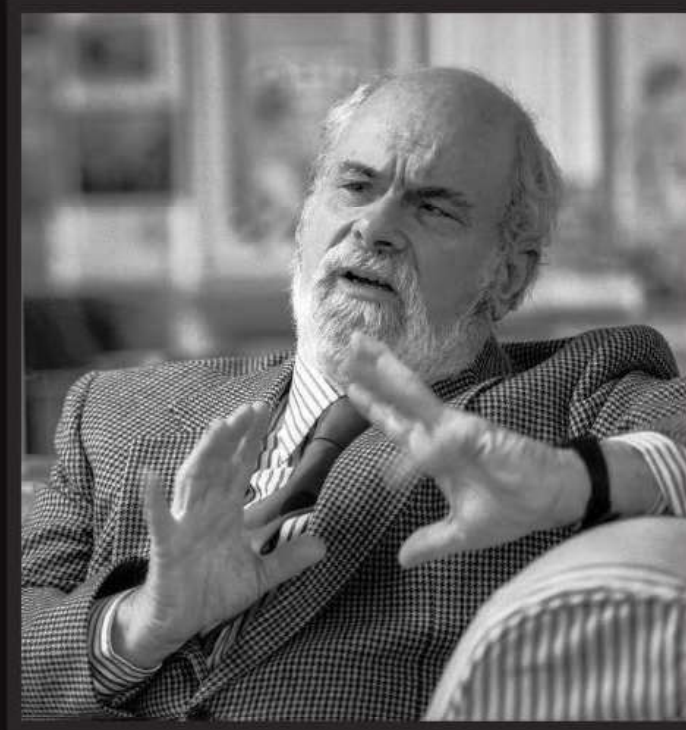


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Edited by
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LYDIA GOEHR

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Danto and Dickie: Artworld and Institution

MICHALLE GAL

Time and again George Dickie quotes Arthur Danto's proposition from his 1964 "The Artworld" that "to see something as art requires something the eye cannot de[s]cry – an atmosphere of artistic theory, a knowledge of the history of art: an artworld" (Danto 1964, 580). The [s] is added by Dickie, changing the original "decry" to "descry," thus shifting the meaning to have a less refined gesture toward the inferiority of the eye in the apparatus of aesthetic perception and classification.

To recall, the eye was the central tool of perception which contemporary modernist-formalist art invited the beholder to use. In 1960 Clement Greenberg characterized modernist painting as that which "can only be seen into; can be traveled through literally or figuratively, only with the eye" (Greenberg 1995, 90). The aimed-at-the-eye painting being committed to spatial flat forms was considered the ultimate embodiment of the essence of painting. Greenberg further deemed modernist painting paradigmatic of all art that aspires to reach an irreducible uniqueness. Greenberg's theory of art is criticized by Danto in *After the End of Art* as insufficiently general to serve as a definition of art: "what Greenberg had done was to identify a certain local style of abstraction with the philosophical truth of art, when the philosophical truth, once found, would have to be consistent with art appearing in every possible way" (Danto 1997, 14). This critique of Greenberg and the subsequent imperative to invert the modernist method comprise Danto's and Dickie's shared philosophical motivation. While modernist formalism identified the "philosophical truth of art" with aesthetic composition, Danto and Dickie identified it with a non-visual essence, in virtue of which works that were excluded by the modernists would be reclaimed as art.

When art started to appear in every possible way, according to Danto, the period of modernist-formalist art reached a kind of conclusion. Indeed, Danto asserted that that moment marked the end of art and the beginning of the philosophy of art (Danto 1981, vii, among others). The latter assertion is debatable, given that pre-modernism and modernism supplied fairly substantial and abstract definitions of art that could be used

later on. Although, undeniably, at the end of modernism the philosophy of art took an anti-modernist turn. Shortly after “The Artworld” was published, Dickie embraced Danto’s strong proposition about the new openness of the category of “art.” The modified “decry” to “descri” in Danto’s assertion about the eye became the version that ended up repeatedly cited by analytic aestheticians. Semantic nuances aside, Dickie used Danto’s proposition as a premise for a wide-ranging definition of visual art that would apply to the ever-changing artworld and its items. Interestingly, the capacious scope of the extensions of the new definition of visual art is achieved by an “attack on the senses.” Parallel to it emerged the aesthetic turn from the visual to the non-visual in contemporary practices of art.

Danto preceded Dickie in this path, and it is from him that Dickie borrowed the concept of the “artworld” for the non-visibility condition in the definition of art. Their artworld-related accounts were developed into anti-formalist theories toward the end of the modernist era and were actually part of its demise and that of an aesthetic wave starting in the 1960s. But then, through different analyses of the concept of the “artworld” – as an intellectual sphere by Danto versus an institutional one by Dickie – they parted ways to pursue opposing ontologies of the artwork. One may claim that Danto formulated an internalist/intentionalist ontology, developed around his concept of embodiment, while Dickie presented an externalist one. The juxtaposition of the two theories is illuminating given the depth of their shared philosophical motivation, which is sometimes overlooked in the literature.

Danto characterized the modernist-formalist ontology of the artwork as “too materialist,” because it was “concerned ... with shape, surface, pigment, and the like as defining painting in its purity” (Danto 1997, 14). These material-visual features were classified by the formalists under internal properties of the artwork. They left the non-visual properties to be construed as external to the artwork – that is, irrelevant to the arthood of the artifact. Both Danto and Dickie inverted the formalist distinction between internal and external properties of the artwork. Both classified properties that the modernist deemed external to the artwork as essential and material properties as external or subjugated. Nonetheless, in Danto’s ontology, the artwork comprises a myriad of properties. That is, the properties of the artwork, according to Danto, include the conceptual, *intentional mental content* of the artist, saturated with the intellectual *Zeitgeist*. The artwork is the embodied meaning or idea, rationally planned and executed by the artist, and tasked to the interpreter to grasp. The mental properties are internal, rendering the artwork in its entirety, including both non-visual and visual properties, as an “intellectual product” (Danto 2004, 93). For Dickie, what essentially constitutes an artwork are social practices. Unlike Danto, Dickie draws away from what was traditionally deemed the ontological boundaries of the artwork and its medium toward the institutional elements in its sphere. Yet Danto’s ontology of the artwork itself is more versatile than Dickie’s. It explains how, by subjugating the material properties to the intellectual ones, the work is structurally ontologically transfigured to be art. For Dickie, in an almost diametric opposition, a work is attributed the status of “art-hood” by agents in its social sphere. Dickie seems to expand the ontological domain of the artwork as wider than the one presented by Danto, advancing from what is usually considered the artwork to its social apparatus and to a “multi-placed network of much greater complexity than anything envisaged by the earlier theories,” as he puts it in *The*

Art Circle (Dickie 1984, 6). But at the end of the day, unlike Danto's, Dickie's theory leaves the structure of the artwork itself unanalyzed.

Dickie used Danto's then-innovative identification and classification of works of art to formulate a theory that refers to both nonexhibited and exhibited properties of the artwork – the former referring to the intellectual or immaterial properties, the latter to easily perceived properties. In Dickie's 1969 "Defining Art," he introduced the early version of his institutional theory of art that comprises two necessary conditions which are jointly sufficient to characterize an object as a work of art: an artwork is, first, an artifact, which is, secondly, conferred by an artworld agent or institution a status of a candidate for appreciation. Dickie's first version of the institutional theory, fully presented in *Art and the Aesthetic* (1974), is externalist through and through: both conditions for something to belong to the group of artworks, artifactuality and status, are external to the mind. This version was modified in *The Art Circle* (1984) and *Art and Value* (2001), smoothing the externalist edges to a relatively more intentionalist definition by adding the condition that an intention for the artifact should be appropriately related to the art social circle. The combination of intentionalist elements with public ones characterizes Danto's theory of art as well. Still, the nonexhibited content – the mental intention – Dickie notes, is not an integral part of the structure of the artwork but is rather appended to it. In that respect, it is not crucially different from the conferring of status.

Despite the modification, Dickie seems to have remained content with the wide extension of the concept of "art" as he analyzed it right from the beginning. It nicely coped with the challenge set by the post-modern artists who, Dickie claims, contrary to the modernist artists, "regard art genres as loose guidelines rather than rigid specifications" (Dickie 1997, 86). Dickie's theory, similarly to Danto's, did more than just meet this challenge – it *emerged* from this challenge.

Methodically and as a matter of philosophical ideology, Danto and Dickie share four logically related elements. I will present these first and then discuss the difference between their ontologies.

Danto and Dickie's first shared standpoint is that contemporary artistic pluralism – where art "appears in every possible way" (Danto) because it "regards art genre as loose guidelines" (Dickie) – is an integral part of the very artworld. Namely, both deemed this pluralism an element of creating works that remain under the category of "art," rather than transgressing the boundaries of art to philosophy, for example.

The second is that this pluralism enables a real and sufficiently general theory of art. For Danto, the advent of art outside of the pale of history in the 1960s created a framework within which the philosophy of art can reach its objectives. He re-expresses this view 40 years after the publication of "The Artworld" in *The Abuse of Beauty* by claiming that "what we now know is that only when the radical pluralism was registered in consciousness was a definition finally possible." It was only then that it became possible to define art a-historically, Danto maintains. To be exact, it was possible to discover the essence of art in what Danto describes as "properties which must always be present, however various the class of artworks turns out to be" (Danto 2004, xx). These properties are the nonexhibited ones: internal-mental for Danto, external-social for Dickie. Equally, in his *Art and Value* (2001) Dickie explains that the great diversity of the class of artworks sets a barrier to traditional theories since these theories tried to extract the intension of "art" from exhibited properties.

The same diversity led Dickie in the opposite direction, to an “attempt to discover the underlying nature of the extension of works of art – the underlying nature being the *nonexhibited* feature of works of art that ties them together” (italics in original, Dickie 2001, 27). So this is the third standpoint Danto and Dickie share: the aspiration to formulate an art theory that would account for pluralism and be able to apply to future ontologically challenging works. Hence, we see a mutual enabling: pluralist art enables philosophy of art, and philosophy enables pluralist art, as Lydia Goehr presents it in her writings on Danto: “history’s openness is the social condition that, sustained by an analytical philosophy, makes art’s pluralism possible” (Goehr 2007, 27).

The fourth point is the contention that pluralism necessitates a *definition of art*. The contemporary artistic pluralism alongside constant changes in the discipline of art drove Neo-Wittgensteinians such as Morris Weitz, William Kennick, and Paul Ziff¹ to conclude that art has no essence. They claimed that “art” is therefore undefinable in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions. “Art,” then, must be an open concept or, specifically, a family resemblance concept. In contrast, Danto and Dickie found this pluralism to be *revealing* of the essence of art, directing philosophy to art’s nonexhibited infrastructure – beyond the reach of the eye. This meant that the openness of appearances no longer implied an open concept of art. Danto attacked Wittgenstein’s externalist “look and see” approach of describing different phenomena and refused to accept the “Wittgensteinian commonplace that instances can be culled out successfully without benefit of definition” (Danto 2004, 22), as well as Kennick’s version, that we simply recognize art as art when we see it while definitions stand in our way. Since no criterion was available for visually distinguishing a readymade artwork from its counterpart, Danto reflected, “the question of definition became urgent after all.”

Dickie took a parallel approach. In his *Art and the Aesthetic* he joined Maurice Mandelbaum’s repudiation of the Neo-Wittgensteinian aesthetics, introducing a method of denoting the nonexhibited properties shared by members of a group. Mandelbaum rejects Ludwig Wittgenstein’s famous claim that the concept of “game” cannot be defined, since there is no property which is common to all games, and the argument that Morris Weitz derived from it about the impossibility of defining art. According to Mandelbaum, Wittgenstein’s mistake was to focus on exhibited properties; Dickie applies this insight to art, using Danto’s argument that the essential element of the artwork is not material. This leads to Dickie’s and Danto’s aforementioned attacks on the senses. They assert that the senses by themselves are not only incapable of recognizing an art object as art, rather than a mere object, but unable to detect which of the object’s visible properties belong also to the artwork. This is where Danto’s assertion about the thing “the eye cannot descry” serves Dickie. Danto’s propositions in “The Artworld” and “Art Works and Real Things,” Dickie explains in 1974, “are consistent with and can be incorporated into an institutional account” (Dickie 1974, 29, footnote 9).

Dickie is not alone in thinking of Danto’s early theory formulated in “The Artworld” as institutional. Stephen Davies, in his *Definitions of Art*, claims that Danto shifts the attention from artistic properties to the social context that allows artworks to present their properties, even though he acknowledges that Danto rejects Dickie’s interpretation (Davies 1991, 69, 81). However, this line of interpretation misses Danto’s fundamental focus: the transfigured structure of the artwork itself. Danto appreciated

the fact that Dickie was not discouraged by the Neo-Wittgensteinian approach in his quest for definition of art, but he did not endorse Dickie's reformulation of his artworld theory as a social ontology of art. "I saluted Dickie for his daring but faulted his definition, which is institutionalist: something is an artwork if the Art World decrees it so," he pointed out in *What Art Is* (Danto 2013, 145).

Mandelbaum's approach, opening a vent to anti-modernist definitions of art, interestingly brought about opposing accounts of the boundaries of the art object. Danto recounts in 2004 that "self-critique in the arts, as understood by Greenberg, consisted in purifying the medium unique to any art of whatever was extrinsic to it" (Danto 2004, 19).

While both Danto and Dickie re-classified "extrinsic," what Danto refers to when he writes about (Mandelbaum's) nonexhibited properties is very different from what Dickie refers to. Danto's artwork begins with the mental and stretches to its embodying material, which is transfigured by the mental content. This content is the organizing factor of the work. For Dickie, the artwork begins and ends with social categorization, which is merely conferred to the work, and actually does not penetrate the material features. In that respect, Dickie's externalism leaves the artwork, as the modernist classified it, theoretically intact.

Perhaps Dickie's theory is over-criticized here or at least undersold. Like Danto, Dickie holds a constructivist realist position, differentiating between the intrinsic nature of things ("being gold") and cultural nature ("being a bachelor"), and therefore between natural kinds and cultural kinds (Dickie 2001, 29). The ontological openness of his account of artifactuality allows the analysis of crucial or liminal cases. This is exemplified by the case of the driftwood. The first version of the institutional theory allows artifactuality to be a conferred property of the cultural type. But in the second version Dickie retreats from this radical proposition. Taking a functional stance, he converts the conferring to use: a driftwood may acquire artifactuality by being picked up and displayed "in the way that a painting or a sculpture is displayed," that is to say, "being used as an artistic medium and thereby becomes part of the more complex object of art" (Dickie 1997, 87). Still, use is external to the artwork, and in his 2013 *What Art Is*, Danto still acknowledges no critical difference between the early and late institutional versions. Despite the functionalist shift in those versions, Danto claims that, in Dickie, arthood is determined by a process akin to knighthood, and this is a position he cannot abide. Institutionalism "basically states that determining what is art is altogether a matter to be decided by his designation of the Art World, which he defines differently than I do. For Dickie, the Art World is a sort of social network, consisting of curators, collectors, art critics, artists (of course), and others whose life is connected to art in some way" (Danto 2013, 33). According to Danto, what keeps Dickie's theory distant from the depth of the ontological structure of the artwork is exactly this externalist approach.

The main point in Danto's internalist criticism, expressed in *The Abuse of Beauty*, is that *Dickie's theory is not cognitive enough*. Dickie indeed rejects the mentalist definitions of art. The ontological controversy with Danto is well shown in *Art and Value*, where his externalist method categorizes most of the theories of art, mimeticist as well as expressionist, as psychologist. They address, Dickie claims, "innate mechanism of imitating" or the "psychological mechanisms of controlled expression of emotion," and regard

those as sufficient conditions for the creation of art, its ontological status, and its understanding; psychological mechanisms fail to take into account the cultural context of the artist and the viewer (Dickie 2001, 3–4). Dickie finds this psychologism in, among others, Plato, Aristotle, Dewey, Collingwood, and Beardsley.² Fortunately, he claims, aesthetics took a cultural turn, promoting definitions of art as embedded in cultural context rather than as “genetically determined” (Dickie 2001, 24). Dickie argues that Danto’s theory emerged within this framework, using “cultural-sounding language,” and “talking about what would be, if it occurred, cultural phenomena, although he does not explicitly characterize it as such” (Dickie 2001, 6). Danto, in Dickie’s interpretation, ends up with a meta-theory which denotes as a necessary condition the presence of art theories that are contemporaneous with the artwork in question; and in expanding his definition of art to include aboutness as a necessary condition of art, he makes art linguistic by nature. This definition, according to Dickie, is therefore both psychological and cultural, and its necessary conditions are jointly sufficient. Dickie acknowledges his indebtedness to what he perceives as Danto’s cultural analysis of art, which in his version takes a socio-philosophical bent.

Dickie criticizes the psychologist philosophers for assuming “that human beings come equipped with faculties, dispositions, and/or characteristics that suffice for the creation of art” (Dickie 2001, 9). He and Danto agree that for the creation and experience of art, a pre-cultural innate mechanism will not suffice. The artist, according to Danto, must possess *internalized* contemporary artistic ideologies, style and theories, which comprise the historical moment. Moreover, Danto argues that those are integral to the ontology of the work; they are embodied by it. Danto explains in *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* that “You cannot isolate these factors [intention, concept, idea, meaning] from the work since they penetrate, so to speak, to the *essence* of the work” (italics in original): materially indiscernible artworks might be ontologically different. Thus, “graphic congruities notwithstanding,” Danto argues, similarly looking works, may be “deeply different” (Danto 1981, 36). The artwork is, therefore, a cognitive product emerging from the artist’s cognition to transfigure external commonplace and be *embodied* by it, whereas, according to Dickie, the artist is first and foremost a social-cultural agent, working within, and logically dependent on, a social practice. This is the core of Danto’s internalist criticism of Dickie’s externalist model for not being cognitive enough, captured by the concept of “embodiment.”

Danto emphasizes that “embodiment is a philosophical idea of some weight and lineage” (Danto 1986, 18), and it allows him to make sense of the idea that the constitution of the artwork is intentional mental content, which is materialized, not merely represented, by it. The artifact is not just tenuously connected to the idea but contains the idea and is used to make a point. This is well manifested by the attempt “to differentiate artworks from other vehicles of representation,” or between artwork and mere representations, in *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* (Danto 1981, 165).

Here, too, nonexhibited properties are the differentiating factor. Roy Lichtenstein’s *Portrait of Madame Cézanne* (1962), which reuses Erle Loran’s diagram of Cézanne’s painting, “self-consciously exploits the format of the diagram to make a point, and of course it itself is not a diagram” (Danto 1981, 147). The process of embodiment of an idea is rational in kind. Consequently, the work is supposed to be perceived intellectually first by interpreting the idea. Only then can the eye be directed at the material properties

that are relevant to the artwork. The idea is the unifying operator of the artwork, and Danto takes it as far as claiming that having beauty as part of its idea is a necessary condition for an artwork to be beautiful. This is because (contrary to the modernist view) a property is internal to artwork only if it is “internal to the meaning of the work” (Danto 2004, 9, 13, 101, 110). Therefore, he argues, an object might be beautiful, while the artwork made of the object is not beautiful because it is not meant to be beautiful; and the artwork is beautiful only if it is conceptually structured to be beautiful – that is, *only if it is about beauty*.

Dickie’s intentionality is philosophically different: rather than embedded in the artwork as an internal property, it is an intention of applying a label (Dickie 1974, 35–6). The artist’s intention may have bearing merely on the external conditions of the artwork. In 2001 he ends up shunning Danto’s advanced theory, with the admission that “the accounts that Danto and I have given of the artworld are very different” (Dickie 2001, 18). He claims that Danto’s concept of aboutness is reductionist, and as such a part of the traditional *sensuous* model of art: “Danto’s attempt to characterize art in terms of aboutness in an example of the traditional search for the intensional meaning of ‘work of art’ among exhibited characteristics” (Dickie 2001, 27). Dickie’s quasi-empirical argument that many works are not about anything is anticipated by Danto’s claim that even abstract or non-objective artworks are about art, but it does not annul Dickie’s (externalist) doubt regarding the ability of an intention of an author to pour meaning into artworks. For Dickie, meanings are resultant of public conventions, while Danto, from this standpoint, is forcing aboutness, or meaningfulness, on abstract works inauthentically, merely to fulfill a philosophical demand that he himself created. Comparing flag stripes, whose semanticity is based on rigid conventions, and stripes on a painting, Dickie critically notes that “how an artist’s intention can make stripes be about life, love, or death Danto does not say, and I do not see how it could” (Dickie 2001, 37); thus he actually excludes the very concept of embodiment to return back to the artworld which is a sphere of conventions, procedures, and authorities.

Could these social entities have any explanatory power regarding the very object of art? Doesn’t Dickie confuse that object with the world surrounding it? Dickie’s critics such as Davies and Richard Wollheim think that he does, that “his proposed definition pays no heed to the role that gives art its significance in cultural life of a community” (Davies 1991, 45). But this is not Danto’s complaint, which focuses on ontology. And here, as hard as one tries, there is no escape from returning to the piece about which the discussion has become somewhat of a platitude: *Fountain*, by Marcel Duchamp (1917/1964). This is where both Danto and Dickie begin – in attempting to explain what makes readymades and their likes *art*, and trying to use the windows they opened to pluralism in order to formulate new definitions of art. Both referred to *Fountain* in their first canonical essays. However, for Danto it was a paradigmatic manifestation of embodiment of an idea, which meant that most of the urinal’s material properties were external to *fountain*, while other, intellectual properties made it an artwork. For Dickie, on the other hand, it was a paradigmatic example of the authority of Duchamp; an authority that, in a certain institutional setting, he enjoys and the salesman of the plumbing supplies lacks, and which allows what Dickie terms “a conversion” of the original urinal to artwork. For Danto conversion does not suffice; it is not a deep transfiguration and does not make *Fountain* any different from the original urinal. Dickie’s

emphasis, Danto concludes, was on “how something gets to be a work of art, which may be institutional.” But, institutionalism “neglected the question of what qualities constitute an artwork once something is one” (Danto 1981, 94). It does not touch any internal, substantial, property of the artwork *itself*.

Notes

- 1 See Carroll 2010.
- 2 This categorization is a bit superficial and reductionist, since Beardsley’s starting point is the artistic object and artistic action combined with the aesthetic intention.

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