

DICKIE'S INSTITUTIONAL THEORY AND THE "OPENNESS" OF THE CONCEPT OF ART

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In this paper, I will look at the relationship between Weitz's claim that art is an "open" concept and Dickie's institutional theory of art, in its most recent form. Dickie's theory has been extensively discussed, and often criticized, in the literature on aesthetics, yet it has rarely been observed – to my knowledge at least – that the fact that his theory actually incorporates, at least to some extent, Weitz's claim about the "openness" of the concept of art, precisely accounts for what I take to be the main flaws in the theory. In what follows I present arguments for that claim, looking briefly at the position of both authors with respect to the concept of art, then showing how they relate to each other, and what implications this has for Dickie's institutional theory, and more generally for the traditional project of characterising art.

Let me begin with a brief reminder of Weitz's argument against definitions of art, as it appears in his famous essay "The Role of Theory in Aesthetics" (Weitz, 1956). It is a well-known fact that a great number of philosophers, since the time of Plato up to our own day, have attempted to give a "correct" enunciation of the nature of art. They have notably maintained that art consists for example in "significant form" (Bell and Fry's Formalism), or in the communication of emotion through some sensuous public medium (Emotionalism), or in the clarification and externalization of a certain kind of "intuition" (Croce's and Collingwood's Intuitionism), to give but a few examples. Yet Weitz thought that such attempts at capturing the nature of art were all fundamentally flawed. First of all, it seems that one can always find a counterexample to any such proposed definition of art. But furthermore, Weitz said, such definitions simply *cannot* but fail to achieve their aim, because of the very nature of the concept of art. "Art", he argued, is an *open* concept – that is, it is possible to *extend* its meaning in unpredictable and even unimaginable ways, in order to apply it to new entities that were not formerly included under that concept. For that reason, no set of necessary and sufficient

conditions for something to count as art can be provided. And to explain how it is that we apply the concept of art to various human productions, Weitz appealed to Wittgenstein's example of the word "game" in a famous passage of the *Philosophical Investigations* (Wittgenstein, 1953, aphorisms 65-69). According to Wittgenstein, there is no feature common to all games that would constitute the basis for our calling them all "games"; if we do this, it is because of the *family resemblances* that unite them. Game X does not resemble game Z, but it resembles game Y, which itself resembles Z.¹ Weitz thought that the concept of art functioned in a similar manner: we apply it to all the different artworks not because there would be a certain set of features common to them all, but because we can detect certain family resemblances between them. For instance, work A resembles work B in its ability to produce aesthetic pleasure in the viewer, and work C in the way it challenges the artistic conventions that prevailed in its time, but work B does not really resemble work C.

On that basis, Weitz concluded that all attempts at defining art were unavoidably doomed to failure, since novel conditions (the production of something revolutionary) could always arise that would lead to an evolution in the meaning of "art". And importantly, this evolution would be, according to Weitz, the product of a *decision* on our part to extend the concept (Weitz, 1956, 188). According to Weitz, this "openness" of the concept of art is the condition of the possibility of further creativity and innovation in the artistic field:

[T]he very expansive, adventurous character of art, its ever-present changes and novel creations, makes it logically impossible to ensure any set of defining properties.

(*Ibid.*, 189)

As we know, Weitz's challenge to the project of defining art elicited a number of reactions on the part of philosophers, many of whom proposed to meet the challenge. Such reactions owed much to Maurice Mandelbaum's famous essay written in 1965, 'Family Resemblances and Generalization Concerning the Arts', in which he argued that Weitz's argument did not demonstrate the impossibility of finding a "non-exhibited" property common to all artworks, and thus did not manage to discredit the project of producing a definition. Prominent among these reactions against Weitz's position was George Dickie's institutional theory of art. In its latest formulation (from 1984 onwards), Dickie's theory revolves around a set of five definitions, those of "artist", "artwork", "public", "artworld" and "artworld system". I will assume here that we all have at least a rough idea of what the "artworld" is: it encompasses both

¹ What exactly Wittgenstein himself was trying to achieve with the idea of family resemblances is a debated issue, about which a vast literature exists; let me make it clear that I am concerned here, rather, with what Weitz did

the artists and their public – the people who go to concerts and art galleries, the museum curators, the art critics, etc. I will thus content myself with giving Dickie’s definition of an artwork (in its final version):

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

(Dickie, 1984, 80)

Now while it is true that Dickie’s theory originally arose in reaction and in opposition to Weitz’s arguments, it nevertheless remains true, as Robert Yanal has accurately pointed out (Yanal, 1998, 2-3), that Dickie’s theory incorporates to some extent Weitz’s idea that “art” is an open concept. In his most recently published book, Dickie thus writes 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”

(Dickie, 2001, 60; my emphasis).

Although such distinctions may not have been instituted out of a *conscious* decision, Dickie still implies that a “decision” of some kind has been made by our culture to keep dog shows out of the artworld, and on this point he appears to agree with Weitz. As we have seen, Weitz thought that the concept of art evolved according to the decisions regularly made by representatives of the artworld (typically art critics) to extend its meaning to cover new entities. Now I wish to stave off two criticisms that might be made against Weitz here. First, Weitz did not think that such representatives could make their decisions in a purely arbitrary manner – indeed, had he thought so, he would have had no need for a theory of family resemblances to explain why we call certain things art and others not. According to Weitz, when, for example, we ask whether a new literary work of an innovative and disconcerting kind deserves to be called a “novel”, what is at stake is “a decision as to whether the work under examination is *similar* in certain respects to other works, already called “novels”, and consequently *warrants* the extension of the concept to cover the new case” (Weitz, 1956, 188; my emphasis). Secondly, it is also illegitimate to claim, as a number of authors have done (see for example Dickie, 1984, 33, and 2001, 14; or Carroll, 1999, 222-24), that Weitz’s position was incompatible with the specification of *relevant* similarities as acceptable criteria of “arthood”, as opposed to “similarities” broadly

with this idea.

understood, and therefore had the undesirable implication of drawing everything into the realm of art, since everything resembles everything else in some respect or other. Weitz clearly was not opposed to the idea of declaring certain kinds of similarities relevant by contrast with others, since he acknowledged that “[a]estheticians may lay down similarity conditions” (Weitz, 1956, 189).

I think that Dickie’s integration of Weitz’s intuition about the “openness” of the concept of art partly works in favour of his theory. Indeed, it does not appear unreasonable to imagine that, instead of eventually recognizing Duchamp’s readymades, and all the later works inspired by them, as works of art, we might have forged a new concept – other than “art” – under which to include them. For instance we might have chosen to reserve the term “artwork” for creations being at least of the *kind* that tends to produce an aesthetic experience in the viewer (or the listener, or the reader), and to talk of Duchamp’s readymades as being, say, “intellectual jokes” rather than art² – despite the similarities we can discern between them and “artworks” in the strict sense just sketched; indeed, a work like *Fountain* has been created by someone who clearly was an artist (as his early works, at least, testify to), it is displayed in art galleries, and so on. These similarities provide reasons for considering *Fountain* a work of art, yet they do not compel us to do so: the specification just proposed for the concept of “art”, however controversial it may appear, nevertheless does not seem *obviously* illegitimate. Both Dickie and Weitz take such elements into account.

Now it has to be acknowledged that Weitz’s view of what the “decision-makers” could be led to count as art was rather permissive, even though their decisions were supposed to be motivated by an appeal to observed – relevant – similarities with pre-existing artworks. For instance, Weitz thought that an art critic who observed a piece of driftwood in its natural state, untouched by any human hand, and exclaimed, “this piece of driftwood is a lovely piece of sculpture”, was thereby extending the concept of art beyond the realm of artifacts (*Ibid.*, 190). Now I want to argue here that Dickie’s theory actually follows Weitz so far as to become flawed by a lack of sufficient *normative power*. True, Dickie is not as permissive as Weitz. Through the requirement of artifactuality, his definition forbids that something which is not an human creation, like a piece of driftwood in its natural environment, may nevertheless be a work of art in the literal sense of the term. And certainly Weitz was wrong to claim that we could call such a piece of driftwood “art” more than metaphorically (in an honorific sense, as when we praise someone else’s culinary talent by saying: “your cake is a work of art”). I think we cannot but

² This is precisely what someone like Monroe C. Beardsley would have had us do: see Beardsley, 1983, 60.

agree with Dickie when he writes in *The Art Circle* that “not everything created by an artist [...] is necessarily a work of art [...]. Similarly, just because something is treated as a thing of a certain type (art) by someone (art critics) does not necessarily mean that something is a thing of that kind” (Dickie, 1984, 60).

However, Dickie’s definition of art does not appear to provide sufficient safeguards against the danger he himself points out: it still seems to give too much power to the artworld regarding the determination of what is and what is not art. For consider what would happen if, for example, the Western artworld fell into a state of profound decadence, and it became an established view that Jerry Springer’s talk shows, and similar TV programmes, were works of art. (Not that I necessarily think this likely to happen – and fortunately so – yet the example remains enlightening.) It seems that Dickie’s definition would then sanction that view: Jerry Springer’s shows are presumably artefacts in Dickie’s sense (for Dickie an “artefact” is not necessarily a physical object; it rather means “human creation”), and in the hypothetical context I propose to imagine, they would be artefacts of a kind created to be presented to an artworld public. Jerry Springer would indeed have the satisfaction of thinking of himself as an artist, since the artworld would grant him that status, and he would intend his shows for presentation to members of the artworld (which in that case would have come to encompass the viewers of talk shows). Yet certainly we feel that Jerry Springer’s shows are not art – and that they would not be art even if the majority of the artworld declared them to be such; or if we accepted to call them art in order to comply with the general practice, we would still feel that the term “art” had been somewhat emptied of its meaning. Jerry Springer’s shows are pure *entertainment*, and art is something different from entertainment. But Dickie’s definition of art fails to take that feeling into account. It thus appears, to some extent, to be a *sociological* account of “art”, telling us at most what our society dominantly *considers* to be art, rather than a statement of what art actually *is*, no matter what the prevailing view may be about it in the artworld. It is true that, for the reasons Weitz has given, the issue of what art *is* cannot be completely separated from the question of what the artworld *calls* art. But I hope to have shown that these two issues should not be simply identified with one another. A good theory of art, while acknowledging that the concept of art evolves on the basis of *decisions* made by representatives of the artworld, should nevertheless state that such decisions need to have grounds that square with our fundamental intuitions about art (for example, that artworks have to be creations of some sort; that they must at least have a *potential* value of some particular kind; etc.), and that it is not enough that the people who make such decisions *believe* they have good grounds for them – in my example, the admirers of Jerry Springer might argue that his shows have a deep emotional

impact on the viewers, that they involve a confessional aspect similar to the works of Tracey Emin, and so on – and they might take these reasons to warrant the inclusion of talk shows among artworks. Dickie’s theory only partially fulfils that normative requirement.

Moreover, even if we assume that my example has no plausibility and that Dickie’s definition is unlikely to ever *actually* imply that talk shows are works of art, it remains correct to claim that it *would* have that implication *if* the artworld decided to regard them that way; and this, I think, is enough to show the insufficient normative power of Dickie’s definition, which only *contingently* matches certain important intuitions we have about art. Of course one *could* argue in favour of a more permissive view of art than the one I am advocating here; some might even go so far as to agree with Ben Vauthier that “everything is art and art is life”.³ My point, however, is that Dickie’s definition, on his own account, is not meant to accommodate such permissiveness (which would indeed make the concept of art completely empty), but that it still follows Weitz too far in this respect.

Finally, it is an often-made complaint that Dickie’s theory is uninformative because of the circularity of its definitions: “artwork” is defined by reference to the notion of “artworld public”, yet “artworld” is in turn defined in terms of “artworld system”, the definition of which itself refers to the notion of artwork, artist, and artworld public (cf. Stecker, 2003, 148; and Levinson, 1987, 145). I would like to endorse here the charge of unformativeness, but also to suggest that this defect is, again, partly due to Dickie’s affinities with the open-concept position. It seems indeed that Dickie’s definition fails to bring out the specific features that make artworks what they are. He insists that his theory stresses the importance of the institutional framework against which works of art are created (Dickie, 2001, 64). But this can only convince us if we accept Dickie’s point that for something to be “an artefact of a kind created...”, i.e. a work of art, is for it to have been *intended* by its maker to be suitable for presentation to an artworld public. And this point seems to be undermined by the possibility of “ingenuous art”, illustrated both by fictional examples (e.g. the member of a primitive society with no concept of art who creates the representation of a leopard and manages to endow it with something of the fearsomeness of the animal; see Stecker, 1986, 211) and concrete ones (e.g. works like the Venus of Willendorf). But from the moment we reject the idea that an “artistic” intention is necessary for creating art, it appears that while the institutional framework emphasized by Dickie may be crucial to the “arthood” of some contemporary works like Duchamp’s readymades, it is not so for those of a more traditional kind, like figurative paintings and sculptures. To explain why we call the latter

³ Quoted in Osborne, 1980, 11.

type of works art, it seems that we will unavoidably have to refer to the particular *intrinsic features* that make them such, and which, as Noël Carroll suggests, allow them to perform some *acknowledged function* of art (Carroll, 1999, 248). And in this respect, Dickie’s definition tells us nothing at all – not surprisingly, since it is not meant to make any reference whatsoever to the intrinsic properties of artworks. In the end, Dickie’s definition neither provides a satisfactory explanation of why we call certain things “art” and others not, nor a sound criterion for distinguishing between art and non-art in controversial cases (due to its excessive inclusiveness). Precisely because of its commitment to accommodating the “openness” of the concept of art and the incredible heterogeneity within the realm of artworks, Dickie’s definition thus fails to perform what I guess we would expect from a good – purely classificatory – definition of art; so that this commitment would seem to be its undoing.

I think that there are two main lessons to draw from these considerations. The first one concerns the project of providing an essential definition of art. I shall not conclude with Weitz that such a project is necessarily doomed to failure. As Stephen Davies and Noël Carroll, among others, have convincingly argued, we cannot be *certain* that such a definitional project is bound to fail even if we acknowledge that our understanding of art is open to change (see Davies, 1991, 12ff, and Carroll, 220-21). However, it remains that the failure of Dickie’s institutional definition, which is certainly one of the most plausible candidates for carrying out the traditional project of Aesthetics in the contemporary era, can legitimately make us sceptical about the possibility of giving a substantial definition of art that would at the same time take into account contemporary artworks in all their variety. The second lesson is that whether one decides nevertheless to carry on with the project of finding an essential definition, or whether one prefers to abandon it in favour of a solution closer to Noël Carroll’s theory of historical narratives, one should take into account, for the reasons given above, Weitz’s sound intuition about the open character of the concept of art. But on the other hand, the problems we have pointed out about Dickie’s definition of art also show that one should not follow Weitz in his tendency to bestow a degree of quasi-godlike power upon the artworld; room should be left for the possibility that the artworld as a whole may be mistaken in some of its views about art.⁴

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