

The Quest for the Essence of Art

One day in January 1990 outside the Public Library on Vancouver's Burrard Street a local artist, Rick Gibson, found himself surrounded by people angered by his publicized intention to crush a rat, Sniffy, between two canvasses with the help of a concrete block. The block would be dropped on top of Sniffy, who was presumably trapped between the two canvasses. On impact, the flattened Sniffy would leave its imprint on the canvasses (see *Globe and Mail*, 13 January 1990, D1-2).

In that same winter 1989-1990 Andres Serrano's *Piss Christ*, a photograph of a plastic crucifix submerged in a yellow liquid, allegedly the artist's own urine, enraged segments of the American public, including some politicians (see Bolton 1992, 27-37). The waves from the upheaval in the United States were felt as far as Winnipeg, Manitoba. Serrano's appearance at the Winnipeg Art Gallery in March 1990 resulted in a demand from some Winnipeg city counsellors to stop the city's financial support for the gallery (Noble 1990).

Gibson's and Serrano's are but two cases out of many in which would-be-artists present, to an increasingly unmoved world, strange new phenomena for which they claim the status of works of art. Much of the explanation for the outrage occasioned by these "works of art" must be sought, no doubt, in their violation of moral, political, and religious conventions. The offense caused by works such as Serrano's and Mapplethorpe's in the United States, though no doubt genuine, was probably not entirely spontaneous, but orchestrated by the religious right. The works have subsequently become vehicles for extensive debates about "freedom

of expression." Sniffy's life was saved by incensed animal lovers chasing Gibson down the street, rather than by philosophical arguments convincing Gibson that his work was not really art after all.

In the long run, Gibson's, Serrano's and Mapplethorpe's works may turn out to merit no more than a footnote in the history of art. If such works do gain a place in future accounts of the history of art, this will probably be due more to the attention Senator Jesse Helms and his fellow moral reformers drew to them, in itself an instructive example of the influence of extraneous forces on the creation of art-historical discourse.

In any case, during visits to art galleries, or while gazing at a new civic sculpture, most of us have had occasion to reflect on the question of why this particular object is a work of art, and how, if at all, it differs from other, more mundane, objects. Our apprehension is fueled by the belief that the history of Western art is fraught with instances of Van Goghs who, initially the objects of scorn, ridicule, and suspicions of madness, become universally recognized as artists of genius. We do not want to be among those who could not find the courage or innocence to point out that the emperor is parading about stark-naked—nor do we want to be condemned by history as ignorant and insensitive to contemporary works of art which may turn out to pass "the test of time" and obtain canonical status.

Some modern artists see it as the purpose of art to raise the question about art's nature:

The "value" of particular artists after Duchamp can be weighed according to how much they questioned the nature of art, which is another way of saying "what they *added* to the conception of art" or what wasn't there before they started. Artists question the nature of art by presenting new propositions as to art's nature. (Kosuth 1969, 135c)

Artists, if Kosuth is right, have become theoreticians. Through their artworks they pose theoretical questions. A. C. Danto, perhaps the most eminent of contemporary American aestheticians and art critics, has made this theoretical nature of art the centerpiece of his philosophy of art. Art, particularly in the twentieth century, increasingly presupposes theory and sees its task as accounting for its own nature (see, e.g., Danto 1986, 125). It is no doubt correct that the question about the nature of art arises from the actual historical development of artistic practices, from the variety of art production and reception. As observed by Noël Carroll (1994, 5, 14–16), this is particularly true in the age of the avant-garde. The first requirement of any general theory of art must therefore be to say something about this diversity, its unity (if any), and its historical development. And this is exactly one of the core problems of philosophy of art in our century.

In this chapter, I briefly review traditional attempts to deal with this problem. The philosophy of art (or aesthetics—I use the two terms interchangeably) to

be discussed in the following is mainly of what can broadly be characterized as of the analytic variety, and is the type dominating aesthetic discussions in for example *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* and *The British Journal of Aesthetics* (for an overview, see Shusterman 1989). The expression "traditional aesthetics" gained prominence with Kennick's essay "Does Traditional Aesthetics Rest on a Mistake?" (1958), but is now widely used in discussions in the philosophy of art. Starting from the observation of the great variation in art production and reception and its historical developments, traditional aesthetics wants, so to speak, to cut through the diversity to the unchanging essence of art. This is also the intent of George Dickie's celebrated institutional theory of art, which is actually a form of traditional, essentialist aesthetics. For this reason (I will argue) it has nothing to say about why and how art and conceptions of art develop historically.

Essentialism and Traditional Aesthetics

Clive Bell (1881–1964) and Roger Fry (1866–1934) are probably the most famous proponents of the essentialist type of traditional aesthetics (see, for example, Bell 1927 and Fry 1926, and below, chapter 2). The main content of essentialism can be formulated in the following manner: though we seem to perceive an endless variety of things and phenomena in the world, there is, for each group of things to which we apply one name, something unchangeable behind the perceived variety that makes it possible to use one name. This is of course thought to be part of the reason why we *have* one name for one kind of thing. Distinctions in the natural or real world are reflected in our language, a fact that makes it possible to define art by giving the necessary and sufficient conditions (or *genus proximum* and *differentia specifica*) that make something art. This is exactly what Bell does. According to Bell, all works of art provoke, at least in sensitive people, a certain kind of emotion, an "aesthetic emotion." This sensation, Bell presumes, is generated by a common quality in works of art. "[E]ither," Bell said in an often quoted passage,

all works of visual art have some common quality, or when we speak of "works of art" we gibber. Everyone speaks of "art," making a mental classification by which he distinguishes the class "works of art" from all other classes. . . . There must be some one quality without which a work of art cannot exist; possessing which, in the least degree, no work is altogether worthless. . . . What quality is common to Sta. Sophia and the windows at Chartres, Mexican sculpture, a Persian Bowl, Chinese carpets, Giotto's frescoes at Padua, and the masterpieces of Poussin, Piero della Francesca, and Cézanne? Only one answer seems possible—significant form. (Bell 1927, 7–8)

In the philosophy of art few consciously advance essentialist definitions of art or directly defend essentialism, but theories of an essentialist nature are still with us. George Dickie's famous—and continuously influential—institutional theory of art is, as I show below, one of the most elaborate attempts to revive traditional aesthetics, a fact which is frequently not made clear.

The Institutional Theory of Art

The institutional theory of art, Dickie says, “concentrates attention on the *nonexhibited* characteristics that works of art have in virtue of being embedded in an institutional matrix which may be called ‘the artworld’ and argues that *these characteristics are essential and defining*” (Dickie 1974, 12 [last italics mine]). It does so by defining art as an artifact some aspect 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)” (Dickie 1974, 34)

The institutional definition of art has been true at all times, but it has not always been apparent that the institutional character of art is indeed the essence of art. Only with the emergence of modern works of art in the early parts of the twentieth century, particularly Dadaism, was it revealed that none of the other features of works of art (such as their representational or expressive features) could define art.

The artworld is a social institution, not in the sense in which a formalized organization, such as a corporation, club, or political party, is an institution, but in the sense of an “established practice” (31), or a “customary practice” (35). The artworld is composed of a very large group of people: artists, producers, museum directors, museum-goers, theater-goers, reporters for newspapers, critics, art historians, art theorists, philosophers of art, and others (35–36). They are what Dickie calls the core of the artworld. “In addition, every person who sees himself as a member of the artworld is thereby a member” (36).

Many of the elements of the artworld mentioned by Dickie change through history. In the not too distant past (prior to about 1750) there were no public art museums as we know them today, and therefore no museum directors or museum-goers, no critics, and no reporters for newspapers. The actual contents of the artworld undergoes dramatic changes. One of the features of Dickie's definition of art is supposed to be that it, as opposed to other definitions, is able to take developments and changes into account (33, 48).

Though the ability to take change and development in the artistic institutions into account is an important aspect of Dickie's definition of art, it is difficult to see how defining art in the way Dickie does actually contributes to understanding and explaining change and development in the institutional setting of art. In one passage Dickie minimizes the role it would have for his theory if, for exam-

ple, the ancient Egyptians had a conception of art radically different from ours (1974, 28). It would be enough, he says, to specify the present conception of art. But if this is the case, why formulate a theory of art in the form of a definition giving the necessary and sufficient conditions that make something art? If a central concern in defining art is to understand change and development, an investigation of the particular circumstances under which a certain conception of art emerged and developed would be preferable to an essentialist definition of art.

As an essentialist definition of art, the focus of Dickie's institutional theory of art is on the eternal and unchanging nature of art, but the cost is extreme generality. In his explanation of, for example, who the artworld is composed of, Dickie clearly has in mind limited aspects of more recent developments in artistic practice.

The institutionalization of art is a feature of art specific to an historical period where what we consider the fine arts become identifiable as an institution (Bürger and Bürger 1992, chap. 1). Of particular significance in this institutionalization of the arts is the development of the art museum. It is only when the work of art is isolated in the museum, and robbed of that context in which it originally existed that it appears autonomous and the contemplation of it disinterested. Art can then become an aesthetic object, high art, or fine art, in our understanding of this concept (Saisselin 1992, 134–38).

Dickie takes the existence of the entire framework of artistic institutions for granted. Things can enter the institutional framework and thus obtain the status of works of art. But clearly the relationship between works of art and the institutions of art is more complicated than that, and the institutions of the artworld are partly defined by works of art. In some way all the aspects of the institutions must, from a historical point of view, come into being at once and so to speak create each other, or create the entire artistic field.

Dickie elevates an aspect of the development of art to its eternal essence, at the cost of the really interesting questions: to the extent that art is institutionalized and governed by conventions, where did these institutions come from, and how did they develop? Have they changed through history, and if so, what is the nature of this development? Because other parts of Dickie's theoretical efforts are directed to the examination of the historical origin of the aesthetic and of the conventional nature of the presentation of aesthetic objects, the lack of historical specificity seems particularly regrettable.

A similar uncertainty attaches to the question of the composition of the artworld. Though looser in its organization than that of a more formalized organization, it is certainly not true, as Dickie's theory implies, that anyone considering themselves part of the artworld has it in their power to turn something into a work of art. This question—of the composition of the artworld—is one where Dickie's theory would point in the direction of specific, for example sociological, examinations of questions such as, What constitutes membership in the artworld? and Why can some people can get away with exhibiting urinals and others not?

Reduced to its simplest form, Dickie's theory makes the point that it is in the web of human activities we must look for the answer to the question of how some things become art, others not. Rather than following the treads in the web, however, Dickie is satisfied with a formal expression of this relationship between certain forms of human activity and certain objects. The institutional theory of art is a house divided against itself: it emphasizes the collective and social nature of art and could serve as a guide in the examination of what actually constitutes the different forms of "established social practice," and of how they develop and change, but Dickie presents it as the ultimate answer to the question about the essence of art. His theory, therefore, rests on a philosophical assumption which excludes or at least renders uninteresting historical or sociological examinations of those forms of collective human activity which make art.

Definitions and the Real World

As other concepts, 'art' is not a mysterious entity. It is an expression of the way people think about an activity they or others are or were involved in. It sums up aspects of this activity the participants find important. It classifies and evaluates.

Bell's definition of art illustrates that definitions of art can have this function. It was no coincidence that Bell mentioned Cézanne along with Giotto, Piero della Francesca, and Poussin. The three latter painters were clearly accepted as a part of the art-historical canon by Bell's British contemporaries, but Cézanne was not. Until around 1910 Post-Impressionist painters such as Cézanne were relatively unknown in England, and an exhibition of the works of the Post-Impressionists organized in 1910 by Roger Fry had caused quite a stir in the British art-establishment. Bell argues, in effect, that Cézanne, and, by implication, the other Post-Impressionists, are part of the art-historical tradition, because they by definition exhibit the art-making quality: significant form. Bell's definition draws attention to features which have been overlooked in the prevailing mode of reception, where pictures were seen as mainly representational in some straightforward sense of that term, and the definition recommends another way of looking at pictures. (The events surrounding Bell's definition of art as "significant form" are discussed in greater detail below, chapter 2.)

The American sociologist Howard S. Becker (and more recently Noël Carroll) points out that Dickie's institutional theory has a function similar to the one here suggested for Bell's. It provides a theoretical justification for, for example, Dadaist art; in particular, it offers an explanation of how such objects as Duchamp's Readymades can come to be considered art. When artistic phenomena which cannot be accounted for within the prevailing theoretical framework occur, it is the typical task of aesthetics to develop a new theory or definition of art which is able to accommodate these phenomena (Becker 1982, 164; Carroll 1994).

Dickie's theory, then, is not an alternative to traditional aesthetics, and cannot provide us with the framework for an historically oriented understanding of the concept of art. In Wittgenstein's philosophy we do, however, have a sustained and influential criticism of essentialism, and it has been one of the most significant sources in the efforts to develop a new approach to aesthetics. I will therefore take a closer look at some attempts to develop Wittgenstein's philosophy in this area.