



WILEY-
BLACKWELL



Art as a Social Institution: Dickie's New Definition

Author(s): Richard J. Sclafani

Reviewed work(s):

Source: *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 32, No. 1 (Autumn, 1973), pp. 111-114

Published by: [Wiley-Blackwell](#) on behalf of [The American Society for Aesthetics](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/428711>

Accessed: 14/09/2012 03:57

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at

<http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

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



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

<http://www.jstor.org>

are similar to every other performance of Hamlet only make up the barest bones of the play—the story of a melancholy young man whose father was murdered, and so on.

If a work of art is not a universal and Wollheim, although he asserts it to be something else, leaves us perplexed, then what is the work? Perhaps there is nothing other than particular performances of Hamlet or readings of a poem or playings of a piece of music. But, one will say, there are many remarks about works of literature and music that do not appear to refer to an individual reading or performance. If I talk about the lyricism of a Bach aria, I do not mean that *just* the particular performance I heard is lyrical. Let us suppose that all meaningful remarks about works of art either are statements referring to specific individual events or

objects or the remarks are reducible to such statements. Thus when I said, after last night's performance, that the Bach aria is lyrical, I was not asserting that there is something, i.e., *the* work, other than the particular performance that is lyrical, rather I would have meant that that performance was lyrical and any performance similar in other respects to the one last night either is or ought to be lyrical. The similarity would be the criterion for the multiple reference of the title; but the title, if it is taken to name the work, would not name the similarity. The only work of art in the case of music would be a performance, in a poem a reading.

JAY E. BACHRACH

*Central Washington
State College*

ART AS A SOCIAL INSTITUTION: DICKIE'S NEW DEFINITION

There was a time when the central aim of the philosophy of art was to define art in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions. Largely through the influence of Wittgenstein's later philosophy, this era came to a close. Writers such as Gallie, Kennick, Passmore, Ziff, and especially Morris Weitz seemed to have laid to rest any pretensions we might have had of accomplishing the traditional task of art theory. Recently, however, the project of constructing theories of art has been revived. With a new sophisticated awareness of problems inherent in the logic of art concepts, various prominent writers such as Danto, Cavell, Wollheim, and Dickie have opened a new perspective on the role of theories in the world of art. I should like to examine Dickie's contribution to this revised conception of the philosophy of art.

I

George Dickie's approach appears to be traditional. ("Defining Art," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 6, 1969; *Aesthetics: An Introduction*. Indianapolis: 1971.) He intends to define art by genus and specific differentia. He says that a work of art is (1) an artifact, (2) upon which some society or subgroup of a society has conferred the status of candidate for appreciation. But appearances are deceiving. Dickie's definition is significantly different from traditional definitions in several respects: (1) The definition is an institutional definition. It calls attention to what Dickie calls "social properties" of works

of art; properties which center around conventions and practices within the artworld. These features of works of art have been largely neglected heretofore. (2) Dickie does not attempt to define 'art' as though it were a closed concept. He has attempted to take into account what Weitz, following Waismann, calls the "open-textured" character of 'art.' If 'art' is open in texture, then any definition of 'art,' be it in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions or not, must reflect this open quality of the concept. Thus, Dickie says, artifactuality is the genus of art, but he does not say that artifactuality is a rigidly definable closed concept. Nor does he attempt to arbitrarily restrict the extension of 'art' in discussing the differentia. Unlike most previous definitions, Dickie's definition aims at maximal allowance for the expansive, creative character of art. (3) Dickie does not build into his definition various preferred properties of some works of art to be passed off as defining characteristics of all works of art—properties such as significant form, expressiveness, etc. (4) His definition allows for the relevant differences there may be between art and its subspecies (painting, music, happenings, satyr plays, etc.). (5) His definition aims at reflecting both the way in which movements and developments take place in the world of art and the actual practice of artists.

II

In locating the genus of art in the property of being an artifact, Dickie denies the claim

advanced by several contemporary writers that artifactuality is not a necessary characteristic of works of art. Weitz's celebrated *object trouvé*, "This piece of driftwood is a lovely piece of sculpture," allegedly shows that artifactuality cannot be a necessary condition of art. Dickie says that there is a distinction between evaluative uses and descriptive uses of the term 'work of art' and that the driftwood case falls within the evaluative category. Hence, Weitz is wrong about the characteristic of artifactuality with respect to the descriptive uses of 'work of art' (which are the uses definitions are supposed to cover). Here I take issue with Dickie. For one thing, while one might claim that significant form, expressiveness, etc. are evaluative properties of objects, one might quarrel with the claim that being a work of art is one of these properties. What Dickie seems to have in mind is the way the term is used when one peers into the bakery window and says "That birthday cake is a work of art." What one means, I take it, is that the cake exhibits various features which we often associate with works of art (it may be nicely decorated, pleasurable to look at, show interesting color designs, etc.). Whether the term is used this way in the driftwood case, however, is questionable. If you asked the person talking about the birthday cake whether he meant it could acquire the status of a rococo candelabrum, or even a Warhol Brillo box, he would probably tell you that you missed the point entirely—that he didn't intend to say that the cake is a work of art in anything like the same way these other objects are works of art. But the person talking about the driftwood may well want to make such a claim, especially if he were an enthusiast of the "found-object" school. For the moment, we need not push Dickie on this point. His remarks imply something far more dubitable.

Dickie argues that there are two distinct classes of uses of 'work of art,' and furthermore, while these classes may overlap in some instances, they are both purely descriptive uses of the term (e.g., when we are talking about those things to which his definition applies) and purely evaluative uses. (The driftwood example is supposed to be a case in point.) According to Dickie, an evaluative use is one in which the speaker does not intend to locate an object in the class of things his definition covers. He also says, "I maintain that the descriptive use of 'work of art' is used to indicate that a thing belongs to a certain category of artifacts" ("Defining Art," 253). If this is his distinguishing criterion, then the person praising the birthday

cake is very likely using the term purely evaluatively, and the person talking about the driftwood may well be doing the same thing. But surely, this is not the case Weitz has in mind. Weitz is concerned with the case in which a person says "This piece of driftwood is a lovely work of art" and means very much to indicate that the object belongs in the same class of things to which the works of Moore, Calder, Brancusi, etc. belong. Merely to point out that a person *need not* be using the term descriptively in the driftwood case does not prove that they cannot do so. To show that they cannot, and to show that they are wrong if this is what they are claiming, requires much more than drawing a descriptive/evaluative distinction in the manner Dickie suggests. In the end, Dickie need not have entangled himself in this problem-laden distinction at all. Weitz's worry is that the artifactuality condition might inhibit expansiveness and creativity in the arts. Dickie himself has noted that this could hardly be a genuine worry since artifactuality is a necessary condition of creativity. Once this point is elaborated upon (e.g., as Collingwood and Tomas have done) any misgivings we might have had about the artifactuality condition ought to be dispelled.

III

The second part of Dickie's definition marks the beginning of an attempt to explicate an aspect of the artworld which although very important, and in many ways quite obvious, has been largely ignored by philosophers before Dickie. Dickie is interested in exactly how what we do with various objects plays a part in determining whether or not we will regard them as full-fledged works of art. He says that we are most likely to discover the differentia of art by considering what we do with certain objects. The specific something we do with them that Dickie focuses on is to "confer upon them the status of candidate for appreciation." Dickie's notion of 'appreciation' has been criticized at length elsewhere. Because of this, I will concentrate on the notion of 'conferring status.'

According to Dickie "conferred status" is a social or institutional property which is acquired in a social or institutional setting. "Marriage," e.g., is a status conferred upon individuals by a politico-legal institution, the state. "Relic" is a status conferred upon objects by a religious institution, the church. "Ph.D." is a status conferred upon individuals by an educational institution, the university. In all of these cases, conferred status usually involves ceremony,

official proclamation, and the like. Dickie points out that status can be both conferred and acquired informally as well. In many jurisdictions, the status of common-law marriage is acquired quite without ceremony. Dickie says, "What I want to suggest is that, just as two persons can acquire the status of common-law marriage within a legal system, an artifact can acquire the status of candidate for appreciation within the system which Danto has called 'the artworld.'" ("Defining Art," 254.) Dickie also says, "Now what I have been saying may sound like saying, 'a work of art is an object of which someone has said, "I christen this object a work of art."' And I think it is rather like that" (256). Artistic baptism is analogous to Christian baptism for Dickie.

These remarks suggest a genuinely unique analysis of cases which were once regarded as radical, but which we now are ready to accept with sophisticated equanimity. How did that common urinal become the startling work of art which Duchamp entitled "Fountain?" How has Warhol become an artistic Midas, turning ordinary objects into works of art virtually at will? Dickie's christening analogy seems helpful here. Just as a priest or minister can baptize a person into the church, so an artist can baptize an object into the artworld. And just as christening a person has as its background the institutional setting of the church, so christening an object a work of art has as its background the institutional setting of the artworld. Taken at face value, this analogy seems richly promising. Several fundamental problems must be dealt with, however, before we can accept Dickie's definition.

(1) Who can and who cannot confer status on behalf of the artworld? This question can be put another way. Who is and who is not a bonafide citizen of the artworld? That these questions are central can be seen if we reflect on certain minimal conditions which a person must satisfy to qualify as a member of the artworld. To begin with, a person must have the concept of a work of art at his disposal in order to be able to confer art status. What are Dickie's views on "having the concept of a work of art?" Dickie is an ordinary language philosopher who repeatedly insists that his views involve no metaphysical, ideological, or theoretical commitments. For the christening analogy to work, however, such commitments seem essential. The institutional setting of the church is one of byzantine complexity. The concepts of 'priest,' 'minister,' 'christening,' 'relic,' etc. are intelligible only within a vast network of beliefs,

attitudes, conventions, social practices, and historical happenings, i.e., only within the larger historical and ideological framework of the church. Surely, the same must be said for the concepts 'artist,' 'work of art,' 'painter,' 'painting,' etc. The concept 'artist' is especially difficult, since more than merely having the concept of art is required in order to be an artist. It is not clear that Dickie agrees with this. At one point he suggests that a salesman of plumbing supplies could have done what Duchamp did, as long as he did it within the appropriate institutional setting. I find this wholly implausible. The significance of Duchamp's act cannot be divorced from his ingenious conception of what the artworld of the World War I era was and was not ready for. This required an intimate familiarity on Duchamp's part with both the recent and not so recent history of European art. It also required the recognition and development of the notion that artistic creativity need not involve manual craftsmanship. And this is a very complicated matter. Being an artist, or a citizen at large of the artworld for that matter, does not seem to be as simple as Dickie makes it out to be.

(2) What can and what cannot have art status conferred upon it? Here, again, the matter is not as simple as Dickie makes it out to be. His answer would seem to be "Any object at all!" Simply any object? At least the following qualification suggests itself: Any object about which an appropriate story can be told. "Telling a story" is used here as a shorthand for explicating the reasons why one would want to claim that a given object qualifies as art. And this, too, is a complicated business involving a network of beliefs, attitudes, conventions, social practices, and histories. This point suggests that Dickie's conferrals can go wrong in any one of a number of ways. I think Dickie would want to agree with this. But can he? He says that art status is conferrable by a single person's treating an artifact as a candidate for appreciation, usually the artist himself. Well, that depends upon who that person is, and, if he is an artist, on what is built into the concept of an artist. The relevance of my first general question to this question should be apparent. Both of these questions suggest that Dickie will have to work out a detailed account of what "institutional" concepts are supposed to be and what sorts of concepts they stand apart from. This must include developing a position on the role of history in determining the meaning of art concepts.

(3) What, exactly, is being claimed when it is said that both Shakespeare in writing any of

his tragedies or a villager making up a folk-tune are offering up their respective products as candidates for appreciation? They compose plays and tunes. Do they then perform some additional action upon those products called "conferring status?" Or is conferring status part of the activity of writing *Hamlet* or of composing "When Johnny Comes Marching Home?" When we move away from the Duchamp-Warhol type of case, Dickie's definition seems far less plausible. I find it at least difficult, and perhaps impossible, to apply the notion of conferring status to either of the works of art just mentioned. *Hamlet* is a work of art. It is a work of art because tragedy is an art medium, because Shakespeare composed beautiful blank verse, because he molded fascinating characters with a broad range of emotion and thought, etc.—not, as far as I can see, because he conferred the status of candidate for appreciation upon this marvelous brainchild of his.

(4) Does Dickie's definition reflect actual linguistic practice? This is an especially important question for a philosopher who disclaims any metaphysical or theoretical commitments whatsoever. If faced with the task of teaching someone who is uninitiated in the artworld the meaning of such expressions as 'work of art,' 'painting,' 'play,' etc., need I either explicitly or implicitly appeal to Dickie's definition? Suppose I choose *Hamlet*, the "Mona Lisa," Mozart's Symphony No. 41, etc. as examples of works of art, and teach the use of the expression by elaborating upon examples such as these. If what I have said above in (3) is on the right track, then Dickie's definition does not seem to be of much help here either. I believe that Dickie is committed far more strongly to a theoretical stance

on the nature of art than he would like to admit. If this is so, and if Dickie can be construed as an ordinary language philosopher as well, we cannot avoid the suggestion that ordinary art discourse is theory laden. This is precisely the contention that Danto has been concerned to work out at some length.

IV

In "Tradition and the Individual Talent," T. S. Eliot observed, "No poet, no artist of any art has his complete meaning alone; you must set him, for contrast and comparison, among the dead. I mean this as a principle of aesthetic, not merely historical criticism." Eliot's point is that there is something we can call the artistic tradition, and that deciding whether or not something is a work of art involves, among other things, deciding if it can be incorporated into that tradition. Eliot's remarks do not have their complete meaning alone either. They require a comprehensive exposition of concepts such as 'language,' 'meaning,' 'tradition,' 'understanding,' etc. to give them the philosophical underpinnings necessary to make his principle of aesthetic an acceptable one. Eliot went part of the way himself in providing those underpinnings. Collingwood completed the task. As I see it, Dickie will have to emulate Eliot on this matter. And as I read them, Danto, Cavell, and Wollheim have provided a wealth of material which could be used to help Dickie complete his task. Dickie's definition is sufficiently important to warrant the attention philosophers will undoubtedly focus on his project.

RICHARD J. SCLAFANI

Rice University