

On the Question "What Is Art?"

Philosophically, the question "What is art?" is often addressed in an ahistorical manner, as if artworks themselves were not deeply embedded in their cultural matrices and could resist being an integral part of those matrices. The political/social structures and values of a society, however, and its ontological commitments, as it were, do quite obviously inform artistic practices throughout history and contribute significantly to answers given to the question "What is art?" One need only look to the social standing of the artist and the "for whom" and under what conditions the artwork was intended to be viewed and appreciated in different times and places to see how these contributed to any given society's self-understanding of what a work of art is.

In the West alone there has been a remarkable transition from the time when the artist was a rather lowly craftsman (in Greece, especially if the artist were a practitioner of one of the "mechanical" arts, those that required an immense expenditure of physical effort), to his being a member of a respected, if not highly rewarded, guild; to his or her becoming a member of the artworld, subservient, first to aristocratic and royal taste and then to various market considerations and other social/political constraints. In between, of course, the artist was a "genius" asserting his or her own radical, and often antibourgeois, independence.

We clearly get fundamentally different attitudes toward what a work of art should be when there is an educated, leisure class for whom the work is essentially an object for aesthetic contemplation, the viewer becoming, or aspiring to be, as in traditional Confucian China, a "connoisseur," and when, say in the medieval Christian West, with a hieratic, theologically oriented society, the viewer is regarded to be cognitively deficient, the artwork then becoming a means to overcome that deficiency.

When, as in more recent times, artworks became personal property they acquired a new kind of autonomy. Instead of being public works or otherwise "owned" by church or ruler, they became separate, distinct entities that could

be bought, sold, exchanged, stolen, and, in some circumstances, lawfully destroyed.

Kim Levin, an art critic, although overstating somewhat her point, notes that "Because it [Modernist art] was competitive and individualistic, it saw everything in terms of risk. Like capitalism, it was materialistic. From its collage scraps and fur-lined teacups to its laden brushstrokes, I-beams, and Campbell's soup cans, Modernist art insisted increasingly on being an object in a world of objects. What started as radical physicality turned into commodity; the desire for newness led to a voracious appetite for novelty."¹ And the individual arts did, under varying social circumstances, acquire their fundamental independence from extra-aesthetic demands at different times and places. Lydia Goehr has pointed out that

For most of its history, music was conceived as a practice entirely subject to the constraints of extra-musical occasion and function determined mostly by the church, court and scientific community. The changes that took place at the end of the eighteenth century gave rise to a new view of music as an independent practice whose concerns were predominately musical. This independent practice became a practice geared toward producing *enduring products* insofar as it was determined by the more general concepts of fine art and the autonomous work of art. Only with the rise of this new view of music did musicians, critics, and the like begin to think predominately of music in terms of works. Bach did not think centrally in these terms; Beethoven did. Haydn makes the transition.²

With painting, sculpture, and architecture, on the other hand, "autonomy" was apparently achieved to a considerable degree at an earlier Renaissance and post-Renaissance time. Still, with the rise of the private art collector and then of museums, an artwork tended to become part of a gathering and to lose thereby something of its unique, individual power and status. An artwork, a modern artist might well proclaim, wants to be a world—not a part of a collection of things.

Consider also the differences historically as to who was allowed, and under what circumstances, admittance to the performing arts. In ancient Greece, where theater was a communal, ritualistic affair as much as it was a "tragedy" or "comedy," admittance was by citizenship—and not everyone was a citizen. In the eighteenth century musical occasions were for small intimate gatherings, with admittance by invitation. Today, with public concerts and the like, admittance is for anyone with payment. Surely these respective social situations had some direct connection not only with the kind of art produced but to the very conception in those societies regarding what a work of art is. Did it intend to promote certain communal values, or be an occasion for, and thereby subservient to, a display of class interest and power, or be a kind of entertainment, an escape from otherwise humdrum being?

In short, we can, I think, agree with Frank Burch Brown who states that "The aesthetic object is constituted not just by *what* is seen but by *how* it is seen—that is, by what it is seen *as*—which depends partly on its whole milieu, including the contexts of perception and various things that we know or think we know."³

And among the things "we know or think we know" are various structures of being within which, among other factors, we frame our views of what art is. Another way of putting this would be to say that any theory of art or systematic reflection on the subject is always developed against the background of an ontology, stated or not, and its attendant epistemological and axiological claims; for any discussion of what art is can be addressed only through various presuppositions concerning what there is in general and the manner of being of that "what" and how it is known.

Referring to Augustine and Bernard of Clairvaux, for example, Brown argues that their "negative bias against what today we term the aesthetic and the artistic" is intelligible only against the background of the "dubious and originally non-Christian idea from the late Classical and Hellenistic world that there is an ontological hierarchy—a great chain or ladder of being—ascend of which requires that the devout spirit and truth-seeking mind progressively leave behind things of body and sense. It is this particular hierarchy and this view of human nature," he goes on to say, "that prevents any acknowledgement that something so sensory as art could provide a true standard or norm for religious awareness and insight."⁴

In other words, and in short, there can be no aesthetics without ontology (and epistemology); for any analysis of what an artwork is and the experience appropriate to it will necessarily presuppose attitudes toward, if not deep claims about, the way "ordinary things" are and how they are known to be connected and interrelated with one another, and ideas about what human nature itself is.

Further, it is obvious that, as Roland Barthes writes, "the appearance of new technical means . . . modifies not only art's forms but its very concept."⁵ The very term *art*, we know, derives from the Greek *technē* (and its Latin equivalent *ars*) and, for the Greeks, referred to a rich variety of human makings, to anything, in fact, that involved a learned skill, as in medicine, the crafts, or law. "Classifications of the arts" have undergone many changes in Western experience alone,⁶ and it is not surprising, therefore, that a number of contemporary thinkers are convinced that art is simply an "open concept," or as Theodor Adorno puts it, "that, for the plurality of what are called 'the arts,' there does not even seem to exist a universal concept of art able to accommodate them all."⁷

Nevertheless, the question "What is art?" can be, and indeed has been, addressed at several different levels and kinds of generality. It may be dealt with as a problem in systematic philosophy and accordingly answered in

overarching metaphysical terms (Hegelian-like: “Art is a spiritual activity of man which is delivered from a sensuous medium and contains an end bound up with it”); or it may be dealt with somewhat more empirically, art being characterized by those features that supposedly set artworks apart from other objects or that appropriately elicit a special response or “aesthetic experience.”

It has often been recognized, however, the question itself presents linguistic and logical difficulties that seem to rule out any fruitful answer to it. First of all, it might be that what we accept as works of art is so extraordinarily rich and diverse, including as it does exquisite Chinese vases and mammoth Gothic cathedrals, simple songs and elaborate symphonies, abstract paintings, statues of gods and portraits of kings, that what is true about, or holds for, all objects in the class is very little indeed and not very interesting. Further, the question seems always to have been asked (and answered) relative to the art of a particular cultural time and place. The very import of the question “What is art?”, in other words, is culture bound—and perhaps inescapably so. Also, the question appears to invite not so much a description of what art is as a prescription of what art ought to be. Underlying the answer to the question is usually a call or a program for what the answerer believes art ought to be (e.g., as in Tolstoy’s famous essay entitled “What Is Art?”⁸).

Following Wittgenstein, some aestheticians (notably Morris Weitz) have also argued that it is impossible to formulate a conception of art through articulating necessary and sufficient properties of artworks; it is logically impossible, they say, to define art by any set of essential features that distinguish artworks from everything else. “The problem of the nature of art is like that of the nature of games, at least in these respects: If we actually look and see what it is that we call ‘art’, we will also find no common properties—only strands of similarities. Knowing what art is is not apprehending some manifest or latent essence but being able to recognize, describe and explain those things we call ‘art’ in virtue of these similarities.”⁹ ‘Art,’ the argument goes, is an “open concept”; that is, “its conditions of application are emendable and corrigible.”

Maurice Mandelbaum, in his well-known article “Family Resemblances and Generalization Concerning the Arts,”¹⁰ has nicely criticized this view by pointing out that to claim “family resemblance” only (as defined by Wittgenstein) for works of art overlooks the fact that there is an attribute common to all who bear a family resemblance, although it is not necessarily one among those characteristics that are directly exhibited—namely, common ancestry. Artworks may have “relational attributes” of this sort—although it might indeed be extraordinarily difficult to articulate them. Also that the artworld is not closed to new and different forms does not, as Weitz seemed to think, mean that ‘art’ is necessarily an “open concept.” Future instances to which the concept of art may apply can, of course, possess genuinely novel properties, but the instances

may nevertheless still come under a properly formed definition or general concept of art.

In his later thinking on these problems, Morris Weitz acknowledges that he

identified the openness of the concept of art with its open texture [and] . . . assimilated all the subconcepts of art, such as tragedy, to Waismann's notion of open texture. Neither "art" nor any of its subterms, "tragedy," "drama," "music," "painting," etc. could be defined, since their criteria had to allow for the possibility of new ones that render definitive sets of them violations of the concepts they convey.

The wholesale reading of open concepts in aesthetics as open texture concepts was a mistake.¹¹

Weitz nevertheless continued to maintain that we can happily dispense with any "essentialist" account of what art is in favor of having "reasons that relate to disjunctive sets of nonnecessary, nonsufficient criteria and to their corresponding properties in the works of art that have them."¹²

The most radical formulation of an antiessentialist approach, however, is perhaps that put forward by George Dickie and others who, following Arthur Danto in his elaboration of the notion of an "artworld"¹³—only later to be repudiated by Danto in favor of the rather odd view that art, having reached full self-consciousness Hegelian-like in the minds of a number of contemporary urban artists, no longer has a "history"¹⁴—argue that a work of art is not to be defined by any qualities (family resemblancelike or otherwise) it may possess but simply according to what (certain) persons are willing to call a work of art within a certain social or institutional context. If a museum exhibits a pile of dirt thrown randomly on the floor with someone's (presumably the thrower's) signature attached to it, then it simply is a work of art in virtue of that investiture. The concept 'work of art' thus applies to anything artifactual that is legitimized (baptized) in the artworld as a bearer of the concept. Dickie sums-up his 1974 version of the theory in these terms: "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 a candidate for appreciation by some person or persons acting on behalf of a certain social institution (the artworld)."¹⁵ He then offers a revised claim to the effect that "works of art are art as the result of the position or place they occupy within an established practice, namely, the artworld" and defines a *work of art* as "an artifact of a kind created to be presented to an artworld public."¹⁶

In delivering roundhouse blows against this theory, Richard Wollheim notes facetiously that "Painters make paintings, but [according to the theory] it takes a representative of the artworld to make a work of art."¹⁷ Wollheim then poses what has to be taken as a crucial question and finds the "institutional theory" unable to address it satisfactorily.

A question to put to the theory, which nicely divides its supporters into the faint-hearted and the bold, is this: Do the representatives of the art-world have to have, or do they not have to have, reasons for what they do if what they do is to stick? Is their status enough for them to be able to confer status upon what they pick out, or must they additionally exercise judgment, or taste, or critical acumen, so that it is only if the paintings they pick out satisfy certain criteria or meet certain conditions that status is transferred?

Wollheim, and now Danto as well, argue (on quite different grounds) that an artwork must indeed have certain qualities or be part of an interpretative network of relations, the recognition of which requires very much an exercise of judgment and critical acumen.

The answer then to “What is art?” is not to found by either turning away from the question or appealing to the role of (certain members of) institutions, but by *looking deeper*.