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Concepts and Conceptions of Art

Introduction: The Demarcation Problem

The first sentence in Joseph Margolis' work, *Pragmatism without Foundations: Reconciling Realism and Relativism* (1986), reads: 'We cannot seriously believe that science utterly misrepresents the way the world is; and we cannot accurately determine the fit between the two'.[1] He claims further that 'these are among the most stable intuitions we are likely to entertain about the human condition and the prospects of human inquiry'.[2] Since Margolis favours a relativistic view of knowledge and reality – though not of the postmodernist brand – I take it that he would accept that there are several viable world-views and different kinds of knowledge that, in one way or other, capture aspects of what we in want of a better term are accustomed to calling 'reality'. What Margolis rejects from the outset, and quite rightly in my opinion, is the belief that scientific knowledge is wholly illusory and that science is in principle incapable of illuminating aspects of reality. It seems therefore pointless to deny that science produces knowledge, however difficult it may be to give a coherent and satisfactory account of the nature of scientific knowledge. In fact there is little point in raising the question whether

[1] Joseph Margolis, *Pragmatism without Foundations: Reconciling Realism and Relativism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), p. 1.
[2] Ibid.

science gives us knowledge or not and whether scientific research is a cognitive activity or not. Parallel questions about art and artistic activity, on the other hand, are certainly not pointless, they have been at the centre of the philosophical discussion of art since the days of Plato and Aristotle.

It is often assumed that for an activity to be rational and cognitive the fundamental concepts governing that activity must have a reasonably clear and univocal meaning. Ideally the concepts should be definable in formal definitions that state the necessary and jointly sufficient features of the concepts in question, or, if this should prove impossible, we should at least be able to give partial definitions stating some of the necessary conditions for their applicability. I do not know whether all fundamental concepts in physics or chemistry meet these requirements, which stem from a rather rigid positivist view of concepts and of meaning, but I suppose that many fundamental concepts in the hard sciences are so definable and that there is considerable unanimity in these disciplines regarding the correctness of these definitions. Theoretical definitions of the concept of an atom or an electron and the classificatory definitions of chemical compounds are examples of such definitions. From a positivist, or should I say, scientistic perspective, this state of affairs is regarded as an ideal for all rational and cognitive inquiry. I stress this point because I suspect that the excessive interest in the definition of the concept of art on the part of many analytic philosophers of art is partly due to a conscious or semi-conscious adherence to a positivist conception of concepts. If we cannot accurately determine – preferably through a formal definition – what art is, then our inquires into the nature and function of art lacks, on this view, rational foundations and the rationality of our aesthetic pursuits is endangered.

I do not know if a full-blown institutional theory of science, similar in scope and intent to Dickie's institutional theory of art, has ever been put forward, but in several recent conceptions of science and scientific knowledge the social and cultural character of scientific knowledge is highlighted. It is surely reasonable to assume, that whatever else science is, it is 'a human activity and its theories human con-

structions', as Anthony O'Hear puts it.[1] Scientific theories are, moreover, formulated in specific historical circumstances and in particular cultural and social contexts. The acceptance or rejection of a scientific theory is similarly socially and culturally conditioned and the line between science and pseudo-science is drawn differently at different times.

The so-called *problem of demarcation* has exercised many philosophers of science. The expression 'problem of demarcation' stems from Karl Popper,[2] who formulated a criterion by which he thought scientific theories and scientific knowledge could be neatly distinguished from pseudo-scientific theories and false claims to knowledge. According to Popper a theory is scientific if it is falsifiable or refutable or testable in principle, i.e. if is conceivable that the theory can be refuted by observation and experience.[3] The domain of rational theories is, however, not exhausted by falsifiable, scientific theories; philosophical theories, which are not falsifiable in the required sense, are rational if they attempt to solve particular problems and if they can be discussed rationally.[4] The following trichotomy emerges from Popper's discussion: there are scientific theories, which are in principle refutable, there are pseudo-scientific theories claiming to yield genuine knowledge, but which fail to do so, because they are in principle irrefutable and therefore consistent with any possible state of affairs; and finally there are non-scientific, unfalsifiable philosophical theories, which can be rationally assessed.

Invoking Popper here does not mean that I subscribe to his demarcation criterion; I bring up Popper's problem of demarcation because I think there is an analogy between the demarcation problem in the philosophy of science and the problem of determining the bounds of art. Popper's trichotomy also has an analogue in recent discussions of the nature and the definition of art, which are expected to

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1 Anthony O'Hear, *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Science* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1989), p. 206.

2 Karl Popper, 'Science: Conjectures and Refutations', in K. Popper, *Conjectures and Refutations: The Growth of Scientific Knowledge*, 3rd. rev. ed. (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1969), p. 39.

3 Ibid., p. 37.

4 Ibid., pp. 198–9.

yield criteria for distinguishing between art and non-art as well as between art and pseudo-art. Popper regards his definition of science as a normative proposal, which can be justified because of its fruitfulness and because, 'a great many points can be clarified and explained with its help', as he puts it.[1]

Popper was intrigued by the success of Einstein's theory of relativity as compared with what he took to be the failures of Marx's theory of history, Freud's psychoanalysis and Adler's individual psychology. Whereas Einstein's theory received a partial, empirical confirmation through Eddington's eclipse observation in 1919, no crucial tests have been and perhaps cannot be designed for Marx's, Freud's and Adler's theories, which therefore in Popper's view lack empirical content. Newton's mechanics and Einstein's theory of relativity are for Popper paradigm cases of science. If his paradigmatic examples had been different, his theory of science would probably have been different as well. It is interesting to contrast Popper's examples with the examples that are taken as paradigmatic in Althusser's very different theory of science. Marx's and Freud's theories, which for Popper are the epitome of pseudo-science, are singled out by Althusser as prime examples of science and scientific knowledge.[2] It seems clear that the *science-world*, if I may use that expression as a counterpart to the *artworld*, favours Popper's examples. However secure the scientific status of certain central theories and methods may be, disagreement over the scientific status of theories and methods does occur in the science-world even if perhaps not as frequently as disagreements over the art status of purported works of art in the artworld. If the theory of gravitation is the *Choral Symphony* of the science-world and the theory of relativity its *Sacre du Printemps*, then perhaps historical materialism and the Oedipus complex are its singing sculptures and urinals.

To pursue the analogy between the science-world and the artworld a little further, we may note that there are whole branches of science, or would-be science, whose scientific credentials have been questioned, like socio-biology, for example. Similarly it has been denied

1 Karl Popper, *The Logic of Scientific Discovery*, 1934, 3rd. rev. ed. (London: Hutchinson, 1968), p. 55.

2 Louis Althusser & Étienne Balibar, *Lire le Capital 2* (Paris:Maspero, 1968) p. 22.

that certain kinds of art, such as minimal art and conceptual art deserve to be called art. The status of particular classes of objects, such as readymades, remains to a certain extent controversial in the artworld and are regarded by some as pseudo-art, just as some scientists and philosophers regard theories in artificial intelligence and in particular their claims to be able to explain the workings of the human mind as pseudo-scientific.[1]

One way of distinguishing between science, non-science and pseudo-science and between art, non-art and pseudo-art is to formulate a conception of the aims and functions of science proper and of art proper respectively. In his essay, 'The Aim of Science', Popper claims that the purpose of science is to find '*satisfactory explanations*, of whatever strikes us a being in need of explanation'.[2] Quoting Popper again does not betoken my love for him – I refer to his problem about the aim of science and to his answer to that question in order to introduce the parallel question about art.

Popper is, of course, aware of the fact that science and scientists have many different aims, but nevertheless believes, that science has one overarching aim, namely to find satisfactory (causal) explanations of phenomena. In my view we not only can, but should, reject Popper's answer to the question about the aim of science, nor should we accept his formulation of the problem. I don't think it makes sense to speak of *the* aim of science, nor do I believe that Popper's views on scientific explanation are correct. But were we to accept a theory of science of the same structure and scope as Popper's we would be in the possession of criteria for distinguishing between a scientific theory and a pseudo-scientific theory as well as between scientific theories and non-scientific theories. For the theory would provide us with an answer to the question what the aim or the aims of science are, and if the theory specifies, say, explanation, description, classification, and analysis of a given range of phenomena as the aims of science, it should also formu-

[1] See, for example, Sören Stenlund, *Language and Philosophical Problems* (London:Routledge, 1990).

[2] Karl Popper, 'The Aim of Science', in K. Popper, *Objective Knowledge: An Evolutionary Approach*, rev. ed. (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1979), p. 191.

late the standards that explanation, description etc., have to meet in order to count as scientific.

Still, even if a theory of this kind would yield criteria by which the scientific claims of a theory or an explanation could be judged, these criteria have to be applied in practice, which is not always a simple matter. Agreement in definitions does not automatically lead to agreement in practical judgements. I suppose that the legal definitions of premeditated murder, justifiable homicide and manslaughter are reasonably unequivocal, but, as everybody knows, it is not always easy to apply these definitions in practice. It requires experience and sensitivity to interpret and to apply them. Moreover, there are no mechanical rules for applying the criteria. Similarly, adherents of a formalistic theory of art, which defines art in terms of significant form, or proponents of an expression theory of art, which defines art in terms of the intentions of the artist and the expressive properties of the work, must interpretatively apply their respective criteria of art that follow from these theories. It is quite conceivable that one critic discovers significant form in a work that to another critic appears to lack these qualities. I stress this point because it is sometimes assumed that if we can reach agreement on the function and nature of art we will also necessarily agree on the art status of any putative work of art. It is, of course, very unlikely that an agreement on the nature of art and the criteria of art will ever be reached. Or to put it in stronger terms, if the concept of art is primarily an evaluative concept, as I shall argue it is, an agreement on the criteria of art seem to me to be excluded in principle.

I: THE QUEST FOR THE DEFINITION OF ART

Part One

Many philosophies of art, both ancient and modern, have tried to answer the question 'What is art?' Those who have been educated in the analytical tradition tend to assume too rashly that the question 'What is Art?' is always a demand for a definition of the term 'art' or the concept of art. But this is not always so. In what has been called aesthetic theory, i.e. traditional, non-analytical ways of philosophizing about art, we seldom encounter explicit definitions of the concept of art. In traditional philosophies of art the answer to the question consists rather in a full-blown theory, where art as a human practice is explained and placed in a larger context. Collingwood's *The Principles of Art* (1938) is, I believe, not only a good example of traditional theorizing, but also one of the best works of traditional theory. Nowhere in his work does he give an explicit definition of art, but his endeavours culminate in a description and an analysis of what he takes to be essential to art proper, viz. the expression of emotion.[1] In the course of his analysis he distinguishes between arousing emotion and expressing emotion, between art and craft, and between art and amusement, among other things. His conception of art is embedded in his systematic philosophy, his epistemology and his ontology, and cannot be understood or judged apart from them. Like so many other theories of art, Collingwood's theory offers criteria for distinguishing between art and non-art and between art and pseudo-art. It does so by formulating a conception of the proper function or point of art. To accept Collingwood's conception of art entails accepting a certain evaluation of art.

I have taken Collingwood's philosophy of art as an example of traditional theorizing. I could just as well have chosen Susanne Langer's semiotic, or should I say, symbolic theory of art instead. Although Collingwood's and Langer's conceptions differ in important respects, and therefore yield different criteria for the application of the term

[1] R.G. Collingwood, *The Principles of Art* (Oxford:Oxford Univ. Press, 1938), ch. VI & VII.

'art', it is clear that Collingwood and Langer agree about the art status of most, if not all, particular works. They have different conceptions of the nature of art, i.e. they give different answers to the question 'Why is something art?', but they both agree that Bach or Cézanne or T.S. Eliot, for example, created works of art. It is true that Langer speaks of art as 'the creation of forms expressive of human feeling';[1] and because this formulation resembles a definition, we might be tempted to speak of her 'definition' of art. Nevertheless, her statement is not a verbal definition; the word 'art' was not used at the time when she wrote *Feeling and Form* (1953) only about things people thought were 'the creation of forms expressive of human feeling'. If we regard it as a real definition, i.e. as a definition formulating the essence of art, it is a rather poor definition because of its vagueness among other things. It is therefore preferable, I think, to speak of Langer's *conception* of art and of Collingwood's *conception* of art, instead of their *definitions* of art, because their views of the nature of art cannot be adequately summarized in a definition or definition-like statement; it is rather their whole theory which attempts to define the nature of art. A conception of art need not issue in a verbal or real definition. The term 'conception' is both more vague and more general than 'definition', and that is the reason why I prefer to speak of a conception of art here, instead of a definition of art.

I now take leave of the traditional philosophers of art, amongst whom Collingwood and Langer are the best and turn to the analytic discussion of art and its definition. In contrast to Collingwood's and Langer's holistic approaches to art, the analytic treatment of the concept of art is often atomistic. Definitions can be likened to the tip of an iceberg; traditional aestheticians of Collingwood's and Langer's ilk want to grasp the contours of the iceberg itself, the analytical aesthetician is more interested in sharpening the contours of the tip of the iceberg, thereby perhaps losing sight of deeper things.

[1] Susanne Langer, *Feeling and Form: A Theory of Art Developed from 'Philosophy in a New Key'* (New York: Scribner's Sons, 1953), p. 60.

Part Two

The discussions of the nature and the definition of art in the analytic tradition often take place in a theoretical and cultural vacuum. But this appearance is in a sense deceptive, since all conceptions and definitions rest on presuppositions of various sorts, which can be made more or less explicit, or be more or less effectively suppressed. Stephen Davies writes in the introduction to his book, *Definitions of Art* (1991), the most comprehensive survey and analysis of the analytical discussion of the concept of art to date, that '[d]efinitional questions are inextricably meshed with ontological, interpretive, and evaluative issues; their implications stretch in many directions and take many twists and turns'.[1] Still he does not hold on to this insight in his critical analyses of various definitions of art. Paradoxically, philosophers like Collingwood and Langer appear to take the view expressed by Davies much more seriously.

Again, in contrast to Collingwood and Langer, most analytic approaches to art do not – and are not meant to – provide an answer to the question *why* art is important and valuable. Davies, for example, claims that a definition of 'what makes something an artwork need pay no special regard to that which gives art its importance to us'.[2] I think this view is mistaken, although many analytic aestheticians pride themselves on being able to give a purely descriptive account of art that avoids the murky waters of value and valuation. Nelson Goodman's attitude is exemplary in this respect. 'The symptoms of the aesthetic are not marks of merit; and a characterization of the aesthetic neither requires nor provides a definition of aesthetic excellence', he claims.[3] He also believes that 'conceiving of aesthetic experience as a form of understanding results both in resolving and in devaluing the question of aesthetic value'.[4] But what if the concept of art and the aesthetic are inescapably value-laden as some analytic aestheticians have thought and

1 Stephen Davies, *Definitions of Art* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1991), ix.
2 Ibid., p. 114.
3 Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art:An Approach to a Theory of Symbols* (London:Oxford Univ. Press, 1969), p. 255.
4 Ibid., p. 262.

what if these concepts and phenomena cannot be adequately grasped without bringing in the question of value? Goodman's own view that 'aesthetic experience is a form of understanding' in fact invites an inquiry into the value of art and an account of why this particular form of understanding is worth pursuing.

Most writers in the analytic tradition believe that the concept of art is a purely descriptive concept, or, rather, they think that there is a purely descriptive and classificatory use of the concept of art which it is the task of the aesthetician to analyze and clarify. Morris Weitz, Monroe Beardsley and George Dickie, to mention three influential contributors to the debate on the nature and the definition of art, while disagreeing on many issues, agree that there is a fundamental descriptive use of the concept of art.

Beardsley is a traditionally minded analytical aesthetician who thought that art could be defined in terms of its aesthetic properties and functions, thereby excluding from the domain of art many objects of avant-garde practice.[1] Weitz, on the other hand, argued in his essay 'The Role of Theory in Aesthetics' (1956), that the concept of art is an open concept which cannot in principle be defined.[2] According to him the attempts to define the concept of art betrays a misunderstanding of the logic of the concept, because there are no necessary and jointly sufficient criteria for the use of the concept and therefore there is nothing to be defined. There is no such thing as the essence of art, he claims. Dickie, responding both to traditionalists such as Beardsley and to champions of the indefinability thesis such as Weitz, formulated an institutional theory of art, according to which an artifact becomes a work of art by being offered by a member of the artworld as a candidate for appreciation.[3]

These analyses of the concept of art triggered off endless debates on the possibility and desirability of defining the concept of art

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1 Monroe C. Beardsley, 'An Aesthetic Definition of Art', in *What is Art?*, ed. Hugh Cutler (New York:Haven, 1983), pp. 15–29.

2 Morris Weitz, 'The Role of Theory in Aesthetics', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 15 (1956), pp. 27–35.

3 George Dickie, *Art and the Aesthetic: An Institutional Analysis* (Ithaca:Cornell Univ. Press, 1974).

and equally interminable discussions regarding the formal and material correctness of the institutional definition of art. Some of the contributions to these debates have been enlightening, but many of them seem to me to concentrate on trivial aspects of the problem. In saying this I have perhaps already indicated that I do not think that the problem of defining art is a problem that merits the attention it has received in the past thirty years. I am therefore inclined to agree with Nicholas Wolterstorff, who notes that during this time 'vast amounts of energy were devoted to devising analyses of the concept of *work of art*', adding that 'for sheer boringness, the results of these endeavours have few peers'.[1]

In spite of this, and with a certain reluctance, I shall tackle some of the issues involved in the debates on the definability and the definition of art. Even if the various attempts to define the concept of art have been unsuccessful and much of the debate concerning the definability of art is perversely detailed and technical, something can be learnt about the concept of art by considering some of the presuppositions and results of these debates.

Before proceeding I wish to make a few introductory remarks. When I speak of art and the concept of art I am using the term 'art' in the generic sense, covering painting, music, literature, architecture, etc. It is this generic sense of the term 'art' philosophers of art have in mind when they offer definitions of art or deny that art is definable. The difficulty of this undertaking should immediately be obvious. Nobody assumes that art wears its essence on its sleeve, therefore the attempt to define art presupposes or should presuppose an investigation of different art forms (painting, music, literature, etc.). The attempt to define art also requires familiarity with different kinds of art (classicist, romantic, modern, postmodern, etc.). For, if we have not made a reasonably comprehensive survey of different art forms and different kinds of art, that is, of phenomena that are supposed to partake in the essence of art, how can we be sure that we have found The Holy Grail? Whether we look for the essential properties of art among the exhibited properties or the non-exhibited relational or functional properties of objects is

[1] Nicholas Wolterstorff, 'Philosophy of Art after Analysis and Romanticism', in *Analytic Aesthetics*, ed. Richard Shusterman (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), p. 37.

immaterial; a survey of art forms and works of art and putative works of art is needed in either case.[1] If I am right in thinking that an overview of the kind I have in mind is needed before we can hope to reach a satisfactory definition, the same considerations apply with equal force to those who deny that art can be defined. For, if we have not familiarized ourselves with different kinds of art, how can we know that art has no essence, that there is no Holy Grail?

There is also another reason for stressing the fact that philosophers of art have the generic sense of the term 'art' in mind when they argue about the nature and the definition of art. For, when they discuss art they usually concentrate on the visual arts and therefore the examples are mostly taken from recent developments in the visual arts. When one reads philosophical articles on the concept of art one gets the impression that Marcel Duchamp's urinal-sculpture *Fountain* (1917) is the acme of modern art, or to put it a little more fairly, that *Fountain* is a typical modernist artwork, which is by no means self-evident. Nevertheless it is understandable that readymades as well as works of minimal and conceptual art have played a conspicuous role in the discussion on the nature of art, because it is works like these that seem to demand a revision of traditional conceptions of art and of traditional standards for evaluating art. It is widely felt that readymades, body art, land art, minimal art, conceptual and whatnot present a conceptual challenge and that a conception of art which excludes them cannot be adequate. It seems that the visual arts in our century have been richer in aesthetic and artistic provocations than any other art form; most of the objects and happenings, which claim to be art, but whose status as art is controversial, have been made by painters and sculptors. There are, to be sure, parallel cases in the other arts, perhaps fewer in literature than in music and the theatre, but I have the feeling that the concentration on the visual arts may be responsible for a certain distortion in the contemporary debate on the nature of art. I doubt whether the institutional theory of art would ever have been put forward if Danto and Dickie had instead focused on architecture or literature or music.

[1] For a discussion of the exhibited and non-exhibited properties of art, see Maurice Mandelbaum, 'Family Resemblances and Generalizations Concerning the Arts', *The American Philosophical Quarterly* 2 (1965), pp. 219–228.

At least since the 1910s the visual arts have produced an abundance of what the American critic Harold Rosenberg has called 'anxious objects'. He coined that phrase 'to describe the kind of modern art that makes us uneasy because of uncertainty as to whether we are in the presence of a genuine work of art or not', as Suzi Gablik puts it in her indictment of modernist art, *Has Modernism Failed?* (1984).[1] Whatever we may think of these 'anxious objects' and their claim to be art, it must be admitted, I think, that the majority of modern and postmodern works of visual art are *not* 'anxious objects', objects whose arthood is open to doubt. We may add that from a historical perspective 'anxious objects' constitute a small minority – because the art status of most works of visual art from, say, Giotto to Francis Bacon can hardly be questioned. I hope it will not sound too sophistical to say that many works of the past are contemporaneous with us in the sense that they are exhibited and interpreted anew and therefore remain alive. Books such as *Shakespeare Our Contemporary* are not the effusions of a smug and sentimental humanism. If artworks of the past are contemporaneous with us in some sense it is reasonable to claim that an overwhelming majority of works of art do not invite the question 'But is it Art?' If this is the case it can, of course, still be said that this is beside the point, because the existence of one 'anxious object' is sufficient to subvert a traditional conception of art. Or is it? We might well question the demand for strict decision procedures, that is, the demand for a definition of art which is supposed to enable us to decide in every particular case whether something is a work of art or not. Moreover, it seems to me that the importance of the question 'Is it Art?' has been exaggerated.

II: THE INSTITUTIONAL THEORY OF ART

Part One

The institutional theory of art is designed to accommodate 'anxious objects'– and, we might add, anxious non-objects as well – and to solve the mystery how these objects can be works of art. The institutional theory of art is sometimes fathered upon Arthur Danto, although he has said

[1] Suzi Gablik, *Has Modernism Failed?* (London:Thames & Hudson, 1984), p. 36.

that 'the theory [...] is quite alien to anything I believe'.[1] For one thing Danto does not offer a formal definition of art as does Dickie. A second difference is that Danto does not explicitly say that the artworld confers the status of art on objects that otherwise would not be works of art, although he believes that there can be no art without an artworld. As Stephen Davies points out in *Definitions of Art* Danto criticizes Dickie for being 'concerned only with the mechanics of the context in which art is created' whereas Danto himself 'is concerned with a definitional question of more substance: that of how art status might be merited'.[2] Consequently, a third difference between Danto and Dickie is that Danto's conception of art is embedded in an ontology, whereas Dickie's no-nonsense approach eschews ontological questions altogether. Finally, to my mind they differ in a fourth respect, for Danto, as I see it, is a more subtle and more exciting philosopher of art than Dickie, not least because Danto's interest in and knowledge of art is evident on almost every page he has written. It is, of course, true that Dickie has popularized Danto's idea of an artworld, an expression which was introduced by Danto in his essay 'The Artworld', published in 1964,[3] but that does not make their approaches identical.

Although the institutional theory of art is primarily associated with Dickie, who according to Beardsley 'offered the most carefully-worked-out and impressive version',[4] the institutional view of art has been in the air for a long time. Terry Diffey's article 'The Republic of Art' (1969) is the first explicit statement of an institutional conception of art. In his essay hi speaks of 'the institutionalized presentation of the object' as well as of the conferral of status on an object, phrases that reoccur almost verbatim in Dickie's writings.[5] Diffey's discussion is, to my mind, more perceptive and balanced than Dickie's, but also less straightforward and less systematic, which perhaps is the reason why his

1 Arthur Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace: A Philosophy of Art* (Cambridge, Mass.:Harvard Univ. Press, 1981), viii.
2 Davies, Definitions of Art p. 82.
3 Arthur Danto, 'The Artworld', *The Journal of Philosophy* 61 (1964), pp. 571–584.
4 Monroe Beardsley, 'Is Art Essentially Institutional?', in *Culture and Art: An Anthology*, ed. Lars Aagard-Mogensen (Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press, 1976), p. 199.
5 Terry Diffey, 'The Republic of Art', in T.J. Diffey, *The Republic of Art and Other Essays* (New York: Peter Lang, 1991), p. 41.

views have attracted less attention than Dickie's robust institutionalism. I should also like to point out in passing that Davies misrepresents Diffey's views, for Davies says that Diffey has 'moved away from the spirit of the institutional theory', renouncing it on the grounds that it 'confuses treating a thing as an artwork with its really being an artwork'.[1] It may be true that the institutional theory is guilty of that particular confusion, but Diffey has not repudiated the institutional approach to art. In the introduction to his collection of essays, *The Republic of Art and Other Essays* (1991) he says that he 'has not changed [his] mind on the basic intuition that if we want an answer to the question, "What is art?", we should continue to look in the direction of the institutional theory'.[2]

I have said that the institutional theory and institutional like theories have been in the air for a long time. Whatever the differences between Danto's, Diffey's and Dickies's theories may be, they all maintain that art is a cultural and social practice, which implies that the function and perhaps even the nature of art is historically relative.

The institutional theory (when I henceforth speak of the institutional theory I am referring only to Dickie's theory unless I say otherwise) wants to solve several problems, but it is primarily designed to accommodate 'anxious objects' and other phenomena whose art status cannot be explained or accepted in terms of any traditional theory. However, to learn that a work of art is an artifact, on which some member of the artworld has conferred the status of candidate for appreciation is not to learn very much. It is to learn that somebody calls a specific object or phenomenon 'art', but when we are confronted with controversial works, whose claim to be art is in dispute, it is not very helpful to be told that the artist or that some critic has called the thing 'a work of art'. Dickie's theory is in a sense the academic elaboration of the American minimalist Donald Judd's statement: 'If someone says it's art, it's art'.[3]

Suzi Gablik remarks, that '[i]t remains one of the more disturbing facts about modernism that a sense of fraudulence has, from

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1 Davies, *Definitions of Art*, p. 83.

2 Terry Diffey, 'Introduction', in Diffey, *The Republic of Art and Other Essays*, p. 5.

3 Quoted from Roberta Smith, 'Conceptual Art', in *Concepts of Modern Art*, rev. ed., ed. Nikos Stangos (London:Thames & Hudson, 1981), p. 261.

the start, hung round its neck like an albatross'.[1] If Dickie's theory were correct, the distinction between art and pseudo-art would be abolished, and consequently it would not make sense even to raise the question whether something is a fraudulent work of art.

It has been said that anything can be art nowadays – I am of course thinking of the visual arts – and it is sometimes added that if everything is art then nothing is. Dickie, however, does not believe that anything is or can become a work of art, for one thing a work of art must be an artifact, or at least something that is being used as an artistic medium, which thereby becomes 'an artifact of an artworld system', as he puts it.[2] Rauschenberg's *Erased Drawing* (1953), originally a drawing by Willem de Kooning which Rauschenberg got the permission to erase, and spent one month and forty erasers doing so, does not present a difficulty for Dickie. There is an artifact all right, although there is nothing to be seen. The institutional theory has no problems with the art status of such things as Yves Klein's empty gallery, Arman's gallery filled with truckloads of rubbish, or Walter de Maria's gallery containing 220.000 pounds of earth. But things like clouds and stars, which, unlike mountains and forests, are out of the artists's reach, cannot be works of art on the institutional view, because they cannot be 'artifactualized', to use Dickie's expression. Dickie himself refers to Salvador Dali, who once said that some rocks were art because he pointed to them and called them art.[3] For Dickie the fact that an artist calls something a work of art is not sufficient, it is not by itself an art-making feature; the artist must do something, however little, with the thing or phenomenon he labels art.

Richard Wollheim writes in his article 'Minimal Art' (1980) that '[t]he existence of such objects [i.e. 'anxious objects'], or rather their acceptance as works of art, is bound to give rise to certain doubts and anxieties; which a robust respect for fashion may fairly permanently suppress but cannot effectively resolve'.[4] I do not wish to accuse Dickie

1 Gablik, *Has Modernism Failed?*, p. 13.
2 George Dickie, *The Art Circle: A Theory of Art* (New York:Haven, 1984), p. 45.
3 Ibid., p. 46.
4 Richard Wollheim, 'Minimal Art', in *Aesthetics Today*, rev. ed., eds. Morris Philipson & Paul J. Gudel (New York: New American Library, 1980), p. 203.

of an undue respect for fashion, for saying that something is a work of art does not, on his view, entail believing the work to be a good or interesting work of art. But I think that even Dickie has his anxieties and doubts about the art status of certain objects and phenomena claimed to be art by representatives of the art world.

In a little-known article entitled 'What is Anti-Art?' (1975) Dickie discusses some of the 'works', or should I say activities, of the conceptual artist Vito Acconci, who used to notify members of the art-world by mail that he would mount a stool in his studio at certain times on a certain day, and that this 'work' could be viewed at those times. One of his other feats is the 'work' called *Seedbed* (1972), consisting of posters explaining that 'the goal of [his] activity is the production of seed', and '[t]he means to this goal [...] private sexual activity', which he attempts to perform throughout the day, etc., etc. The posters are supplemented by the artist's private sexual activity, i.e. the artist masturbates beneath a gallery-wide ramp out of sight, while 'the visitors walking above were subjected to the sounds (via loudspeakers) of his fantasizing, often about their footsteps'.[1] Dickie does not discuss *Seedbed*, but *Seedbed* certainly qualifies as anti-art, if anything does. Thinking of Acconci's 'exhibition' of his mounting his stool in his studio, Dickie makes the following telling remark:

> Acconci is exercising the machinery of the artworld and conferring the status of art on something – an action – which is radically different from traditional paintings and sculptures, and even radically different from 'ready-mades'.[2]

On Dickie's theory this should be the end of the matter, for Acconci is conferring the status of art on certain actions, and although this is radically different from conferring the status of art on various objects, that is all that is needed in on Dickies's view to make it art. Nevertheless Dickie is uneasy about the art status of Acconci's activities, for although he claims that 'Acconci's [...] "art" is real anti-art: art because [he] use[s] the framework of the artworld, anti because [he] do[es] nothing with it', his conclusion is that '[i]f all artists "produced" only anti-art,

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1 Roberta Smith, 'Conceptual Art', in *Concepts of Modern Art*, p. 266

2 George Dickie, 'What is Anti-Art?', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 33 (1975), p. 421.

that is, were anti-artists, then Hegel's prophecy would be fulfilled – art would be dead'.[1] The reference to Hegel here is misplaced, because Hegel did not envisage the possibility that art would be engulfed by anti-art, but the important thing to note is that Dickie's view that art would die if anti-art were to become dominant is inconsistent with his institutional theory. Dickie could, and should, have said, that if all artist only produced anti-art of Acconci's sort, art would lose all interest for us, for on Dickie's theory, art can disappear only if the artworld were to be dissolved, and in that case nobody could accord the status of art to anything.

Part Two

I shall not rehearse the main arguments that have been advanced against the institutional theory. I will concentrate on one fundamental aspect of the theory, its descriptive character.

Dickie claims that there are 'at least three distinct senses of "work of art": the primary or classificatory sense, the secondary or derivative, and the evaluative'.[2] In the first place, it can be doubted whether the three senses Dickie mentions are so distinct as he claims, but my main concern is with the claim that there is a clear classificatory sense of the term 'work of art'. Secondly, we should note that Dickie assumes that the primary sense of the term 'work of art' is classificatory, thus begging the question against the view that the primary sense of the term 'work of art' is evaluative. Dickie's assumption that the primary and the classificatory use is the same is responsible among other things for his misreading of Diffey's version of institutionalism. For Dickie claims that Diffey wishes to give an account 'of something like an evaluative sense, and consequently the scope of his theory is much narrower than [Dickie's]'.[3] But Diffey does not believe that the primary sense of 'work of art' is purely descriptive, for he thinks that '[t]o say that something is a work of art is to imply that it is a thing of interest and of

1 Ibid.
2 Dickie, *Art and the Aesthetic*, p. 25.
3 Ibid., p. 39, n. 11.

worth'.[1] Diffey also says that he is not sure 'whether our grasp of the concept of art isn't affected by our knowledge of and interest in works of art',[2] and he maintains that 'the judgment that something is a work of art is in some sense an evaluative one'.[3] Diffey's conclusions are rather tentative, but it seems clear to me that he does not believe that there is a purely classificatory, descriptive sense of the term 'work of art'. Therefore, his analysis is not narrower than Dickie's; it has the same scope as Dickie's but it is different in other respects.

Dickie apparently thinks that a descriptive sense of 'work of art' can easily be isolated from the actual uses of the term 'work of art' current within and without the artworld. It is curious that he should speak of a classificatory sense as primary, because he admits that this sense of 'work of art' occurs 'very infrequently in our discourse'.[4] The classificatory use of 'work of art' is primary, Dickie argues, because 'it [...] structures and guides our thinking about our world and its contents'.[5] He apparently believes that we first have to identify or accept something as a work of art before questions about the work's point, significance and value can be raised, the identification of something as a work of art and the evaluation of something as a work of art being totally different things. Therefore he thinks that the classificatory sense is primary from a logical point of view. Even if we seldom use the expression 'work of art' in order to classify something, there are, he says, occasions when the utterance 'That is a work of art' is in order; 'junk sculpture and found art may occasionally force such remarks', Dickie thinks.[6]

Let's consider the following cases. If, after a great performance of the *Choral Symphony* I exclaim: 'This is music!', this rather unimaginative statement expresses my excitement. The statement 'This is music' can, of course, under special circumstances have a classificatory use, for example, if I wish to inform someone unacquainted with Western art music, that the thing we had been listening to was not

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1 Terry Diffey, 'Essentialism and the Definition of "Art"', in Diffey, *The Republic of Art and Other Essays*, p. 42.
2 Ibid., p. 30.
3 Ibid., p. 47.
4 Dickie, *Art and the Aesthetic*, pp. 26–7.
5 Ibid., p. 27.
6 Ibid., p. 27.

noise, or some elaborate religious ritual, but in fact music. But if this were my intention, I had better say 'This is music' before the performance and also try to explain why music is valued in our culture. But if the programme of the concert had included John Cage's *4"33*, which consists of 4 minutes and 33 seconds of silence, the only audible sounds being those produced by the audience (coughing, sneezing, and possibly laughing), and one of La Monte Young's *Compositions 1960*, which consists of one chord – a diminished fifth – played for 45 minutes, then the phrase 'this is music' could be used either to inform the incredulous about the art status of these pieces, or the intent of the remark might be ironical. Or, consider the avant-garde composer Mauricio Kagel's piece *Unter Strom*, in which three players perform on household equipment. According to one assessment the piece raises

> questions about the point of virtuosity, about the ethics of a culture based on producing waste, about whether or not there is a need and a function for music, about the overloading of western civilization with masterpieces from the past.[1]

If I ask whether this piece by Kagel is a work of art, whether it is a piece of music, and my question is answered in the spirit of the quotation, I have been shown the possible point of the piece, and if I think that point is worth making, I might accept that Kagel's piece is a work of art, but I am not forced to do so. For not all comments on and questions about the artworld are *ipso facto* artworks. We can agree that these 'anxious objects' belong to the artworld, but many phenomena that belong to the artworld are certainly not works of art: art magazines, academies of fine art, and the artists themselves belong to the artworld, but they are not works of art.

The challenge that avant-garde works present is a conceptual one. We want to understand *how* and *why* readymades, minimalist works and works of conceptual art, etc., are works of art. Harold Osborne, a defender of a rather traditionalist or 'aestheticist' conception of the nature of art, gave the following succinct formulation of the problem: '[T]his is a challenge of new kind and of a different order from what has gone before. In the past controversy was basically critical; now it is

[1] Paul Griffiths, *A Concise History of Modern Music:From Debussy to Boulez* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1978), p. 188.

conceptual'.[1] In a similar vein, but from a different theoretical standpoint, Ben Tilghman says that in front of 'anxious objects' the question 'about art [...] is a demand for an explanation of the thing as art and a plea to be shown what is relevant to an understanding and appreciation of it as art'.[2] When we ask whether a thing exhibited as art really is an artwork, we are, according to Tilghman, 'using the word in a way that is captured by neither half of the classificatory/evaluative dichotomy'.[3] Following Diffey, we might say that in this case we are using the term 'work of art' critically, and therefore to answer our question 'Is it art?' by pointing out that the object in question is called a work of art by the artworld does not solve our problem. A decision is called for, and if we accept the new object or non-object as the case may be, as a work of art, our conception of the purpose and function of art will be affected. It could be said that these decisions are sometimes made for us by the artworld, so that it does not make much sense to question the art status of things like readymades, for example.[4] But when influential critics and artists accepted them as works of art, they had to make a decision to regard them as art, and I suggest that that decision – right or wrong – was based on evaluative considerations. Not because these objects were thought to be beautiful or to have intrinsic aesthetic value, but because they were somehow significant. Nevertheless, it is not pointless to question these decisions; we must ourselves take a stand in any particular case, or as Osborne pointed out, 'the willingness to accept at least provisionally whatever is put forward clamorously enough as art, may itself be a shedding of responsibility'.[5] Osborne maintains that '[w]e must be able within limits to say: This is art but that is not. And we must give good reasons for what we say'.[6] Both conceptual and evaluative arguments are relevant in this case, and count therefore as good reasons.

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1 Harold Osborne, 'Aesthetic Implications of Conceptual Art, Happenings, Etc.', *The British Journal of Aesthetics* 20 (1980), p. 10.

2 Ben Tilghman, *But is it Art?: The Value of Art and the Temptation of Theory* (Oxford:Blackwell, 1984), p. 55.

3 Ibid.

4 See Terry J. Diffey, 'On Defining Art', in Diffey, *The Republic of Art and Other Essays*, p. 60.

5 Osborne, 'Aesthetic Implications of Conceptual Art, Happenings, Etc.', p. 10.

6 Ibid.

Part Three

Marcel Duchamp, who made, or rather christened, his first readymades, *Bicycle Wheel* and *Bottle Rack*, in 1913 and 1914 respectively, has commented on his readymades on several occasions, but his attitude is ambiguous. In an interview with Hans Richter he said that these works were not works of art; they were non-art.[1] But he also declared that

> these ready-mades became works of art as soon as he said they were [...] When he 'chose' this or that object [...] it was lifted from the limbo of unregarded objects into the living world of works of art: *looking at it made it into art*.[2]

Duchamp later criticized Pop Art and other movements for finding aesthetic qualities in his readymades, and for imitating his gesture of exhibiting readymades, whereas Duchamp himself 'threw the bottle-rack and the urinal into their faces as a challenge and now they admire them for their aesthetic beauty', as he puts it.[3] The question remains: was the point of Duchamp's readymades to criticize the artistic and aesthetic goals of his contemporaries, or did he rather attempt to make a conceptual point about art? The latter interpretation seems to be widespread. In the words of one specialist, Duchamp 'reduced the creative act to a stunningly rudimentary level: to the single, intellectual, largely random decision to name this or that object or activity "art"'.[4] This interpretation seems, however, to be wrong, at least as regards Duchamp's famous *Fountain*, the urinal signed R. Mutt, which he submitted to the exhibition of The Society of Independent Artists in New York in 1917. Duchamp was a founding member of that society, but when his *Fountain* was rejected he resigned from the Society. According to Harold Osborne Duchamp's *Fountain* 'was the perfect *reductio ad absurdum* of [the] "democratic" principle of the large, unjuried exhibi-

1 Hans Richter, *Dada* (London, 1965), p. 52.
2 Ibid., pp. 88–9.
3 Ibid., pp. 207–8.
4 Roberta Smith, 'Conceptual Art', in *Concepts of Modern Art* p. 257.

tion, to which the Society was committed'.[1] Seen in this light, the implication of Duchamp's submission of *Fountain* to the exhibition is *not*, as is often assumed, that anything can be or become a work of art.

But is *Fountain* a work of art or not? Before trying to answer this question, or rather refusing to answer it, I will review three different answers to it. In two articles in *The British Journal of Aesthetics* Paul Humble addresses himself to the problem of the art status of Duchamp's readymades. He argues that some of his readymades, such as *Fountain*, are anti-art pure and simple, which in his view implies that they do not satisfy the criteria of art, and others such as *Bicycle Wheel* are works of art, because they 'exhibit value-features whose presence in the object is *due or partly due to Duchamp*'.[2] Humble relies on two fairly traditional criteria of art, namely that the work be produced with the intention of giving aesthetic pleasure and that the features, the contemplation of which is aesthetically rewarding, are due to the artist.[3] According to Humble, then, *Fountain* is not a work of art, but not because readymades cannot be works of art.

Monroe Beardsley, whose conception of art is similar to Humble's, seems to think that no readymades can be works of art. For him 'a work of art (in the broad sense) is any perceptual or intentional object that is deliberately regarded from the aesthetic point of view',[4] and which is created with the intention that it be regarded from the aesthetic point of view. He repudiates the view that readymades are works of art in virtue of being called works of art:

> To classify them as artworks just because they are called art by those who are called artists because they make things they call art is not to classify at all, but to think in circles. Perhaps these objects deserve a special name, but not the name of art. The distinction between objects that do and those that do not en-

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[1] Harold Osborne, 'Duchamp, Marcel', in *The Oxford Companion to Twentieth-Century Art*, ed. H. Osborne (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1981), p. 167.

[2] Paul Humble, 'Duchamp's Readymades: Art and Anti-Art', *The British Journal of Aesthetics* 22 (1982), p. 58.

[3] Paul Humble, 'The Philosophical Challenge of Avant-garde Art', *The British Journal of Aesthetics* 24 (1984), p. 125.

[4] Monroe C. Beardsley, 'The Aesthetic Point of View', in *Philosophy Looks at the Arts*, 3rd. ed., ed. Joseph Margolis (Philadelphia: Temple Univ. Press, 1987), p. 13.

> ter into artistic activities by reason of their connection with the aesthetic interest is still vital to preserve, and no other word than 'art' is as suitable to mark it.[1]

Art has a specific function, according to Beardsley, an aesthetic function which readymades as well as works of minimal art and conceptual art are incapable of fulfilling. I will move on to Diffey's answer to the question: 'Are readymades works of art?' before commenting on Beardsley's statement that objects like readymades may deserve a special name, but not that of art.

Diffey does not believe that art has a specific aesthetic function, nor that works of art can be defined in terms of necessary and jointly sufficient features. His view is that something achieves the status of art by being accepted by the institutions of the art world. But in contrast to Dickie, for whom the art status of readymades is not a moot point, Diffey has some doubts about the arthood of readymades, '[R]eadymades do not have to be uncritically absorbed into the categories of art',[2] he says. In his view it is not simply a question of classifying readymades as art or as non-art, for

> If we think that readymades are not really works of art we do not mean that they are fakes or forgeries. Rather to hold that something is not really in this sense art is to maintain that something done in the name of art does not deserve or merit the status of art. To question whether, or to deny that readymades are works of art is to use the term 'art' critically.[3]

In other words, the problem is at least partly evaluative. In the end, however, Diffey comes down in favour of the view that readymades are works of art:

> I am prepared to accept that this is not a live issue [whether readymades are works of art or not] since they have in fact long since been [...] assimilated [into the categories of art]. This would be to say that as a matter of history it has been settled that readymades are works of art.[4]

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1 Beardsley, 'An Aesthetic Definition of Art', in *What is Art,* p. 25.
2 Diffey, 'On Defining Art', in Diffey, *The Republic of Art and Other Essays,* p. 61.
3 Ibid., p. 60.
4 Ibid., p. 61.

Diffey seems to want to have it both ways, and I think we can understand why. For if 'these objects deserve a special name', as Beardsley put it, what will we call them if not art? On the other hand, if we think they have very little value or no value at all as works of art, we might be inclined to deny that they are works of art. If we opt for the first alternative, we are using the term 'work of art' acquiescently; if we deny that they are works of art, we are using 'work of art' critically. I have borrowed from Cyril Barrett the idea of an acquiescent use of 'work of art', which he explains as follows:

> [O]ne is using the term *acquiescently* when one makes no special claim that a work is or is not a work of art, but simply goes with the accepted usage in so far as it can be ascertained.[1]

Accepting readymades as works of art, as Diffey does, because it has been decided as a matter of history that they are works of art, is perhaps using the term 'work of art' acquiescently. This impression is strengthened by Diffey's conclusion that '*Fountain* [...] has considerable importance [...] in the history of art but little as a work of art'.[2] Doesn't saying that *Fountain* has little value as a work of art come close to saying that it is not a work of art?

I have reviewed three different answers to the question: 'Are readymades works of art?' How should the question be answered? I don't think very much of importance depends on the answer. So let's forget about *Fountain.* One final remark: if we are writing the history of recent social science and psychology we could hardly exclude sociobiology or psychoanalysis from our account, whatever we may think of their claims to be genuinely cognitive disciplines. Likewise if we wish to write the history of recent developments in the visual arts, we cannot exclude readymades, minimal art, etc., from our story. In some minimal, acquiescent sense they have to be regarded as art. I suggest that these works have become accepted as art not because they have been called art by artists and critics, but because they have been valued in a certain way by artists and critics. Even if we call these objects 'works of art', it does not mean that we necessarily agree with the original value

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1 Cyril Barrett, 'Are Bad Works of Art "Works of Art"', in *Philosophy and the Arts*, ed. G. Vesey, Royal Institute of Philosophy Lectures 6 (London:Macmillan, 1972), p. 188.

2 Diffey, 'On Defining Art', in Diffey, *The Republic of Art and Other Essays*, p. 62.

judgements, any more than we have to think of sociobiology or psychoanalysis as the culmination of modern science although we call them 'science'. The value judgements have become ossified and have degenerated into an acquiescent use of the term 'work of art'. Taking this acquiescent use of 'work of art' as primary, as Dickie does, results in a distorted view of the history of art as well as of the modernist revolutions in art.

Nevertheless Dickies's institutional theory points, I think, in the right direction, since it views art as a social and cultural phenomenon. But the theory is mistaken, nevertheless, because it concentrates on only one aspect of art as a cultural phenomenon, its institutional setting. Moreover, the institutional theory's conception of an institution is rather shallow, and in so far as art can be viewed as an institution, art should not be defined in institutional terms.

A more fruitful approach, which views art as a social and cultural practice, can be found in the writings of Kjell S. Johannessen and Richard Shusterman. Both philosophers stress the fact that art as we know it in our culture is an historically evolved practice, which cannot be understood apart from its historical development. They also agree on the following fundamental point: even if the historical and cultural nature of art is of the essence of art, the concept of art cannot be defined in terms of necessary and sufficient properties. Johannessen argues that something is a work of art only if it is embedded in what he calls *aesthetic practice*, and he believes that 'there is a kind of intrinsic or necessary relationship between works of art and aesthetic practice'.[1] This means that '[w]hat we call works of art cannot exist without being *understood* as works of art', which implies that '[w]orks of art must be *talked about* in a certain way in order to achieve the status of a work of art'.[2] Works of art can be talked about in many different ways, but I believe that the question of the value and importance of a work of art arises in all our dealings with art and that to *evaluate* art is a fundamental way of talking about art. The concept of art remains essentially con-

[1] Kjell S. Johannessen, *Kunst, språk og estetisk praksis* [Art, Language, and Aesthetic Practice] (Bergen:Department of Philosophy, 1984), p. 34; my translation.
[2] Ibid., p. 38.

tested because,[1] as Shusterman says, '[the] internal reasons, standards, and goods [of the history of the practice of art] are not rigidly defined, a practice involves a temporally extended debate over their interpretation and relative validity'.[2] If questions about the value of a work of art cannot be avoided, and if the concept of art is basically an evaluative concept, the situation Shusterman describes is exactly what we should expect.

I have indicated several times that I think that the concept of art is evaluative in some sense. It is now time to explore this idea in some detail. Let me begin by recording my agreement with Anita Silvers' view that '"Art" in the evaluative sense [is] commonly employed to support applications of "art" in the classificatory sense'.[3] I also agree with her claim that

> we typically justify our classificatory use of 'art' by arguing that, according to the newly formulated theory, the object, odd as it may be, can be shown to posses aesthetic value and therefore should be honored by being called 'art'. This is the process through which new art schools or art styles or art masters typically are acknowledged.[4]

In contrast to Silvers I would prefer to speak of artistic value here instead of aesthetic value, because artistic value is a broader category which can include aesthetic value. Silvers' claim can be substantiated with examples from art history. The fact that Duchamp's *Fountain* was rejected by his fellow-artists, and not by some conservative and uncomprehending jury, gives us a clue about the evaluative nature of the decisions that are made about the art status of new, purported works of art. When innovative works, which herald new developments in painting appear on the scene, the sternest critics are often found among the fellow-artists of the painter who broke with the accepted artistic ideals and

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1 The idea of an essentially contested concept was first developed by W.B. Gallie in his articles 'Essentially Contested Concepts', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 56 (1956), pp. 167–198 and in 'Art as an Essentially Contested Concept', *The Philosophical Quarterly* 23 (1956), pp. 97–114.

2 Richard Shusterman, *Pragmatist Aesthetics: Living Beauty, Rethinking Art* (Oxford:Blackwell, 1992), p. 42.

3 Anita Silvers, 'The Artworld Discarded', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 34 (1976), p. 444.

4 Ibid.

styles. Courbet and, later, the impressionists were kept out of the salons by other painters, and Paul Signac, the neo-impressionist painter who at the time was vice-president of the Salon des Indépendants, tried to keep Matisse's *Joy of Life* (1906) out of that years's the exhibition, because he thought that 'Matisse [...] had gone to the dogs' because he had painted 'some strange characters with a line as thick as your thumb', as he put it.[1] Matisse himself reacted in a similar way a year later when Picasso's *Demoiselles d'Avignon* (1907) was exhibited. Picasso's picture was outrageous and a hoax, Matisse thought. These are not isolated cases, but illustrate, if we are to believe Leo Steinberg, the rule.[2] Steinberg's explanation of this phenomenon is worth quoting:

> Contemporary art is constantly inviting us to applaud the destruction of values which we cherish, while the positive cause, for the sake of which the sacrifices are made, is rarely made clear. So that the sacrifices appear as acts of demolition, or of dismantling, without any motive – just as Courbet's work appeared to Baudelaire to be simply a revolutionary gesture for its own sake.[3]

If artists don't nowadays get as upset as they used to and appear to be more tolerant, the reason might in fact be that radically new and outrageous works cannot be created any more. What has happened is what Steinberg calls 'the [...] domestication of the outrageous', which he regards as 'the most characteristic feature of our artistic life'.[4]

If anything or almost anything can be art, and is accepted as art without argument, and if everybody starts using the term 'work of art' only in a classificatory, descriptive sense, which is akin to the acquiescent use, questions about the value and the point of art would appear to be definitely outmoded. I have said that we should not worry too much about the question 'But is it Art?' What we should worry about are the reasons given, if any, for the judgement that something is a work of art, because these arguments will characteristically appeal to

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1 Quoted from Leo Steinberg, 'Contemporary Art and the Plight of its Public', (1962), in L. Steinberg, *Other Criteria:Confrontations with Twentieth-Century Art* (New York:Oxford Univ. Press, 1972), pp. 3–4.

2 Ibid., p. 4.

3 Ibid., p. 10.

4 Ibid., p. 5.

values and norms, and thus will reveal an underlying conception of art. As long as we are interested in art, questions about the significance and value of art remain relevant. Paradoxically, the question whether something is art or not seems to me to be secondary.