

Chapter 8

The Institutional Theory of Art

Guided by the ideas in Mandelbaum's article and Danto's earliest article, beginning in 1969 with "Defining Art"¹ and culminating in 1974 with *Art and the Aesthetic*,² I worked out the earlier of two versions of the institutional theory of art. In response to a variety of criticisms of the earlier version, I presented a greatly revised, and I think improved, version of the institutional theory in my 1984 book, *The Art Circle*.³ I will give accounts of both versions.

Traditional theories of art place works of art within simple and narrowly-focused networks of relations. The imitation theory, for example, suspends the work of art in a three-place network between artist and subject matter, and the expression theory places the work of art in a two-place network of artist and work. Both versions of the institutional theory attempt to place the work of art within a multi-placed network of greater complexity than anything envisaged by the various traditional theories. The networks or contexts of the traditional theories are too "thin" to be sufficient. Both versions of the institutional theory attempt to provide a context that is "thick" enough to do the job. The network of relations or context within which a theory places works of art I will call "the framework" of that theory.

All the traditional theories assume that works of art are artifacts, although they differ about the nature of the artifacts. There is, then, a sense in which the institutional approach is a return to the traditional way of theorizing about art, for in

the ordinary dictionary definition: "an object made by man, especially with a view to subsequent use." Furthermore, although many are, an artifact need not be a physical object: for example, a poem is not a physical object, but it is, nevertheless, an artifact. Still further, things such as performances, for example, improvised dances, are also "made by man" and are, therefore, artifacts.

On the surface anyway, there is no mystery about the making of the great bulk of artifactual art; they are crafted in various traditional ways—painted, sculpted, and the like. There is, however, a puzzle about the artifactuality of some relatively recent works of art: Duchamp's readymades, found art, and the like. Some deny that such things are art because, they claim, they are not artifacts made by artists. It can, I think, be shown that they are the artifacts of artists. The two versions diverge over how artifactuality is achieved in the cases of Duchamp's readymades and their like.

The Earlier Version

The earlier version of the institutional theory of art can be summed up in the following definition from my 1974 book, *Art and the Aesthetic*.

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 candidate for appreciation by some person or persons acting on behalf of a certain social institution (the artworld).⁴

The notion of conferring status is the central notion in this earlier version. The most obvious and clear-cut examples of the conferring of status are certain actions of the state in which legal status is involved. A king's conferring of knighthood or a judge pronouncing a couple husband and wife are examples in which a person acting on behalf of an institution (the state) confers *legal* status. The conferring of a Ph.D. degree on someone by a university or the election of someone as president of the Rotary are examples in which a person or persons confer nonlegal status. What the earlier institutional definition of "work of art" suggests is that just as two persons can acquire the status of being married within a legal system and as a person can acquire the nonlegal status of being president of the Rotary, an artifact can acquire the status of candidate for appreciation within the cultural system called "the artworld."

How, according to the earlier version, is the status of candidate for appreciation conferred? An artifact's hanging in an art museum as part of a show or a performance at a theater are sure signs that the status has been conferred. These two examples seem to suggest that a number of people are required for the actual conferring of the status in question. A number of people are required to make up the cultural institution of the artworld, but only one person is required to act on behalf of or as an agent of the artworld and to confer the status of candidate for

an artifact as a candidate for appreciation. Of course nothing prevents a group of persons conferring the status, that is, acting as an artist, but it is usually conferred by a single person, the artist who creates the artifact. In fact, many works of art are never seen by anyone but the persons who create them, but they are still works of art.

It may be felt that the notion of conferring status within the artworld, as conceived in the earlier version, is excessively vague. Certainly this notion is not as clear-cut as the conferring of status within the legal system, where procedures and lines of authority are explicitly defined and incorporated into law. The counterparts in the artworld to specified procedures and lines of authority are nowhere codified, and the artworld carries on its business at the level of customary practice. Still there is a practice and this defines a cultural institution. Such an institution need not have a formally established constitution, officers, and bylaws in order to exist and have the capacity to confer status. Some institutions are formal and some are informal.

Consider now the notion of appreciation. In the earlier version, the definition of "work of art" speaks of conferring the status of *candidate* for appreciation. Nothing is said about actual appreciation, and this allows for the possibility of works of art that are not appreciated. It is important not to build into the definition of the *classificatory* sense of "work of art" value properties such as actual appreciation; to do so would make it impossible to speak of unappreciated works of art and difficult to speak of bad works of art, and this is clearly undesirable. Any theory of art must preserve certain central features of the way in which we talk about art, and we do find it necessary sometimes to speak of unappreciated art and bad art. It should also be noted that not every aspect of a work of art is included in the candidacy for appreciation. For example, the color of the back of a painting is not ordinarily an object of appreciation. The reader will recognize that the question of which aspects of a work of art are to be included within the candidacy for appreciation has already been dealt with in Part I.

The earlier version of the institutional theory does not involve a special kind of *aesthetic* appreciation. In Part I it was argued that there is no special kind of aesthetic perception and there is no reason to think there is a special kind of *aesthetic appreciation*. All that is meant by "appreciation" in the earlier definition is something like "in experiencing the qualities of a thing one finds them worthy or valuable."

Both versions of the institutional theory of art have quite consciously been worked out with the practices of the artworld in mind—especially developments of the last hundred years or so, such as dadaism, pop art, found art, and happenings. The institutional theory and these developments raise a number of questions, and a few of these will be dealt with here.

First, if Duchamp can convert a urinal, a snowshovel, and a hatrack into works of art, can't natural objects such as driftwood also become works of art? Such nat-

them. One thing that would do the trick would be to pick a natural object up, take it home, and hang it on the wall. Another would be to pick it up and enter it in an exhibition. It was being assumed earlier that Weitz's sentence about the driftwood referred to a piece of driftwood in its ordinary situation on a beach and untouched by human hand. Please keep in mind that for something to be a work of art in the classificatory sense does not mean that it has any actual value. Natural objects which become works of art in the way being discussed are, according to the earlier version, artifactualized without the use of tools—the artifactuality is conferred on the object rather than worked on it. Of course, even if this is true, in the cases of the great majority of artworks, artifactuality is achieved by being crafted in some way. Thus, according to the earlier version, artifactuality can be achieved in two quite different ways: by being worked and being conferred. In the cases of things like Duchamp's readymades such as *Fountain*, a plumbing artifact has artistic artifactuality conferred on it and is a double artifact.

Note that according to the earlier version, two quite different kind of things can supposedly be conferred: artifactuality and candidacy for appreciation.

Second, a question that frequently arises in connection with discussions of the concept of art and which seems especially relevant in the context of institutional theory is, "How are we to conceive of paintings done by individuals such as Betsy the chimpanzee from the Baltimore Zoo?" Calling Betsy's products "paintings" here is not meant to prejudge that they are works of art; it is just that some word is needed to refer to them. The question of whether or not Betsy's paintings are art depends on what is done with them. For example, The Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago once exhibited some chimpanzee and gorilla paintings. In the case of these paintings we must say that they are not works of art. However, if they had been exhibited a few miles away at the Chicago Art Institute they *could* have been works of art—the paintings *could* have been art if someone at the Art Institute had, so to speak, gone out on a limb. It all depends on the institutional setting—the one setting is congenial for the creation of art and the other is not. (In speaking of institutional setting, I am not referring to the Art Institute as such but to an institutional practice.) According to the earlier version, what would make Betsy's paintings works of art would be some agent's conferring artifactuality and the status of candidacy for appreciation on them on behalf of the artworld. Despite the fact that Betsy did the painting, the resulting works of art would not be Betsy's but the work of the person who does the conferring. Betsy cannot do the conferring because she cannot see herself as an agent of the artworld—she is unable to participate (fully) in our culture.

Weitz charged that the defining of art or its subconcepts forecloses creativity. Some of the traditional definitions of art may have and some of the traditional definitions of its subconcepts probably did foreclose creativity, but neither version of the institutional account of art would. The requirement of artifactuality can scarcely prevent creativity, since artifactuality is a necessary condition of creativity.

Could there be an instance of creativity without an artifact of some kind being produced? The other requirement of the earlier version involving the conferring of the status of candidate for appreciation could not inhibit creativity; in fact, it encourages it. Since it is possible for almost anything whatever to be used to make art, the definition imposes no restraints on creativity. Weitz is probably right that the definition of some of the subconcepts of art have foreclosed creativity, but this danger is now a thing of the past. With the well-established disregard for established genres and the clamor for novelty in art, this obstacle to creativity probably no longer exists. Today, if a new and unusual work is created and it is fairly similar to some members of an established type, then it will usually be accommodated within that type, or if the new work is very unlike any existing works, then a new subconcept will probably be created. Artists today are not easily intimidated, and they regard art genres as loose guidelines rather than rigid specifications.

The earlier version of the institutional theory of art may sound like saying, "A work of art is an object of which someone has said, 'I christen this object a work of art.'" And it is rather like that; although this does not mean that becoming art, as conceived by the earlier version, is a simple matter. Just as christening a child has as its background the history and structure of the church, becoming art has as its background the Byzantine complexity of the artworld. Some people may find it strange that in the nonart cases discussed it appears that there are ways in which the conferring can go wrong, while there does not appear to be a way in which the conferring involved in producing art can be invalid. For example, an indictment might have been improperly drawn up, and the person charged would not actually be indicted. But nothing parallel seems possible in the case of art. This fact reflects the differences between the artworld and legal institutions. The legal system deals with matters of grave personal consequences and its procedures must reflect this; the artworld deals with important matters also, but they are of a different sort entirely. The artworld does not require rigid procedures; it admits and even encourages frivolity and caprice without losing its serious purpose. However, if it is not possible to make a mistake in the conferring involved in producing art, it is possible to make a mistake by conferring candidacy for appreciation. In conferring such status on an object, one assumes a certain kind of responsibility for the object in its new status; presenting a candidate for appreciation always faces the possibility that no one will appreciate it and that the person who did the conferring will thereby lose face. One can make a work of art out of a sow's ear, but that does not necessarily make it a silk purse.

The Later Version

The earlier version of the institutional theory is, I believe, defective in several respects, but the institutional approach is, I think, still viable. In the earlier version, I claimed, I now think mistakenly, that artifactuality is conferred on things such as

Duchamp's *Fountain* and found art. I now believe that artifactuality is not the sort of thing that can be conferred.

Typically an artifact is produced by altering some preexisting material: by joining two pieces of material, by cutting some material, by sharpening some material, and so on. This is usually done so that the altered material can be used to do something. When materials are so altered, one has clear cases that neatly fit the dictionary definition of "artifact"—"An object made by man, especially with a view to subsequent use." Other cases are less clear-cut. Suppose one picks up a piece of driftwood and without altering it in any way digs a hole or brandishes it at a threatening dog. The unaltered driftwood has been made into a digging tool or a weapon by the use to which it is put. These two cases do not conform to the nonnecessary clause of the definition "especially with a view to subsequent use" because they are pressed into service on the spot. There does seem to be a sense in which something is made in these cases. What, however, has been made if the driftwood is unaltered? In the clear cases in which material is altered, a complex object is produced: the original material is for present purposes a simple object and its being altered produces the complex object—altered material. In the two less clear-cut cases, complex objects have also been made—the wood used as a digging tool and the wood used as a weapon. In neither of the two less clear-cut cases is the driftwood alone the artifact; the artifact in both cases is the driftwood manipulated and used in a certain way. The two cases in question are exactly like the sort of thing that anthropologists have in mind when they speak of unaltered stones found in conjunction with human or human-like fossils as artifacts. The anthropologists conclude that the stones were used in some way because of, say, certain marks of the stones that they take to be traces left on the stones by that use. The anthropologists have in mind the same notion of a complex object made by the use of a simple (i.e., unaltered) object.

A piece of driftwood may be used in a similar way within the context of the artworld, that is, picked up and displayed in the way that a painting or a sculpture is displayed. Such a piece of driftwood would be being used as an artistic medium and thereby would become part of the more complex object—the driftwood-used-as-an-artistic-medium. This complex object would be an artifact of an artworld system. Duchamp's *Fountain* can be understood along the same lines. The urinal (the simple object) is being used as an artistic medium to make *Fountain* (the complex object), which is an artifact within the artworld—Duchamp's artifact. The driftwood would be being used and the urinal was used as an artistic medium in the way that pigments, marble, and the like are used to make more conventional works of art. The driftwood used as a weapon and the urinal used as an artistic medium are artifacts of the most minimal sort. Duchamp did not confer artifactuality; he made a minimal artifact.

A second difficulty with the earlier account was pointed out by Monroe Beardsley. He observed that in the discussion surrounding the definition in the earlier version of the theory, I characterized the artworld as an "established practice," an

inform. . . d of activity. He then goes one to point out that the quoted definition makes use of such phrases as "conferred status" and "acting on behalf of." Such phrases typically have application within formal institutions such as states, corporations, universities, and the like. Beardsley correctly notes that it is a mistake to use the language of formal institutions to try to describe an informal institution as I conceive the artworld to be. Beardsley queries, "does it make sense to speak of acting on behalf of a practice? Status-awarding authority can center in [a formal institution], but practices, as such, seem to lack the requisite source of authority."⁵

Accepting Beardsley's criticism, I have abandoned as too formal the notions of *status conferral* and *acting on behalf of* as well as those aspects of the earlier version that connect up with these notions. Being a work of art is a status all right, that is, it is the occupying of a position within the human activity of the artworld. Being a work of art does not, however, involve a status that is conferred but is rather a status that is achieved as the result of creating an artifact within or against the background of the artworld.

The later version claims (as does the earlier version) that works of art are art as the result of the position or place they occupy within an established practice, namely, the artworld. There are two crucial questions about the claim: is the claim true and if the claim is true, how is the artworld to be described?

This is a claim about the existence of a human institution, and the test of its truth is the same as for any other claim about human organization—the test of observation. "Seeing" the artworld and the works of art embedded in its structures, however, is not as easy as "seeing" some of the other human institutions we are more accustomed to thinking about.

Danto's visually-indistinguishable-objects argument shows that works of art exist within a context or framework, but it does not reveal the nature of the elements making up the framework. Moreover, many different frameworks are possible. Each of the traditional theories of art, for example, implies its own particular framework. For one example, Susanne Langer's view that "Art is the creation of forms symbolic of human feeling" implies a framework of artist (one who creates) and a specific kind of subject matter (human feeling). Langer's theory and the other traditional theories, however, fall easy prey to counterexamples, and, consequently, none of the frameworks they imply can be the right one. The reason that the traditional theories are easy prey for counterexamples is that the frameworks implied by the theories are too narrowly focused on the artist and the more obvious characteristics works of art may have rather than on *all* the framework elements that surround works of art. The result is that it is all too easy to find works of art that lack the properties seized on by a particular traditional theory as universal and defining.

The frameworks of the traditional theories do lead in the right direction in one respect. Each of the traditional theories conceives of the making of art as a human

of these theories is conceived of as a cultural phenomenon that persists through time and is repeatable. The persistence of a framework as a cultural practice, is enough, I think, to make the traditional theories themselves quasi-institutional. In every one of the traditional theories, however, there is only one established role envisioned and that is the role of the artist or the maker of artifacts. And, in every case, the artist is seen as the creator of an artifact with a property such as being representative, being symbolic, or being an expression. For the traditional theories the artist role is envisaged as simply that of producing representations, producing symbolic forms, producing expressions, or some such thing. This narrow conception of the artist role is responsible for the ease with which counterexamples can be produced. Since the traditional theories are inadequate, there must be more to the artist role than the producing of any, or even all, of these kinds of things that the traditional theories envisage. What an artist understands and does when he or she creates a work of art far exceeds the simple understanding and doing entailed by the traditional theories.

Whenever an artist creates art, it is always created for a *public*. Consequently, the framework must include a role for a *public* to whom art is presented. Of course, for a variety of reasons many works of art are never in fact presented to any public. Some works just never reach their publics although their makers intended for them to do so. Some works are withheld from their publics by their creators because they judge them to be in some way inferior and unworthy of presentation. The fact that artists withhold some of their works because they judge them unworthy of presentation shows that the works are things of a *kind* to be presented, otherwise, it would be pointless to judge them unworthy of presentation. Thus, even art not intended for public presentation presupposes a public, for not only is it possible to present it to a public (as sometimes happens), it is a thing of a type that has as a goal presentation to a public. The notion of a public hovers always in the background, even when a given artist refuses to present his or her work. In those cases in which works of art are withheld from a public, there is what might be called a "double intention"—there is an intention to create a thing of a kind that is presented, but there is also an intention not to actually present it.

What is an artworld public? It is not just a collection of people. The members of an artworld public know how to fulfill a role that requires knowledge and understanding similar in many respects to that required of an artist. There are as many different publics as there are different arts, and the knowledge required for one public is different from that required by another public. An example of one bit of knowledge required of the public of stage plays is the understanding of what it is for someone to act a part. Any given member of a public would have a great many such bits of information.

The artist and public roles are the minimum framework for the creation of art, and the two roles in relation may be called "the presentation group." The role of

create art of a particular kind. Likewise, the role of a public has two central aspects: first, a general aspect characteristic of all publics, namely, the awareness that what is presented to it is art and, second, the abilities and sensitivities which enable one to perceive and understand the particular kind of art with which one is presented.

In almost every actual society that has an institution of art-making, in addition to the roles of artist and public, there will be a number of supplementary artworld roles such as those of critic, art teacher, director, curator, conductor, and many more. The presentation group, that is, the roles of artist and public in relation, however, constitutes the essential framework for art-making.

Among the more frequent criticisms of the earlier version was that it failed to show that art-making is institutional because it failed to show that art-making is rule-governed. The underlying assumption of the criticism is that it is rule-governedness that distinguishes institutional practices such as, say, promising from noninstitutional ones such as, say, dog-walking. And it is true that the earlier version did not bring out the rule-governedness of art-making and this requires correcting. There are rules implicit in the theory developed in the earlier book, but unfortunately I failed to make them explicit. There is no point in discussing the rules governing art-making implicit in the earlier theory, but those of the present revised theory can be stated. Earlier I argued that actfactuality is a necessary condition for being a work of art. This claim of necessity implies one rule of art-making: if one wishes to make a work of art, one must do so by creating an artifact. I also claimed that being a thing of a kind that is presented to an artworld public is a necessary condition for being a work of art. This claim of necessity implies another rule of art-making: if one wishes to create a work of art, one must do so by creating a thing of a kind which is presented to an artworld public. These two rules are jointly sufficient for making works of art.

The question naturally arises as to why the framework described as the institutional one is the correct essential framework rather than some other framework. The frameworks of the traditional theories are clearly inadequate, but their inadequacy does not prove the correctness of the framework of the present version of the institutional theory. Proving that a theory is true is notoriously difficult, although proving that a theory is false is sometimes easy to do. It can be said of the present version of the institutional theory that it is a conception of a framework in which works of art are clearly embedded and that no other plausible framework is in the offing. For lack of a more conclusive argument that the institutional theory's framework is the right one, I will have to rely on the description of it I have given to function as an argument as to its rightness. If the description is correct, or approximately so, then it should evoke a "that's right" experience in the listener.

In the earlier version, I talked a great deal about conventions and how they are involved in the institution of art. I tried to distinguish between what I called "the primary convention" and other "secondary conventions" that are involved in the

tions discussed there is the Western theatrical convention of concealing stagehands behind the scenery. This Western convention was there contrasted with that of classical Chinese theater in which the stagehand (called the property man) appears on stage during the action of the play and rearranges props and scenery. These two different theatrical solutions for the same task, namely, the employment of stagehands, brings out an essential feature of conventions. Any conventional way of doing something could have been done in a different way.

The failure to realize that things of the kind just discussed are conventions can result in confused theory. For example, it is another convention of Western theater that spectators do not participate in the action of a play. Certain aesthetic-attitude theorists failed to realize that this particular convention is a convention and concluded that the nonparticipation of spectators is a rule derived from aesthetic consciousness and that the rule must not be violated. Such theorists are horrified by Peter Pan's request for the members of the audience to applaud to save Tinkerbelle's life. The request, however, merely amounts to the introduction of a new convention that small children, but not some aestheticians, catch on to right away.

There are innumerable conventions involved in the creation and presentation of art, but there is not, as I claimed in the earlier version, a *primary* convention to which all the other conventions are secondary. In effect, in the earlier version, I claimed that not only are there many conventions involved in the creation and presentation of art, but that at bottom the whole activity is completely conventional. But theater, painting, sculpting, and the like, are not ways of doing something that could be done in another way, and, therefore, they are not conventional. If, however, there is no *primary* convention, there is a primary *something* within which the innumerable conventions that there are have a place. What is primary is the understanding shared by all involved that they are engaged in an established activity or practice within which there is a variety of roles: artist roles, public roles, critic roles, director roles, curator roles, and so on. Our artworld consists of the totality of such roles with the roles of artist and public at its core. Described in a somewhat more structured way, the artworld consists of a set of individual artworld systems, each of which contains its own specific artist and public roles plus other roles. For example, painting is one artworld system, theater is another, and so on.

The institution of art, then, involves rules of very different kinds. There are conventional rules that derive from the various conventions employed in presenting and creating art. These rules are subject to change. There are more basic rules that govern the engaging in an activity, and these rules are not conventional. The artifact rule—if one wishes to make a work of art, one must do so by creating an artifact—is not a conventional rule, it states a condition for engaging in a certain kind of practice.

As I remarked earlier, the artifact rule and the other nonconventional rule are sufficient for the creating of art. And, as each rule is necessary, they can be used to formulate a definition of "work of art."

world public.

This definition explicitly contains the terms "artworld" and "public" and it also involves the notions of *artist* and *artworld system*. I now define these four as follows:

An artist is a person who participates with understanding in the making of a work of art.

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.

The artworld is the totality of all artworld systems.

An artworld system is a framework for the presentation of a work of art by an artist to an artworld public.⁶

These five definitions provide the leanest possible description of the institution of art and thus the leanest possible account of the institutional theory of art.

To forestall an objection to the definition of "work of art," let me acknowledge that there are artifacts that are created for presentation to the artworld publics that are not works of art: for example, playbills. Such things are, however, parasitic on or secondary to works of art. Works of art are artifacts of a primary kind in this domain, and playbills and the like that are dependent on works of art are artifacts of a secondary kind within this domain. The word "artifact" in the definition should be understood to be referring to artifacts of the primary kind.

The definition of "work of art" given in the earlier version was, as I acknowledged, circular, although not viciously so. The definition of "work of art" just given is also circular, although again not viciously so. In fact, the definitions of the five central terms constitute a logically circular set of terms.

There is an ideal of noncircular definition that assumes that the meaning of terms used in a definition ought not to lead back to the term originally defined, but rather ought to be or lead to terms that are more basic. The ideal of noncircular definition also assumes that we ought to be able to arrive at terms that are primitive in the sense that they can be known in some nondefinitional way, say, by direct sensory experience or rational intuition. There may be some sets of definitions that satisfy this ideal, but the definitions of the five central terms of the institutional theory do not. Does this mean that the institutional theory involves a vicious circularity? The circularity of the definitions shows the interdependency of the central notions. These central notions are *inflected*, that is, they bend in on, presuppose, and support one another. What the definitions reveal is that art-making involves an intricate, co-relative structure that cannot be described in the straightforward, linear way envisaged by the ideal of noncircular definition. The inflected nature of art is reflected in the way that we learn about art. This learning

to draw pictures that can be displayed, for example. This learning is sometimes approached through being taught how to be a member of an artworld public—learning how to look at pictures that are presented as the intentional products of artists. Both approaches teach us about artists, works, and publics all at the same time, for these notions are not independent of one another. I suspect that many areas within the cultural domain also have the same kind of inflected nature that the institution of art has—for example, the area involving the notions of *law*, *legislature*, *executive*, and *judiciary*.

The ideal of noncircular definition holds also that sets of circular definitions cannot be informative. This may be true of some sets of definitions, but it is not, I think, true of the definitions of the institutional theory. For these definitions just mirror the mutually dependent items that constitute the art enterprise, and, thereby, informs us of its inflected nature.

In recent years Jerrold Levinson,⁷ Noel Carroll,⁸ Stephen Davies,⁹ and others have published theories of art or drawn theoretical conclusions about art that relate in one way or another to the institutional theory of art.