

The Artworld and The Institutional Theory of Art: an Analytic Confrontation.

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Abstract: In this paper, two of the most well known theories of art in Analytic philosophy,¹ The Artworld and The Institutional Theory of Art, are compared. Both of them aim to analyse the complex context of contemporary art in Western culture. Despite some apparent similarities and the fact that they are often used synonymously, the two theories have different meanings. It is argued that, although to a different extent, the two theories are incomplete and they do not offer a satisfying definition of art. In order to demonstrate this thesis statement, firstly the two concepts of art are analysed, showing, consequently, how they diverge from each other and, finally, it is explained why they fail to meet their premises. The confrontation between the two theories is mainly focused on the considerations made by the authors as to their own definitions of art and on the criticisms each theorist addresses to the other. This is functional to demonstrate how the two theories can be seen as similar and, consequentially, how the authors deploy a great deal of effort to distinguish themselves from each other. The conclusion expresses a different way to consider the relation between Analytic and Continental philosophy; specifically, it proposes the possibility to formulate a new concept of art theory as a complementary unity of both approaches.

Introduction

Both university professors of philosophy in the USA, Arthur Coleman Danto (1924-2013) and George Dickie (1926) are considered as influential as their theories. Danto developed the idea of “the artworld” in his homonymous article in 1964. He contrasted this theory with the traditional, Platonic Imitation Theory of Art, which is, on the one hand “an exceedingly powerful theory, explaining a great many phenomena connected with the causation and evaluation of artworks, bringing a surprising unity into a complex domain” (Danto 1964, 572) and on the other hand became no longer

¹ As perfectly stated by Clive In Cazeaux, “in the western tradition, it is often claimed that there are two styles or ways of doing philosophy: the Continental, characterized primarily by the work of French and German philosophers, and the analytic, dominant in most American and British philosophy departments. Generally speaking, Continental philosophy pays greater attention to the historically rooted and culturally constructed nature of ideas; philosophy is recognized as something which is made and written and, therefore, as something which cannot be divorced from the contingencies of language and tradition. In contrast, analytic philosophy, with its roots in British empiricism and logical positivism, is committed to the belief that a problem can be clarified or brought out into the open through the careful and rigorous analysis of concepts as we understand them today. In response to the question “what is art?”, an analytic philosopher might attempt to devise a checklist of properties that an object must have in order to count as a work of art (a set of necessary and sufficient conditions), whereas the Continental philosopher might take the question less on its own terms and suggest instead that it exists as part of a broader sweep of enquiry where the greater interest lies in what it means to be indefinable” (Cazeaux 2000, XVI). In logic a necessary and sufficient condition is a condition that satisfies the truth of two statements. For instance: having three sides is a necessary and sufficient condition for being a triangle “For me make the number a criterion for the triangle, and the triangle a criterion for the number” (Wittgenstein 1976, 164).

helpful with the indiscernible artworks of avant-garde.² In fact, these artworks “are not imitations but *new entities*” (Danto 1964, 574, emphasis his). The eminent example in the article, and in the later works of Danto, is the *Brillo Box* by Andy Warhol.

For Danto the point is not if the *Brillo Box* is good or mediocre art; for him “[t]he impressive thing is that it is art at all” (Danto 1964, 581). If it is, the question is: “why are not the indiscernible Brillo boxes that are in the stockroom?” (ibid). The problem, consequently, is the *indiscernibility* of the real Brillo boxes from Warhol’s copies (Fig. 1). To solve the problem Danto states: “It is the theory that takes it up into the world of art, and keeps it from collapsing into the real object which it is” (ibid). From the beginning, Danto refers to *his own* theory to demonstrate his thesis in a way that seems circular, as demonstrated when he writes directly afterwards: “It is the role of artistic theories, these days as always, to make the artworld, and art, possible” (ibid). The circularity here is not only evident but it seems to invalidate the theory: how can it be possible to have a theory that discerns between artworks and real things and, at the same time, makes the artworld and art possible? Which came first? Moreover, if the artworld is the art theory of Danto, saying that the art theory makes the artworld possible, corresponds to asserting that the Artworld makes possible the artworld. This is the most basic level of vicious circularity. He himself delineates the equation ‘theory = artworld’ when he writes that “[t]o see something as art requires something the eye cannot decry – an atmosphere of artistic theory, a knowledge of the history of art: an artworld” (ibid). Danto does not acknowledge the problem of circularity: the artworld is at the same time a product and a prerequisite of the theory.

The Institutional Theory of Art implanted its roots on this ground, although it was the result of a misunderstanding. As Dickie himself admits: “My earlier mistaken belief that my theory was in direct line of philosophical descent from Danto’s was the result of a misunderstanding on my part” (Dickie 2012, 111). He realized only afterwards that “the things that Danto has in mind as the artworld and what I understand the artworld to be are very different sorts of things” (ibid). They are very different indeed. Carroll acknowledges this when he writes that “If Danto’s artworld is a world of ideas, Dickie’s is a world of people, of artists and their publics” (Carroll 2000, 14); however, the differences between the two artworlds are much deeper than this. To better understand, it will be

² Although Danto refers mainly to the 1960s avant-garde of Pop art and in particular to Andy Warhol, the first avant-garde movement to use indiscernible artworks was Dadaism in the beginning of the 20th century. Specifically, Marcel Duchamp introduced this new practice in art with his *ready-mades*. Probably the most notorious of his *ready-mades* is *Fountain* made, as it were, in 1917 by merely displaying a brand new urinal signed ‘R. Mutt.’

useful to analyse the clarifications that the authors made in order to distinguish their respective theories.

The Position of Danto

Many times Danto specified that he was “often credited with being the founder of the institutional theory, though in fact it was George Dickie whose theory it was, even if it arose in his mind through his interpretation of a sentence” present in “The Artworld” (Danto 2012, 298). These words seem to be a plain acknowledgment of a theory’s paternity but, actually, they follow decades of bitter confrontations. In the “Preface” of his milestone, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, Danto writes: “I am very grateful to [...] those who have erected something called the Institutional Theory of Art on the analysis of “The Artworld”, even if the theory itself is quite alien to anything I believe” (Danto 1981: VIII). This is quite a severe statement but it shows only a rejection of paternity; it does not express the reasons for this complete refusal. There would not be a better explanation until the publication of “The Art World Revisited” (Danto 1992) in which Danto rethinks his theory and gives more reasons for his interpretation of Dickie’s theory.

When Danto writes that he “thought of the art world as the historically ordered world of artworks, enfranchised by theories which themselves are historically ordered” (Danto 1991, 38), he admits that his “was a kind of institutional theory, in that the art world is itself institutionalized” (Danto 1981, 38). Nevertheless, it was not the institutional theory, which was the result of a “creative misunderstanding” (ibid) of his work by George Dickie, “who was less concerned with what makes a work of art like Warhol’s possible than what makes it actual” (ibid). Moreover, for Danto, Dickie’s “notion of the art world was pretty much the body of experts who confer that status on something by fiat” (ibid). In this way, Danto concludes, “Dickie’s theory implies a kind of empowering elite” (ibid).

In these passages it is possible to observe the main differences between the two theories from the standpoint of Danto: he defines his artworld as an institutionalized world made of historically ordered artworks and theories, different from the institutional theory of art, which tries to define the work of art through the legitimisation of an elite or a body of experts. It is possible to infer that Danto is not interested in a definition of art but only in a definition of a theory that can justify the existence of artworks such as Warhol’s. Moreover he refuses to be linked to Dickie’s theory, which is, to him, affected by a strict causality: someone – or a group of people – declares that something is art and the object becomes art. Seen in this way, it is imperative to agree with

Danto that the problem of this theory “is that something is art when declared to be art by the art world” with the consequent questions: “Who is the art world?” and “How does one get to be a member of it?” (Danto 1991, 38).

The opposition shown by Danto towards Dickie is somewhat awkward. It seems to be more of a pre-emptive defence towards possible critics opposed to his theory than a real analysis of the Institutional Theory. Is it not possible, in fact, to ask the same questions to Danto? Is it enough to assert that a theory is “historically ordered” to make it objective? Is not the historically ordered theory composed by people as well? And also the reverse: is not the elite that chooses artworks historically ordered and always guided by a theory – even if it is not extensively formulated, such as the one of Danto?

The Position of Dickie

Dickie defends himself from Danto’s criticisms saying he has never intended that the artworld, as a group, creates works of art (Dickie 2012, 112); however, he admits, there is a basis for this misunderstanding of his view. To illustrate it, Dickie offers a helpful synthesis of his theory’s development.

At the beginning in 1969, I spoke of “an artifact upon which some society or some subgroup of society has conferred the status of candidate for appreciation.” [...] in my second and third attempts at formulating the theory, I spoke of “some person or persons acting on behalf of” the artworld. When I spoke here of some person acting, I had in mind the activities of a single artist, and when I spoke of persons acting, I had in mind the activities of groups of the kind that make movies, plays, and operas. In my last, and I hope final, attempt at formulating the institutional theory of art in 1984, I spoke simply of the creating of an artifact. But in none of these cases did I intend to say that it was the artworld as a group that created works of art. All of the many examples that I gave to illustrate what I was talking about were of individual artists or of groups of artists creating art. (Dickie 2012, 112)

It is possible to deduce from this passage that the artworld, in all versions, is something different from a group that creates artworks and that only the artist is entitled to create artifacts. However, it is not stated what the artworld is. In this attempt at justification, Dickie shrinks his theory so drastically that it is legitimate to ask if the theory is still alive. The problem here is that, from an Analytic point of view, focusing only on the artist can be a necessary condition but it is not sufficient. The artist cannot be the producer and the judge of his art; otherwise there would be no difference between the private production of artwork and the socially recognized work of art. In other words, it is still possible to argue what Carroll said about the first of Dickie’s definitions, namely that “the artist does not confer the status of artwork on her artifact. The status that she

confers on the artifact is candidate for appreciation” (Carroll 1999, 229); it is not part of the artworld yet.

Even if it is possible to accept the defence that Dickie proposes to Danto’s objections, it is impossible not to notice that, also in his last definition of art, Dickie – although in a more refined and comprehensive manner – only *describes* the artworld in its functions as he sees it.³ He does not give any account of why it is fashioned thus and why an artist or a work of art is considered as such. The descriptive nature of his definitions inevitably affects the logical structure of his theory. In fact, in his attempt to formulate a classificatory definition, he allows it to be infiltrated by arbitrariness. Wollheim lucidly asks about the Institutional Theory: “Is it to be presumed that those who confer status upon some artefact do so for good reasons, or is there no such presumption?” (Wollheim 1980 [1968], 160). Janaway brilliantly adds that, if there is no such presumption, “then being a work of art seems an arbitrary status; but if there can be good reasons for some things to become art and not others [...] then the taking up of things into the artworld cannot be the only factor in their being art” (Janaway 2006, 185). This objection can be applied to Danto’s artworld as well. Surprisingly, Dickie himself suggests so:

[Danto] writes in his colloquium paper of *Brillo Boxes*, “The fiat was perhaps Warhol’s, but enough people who participated in the history of relevant reasons were prepared to admit it into the canon of art that it was admitted.” [...] It sounds as if Danto is saying that it was not Warhol who made *Brillo Boxes* a work of art but a sufficient number of artworld persons including Warhol who *acted as a group* to make *Brillo Boxes* a work of art. This cannot be right because in refuting what he took to be my view, Danto *denies* that the artworld acts as a group to make art, and if the artworld acting as a group does not make art, it seems unlikely that a subset of the artworld acting as a group does either [...] On [*sic*] Danto’s view, can a work of art be made by a single artist such a Warhol or does it require the *actions* of members of a larger group – a quorum of artworld persons? (Dickie 2012, 114, emphasis his)⁴

³ “I) An artist is a person who participates with understanding in making a work of art. [...] II) A work of art is an artifact of a kind created to be presented to an artworld public. [...] III) A public is a set of persons whose members are prepared in some degree to understand an object that is presented to them. [...] IV) The artworld is the totality of all artworld systems. [...] V) An artworld system is a framework for the presentation of a work of art by an artist to an artworld public” (Dickie 1984, 80-2).

⁴ In his reply to the paper of Dickie, although Danto refused the critique saying that, by artworld, he “actually meant a world consisting of works of art, a self-enriching community of ontologically complex objects, often inter-referential” (Danto 2012, 298), it remains the problem of who decides what art is. Moreover, Danto “might be read as a critic who has pinpointed, not the eternal nature of art, but the salient feature of art in what might be called its Age of Theory” (Carroll 2012, 129), reducing, in this way, the universality of his theory.

These passages show clearly the deep contradiction dwelling inside the two theories. They are always in precarious balance between an artworld that, on the one hand, declares objects as legitimate artworks and, on the other hand, makes the production of art possible; that is to say, the artworld is a product and, at the same time, a prerequisite of the theory.

The Rationales of the Two Authors

Despite all the efforts of the two authors to distinguish one theory from the other, it seems clear that each accuses the other of considering the artworld as a group of people that takes decisions about artworks. The question is why they do so. Regarding Dickie, it seems clear that he reacted to the attacks of Danto – otherwise, in his *Aesthetics: An Introduction*, he would not have acknowledged Danto's influence in developing his first definition of art (Dickie 1971, 101). For Danto, the reason for his efforts is more complex. In his works there is a visibly progressive estrangement from the concept of the artworld. This process culminates in the definition of art that Danto proposes in his *After the End of Art* and in other later publications: "Something is a work of art if it has a meaning – is about something – and if it embodies its meaning" (Danto 2007a, 126). It is possible to debate if this definition is necessary and yet sufficient⁵ – design objects, including the real Brillo box, can meet the same condition (Carroll 2012b, 146). However, the main point is not this. The problem of necessary and sufficient condition is only a consequence of what the definition excludes: specifically "it left out what [...] was one of Danto's greatest hypotheses, namely that art required an atmosphere of art theory" (Carroll 2012b: 146). As a result "without the requirement of artworld theories and narratives, his position becomes overly inclusive" (Carroll 2012b: 147). In fact, as previously mentioned, in Danto, art theory and artworld are the same; consequentially, in discharging the theory, the artworld is deleted as well and the possibility to interpret the artwork in its indiscernibility is irremediably lost. But why did Danto take such a radical decision?

The reason is that – and here dwells the real difference between Danto and Dickie – in formulating the concept of the artworld, Danto tried to find a link between Analytic and Continental philosophy.⁶ His books *Nietzsche as philosopher* and *Jean-Paul Sartre* are examples of his interests, yet few critics have noticed this connection with Continental philosophy (Andina 2011, 5). In particular, Danto was interested in Hermeneutics, which gave him the possibility to introduce the

⁵ Cf. footnote n.1

⁶ With his theory, Danto tried to propose a definition of art that discerns between indiscernible objects – as in *Brillo Box* and Brillo box – and, simultaneously, to suggest an interpretative setting that allows making these objects meaningful and contextualized.

interpretation⁷ into his artworld – something completely absent in Dickie’s theory. This was a useful tool in order to solve the problem of indiscernibility between artworks and the real thing but, at the same time, it introduced the problem of perspectivism, which was unacceptable from an Analytic standpoint. For this reason, and to solve the problem of circularity, Danto dropped the concept of artworld and stated that meanings “are universal in the sense that what a work of art means is invariant to time, place, and viewer” (Danto 2007b, 164). If the artworld is no longer necessary, as a result, the theory is useless as well. In reading artworks: “It is the role of art criticism to identify [...] their meanings” (Danto 2007b, 164). In this way, there is no longer any theory to sustain the interpretation of the critic whose duty is reduced to identify only what is supposed to be the *real* meaning of the artwork.

Conclusions

To conclude, it is possible to assert that the two theories failed in their attempts: the artworld of Danto is affected by circularity and perspectivism; on the other, extreme side, Dickie’s institutional theory, in its description of the artworld’s structure, does not give any explanation as to how the artwork gains its status.⁸ However, the two theories nonetheless stimulated a new way of thinking about the art theory. The effort made by Danto in linking the Analytical and Continental philosophy is particularly significant: even with its limits, his theory traced one of the most fertile directions of analysis at the moment. In a world that is ever-increasingly globalised, it becomes evident that the distinctions between Analytic and Continental aesthetics, even if they were expressions of specific and legitimate perspectives, are no longer necessary or, to say it better, there is no reason to keep these distinctions separated any longer. Surely an Analytic philosopher can try to find “properties that an object must have in order to count as a work of art” (Cazeaux 2000, XVI). However, those properties will always have embedded perspectives related to cultural spheres.

The Continental approach can help to situate these points of view and to define the intentionality in choosing the properties of the artwork. In defining our horizon as a complementary unity of Analytic and Continental approaches, it is possible to have both a classification and an evaluation of the artwork. This can also offer a solution concerning the problem of circularity. In fact,

⁷ “To interpret a work is to offer a theory as to what the work is about, what its subject is” (Danto 1981, 119).

⁸ It is relevant to add – even though it is not possible to develop it more in this context – that also in Dickie’s approach there is circularity: “Dickie is content to acknowledge a circularity in his definition (‘art’ and ‘artworld’ are interdefinable) but insists that it is nonvicious circularity” (Lamarque and Olsen 2004, 10).

if we accept that it is impossible to think outside the circle and we agree with Heidegger that “what is decisive is not to get out of the circle but to come into it in the right way” (Heidegger 1962, 195), it becomes clear that, in defining the artwork, it is necessary to take into account how we enter the circle. That is to say, if every definition of artwork not only defines the work of art, but also embeds the standpoint of this definition, therefore the formulation of an art theory must consider both the subject and the object of the theorisation. In other words, the art theory needs to define the artwork and, at the same time, the way the thinking process enters into the circle.

Illustrations



Figure 1: Andy Warhol, *Brillo Box*, 1964. The Brillo boxes, reproduced in many exemplars by Andy Warhol, are almost the exact reproductions – in plywood – of Procter and Gamble’s commercial boxes – in cardboard – used by Brillo company to ship its product. For this reason Danto talks of indiscernibility: it is difficult to distinguish the copy from the original. Moreover, he repeatedly said that, although there are differences between the two objects, this is not a question of interest: “A philosopher would sound foolish who said that being made of wood is what marks the work of art, especially when so many of the world’s artworks are made of paper. And it could easily have been imagined that the reverse of what did happen happened – *Brillo Box* could have been a cardboard simulacrum of the good solid plywood containers in which the Brillo people shipped their soap pads” (Danto 1992, 38).

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