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Rethinking the Institutional Theory of George Dickie: The Art Circles

Abstract: This paper initially revisits the institutional theory of George Dickie, which originated in relation to Arthur Danto's "The Artworld" and the works of other analytic philosophers dealing with art theory at the time. This contextualization is followed by an attempt at finding possible relations and theoretical developments of Dickie's work in theorists such as Howard S. Becker and Pierre Bourdieu. The aim is to find basic correlations and differences between Dickie's theory, Becker's symbolic interactionism and Bourdieu's field theory. The final segment consists of linking the interpreted theoretical terms and summing up the possibilities that arise out of them for contemporary art theory.

Keywords: institutional theory, institutional critique, symbolic interactionism, field theory, theory of art

In order to begin the process of rethinking the institutional theory of George Dickie we must first explore his findings and then go beyond them. For my paper this means going back to recapitulate the origins and developments of Dickie's theory and then moving on to later writers such as Howard S. Becker and Pierre Bourdieu. More precisely, I would like to deal with their distinct circular models of the institution of art in their respective theories. Even though we will be dealing with three (or less) conceptually very different *circles* the driving hypothesis of this essay is that if they are critically differentiated and applied they can open previously inaccessible modes of interpreting certain artistic practices. We should start from the first author by giving some basic context.

Background: Analytical philosophy, aesthetics and Arthur Danto

Analytical philosophy can be generally described as an anti-essentialist philosophy. More specifically, it can be labeled as an anti-realist and relativist theoretical movement. This trend in thought represents the break with metaphysical concepts such as *truth*, *spirit*, *essence* and *being* in a part of Western Academia. The central thesis of early Wittgenstein was that all metaphysical speculations should be replaced with formal analyses of the language of propositions and notions by which these speculations operate. Analytical aesthetics was developed from these findings during the 1930s and early 1940s in the Anglo-American world. Although Wittgenstein never specifically dealt with art in his lectures, a number of analytical aestheticians wanted to apply the *Tractatus* theses to terms common in aesthetics, art theory and criticism. They thought that these should be treated as problems of everyday language just like the terms of metaphysics. Others were occupied with the meaning of the 'the work of art' and the discourse of criticism. They did this relying heavily on Wittgenstein's later thesis on *language games*. This group found that the task of an analytical aesthetician was to describe and explore the rules of these games.[1] Here we should single out the work of Morris Weitz, Nelson Goodman, Monroe Beardsley, Richard Wollheim, Joseph Margolis, Arthur Danto and George Dickie.

In the mid 1960s most of these philosophers were dedicated to solving the problem of the *status* of the work of art. Their thinking was driven by Marcel Duchamp's *ready made*s. They saw them as instances of the conferring of artistic status to everyday objects. Through their discussions they eventually arrived at three possible solutions to this problem: the open concept of an art work, the theory of the art world and the institutional theory of art.[2] As promised in the introduction I will focus on the last two. The term *art world* appears in the identically titled essay of Arthur Danto. In it he deals with the problems of integrating new objects into the system of art and with the process in which ordinary objects become works of art. To solve the first problem Danto uses an analogy – just like a discovery of new categories of facts in a science leads to the questioning of the current scientific theory so too does the appearance of a new category of art objects lead to the questioning of the current art theory. Theorists are more likely to expand the current theory with additional hypotheses than to discard it completely. Integrating new objects into art is a process of expanding the term *art* and not an effect of some epochal change in *taste* or *spirit*. For an object to cause such problems to theorists it is necessary that it is identified as a work of art. The precondition for such an identification is "an atmosphere of art theory, knowledge of art history: the *artworld*."[3] In another essay, "Artworks and Real Things", he claims that

[1] Miško Šuvaković, "Analiza umetnosti i umetničkog dela: slučaj Ričarda Volhajma", in: Ričard Volhajm, *Umetnost i njeni predmeti*, Beograd, Clio, 2002, 217–218.

[2] Ibidem.

[3] Arthur Danto, "The Artworld", in: Joseph Margolis (ed.), *Philosophy Looks at the Arts: Contemporary Readings in Aesthetics*, Philadelphia, Temple University Press, 1987, 154–167.

after an object starts to be viewed as an art work it becomes a subject of interpretation. "The interpretation is in some measure a function of the artistic context of the work: it means something different in relation to its art-historical location, its antecedents and the like."[4] Here interpretation is understood as a function of a certain context and as a specific linguistic ability of the participants in the art world to perform such a function. When, for whatever reasons, the interpretation ceases the object loses its status as a work of art.

By these theses Danto tried to provide a solution for the problem of ordinary objects becoming bearers of artistic status. The work of art is seen not only as a material container for a potential aesthetic encounter but also as an institutionally-conditioned statement on the representations and the atmosphere of the 'art world.'

George Dickie and the logical circle

A few years after Danto's essay Dickie started to develop a thesis on the institutional character of 'the art world'. Unlike Danto he didn't see the world of art as an 'atmosphere of theory' or as an art historical context, but as a social institution seen as an assemblage of structured human relations of a transgenerational duration. His aim was to define the conditions by which certain objects inside the institution gain the status of a work of art. By producing this definition Dickie primarily wanted to take a critical stance towards the theses of Morris Weitz about the impossibility of defining art. He was much closer to the tendency led by Margolis and Mandelbaum who both claimed that art can be defined. He borrowed Weitz's thesis on evaluative and descriptive utterances of the sentence "This is a work of art" and significantly modified it.

In his early texts Dickie distinguishes three instead of two senses in which it is used**.** They are the classificatory, evaluative and the derivative sense**.** He is very specific in pointing out that his definition is strictly classificatory. It goes as follows: **"**A work of art in the classificatory sense is (1) an artifact (2) a set of aspects 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 (artworld)."[5] Dickie finds the artifactuality of an artwork the first condition for its existence while the second is the "the social character of art". In order to describe this second condition he introduces a four-part schema. He distinguishes between: "(1) acting on behalf of the institution; (2) conferring of status, (3) being a candidate, (4) appreciation."[6] The definition is classificatory as promised. The main reason for this approach is the avoidance of the definition that prohibits bad art. He didn't want to set up a theory that could help establish

[4] Arthur C. Danto, "Artworks and Real Things", in: W. E. Kennick (ed.), *Art and Philosophy: Readings in Aesthetics*, New York, St. Martin's Press, 1979, 98–110.

[5] George Dickie, "What is Art? An Institutional Analysis", *Art and the Aesthetic: An Institutional Analysis*, Ithaca, NY, Cornell University Press, 1974, 24.

[6] Ibid, 89.

a norm for art making. On the contrary he was interested in the process of any one object becoming a part of the institution of art. I would like to suggest that avoiding the appearance of 'bad art' is quite a weak place in his theory, regardless of his reasons.

But before I delve into this problem there is some more to say about the Dickie's theory. His insistence on the classificatory sense can also be seen as a confrontation with Monroe Beardsley's aesthetic functionalism.[7] According to Beardsley, the precondition for an object to become a work of art is that it must fulfill a specific function of providing aesthetic experiences. In a later book Dickie described his work as follows: "The theory of Beardsley has in mind is a theory of what works of art do, not what they are." Unlike him Dickie claims that his institutional theory doesn't set any limitations on the possible functions of art but wishes to "catch its essential nature."[8] Given what we know about analytical philosophy it can be said that Dickie sees his theory as an objective description of the logical rules on which the institution of art and artworks are based. The idea of uncovering logical models (definitions) as the 'essential nature' of social institutions rests on the analytical philosopher's assumption that the logical structure of human mental and linguistic representations are the basis of the social world. This is also a weak place in his theory because of the sheer reductionism of the causes of social occurrences to a petrified logical structure.

After much criticism from other analytical philosophers Dickie reviewed and expanded his definition to a series of five new definitions that cover the three types of roles in the art world: the artists, the presenters and the public**.** They are as follows: (1) The artist is "a person who participates with understanding in the making of a work of art;" (2) "A work of art is an artifact of a kind created to be presented to an art world public;" (3) "A public is a set of persons the members of which are prepared in some degree to understand an object which is presented to them;" (4) "The art world is the totality of all art world systems;" (5) "An art world system is a framework for the presentation of a work of art by an artist to an art world public."[9] What is immediately apparent is the circularity of these definitions. Dickie never saw any logical problem with this aspect of his theory because he claimed that the characteristics of the institution of art were such that they required circular definitions.[10] This seems like an echo of the previously mentioned reductionism.

To conclude, it can be said that on the one hand Danto's thesis can be characterized as transcendent because it points towards the indistinct atmosphere outside the object that is a designated work of art. On the other hand, Dickie bases his theory on a pragmatic dimension in the acts of competent experts. However this is the place where he retains an essentialist assumption that every object is aesthetically relevant even though it becomes a work of art only by an expert's intervention. Both of these authors, apart from their noticeable differences, share a common interest in framing the art world as

[7] Stephen Davies, *Definitions of Art*, Ithaca, NY, Cornell University Press, 1991, 171.

[8] George Dickie, *The Art Circle*, New York, Heaven Publication, 1984, 85–86.

[9] Ibid, 79–82.

[10] Ibid, 79.

a closed symbolic space. Dickie did this explicitly by claiming that circular definitions are fitting to the circular nature of the art world. Danto, who was more implicit, did it by focusing on the theoretical-historical context as closed to the outside world.

Recirculating with Howard Becker and Pierre Bourdieu

Howard S. Becker comes from a distinct school of social thought – symbolic interactionism. His work on institutional art theory is relevant in the sense that it helps us as contemporary theorists to remove ourselves from the structuralist heritage of European thinkers as well as from the more individualist approaches to symbolic interactionism.[11] He uses the term 'art world' to "denote the network of people whose cooperative activity, organized via their joint knowledge of conventional means of doing things, produces the kind of art works that the art world is noted for."[12] This immediately shows that Becker can't really help in rethinking the circularity of Dickie's definitions because he accepts it. He claims his formulation is merely 'technical' but the implication that art is a cooperative activity clearly shows that Bourdieu was right to criticize this reduction of the artistic field to a population "that is to say, the sum of individual agents linked by simple relations of interactions or more precisely, cooperation."[13] But what this shows is reluctance on Becker's part to go further into the role of value and power in society in this part of his work. In fact, any author that chooses to explore the changing art world apart from other societal institutions in an ahistorical manner must accept some form of claustrophobic circularity. Here Bourdieu will prove more instrumental a little later – for now we'll get back to Becker.

In commenting on Dickie and Danto, Becker states that he wants to give empirical backing to the more logically concerned philosopher's inquires.[14] There are two main aspects of Becker's theory of *Art Worlds* – one is its focus on "collective activity" and the other on "conventions". Collective activity of the art world is broken down by Becker in seven regular activities. Conventions form a framework that makes collective activity possible. The activities are: "developing an idea"; its "execution"; "acquiring materials and equipment"; securing "distribution" and doing "supporting activities." There are also the activities of "response and appreciation" and "creating and maintaining a rationale" that make the sum of all activities seem sensible to the actors.[15] What can be seen is that instead of having an expert confer status we have

[11] Becker is sometimes framed as having a similar approach as Herbert Blumer, but not as George Herbert Mead. To get a general perspective on the latter author see: Richard W. Scott, *Institutions and Organizations*, London, SAGE Publications, 1995, 8, 13–14.

[12] Howard S. Becker, *Art Worlds*, Berkley–Los Angeles–London, University of California Press, 1982, x.

[13] Pierre Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field*, Stanford CA, Stanford University Press, 1995, 204–205.

[14] Howard S. Becker, op. cit., 149–150.

[15] Ibid, 4–6.

numerous art world*s* all based around collective activity. Of course not all 'bundles of tasks' these actors perform are the same, or hold the same importance for the existence of the art world, but they all determine the work. Unlike Dickie and Danto, Becker holds that there aren't any activities that are indispensable for an object to become a work of art. The critics and the public might not support it so it could come to pass as unappreciated, or, in some cases, underproduced – but it would always exist since there is a variety of ways the many factors of collective activity can bring about a work of art. This shines a new light on what Dickie called 'bad art'. We mentioned that he avoided writing about it because he didn't want to produce an evaluative definition nor set up a kind of normative standard through his philosophical work. However, by imagining this process more flexibly Becker helps open the space for 'bad art' as important in a collective activity that makes up the art world.

What happens when we employ the term *artistic field* as elaborated by Bourdieu? First of all it should be said that Bourdieu considered his theory superior to those of his American counterparts because it depicted "the objective relations which are constitutive of the structure of the field and which orient the struggles aiming to conserve or transform it."[16] This differentiation is telling of what we find in Bourideu's theory. It is generally structural and realist unlike the anti-realist, interactionist and individualist theories of the previous two authors. The fields form a social structure, which has a number of *positions*, inhabited by agents according to their *habitus*. The field is also the site of a struggle for *symbolic capital* amongst competing agents. These take place in the field governed by an individual's *illusio* and steered by the structure's supra-individual *doxa*. This *doxa* is a system of rules, values and modes of talking and writing that first strikes one as common sense. It appears in the field as a singular orthodoxy – which is simultaneously challenged by several heterodoxies. The dominant definition of art would be the *nomos*.

Without going into more detail of this grand theory, it will suffice to say that some have argued that even Bourdieu's 'field' is circular.[17] But to say this would be to miss the point of the theoretical differences between these authors. For Bourdieu the definition, what Dickie is searching for and Becker only sketches, is the *nomos* – a historical occurrence *overdetermined* by the field. There exists a strong distinction between analyzing institutions as based on logical rules and trying to theorize the structural aspects of human action, such as art, in a history of capital accumulation. With these terms and theses (which only very carefully may be said to form a 'circle' because of the immanent coherence of the field) arises a possibility to go outside the logical/symbolic circle as set up by Dickie and Becker.[18] Bourdieu makes this possible by introducing history as a current that permeates the structure.

[16] Pierre Bourdieu, op. cit.

[17] Hans van Maanen, *How to Study Art Worlds*: *On the Societal Functioning of Aesthetic Values*, Amsterdam, Amsterdam University Press, 2009, 62.

[18] Pierre Bourdieu, op. cit., 113.

Instead of a conclusion

The way these altogether diverging theories combine to give us a meaningful thought of contemporary artistic practices can be found in an example of the art movement known broadly as 'institutional critique'[19].

We may take the example of Michael Asher's *Pomona College Installation* from 1970. A work in which the artist rearranged the architectural elements of a gallery (e.g. walls, doorways) to use the entire institutional space as his material. The intervention was twofold, engaging both the plasticity of the brick and mortar as well as the symbolic meaning of remolding the space of art consumption in a capitalist society. If we were to remain in the realm of Dickie's circular definitions we would agree on the pragmatic character of the artist's intention to confer the status of a 'work of art' on the installation. After that it would be a candidate for and eventually achieve appreciation in the art world. But if we are to ask the relevant questions such as what is the fundamental link of the institution of art to others we need theories such as Becker's and Bourdieu's. For instance all issues of distribution, the material facts concerning the network of intermediaries working as hard as the artist to produce mediation can be much fully engaged with Becker's theory. What springs up from *Pomona* now is my personal contemporary reception of it. I would tend to ask myself where was the first place I learned of this work and which where the factors of material distribution that made this possible etc. If we were to think of the historical dynamics that lead beyond a logical circle we would have to consult Bourdieu. All aspects of Asher's actions – from the 'ilusio' of the artist investing himself, to the amounts of 'symbolic capital' possessed by him and the 'habitus' he holds – are to be factored in so that we can hopefully get a solid perspective on the meaning of such a 'position' in the very dynamic 'artistic field' of the time.

[19] Cf. Marko Đorđević, *Institucionalna kritika i problem subjektivizacije u savremenoj umetnosti*, Beograd, Orion Art–FMK, 2015, 69–71.