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THE INSTITUTIONAL THEORY: A CANDIDATE FOR APPRECIATION?

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I. THE SHY ARTIST PROBLEM

AMONG attempts to define 'art' in institutional or 'procedural' terms, Dickie's account in *Art and the Aesthetic* probably remains the most attractive, at least on first reading.¹ In a recent article in this journal Dickie has returned to a defence of this account.² Here he accuses Wollheim of a serious misunderstanding of what he had said in his book. Wollheim, he points out, had understood the conferring of 'status of candidate for appreciation' to be done by people 'commissioning a piece of music' or 'buying a painting for a gallery';³ whereas he (Dickie) had been 'trying to give an account of what goes on when art is created *by artists*'.

Wollheim's misunderstanding is understandable, however. For the plausibility of the institutional definition rests largely on taking it in the sense now disowned by Dickie. Let us take the case of a 'readymade' or similarly controversial object exhibited in a respectable art gallery. 'But is this art?', asks the bewildered visitor. 'It must be', comes the reply, 'since it is offered as a candidate for appreciation by a person qualified to act on behalf of that institution.' This reply, or supposed reply, has in fact persuaded many ordinary people that the objects in question are (or 'must be') art.

We are encouraged to understand Dickie's theory in this way by his own comparison of the relevant act of conferral with an act of christening (*A&A*, p. 49). The institutional theory, he wrote, '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 it is rather like that.' When a qualified person, acting on behalf of a certain institution, pronounces the words 'I name this child "Jane"', it follows that henceforth the child's name is Jane. And one might reasonably take Dickie to be saying that a similar act is performed by the person acting on behalf of a gallery or publishing house when he exhibits or publishes a work.

Now an obvious objection to this is that something may be a work of art even

¹ George Dickie, *Art and the Aesthetic* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell U.P., 1974). Hereafter *A&A*.

² George Dickie, 'Wollheim's Dilemma', *British Journal of Aesthetics*, vol 38, no. 2 (1998), pp. 127-135.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 131.

though it is never exhibited or published; but this objection would not apply to the view expressed in an earlier passage of *Art and the Aesthetic* (which, apparently, Wollheim had neglected). 'In fact', acknowledges Dickie here, 'many works of art are seen only by one person—the one who creates them—but they are still art.' In this case 'the status in question [is] acquired by a single person's acting on behalf of the artworld and *treating an artifact as a candidate for appreciation*'; this being, according to Dickie, the more usual case (*A&A*, p. 38).

But how are we to understand the italicized expression? Again Dickie provided an illustration that may seem helpful. The relevant act, he explains, was performed by Duchamp when he took his urinal to 'that now-famous art show', in this way converting it 'into a work of art' (*A&A*, p. 38). Now whether this would be enough to convert the urinal into a work of art is a question to which I shall return; but it is true that, by offering it to the art show, Duchamp was treating it as a candidate for appreciation. This, however, is not the position of the artist whose works 'are seen only by one person—the one who creates them'. What, we must ask, is *he* supposed to have done by way of treating his works as candidates for appreciation? Does he pronounce the words 'I hereby confer . . .' in the privacy of his studio? Does he look at the objects in a particular way? And in what sense would the relevant act, supposing we could identify it, be performed 'on behalf of an institution'? This phrase obviously makes sense when applied to the director of a gallery or publishing house, but not when applied to the shy artist. When the theory is applied to such cases, it is so implausible that readers may be forgiven for taking their cue from the comparison with christening, rather than adhering to Dickie's statement, just quoted, about works that are 'seen only by one person—the one who creates them'. But then, of course, the difficulty of that kind of case remains.

II. WORKS OF ART, CHRISTENINGS, AND KNIGHTHOODS

The comparison with such institutional acts as christening can also mislead in another way. This is especially clear in the case of another example used by Dickie—that of conferring a knighthood. Consider the case of the not-so-shy artist, who shows his work to a friend or, perhaps, puts it in a prominent place where it is likely to be seen by others. He may be said to have conferred on it the status of candidate for appreciation. Now according to Dickie,⁴ the conferring of this status is comparable to the conferring of a knighthood; and this may seem a plausible comparison, for in each case there is an act that confers on the object or person a status that it or he did not have before.

The comparison is, however, misleading. In the case of knighthoods the conferral (as Dickie points out) is not conditional on the worthiness of the recipient. Worthy or not, such a person is created a knight purely by the relevant performance on the part of the monarch. But is it the same in the case of

⁴ *Ibid.*

candidates for appreciation? Suppose I held up a shoelace with the words 'I offer this as a candidate for appreciation.' This would make no sense unless my audience understood what kind of appreciation was intended, and what it was about the object that might be regarded as worthy of appreciation.

This difference is connected with the question whether, or in what sense, the artworld is an institution. It certainly *contains* institutions; but that it is itself an institution is far from clear. But if it is, it is not of the same kind as that of bestowing knighthoods. There is a long-standing convention that whoever receives the royal treatment is, by that performance alone, created a knight; but there is no such convention in the case of art. And while a knighthood may be conferred in the absence of any chivalrous qualities, the idea of offering something for appreciation without some idea of its worthiness to be appreciated remains obscure. According to Dickie, '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'.⁵ But how is this to be understood? Could Duchamp have said 'Here is something for you to appreciate, but I don't expect anyone to appreciate it?'

III. HOW 'WORK OF ART' IS USED: NECESSARY AND SUFFICIENT CONDITIONS

The difficulty about the shy artist is a difficulty about necessary conditions: about whether the institutional definition succeeds in capturing the use of 'work of art' in that respect.

How, in general, is the presence of necessary conditions established? Let us agree that being unmarried is a necessary condition of being a bachelor. What this means is that one cannot—cannot without contradicting oneself—describe Herbert both as a bachelor and as being married. Even to *question* whether Herbert the bachelor must be unmarried would betray a failure to understand these words. Now imagine the following case: A and B are looking through the artist's attic after his death and A exclaims: 'To think that these wonderful works of art have been lying here without anyone having been given a chance to appreciate them!' If the institutional definition were correct, then A must be talking nonsense: he must be failing to understand the meaning of 'work of art'.

Objectors to the institutional and similar attempts to define 'art' have, on the whole, drawn attention to failures in respect of necessary conditions. But the question of *sufficient* conditions is more relevant to the main motive for this kind of definition: that of dealing with the unprecedented appearance of objects purporting to be works of art, in spite of not satisfying, or even being intended to satisfy, traditional expectations. Under the new definitions these objects would be accommodated in spite of this lack. But how do these definitions measure up to the actual use of 'work of art' in respect of sufficient conditions?

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 132.

Let us consider how the presence of sufficient conditions is established. Suppose it were claimed that being male and unmarried is sufficient for being a bachelor. The way to test this would be by way of counter-examples. Could we not suppose that something fails to be a bachelor in spite of satisfying those conditions? Of course we could. But with the addition of further conditions (being human, being adult and others), we might hope to arrive at a set of conditions that is truly sufficient, corresponding to the actual use of 'bachelor'.⁶ And then we would say that one cannot (cannot without contradicting oneself) deny that Herbert is a bachelor if he satisfies those conditions. Even to *question*, in such a case, whether Herbert is a bachelor, would betray a failure to understand what the words in question mean.

The same points can be made about the example of christening. Given that an authorized person, in such and such circumstances, pronounces the words 'I name this child Jane', it follows that henceforward the child's name is Jane. Someone who denied this would be contradicting himself: he would fail to understand what the words in question mean. And this would be so even if he doubted or questioned the inference.

But is it so in the case of art? Suppose someone denied that one of the artefacts in question is really art, while granting that the procedure posited by the theory had been applied to it: must we conclude that he is contradicting himself, that he fails to understand the meaning of 'work of art'? If not, then the definition fails in respect of sufficient conditions. This would be so even if someone could merely *question* or *doubt*, without absurdity, whether those objects are really art. It is important to insist on this point. If the definition were correct in respect of sufficient conditions, then someone who merely hesitated to describe those objects as 'art' would, thereby, betray a failure to understand the meaning of this word. It is obvious, however, that many competent speakers of the language concerned do hesitate, or indeed refuse, to describe such objects as art.⁷

However, even those who are prepared to describe them as art may do so for the wrong reason from the point of view of the theory. Suppose that the reason given is 'Because they are in an art gallery'. Further questioning may show that what is meant is not that the objects *became* art by being put in the gallery, but that the people in charge would be unlikely to exhibit them unless they *were* art, irrespective of being put in the gallery. It is a case of trusting the experts. The

⁶ The definition of 'bachelor' turns out to be surprisingly difficult. Not only must 'unmarried' be replaced by 'has never been married' so as to exclude widowers from being bachelors, but something further may need to be added to exclude celibate priests. There must also be a proviso to exclude men in societies where there is no concept of marriage and, finally, men in *our* society who, though not married, are living in a stable relationship with a woman.

⁷ I recently put the question 'Would you describe *Fountain* as a work of art?' to four groups of Open University students and obtained the following answers: yes, 11; no, 17; undecided, 6. Prior to answering, students were asked to forget any philosophical arguments and try to approach the question as ordinary members of the public with at least a moderate interest in art.

assumption would be that the objects *must have* suitable qualities: qualities that are perceptible by the experts and should be perceptible by the rest of us, if and when we make the effort. The fact that they are in the gallery would be a reasonable ground for inferring that they are art, but not a proof that they are.

IV. DEFINITION AND SEMANTIC CHANGE

What is the status of the institutional definition? Is it supposed to capture the meaning of 'work of art' as used in current English? If so, it fails, in respect of both necessary and sufficient conditions. Could the definition be understood, perhaps, in a predictive sense, rather than as an attempt to describe the current use of 'work of art'?

Let us suppose that being offered for appreciation came, in due course, to be treated as a sufficient condition for the use of that expression. Would this mean that the institutional definition had turned out to be right after all, at least in respect of sufficient conditions? No; for in that case the expression would have changed its meaning: the conditions governing its use would be different from what they are now. It is of course possible that this expression, like any other, will change its meaning in various ways; but if the envisaged change took place, this would not mean that the institutional definition had turned out to be right: what would have turned out to be right would be merely the prediction, or conjecture, that the expression in question would change its meaning in that way.

It is important to distinguish changes of meaning, such as that just described, from conceptual changes. If 'work of art' came to be synonymous with, say, 'object offered for appreciation', it would not follow that the *concept* of a work of art, or the distinction between works of art and objects offered for appreciation, had disappeared. That distinction could still be expressed in other words. (Similarly, if 'disinterested' came to be used by everyone in place of 'uninterested' it would not follow that the distinction between these *concepts* had disappeared.) Such changes in the meaning of 'work of art' would not affect the question whether a given object *is a work of art*. In posing this question it is presupposed that we are speaking the language that is current among us now, but if 'work of art' came to have a different meaning, then the question whether the object is (scare quotes) 'a work of art' would not be the same question.

The claim that the creation of art depends on the existence of an art world should also be considered in the light of how we use this language. That claim was made by Danto in his influential article 'The Artworld', in which he regarded the idea of art without an art world as comparable to that of 'flight insurance in the middle ages';⁸ and it appears again in Dickie's latest definition.⁹ In another

⁸ Arthur Danto, 'The Artworld', *Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 61 (1964).

⁹ In George Dickie, *Introduction to Aesthetics* (Oxford: Oxford U.P., 1997), p. 92: 'A work of art is an artifact created to be presented to an artworld public'.

recent definition (this time in terms of the *function* of art) we find the related claim, that the status of being a work of art varies with different times. Thus 'an item is an artwork at time t if and only if it is in one of the central art forms at t and is intended to fulfil a function art has at t ; or it is an artifact that achieves excellence in fulfilling such a function'.¹⁰

But these claims are not true to the actual use of 'work of art'. To speak of 'flight insurance in the middle ages' is to talk nonsense; but when someone speaks of 'cave art' and 'cave artists', this is not nonsense. If these expressions *were* nonsense, then the words 'art' and 'artist' would have different meanings from those which are current.

Suppose A and B are visiting the cave paintings at Lascaux and A exclaims: 'To think that these wonderful works of art were created thousands of years ago!' A, we may assume, would not be prepared to claim that these works satisfy the conditions mentioned above ('one of the central art forms at t ', etc.), but it does not follow that A would not know what he is talking about. It might be suggested that when A speaks of 'these wonderful works of art', what he really means is: 'these objects which are now ("at time t ", but not before) works of art'; but there is no reason to endorse this suggestion.

It is important to observe the difference between being a work of art and being regarded as such. Being regarded as an X (a tree, a work of art, a DNA molecule) is, of course, something that varies with different times (and places), but this is not so with *being* an X. It is true that we would not describe something as being an X if we did not, at the time of speaking, regard it as such; but this does not mean that being an X can be equated with being regarded as such.

Whether something is an X, and whether it is regarded as such, are two different questions. To answer the latter we need knowledge about the language and practices of the people concerned; but to establish that the Lascaux paintings are works of art we need only to look and see.

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¹⁰ Robert Stecker, *Artworks* (Pennsylvania, 1997), p. 4. The definition is elaborated on p. 50.

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