulations of the definition of 'work of art,' I broke it into two parts. The first part involved artificiality and the second part involved the conferring of candidacy for appreciation. Both conferring and candidacy for appreciation have been dropped, and the definition is not broken up in any way. In the later version, the defining of 'work of art' is approached entirely through the *creating* of an artifact. Focusing on artificiality in this way is a return to tradition, for from ancient times on philosophers of art have been concerned to theorize about the class of objects that is generated by a particular kind of human making. Philosophers have been interested in these objects precisely because they are human artifacts. According to the later definition, the *status* of art is achieved through the *creating* of a certain sort of artifact. Such an artifact is one that is intended to be a particular sort of thing, namely, the kind of thing created to be presented to an artworld public. Notice that putting it in this way leaves open the possibility that artworks can be created that are *never* presented to anyone, for the definition requires only that an artwork be a kind of thing to be presented. I have phrased the definition in this way to allow for the untold artworks that have been created but which for one reason or another have not reached any art-world public. By the way, in using the word 'kind' here, I am using it in a very general way and am not using it to suggest kinds or genres within art such as novels, painting, or the like.

I should note that such things as playbills, exhibition catalogues, and the like are created to be presented to artworld publics but they are not artworks. They, however, are derived from artworks, and the definition is intended to apply to *primary* objects of the artworld domain.

The definition of 'work of art' makes essential use of the notions of *public* and *artworld*, so these two notions need definition and discussion.

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.

'Public' as here defined is not tied solely to the artworld — it is a notion of general application. There is a voting public, a basketball public, a dog-

show public, and the like, as well as a painting public, a stage public, and other artworld publics. A public as such is just a set of persons with knowledge of how to understand and deal with a particular kind of situation. A member of an artworld public has characteristics that parallel those of an artist: (1) a general idea of art and (2) a minimal understanding of the medium or media of a particular art form.

Does an artist always have in mind a public for his or her work? Suppose an artist deliberately withholds a work from actual presentation? If an artist does so because he or she judges it unworthy, then it is being judged as unworthy for a public and is thus being counted as a kind of thing created to be presented to a public. Suppose an artist withholds a work because he or she regards it as too revealing in some way. In this kind of case, an artist has a public in mind because it is a public to whom the work would be revealing. In cases when a work is deliberately withheld from a public, there is a *double intention*, that is, there is an intention to create a thing of a kind to be presented to an artworld public, but there is also an intention not to actually present it.

Now for the definition and discussion of the other notion used in defining 'work of art,' namely 'artworld.'

The artworld is the totality of artworld systems.

This means that the artworld is a collection of different systems — painting, literature, theater, and the like. The collection is not a tidy one but is rather one that has been drawn together over time in a somewhat arbitrary way. Why does it include literature, theater, and ballet but not dog shows, horse shows, and circuses? The answer is that the artworld is a cultural construction — something that members of society have collectively made into what it is over time. Although perhaps no one has ever consciously decided that dog shows are excluded from the cultural construction that is the artworld, it has turned out that way. If the history of culture had been a little different, the artworld might also be different and include dog shows. There is a strong chance of there being an element of arbitrariness in every cultural construction simply because they come about as a result of people's behavior over time.

Traditional theories of art try to avoid the untidiness exhibited here by attempting to bind all the diverse works of art together as instances of some characteristic or characteristics of human nature such as the expression of emotion; the characteristic (or characteristics) is used as the essence (or essences) of art. The sheer diversity of artworks, however, destroys the

traditional approach. The institutional approach embraces the great diversity and admits to the kind of logical untidiness discussed above. Traditional theories try to discover the essence of art in some aspect of human nature such as the expression of emotion. The institutional theory focuses on human culture and its history.

The definition of 'the artworld' depends entirely on the notion of *artworld system*, which I have defined as follows:

An artworld system is a framework for the presentation of a work of art by an artist to an artworld public.

The first four definitions of the later version have been produced by means of a linear descent, that is, 'artist' is defined in terms of the notion of *work of art*. 'Work of art' is defined in terms of the notions of *public* and *artworld*. 'Public' is defined generally and thus stands outside the linear descent. 'The artworld' continues the linear descent and is defined in terms of the notion of *artworld system*. The definition of 'artworld system,' however, instead of extending the linear descent using more foundational notions, reaches back and uses all four of the earlier defined notions in its definition. Thus, what begins as a linear descent ends up being a circle — the five definitions constitute a circular set. Circularity is a characteristic that traditional theories do not have. For example, expressionism defines 'art' in terms of the expression of emotion, but the definition of the 'expression of emotion' would not involve the notion of art.

Circularity is generally regarded as a logical fault because it is claimed that it fails to give an informative definition or description. For example, when Clive Bell said that significant form is what causes aesthetic emotion and then said that aesthetic emotion is what is caused by significant form, many concluded that they had really not been told anything, and perhaps they had not. Artist, work of art, public, artworld and artworld system, unlike significant form and aesthetic emotion, are not technical notions generated within a theory and in need of a theoretical explanation. The five central notions of the institutional theory are all notions that we all learn at a tender age, and we learn them together as a set. Art teachers and parents teach children how to be artists and how to display their work. Children are taught how to draw and color and how to put their drawing on the refrigerator door for others to see.

What children are being taught are basic *cultural roles* of which every competent member of our society has at least a rudimentary understanding. These cultural roles are, I believe, invented very early on in primitive

societies and persist through time into all structured societies. So, when we hear 'artist' and 'work of art' we are not baffled in the way that we are when we hear 'significant form' and 'aesthetic emotion'. When an adult hears 'artist' and 'work of art', they hear words that they have known the meaning of for a very long time. The circularity of the central notions of the institutional theory thus poses no problem of the understanding of these notions. The fact that the five central notions of the institutional theory are learned together as a set means that they are what I call inflected concepts, a set of concepts that bend in on themselves, presupposing and supporting one another.

There is nothing mysterious about such sets of concepts. I suspect that many of our cultural phenomena involve inflected notions, notions that are interdefined and are learned as a set. The political notions of executive, legislature, judiciary, and law are such a set of concepts.

I noted earlier that artist and artwork public roles come into existence in the most primitive of societies and persist into the most advanced of societies. In their earliest manifestations, the central roles of artist and artwork public pretty much are the culture's artworld. Later, the artworld contains many other roles: art galleries entrepreneurs, museum curators, art critics, art theorists, philosophers of art, and others. All of these sophisticated roles are parasitical on the central roles of artist and artwork public, the cultural framework that persists through time and constitutes the core of the art-making enterprise.

When, someone might ask, did the first work of art come into existence according to the institutional theory? First, the institutional theory is a structural theory, by which is meant that the theory is about the five defined elements that make up the structure of the art-making enterprise. Thus, according to the institutional theory, the first work of art would be the one that occupied the work of art node of the artworld structure when that structure first gelled. It would of course be very difficult to date the time of such a gelling, although no doubt it has occurred many different times in many different cultures.

Finally, it should be noted that the institutional theory of art is not an attempt to say everything that there is to be said about art. Art does many, many different things that are not touched on by the institutional theory or any other theory of art. Any theory of art, including the institutional theory, attempts to specify defining characteristics, which are going to be rather narrowly restricted and simply will not reflect the broad scope of the things that works of art do.

Richard Wollheim in 1980²³ set out an argument against the institutional theory of art as it was presented in my *Art and the Aesthetic* in 1974.²⁴ This argument is cited and referred to frequently and many apparently regard it as a definitive refutation of the institutional theory – a sort of killer argument on the model of the Monty Python killer joke. I think it is important to consider and refute this argument in spite of the fact that I no longer hold the 1974 version of the institutional theory. I think Wollheim's argument is completely spurious, and further I think it is important to clarify the issue in case anyone thinks his argument applies to the later version of the institutional theory.²⁵ → see my new refuted

Wollheim begins the article in which the argument at issue occurs by denying that there are evaluative and other senses of 'work of art' – senses that I had tried to distinguish. He claims that what I called senses of the term are cases of ellipsis and metaphor. He writes that what my examples "show is that 'art' is often used idiomatically or in ways which cannot be understood simply on the basis of knowing its primary meaning" (italics mine).²⁶ Whether there are different senses or simply cases of ellipsis and metaphor here is not important, as Wollheim's remark about primary meaning shows; the institutional theory has always been an attempt to deal with what Wollheim calls the primary meaning of 'work of art'. Whether there are evaluative or other senses of 'work of art' or whether there are only ellipses and metaphors, it is the primary meaning of 'work of art' that is at issue. (Whether a given usage of a word is metaphorical or has a new sense depends, I suppose, on whether or not a metaphor has recently died.)

I turn now to Wollheim's argument. His argument takes the form of a dilemma. He writes:

Is 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 – that is, they represent the artworld?²⁷

If, Wollheim claims, the institutionalist takes the first horn of the dilemma, his theory is not institutional, but if he takes the second horn it is not a theory of art.²⁸ Taking the first horn, Wollheim argues, would make the theory noninstitutional because it would be the possession of the characteristic referred to by the good reason that makes the artifact a work of art. As far as I can tell Wollheim never says or indicates why taking the second horn would prevent the theory from being a theory of art.

As noted earlier, Wollheim caricatures the institutional theory as holding that there are artworld representatives who are nominated and have meetings to confer the status of art. In *Art and the Aesthetic*, I did speak of a person (an artist) acting on behalf of the artworld to confer the status of candidate for appreciation because of his or her imagination and because of his or her knowledge of the artworld. I did not say that the status of candidate for appreciation is conferred because of a status that a person has. Perhaps the dilemma could be rewritten as:

Is 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 requisite knowledge and imagination.

Having stated the alleged dilemma, Wollheim begins a discussion of the first horn:

If the representatives of the artworld, setting out to confer status upon an artifact, are effective only if they have certain reasons which justify their selection of this rather than that artifact, does it not look as though what it is for an artifact to be a work of art is for it to satisfy these reasons? But, if this is so, then what the representatives of the artworld do is inappropriately called 'conferment' of status: what they do is to 'confirm' or 'recognize' status in that the artifact enjoys the status prior to their action; and the consequence is that reference to their action ought to drop out of the definition of art as at best inessential.²⁹

In this passage, Wollheim writes as if the institutional theory conceives of all art-making as proceeding in the way that Duchamp made his ready-mades — by the "selection of this rather than that artifact." This is misleading. The institutional theory conceives of the great bulk of art-making as proceeding in the traditional ways of painting, sculpting, and so on; it just pictures these procedures as taking place within a certain institutional framework. In any event, Wollheim queries in an assertive manner, "does it not look as though what it is for an artifact to be a work of art is for it to satisfy these reasons?" For him, to have a good reason means to note that an artifact has a certain characteristic, and having that characteristic is what is solely responsible for the artifact's being a work of art. But then after the just quoted passage, he raises the possibility that (1) having a good reason for conferring the status, and (2) the conferring of status are both

necessary for making art. Wollheim, however, then immediately rejects this possibility and concludes,

Of course, in the absence of any account of what these reasons are or are likely to be the issue cannot be settled, but it is hard to see how there could be reasons putatively for making an artifact a work of art which were not better thought of as reasons for its being one.³⁰

Since Wollheim raises the issue of good reasons, it is puzzling that he does not give at least a brief account of what these reasons are or are likely to be. He does not give even one example of what he has in mind but just keeps referring indeterminately to good reasons. In any event, Wollheim's conclusion is clearly that it is the characteristic referred to by a good reason alone that makes something a work of art and that, therefore, no kind of institutional action is involved in art-making.

In order for this sub-argument concerning the first horn of the dilemma to be persuasive, the last sentence quoted would have to be backed up with further argument or be obviously clinching, which it is not. Wollheim, however, drops this point and changes the subject. First, with regard to his quoted comment concerning reasons, the discussion should be about making an artifact a candidate for appreciation, not about making one a work of art. My actual view in 1974 was that there are two necessary conditions that are jointly sufficient for making a work of art: (1) the producing of an artifact, and (2) the conferring of the candidacy for appreciation. Wollheim is aware of the distinction that I made between being a candidate for appreciation and being a work of art because he specifically alludes to it, saying that for institutionalists "The status conferred is, more specifically, that of being a candidate for appreciation."³¹ When setting out his arguments, however, he ignores my actually stated views and writes as if the 1974 version of the institutional theory involves the conferring of the status of work of art. I have in the following tried to deal with this misrepresentation by using the disjunction 'candidate of appreciation or work of art.' Second, his quoted comment concerning reasons is clearly wrong; there could be all sorts of reasons for making an artifact a work of art or for conferring candidacy for appreciation on it that would not be reasons for the artifact's being a work of art or a candidate for appreciation. For example, an artist might have as a good reason for creating a particular work of art or candidate for appreciation that it is intended to promote a particular moral point of view. Let it be assumed that the work of art or candidate for appreciation when created does

promote the particular moral point of view. While this is a perfectly good reason for crafting a work of art or candidate for appreciation, intending it to promote a particular moral point of view or actually promoting a particular moral point of view is not something that is responsible for its being a work of art or a candidate for appreciation in, for example, the way crafting is responsible for its being a work of art or a candidate for appreciation. (I am not assuming that crafting alone is responsible for something's being a work of art or a candidate for appreciation. I do not think that it is.) Crafting a work of art or a candidate for appreciation to realize certain aesthetic qualities would be another typical good reason for such creation, but neither intending the created object to realize these aesthetic qualities nor actually realizing the aesthetic qualities is what is responsible for its being a work of art or candidate for appreciation in, for example, the way crafting is. (Again, I am not saying that crafting alone is the whole story.) Works of *nonart* can self-consciously be made by their creators intending these two good reasons and realizing them without either the reasons in mind or the corresponding characteristics in the artifact making or even tending to make their creations into works of art or artwork candidates for appreciation. For example, a religious person might write a tract with the intention to promote a particular moral point of view and realize this end or a tool designer might create a wrench to have certain aesthetic qualities and realize this end. In neither of these two cases would the good reasons in the makers' minds or the corresponding characteristics in the artifacts make or tend to make the created objects into works of art or artwork candidates for appreciation. Wollheim's sub-argument about the first horn of the dilemma just stops in mid-air, drawing an invalid conclusion without any argument. (I remind the reader that in speaking of conferring candidacy for appreciation here I am, for purposes of argument, stepping back into a theory that I no longer hold.)

There are some other good reasons that are worth considering briefly. These are reasons that have figured in various theories of art: the desire to produce a representation, the desire to express an emotion, and so on. These reasons and their corresponding characteristics in artifacts fail as art-making for the same reason that the earlier reasons and corresponding characteristics do, because the desires and these corresponding characteristics can be satisfied and realized by the production of nonart.

After concluding his argument about the first horn of the dilemma, Wollheim challenges the institutionalist to give "some independent evidence . . . for what the representatives of the artworld allegedly do" and to "point to positive practices, conventions, or rules, which are all explicit

in the . . . artworld."¹² He writes of the evidence of the kind of artworld actions that he thinks the institutionalist might have in mind:

This need not be evidence for some altogether new action on their part. It could be evidence that a new description is true of some already identified action: that commissioning a piece of music, buying a painting for a gallery, writing a monograph on a sculpture should be redescribed as acts conferring the status of art upon certain artifacts.¹³

This last quotation shows how badly Wollheim has misunderstood what I said in *Art and the Aesthetic*. I was trying to give an account of what goes on when art is created by artists. He seems to think I might have been talking about activities such as commissioning music and buying paintings as art-making — activities that revolve around artists and art-making at some considerable distance.

Near the end of his article Wollheim returns to a discussion of the first horn of the dilemma. He says there is a sub-argument that forces an institutionalist to take the first horn of the dilemma, so that the institutionalist "has to say that the conferment of the status of work of art [read candidate for appreciation] upon an artifact depends upon good reasons, with the consequence that conferment ceases to be an essential feature of art and so drops out of the definition of art."¹⁴ Before examining the sub-argument that the institutionalist must accept the good-reasons alternative, consider whether Wollheim's supposed consequence really follows. He says that if good reasons are necessary for conferring the status of arthood or candidacy for appreciation, then conferring drops out as a necessary condition of art or candidacy for appreciation. Consider a parallel case. Presumably having a good reason is required for a king or queen to confer a knighthood. Say that a man has had knighthood conferred on him because he is believed to have slain a dragon. Believing the man to be a dragon-slayer is the good reason that he has had knighthood conferred on him, but he would not be a knight if a king or queen had not conferred the status on him. The conferring does not 'drop out' as a necessary part of becoming a knight because it is done for a good reason. That conferring 'drops out' if a good reason is necessary is just false as a generalization. I do not claim that Wollheim holds such a generalization, but I do not see any reason to think that having a good reason for conferring candidacy for appreciation (or art status) would cause conferring to 'drop out' as necessary in the case of art-making, if, as I thought it was in 1974, conferring were involved in art-making.

Now back to the sub-argument that supposedly forces the institutionalist to accept the good-reasons alternative. Wollheim's argument is that in presenting something as a candidate for appreciation, the presenter must have in mind something about the presented thing that he wants to be appreciated and what he has in mind is what Wollheim is calling a "good reason."³⁵ It is certainly true that in the creation of art over almost all of its history artists have had good reasons in Wollheim's sense. There are many, many things that artists have wanted appreciated about their art — its aesthetic qualities, its political statement, its moral vision, its stylish verve, and so on and on. But after the practice of art-making, with good reasons invariably present, had been in place for a long time, it occurred to Duchamp and his ilk that they could present candidates for appreciation within the framework of the artworld that they did not expect anyone to appreciate — that is, they presented them in defiance of the usual good reasons. What Duchamp's readymades show is that candidacy for appreciation can be conferred and art created without the usual good reasons. There is perhaps a further analogy between art-making and knight-making. In the days when monarchs had absolute power there were no doubt cases in which the monarch conferred knighthood on persons without having a good reason, while, of course, pretending to have one. The real (bad) reason might be that the person was an old, boyhood friend or the like. Despite the lack of a good reason, such persons would still be knights. I do not wish to suggest that Duchamp had absolute power in the artworld as a monarch had in the political world, but he certainly had the power to be noticed.

But let it be assumed for the sake of argument that readymades are not art and that artists always have had and always will have a good reason for conferring candidacy for appreciation and for making art. What is the significance of having a good reason? Earlier, Wollheim seemed to be claiming that it is the good reason that makes something a candidate for appreciation or art. This was shown to be invalid because nonart can be created with all the same good reasons. What then would be the significance of the fact, if it were a fact, that artists always have a good reason for conferring candidacy for appreciation or making art? None, I think, other than the fact that people typically like to have a good reason for what they do, and in a highly regularized activity such as art-making, it should not be surprising if there were always a good reason for carrying on the activity. I suppose it was this feature of art-making that made the shenanigans of Duchamp and company so upsetting to so many.

Wollheim's sub-argument concerning the first horn of the dilemma fails at every juncture. There are all sorts of reasons for making an artifact a work of art or a candidate for appreciation that are not reasons for its being a work of art or a candidate for appreciation. Moreover, having a good reason for conferring arthood or candidacy for appreciation such as intending to realize certain aesthetic qualities, promote a moral point of view, and the like is *not* what makes an artwork art or something a candidate for appreciation. Also, there is no justification for thinking that having a good reason would cause conferring to 'drop out' as essential, if conferring were involved in art-making.

I turn now to the second horn of Wollheim's dilemma. He quite correctly thinks that an institutionalist will not willingly choose the first horn and will prefer the second. He writes that an institutionalist will deny

that the representatives of the artworld need to have good reasons for conferring the appropriate status upon an artifact. All that is required (he [the institutionalist] will say) is that they themselves have the appropriate status: to require more is to betray a serious confusion. The confusion would be between the conditions under which something is (or becomes) a work of art and the conditions under which a work of art is a good work of art. To assert that something is a work of art depends, directly or indirectly, only upon status: by contrast, to assert that a work of art is a good work of art does require to be backed up by reasons, and it receives no support from status.³⁶

Now as earlier, Wollheim in the passage quoted does not have the second horn stated correctly, but in 1980 I certainly would have chosen the second horn if it asserted that something's being a candidate for appreciation depends on its being conferred by someone with the relevant imagination and knowledge, i.e., someone filling the role of artist. Even if it were the case that there is always a good reason when candidacy for appreciation is conferred, I would choose the second horn in the sense that I would claim that it is not the good reason but the conferring's taking place within the relevant institutional setting that is responsible for the candidate for appreciation becoming an artworld candidate. So, Wollheim has put the wrong words into my mouth. My choice was *not* driven by an attempt to avoid a confusion between being art and being good art; my choice was driven by the desire to describe the process by which art is created, which I then thought involved (in part) the conferring of the candidacy for appreciation. Once it has been shown that, even if there is always a good reason, the institutionalist is not forced to say that

it is having a good reason that makes something a candidate for appreciation or an artwork, then the second alternative, as I have rewritten it, is not a horn of a dilemma but a perfectly acceptable alternative. Candidacy for appreciation can be conferred and art made independently of having a good reason, even if there is always a good reason. I can accept both horns of Wollheim's dilemma as I have reformulated it. I came to believe that the 1974 account of the institutional theory was wrong but not for the reasons that Wollheim gives.

Wollheim is right on one point, I did then and do now want to avoid confusing being art and being good art. Wollheim apparently thinks it is a mistake to try to distinguish between being art and being-good art; he says that making this distinction violates two powerful intuitions that we have. The first intuition appears to be embodied in his assertion, "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."³⁷ If the imitation, the expression, or some such theory of the nature of art were true, then Wollheim's claim would be justified. For example, if the nature of art were imitation, then reflection would no doubt reveal that the better the imitation the better the art. The intuition Wollheim is appealing to here is a theory-laden one. Everything, thus, depends upon the *nature* that is to be reflected on when the nature of art is reflected on. Wollheim's first 'intuition' simply assumes that some particular theory of art other than the institutional theory is true and thereby begs the question. The second intuition "is that there is something important to the status of being a work of art... [and] 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."³⁸ The status of being a work of art is important, and the reason is that the class of works of art contains a large number of very valuable items. The class of works of art also contains many works that are mediocre, and many that are bad, and this is the reason that I wish to distinguish between being art and being good art. It is necessary that we have a way to talk about mediocre and bad art.

At the end of his essay, Wollheim comments that the institutionalists have made too much of Duchamp. He writes that institutionalists

have been deeply impressed by the phenomenon of Marcel Duchamp and his readymades. . . . It certainly would be a total misunderstanding of Duchamp's intentions . . . to think that the existence of readymades requires *aesthetic* theory to be reformulated in such a way as to represent an object

like *Fontaine* as a *central* case of a work of art. On the contrary, it seems more like an extra condition of adequacy upon a contemporary *aesthetic* theory that objects like Duchamp's readymades, which are heavily *ambiguous*, highly *provocative*, and altogether *ironical* in their relationship to art, should have this overall characteristic preserved within the theory, or that the theory should be sufficiently sophisticated to recognize such *special cases* as what they are. (italics mine)³⁹

A number of comments are in order here. First, the institutional theory is not an aesthetic theory, it is a theory of art. Second, the theory does not claim that readymades are *central* cases of works of art; it regards them as works of art that are useful in revealing the matrix in which works of art exist because readymades lack the usual interesting features of art. In Wollheim's terms, the institutional theory regards readymades as works of art that exist independently of the usual good reasons. I have even suggested the possibility that they are not works of art but are revealing in the relevant way because some people mistakenly believed them to be art.⁴⁰ (Of course, this last point was made four years after Wollheim's piece was published.) Finally, I have always been aware that readymades are ambiguous, provocative, ironical, and are special cases. I doubt that anyone thinks that there cannot be ambiguous, provocative and ironical art or art that is a special case in some way.

In closing this chapter on the history of the institutional theory, I note that several philosophers in recent years have developed a theory of art that is institutional or has an institutional aspect. Terry Diffey, in 1969, in an article entitled "The Republic of Art," set forth a kind of institutional theory, but it was not an anthropological sort as mine is.⁴¹ As noted in chapter 2, Stephen Davies, in the process of criticizing my view, sketches an institutional theory of art the central notion of which is that art-making derives from an exercise of authority. He, however, neither develops nor argues for this view. Noël Carroll's account of identifying works of art turns out to presuppose an institutional theory of art when its presuppositions are unpacked.

Notes

- 1 George Dickie, "Defining Art," *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 1969, pp. 253-6.
- 2 George Dickie, *Aesthetics: An Introduction* (Indianapolis: Prentice-Hall, 1971), pp. 98-108.

- 3 George Dickie, *Art and the Aesthetic* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1974), pp. 204.
- 4 George Dickie, *The Art Circle* (New York: Haven, 1984), p. 116.
- 5 Dickie, "Defining Art," p. 252.
- 6 *Ibid.*, p. 252.
- 7 Dickie, *Aesthetics: An Introduction*, p. 101.
- 8 Dickie, *Art and the Aesthetic*, p. 34.
- 9 Richard Wollheim, *Painting As An Art* (Princeton University Press, 1987), p. 15.
- 10 It is true that unfortunately in *Aesthetics: An Introduction* and *Art and the Aesthetic* I occasionally did speak of the conferring the status of art as a kind of shorthand for the conferring of the candidacy for appreciation.
- 11 Arthur Danto, "The 1993 Whitney Biennial," *The Nation*, April 19, 1993, p. 553.
- 12 Arthur Danto, "Danto Replies," *The Nation*, June 7, 1993, p. 758.
- 13 Dickie, *Aesthetics: An Introduction*, p. 103.
- 14 Dickie, "Defining Art," p. 255.
- 15 For another discussion of Wollheim's misinterpretation see my "An Artistic Misunderstanding," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 1993, pp. 69-71.
- 16 *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*, ed. Robert Audi (Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 378-9.
- 17 Monroe Beardsley, "Is Art Essentially Institutional? in *Culture and Art*, ed. Lars Aagaard-Mogensen (Atlantic Highlands, NJ, 1976), pp. 51-2.
- 18 Dickie, *The Art Circle*. This book is the single best account of the institutional theory of art.
- 19 *Ibid.*, pp. 80-2.
- 20 *Ibid.*, pp. 9-10.
- 21 See Paul Ziff, "The Task of Defining a Work of Art," *Philosophical Review*, 1953, pp. 58-78; Morris Weitz, "The Role of Theory in Aesthetics," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, (1956): 27-35; and William Kennick, "Does Traditional Aesthetics Rest on a Mistake," *Mind*, 1958, pp. 317-34.
- 22 My ideas on this point have their origin in an article by Maurice Mandelbaum, "Family Resemblances and Generalization Concerning the Arts," *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 1965, pp. 219-28.
- 23 Richard Wollheim, *Art and Its Objects* (Cambridge University Press, second edition, 1980), pp. 157-66.
- 24 Dickie, *Art and the Aesthetic*, pp. 19-52.
- 25 Dickie, *The Art Circle*.
- 26 Wollheim, *Art and Its Objects*, p. 159.
- 27 *Ibid.*, p. 160.
- 28 *Ibid.*, p. 164.
- 29 Wollheim, *Art and Its Objects*, pp. 160-1.
- 30 *Ibid.*, pp. 161-2.

- 31 *Ibid.*, p. 164.
- 32 *Ibid.*, p. 162.
- 33 *Ibid.*
- 34 *Ibid.*
- 35 *Ibid.*, p. 165.
- 36 *Ibid.*, pp. 162-3.
- 37 *Ibid.*, p. 163.
- 38 *Ibid.*, pp. 163-4.
- 39 *Ibid.*, pp. 165-6.
- 40 Dickie, *The Art Circle*, p. 63.
- 41 Terry Diffey, "The Republic of Art," *The British Journal of Aesthetics* 9, 1969, pp. 145-56.