The End of Art Theory

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> "In aesthetics . . . one can argue more and better than in any other subject."
>
> —Anatole France[1]

A Mildly Polemical Preface

It needs finally to be said, in paraphrase and in extension of Hegel, that *art theory on the side of its highest possibilities is a thing of the past*. How did this come about? How did art theory come to its demise?

Things die off in various ways: they wear out, they dissipate into triviality, they self-destruct, they no longer have any *raison d'être*. Postmortem analysis of art theory will reveal that at the turn of the millennium it has succumbed to all four of these.

Hegel's premature obituary concerns *art*, of course, and not art *theory*.[2] The precise and complete quote reads:

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[1] "The Unsubstantiality of Aesthetics" from "Preface" to *Life and Letters,* trans. Bernard Miall (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1924), reprinted in *Literary Criticism, Pope to Croce,* ed. Gay Allen and Harry Clark (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1962), 582.

[2] Or "aesthetics," or "philosophy of art," or "philosophy of fine art"—all of which terms Hegel uses with equanimity—though he seems to prefer the first for its precision. See *Hegel's Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, trans by T. M. Knox (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), 1—hereinafter cited as Hegel/Knox. An alternative translation of the "Introduction" of this work by F. P. B. Osmaston (to be found in *Philosophies of Art and Beauty,* eds. Albert Hofstadter and Richard Kuhns (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964) is sometimes to be preferred and will be cited as Hegel/Osmaston.

> Art no longer affords that satisfaction of spiritual needs which earlier ages and nations sought in it, and found in it. . . . Consequently the conditions of our present time are not favorable to art. . . . In all these respects art, considered in its highest vocation, is and remains for us a thing of the past. Thereby it has lost for us genuine truth and life, and has rather been transferred into our *ideas* instead of maintaining its earlier necessity in reality and occupying its higher place.[3]

Hegel: Art "has lost for us genuine truth and life, and has rather been transferred into our ideas.*"*

As to the manner and cause of art's end, Hegel adds: "it is precisely at this its highest stage that art terminates, by transcending itself; it is just here that it deserts the medium of harmonious presentation of mind in sensuous shape and passes from the poetry of imaginative ideas to the prose of thought."[4] In the present age Hegel claims that "the form of art has ceased to be the supreme need of the spirit,"[5] because art as a vehicle of the evolution of Spirit is now no longer competent to bear its load, that this task is now the burden and right of pure thought, of philosophy (indeed, of Hegel).

Hegel was wrong about the art of his own "now" (roughly the 1820s when he composed his lectures on art which were posthumously published after his death in 1831). We all know (or well believe) that art—even great art, on the side of its highest possibilities—was being produced then and has been produced since. But perhaps it was just his timing that was off. Thus, while his obituary for art may have been premature, that error does not entail that in principle the basic assumption on which it rests, namely that of its possibility, is false. Surely it is possible that at *some* time art might die.

In fact, I think he may have been right on two counts—(1) that art can demise, on the side of its highest possibilities (after all, other modes of human endeavor have disappeared), and (2) that *upon and through* its death, art is destined to be transformed or subsumed (*aufgehoben*) into philosophy. Historically, I would argue further (but not here) that art's time probably came several decades ago. What I do intend to show, however, is that art *theory's* time has now arrived.

Arthur Danto and his followers and critics have made much of

[3] Hegel/Knox, 10-11. The Osmaston translation has "highest possibilites," while Bernard Bosanquet's translation has "highest destiny."

[4] Hegel/Osmaston, 444; in Hegel/Knox at "Introduction" 8,iii,c,γ, p. 89.

[5] Hegel/Knox, 103.

some of the foregoing—that art might be dead and that it has been (to use Danto's term) "philosophically disenfranchised."[6] The implication is that philosophy has overtaken (more properly "taken over") art, in the same fashion as a greater power subsumes a weaker. Danto also, like Hegel, seems to think that the disenfranchisement (if not quite a *necessary* event) is a good thing—for art and for philosophy.

While I would agree that philosophy has supplanted art, I would view the process in the other direction and reach a different appraisal. It is, rather, that philosophy has been artistically co-opted, that art has (perhaps from the ennui of exhaustion, perhaps in a crisis of despair, perhaps as an emetic from constipation) attempted to transform itself into philosophy, which has become the mere handmaiden (or the "evil confidante with bad advice") of art. And I think, further, that this transformation, or transubstantiation, is *not* a good thing—neither for art nor for philosophy.

Lamenting the demise by transformation of the great art of the past, Nietzsche made a similar point in the 1880s in *The Will to Power*:

> No one is simply a painter; all are archeologists, psychologists theatrical producers of this or that recollection or theory. They enjoy our erudition, our philosophy. Like us, they are full and overfull of general ideas. They like a form, not for the sake of what it is, but for the sake of what it expresses. They are the sons of a scholarly, tormented, and reflective generation—a thousand miles removed from the old masters, who did not read and only thought of feasting their eyes.[7]

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[6] See Arthur C. Danto, "The End of Art," in *The Death of Art*, ed. Berel Lang (New York: Haven Publishing, 1984); Arthur Danto, "Art After the End of Art," in *Embodied Meanings* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1994); Arthur C. Danto, *The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986); Arthur C. Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981); *Philosophizing Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999); and *Beyond the Brillo Box* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1992). In the above list I am referring only to the basic or original statements of these authors. Of course the literature in the past twenty years regarding these theories has been immense. The most recent attempts by Dickie to defend himself (and, implicitly, Danto) from some of the criticisms I shall point out below, such as circularity and vacuousness on the one hand and inherent crypto-evaluation on the other (see *The British Journal of Aesthetics* 38:2 [1998], 39:3 [1999] and 40:2 [2000], respectively), I do not find convincing simply because they lead along different routes to the same impasses.

[7] Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. W. Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Random House, 1967), 437.

One might say of Nietzsche the same as was said of Hegel—that his timing was off. But his point was sound.

Of course—to be polemical—the fundamental problem with contemporary art theory, the cause of its demise, has been brought on by its subject matter, by contemporary art. Having stretched itself to its limits in every direction—from being a mere sensuous medium to mere disembodied thought—art of the last several decades became everything and nothing. And died:—on the side of its highest possibilities, of course. Art theory, in consequence, trying to swallow this whole realm of being and nothing, simply expired by engorgement (or by starvation, depending on one's viewpoint).

Art of recent decades became everything and nothing.

But having had my polemical moment, I do not wish in what follows to address the issue of the death of art *per se*—nor whether the actual event occurred (or the onset of the disease began) with Duchamp's Dadaist "ready-mades" such as "Bicycle Wheel" and "Fountain," or with Kandinsky's Nonobjective Expressionism (both of which emerged during World War I), or with Pop Artists such as Warhol and Ed Ruscha in the 1960s, or with Conceptualism and various forms of Ideological Art (where the idea or message, even a written text, becomes the art object) in the 1970s. My concern is with the death of art *theory*. I intend to show *that* contemporary art theory is at an end and *why* that is so.

The Context and Scope of the Argument

I do not want here to discuss the death of art. I do wish to discuss the death of art theory. But is it merely a happy coincidence that Danto's preoccupation with "the death of art" has led him to propose the "artworld theory" of art and that this has spawned such successors as George Dickie's "institutional theory of art" which are the paradigms of art theory at the end of its time? The reader may let this question pass for the moment as a rhetorical one, for we need to consider what is meant by "art theory at the turn of the millennium," which I am claiming is at its end.

Unlike science, philosophy has never spoken in the collective voice of consensus that would allow it to talk about *the* philosophic view of reality in the late nineteenth century, for example—or about *the* philosophic view of anything at any time, for that matter—as one *could* speak of a similar view in physics. There is

no equivalent in philosophy of "the quantum theory" in physics. Hardly surprising, then, that one cannot really speak of "art theory at the turn of the millennium" and expect this to denote anything so neat as *a single* theory accepted as true by the vast majority of philosophers. From this basic fact regarding the nature of the philosophic enterprise and the status of theories in philosophy, one could not reasonably argue for the death of *the* current philosophic "theory of such-and-such."

There are many contemporary prominent philosophers of art and they do in fact espouse a variety of philosophical positions. Among current important philosophers of art who defend theories evidently *different from* the one(s) I shall discuss here are Margolis, Walton, Scruton, Goodman, Wollheim, Carroll, Stecker, Levinson, and Arnheim, to mention only major ones. There are others. Nevertheless—and one does not have to be a Hegelian to believe it—there are some philosophers who are so influential in their time that they may be said to speak for their time. Such a philosopher was Hegel in his time, as was Kant in the generation before him. So—at least in the realm of art theory—is Danto in our time.

Thus, while I am aware that I cannot completely make my case for "the death of art theory" in general without taking *all* these different theories into account and showing their separate failures (and the necessity of their individual failures) or by showing that they are really the same theory—and such an endeavor would indeed take a lengthy book rather than this short article—by setting forth the failure of *the* preeminent theory (and its simulacra and progeny), the failure of art theory at the end of the millennium may be epitomized and a path cleared for the eventual demonstration of the collapse of all art theory.[8] That is why taking Danto's theory as *the* contemporary art theory *nonpareil* and as paradigmatic for much contemporary theorizing about art by others and then showing its failure *as* art theory is important for all those who concern themselves with these matters.

[8] In fact it is my belief that the theories of all those philosophers I have just named have *also* failed and that they have failed and must necessarily fail for reasons quite similar to the ones I offer here for the *necessary* failure of what I call "D-theory":—namely, as I argue in the last three pages of this article, that contemporary art, given what it in fact is, cannot have a theory. To demonstrate *how* this is so for *all* other contemporary art theories is beyond my current scope.

That Danto's "artworld" theory and Dickie's "institutional" theory (which is more or less its derivative)[9] are themselves different theories it is true. Their overarching similarity has hardly gone unnoticed, however, even by their authors.[10] And this similarity rests on the same essential claim—that art works are entitled to that name not in terms of any particular intrinsic properties they possess nor in virtue of unique consequences they occasion in experiencers but rather because of a contextual certification of some sort—in Danto a historico-theoretical context called the "artworld" and in Dickie a set of persons comprising the "institution." This point is too well known to most readers to need argument at this juncture and I will take it as given.

For Danto and Dickie, art is not defined in terms of intrinsic qualities or effects.

But one may specify their apparent connection more precisely than similarity or historical derivation. To be exact, Dickie's theory seems to be a more inclusive or generalized case of Danto's, since Danto makes "art" dependent upon a restricted set of factors (namely, a certificative context circumscribed by historico-theoretical parameters called the "artworld") whereas Dickie's certificative context (namely, assertions by certain persons called the "institution") turns out finally (as I will argue) to be unlimited. However, as I shall show, precisely because Danto's theory cannot maintain its own self-imposed restrictions on context without either circularity, triviality or arbitrary fiat, the Danto theory necessarily becomes, in the end, the Dickie theory. For these reasons I will refer to Danto's theory (or set of related theories) and Dickie's theory (in its various versions and guises) collectively as the Danto/Dickie theory—or simply D-theory, for short—and regard it as the paradigmatic contemporary theory of art in terms of its (or their) currency and wide acceptance.

D-theory the paradigmatic contemporary theory of art.

[9] The relevant articles are Arthur Danto, "The Artworld," and George Dickie, "What Is Art? An Institutional Analysis," both reprinted in *The Philosophy of the Visual Arts,* ed. Philip Alperson (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 426-33 and 434-44 respectively. Also see Danto's "Art Works and Real Things" in *Theoria*, 1973; and Dickie's later attempt (I think unsuccessful) to respond to some criticisms in *The Art Circle* (New York, 1984).

[10] Dickie remarks in "What is Art?" (endnote 9) that Danto does not himself develop an institutional account but that based on Danto's remarks in "Art Works and Real Things" both theories are versions of a common "ascriptivity theory" (p. 443). Danto apparently agreed, since he used the same term,"ascriptive," to describe the word "artwork." See "Art Works and Real Things," 247. That, most recently, in the light of much telling criticism, Danto apparently thinks his theory is not similar to Dickie's after all, strikes me as a bit disingenuous.

And if this is so, and if D-theory does indeed represent "art theory at the turn of the millennium," then the several errors of Dickie and Danto's theories (some unique only to one, mostly shared) would indicate a momentous collapse in contemporary art theory. I do not claim to be the first to criticize this theory, or "these theories," nor do I expect to be the last; but I will draw out the consequences that others have noted and propose fresh criticisms of my own. Thus, even if it should be claimed that these theories have *already* died, one may view the following sections as an autopsy together with the placement of some final stakes at crucial loci to prevent their possible resurrection. I will show that these theories fail and that they do so irremediably and necessarily, that they do not and cannot provide what any art theory must, and that, in consequence, art theory, on the side of its highest possibilities, is for us a thing of the past.

Dickie's D-Theory

Dickie's argument may be briefly outlined as follows. He claims that art must be defined in terms of non-perceptual relational properties, heretofore unnoticed except, perhaps, by Danto, though not sufficiently developed by him. After the failure of the expressionist theory of art, which had replaced the imitation theory of art, Dickie says, there arose the view (propounded by Morris Weitz) of the impossibility of any complete definition of art (i.e., in terms of its necessary and sufficient conditions).[11] Dickie says he wants to deny this radical view of Weitz's regarding the indefinability of art. He wishes to maintain that art is definable in its "primary or classificatory sense" (which he says should not be confused with its "evaluative" sense) in terms of two "relational properties" neither of which is an "exhibited property" (which I take to mean not a property which may be *perceived in* the object, but rather one that is *conceived of* the object).

The first of these non-exhibited properties is "artifactuality" and this "is a necessary condition (call it the genus) of the primary sense of art." But this alone is not a sufficient condition for art, he

[11] This, as Dickie remarks, was due to the rising prominence of Wittgenstein's critique of definitions. I suspect that it had just as much to do with the fact that art itself began to adopt the view that it represented nothing at all—neither imitated nor expressed.

says, and therefore he proposes a second and "necessary" condition. Dickie does not say here whether this second property is alone *sufficient* for art; but given that artifactuality has just been called a necessary condition and has also been called the "genus" (and one would assume that without the "genus" of artifact there could be no place for the "species" of art artifact), presumably this second non-exhibited relational property alone must be *in*sufficient. Thus, both are necessary conditions and neither is sufficient alone. This second non-exhibited property is "art-status" that is institutionally conferred. (The obvious benefit of such a definition is that it allows for such heretofore historically puzzling art works—such as Duchamp's "Fountain," which prior to Duchamp's acquisition and installation was simply a urinal—to be justified *as art*, along with all the even more difficult cases of most contemporary art.) Through a combination of these two properties he contrives a definition of art:

For Dickie, art defined by presence of two non-exhibited properties.

> 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).[12]

The syntactical contortions of the definition alone should give one pause. But let us look at specifics.

Dickie claims to have produced here an account of art that classifies without evaluating. But this is hardly the case. First, Dickie himself explicitly and illicitly interjects comments of an evaluative sort into his exposition of his definition; and, second, the definition itself contains terms that are covertly evaluative.[13]

Dickie claims his definition of art classifies without evaluating.

Consider first the occasions where Dickie refers to Duchamp and Walter de Maria. In reference to the former's "Fountain," he comments, even if such "'ready-mades' may not be *worth much* [my italics]" as art,[14] they are useful to art theory. If this is not an evaluative comment—"not worth much"—on a work of art, I do not know what would be. Surely "Fountain" satisfies the definitional conditions of artifactuality and institutionally conferred status. Indeed, it is the archetype or prototype for Dickie's theory.

[12] Dickie, "What Is Art?" 438.

[13] By "evaluative" I assume he means a definition that includes in the *definiens* at least one term that either is or implies a normative concept.

[14] "What Is Art?" 438. As opposed to art *theory*, that is, where they are worth a great deal.

Since there is no basis in the definition for such an evaluative categorization—"not worth much"—one wonders where it originates. Surely it must be from some covert understanding of what art is and ought to be such that "Fountain" does not quite *live up to* being "art" despite its satisfaction of Dickie's definition and its apparent usefulness for illustrating an art theory. This is peculiar.

Consider next Dickie's comment on Walter de Maria's "Bar." This object is displayed with a certificate that certifies "Bar" as an artwork such that "Bar" is only art when the certificate is present. After describing these conditions, Dickie comments that the work is "no doubt a burlesque."[15] To burlesque is to parody with a ludicrous image, to demean or mock; and, while calling a thing a "burlesque" may only be to describe (classify) it, the context of the remark suggests clearly that Dickie thinks it is not *really* art but *only* a burlesque. Moreover, as a *merely* classificatory description it would be a nonsensical remark for Dickie to make, vitiating the intent of his definition, since "Bar" clearly and precisely satisfies it in the most straightforward classificatory way. If anything, "Bar" is an artistic exemplification and certification of Dickie's own theory as much as it is of itself. On the other hand, as the covert evaluation it really is (whether or not it was intended to be), one may rightly ask, of what could "Bar" be a burlesque—except, before its time, Dickie's own theory?[16]

Evaluation implicit in Dickie's definition.

Note that my objection here is not that classification is in fact impossible without at least implicit evaluation (though in fact I think this is so in the case of art objects), but rather that Dickie, having denied this, in fact engages in evaluatively conditioned classification. And this occurs even in his definition.

The terms "status" and "appreciation" there seem to me loaded with implicit evaluation since they connote a worthiness for inclusion in a classification, a merit earned by things that exhibit certain properties. In his attempted rebuff of Ted Cohen's critique, Dickie admits as much when he says "every work of art must have some minimal potential value of worthiness."[17] This can only be

[15] "What Is Art?"439

[16] Perhaps one should not criticize a philosopher too harshly for not seeing all the implications of his own examples, for mis-exemplifying his theory, or, more precisely, for inadvertently mischaracterizing his own examples. But it is unsettling to find such easy examples of a theory's own disconfirmation provided by the theory's author.

[17] "What Is Art?" 440.

taken in context as referring to valuable qualities *of* the object. And presumably these "potential values of worthiness" must be expected to be perceived *in* the object, otherwise Dickie would have to be saying that the eventual appreciation of an object's worthiness leading to its artistic status is based in turn upon a non-perceptual property—*viz.*, is the consequence of the eventual appreciation of the object's being eventually appreciated. Or, bluntly, what will cause us to certify art status is the certification of art status, and this in no way captures the meaning of "appreciation." But this runs counter to his express proposal, both by introducing valuation and by referencing at least potentially exhibited properties. Dickie seems to recognize this difficulty and tries to obviate it at two points. The first time, he tries a triple distancing maneuver. He claims that the object need only be a *candidate* for *possible* appreciation by some person in the *future*—not actually appreciated by any particular person now—because, he says, "this would build in evaluation." But that does not deflect but only delays the inevitable. At some point—the point where art status is in fact conferred—evaluation must be made; and at that point and for that very reason evaluation is built into classification. His second implicit admission of evaluation appears in his account of "appreciation," which, he says, occurs when in "experiencing the qualities of a thing one finds them worthy or valuable."[18] Presumably Dickie does not mean that one is experiencing non-exhibited properties such as the institutional award process itself or the artifactualization procedure, but rather some objective qualities that the thing actually exhibits. So, in addition to evaluation as a precondition for classification, we also find exhibited qualities affirmed as a precondition for appreciation (evaluation).[19]

Evaluation built into classification.

What does the first part of my criticism of Dickie's inability to avoid considerations either of evaluation or of exhibited properties tell us about the theory? (1) That it is not purely classificatory. (2) That as a theory of art it is either insufficient or inconsistent since it appeals ultimately in theory (the statement of the definition) and in fact (by Dickie's own usages) to unspecified qualities

[18] *Ibid.*

[19] Robert Stecker has also noted the confusions of classification and evaluation in Dickie's argument. Robert Stecker, "The End of an Institutional Definition of Art," *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 26, no.2 (Spring 1986), 124-32; hereinafter cited as Stecker.

of the object that must be experienced and appreciated (evaluated) so as to entitle it to art status. (3) That, as he defends it, Dickie offers sufficient evidence that he does not believe his own theory.

Yet the final failings of Dickie's theory concern its circularity; and this, in turn, stems from the ultimate superfluousness of the "artifactuality" condition.

Criterion of artifactuality superfluous.

In discussing the thorny issue of whether a piece of driftwood can be art, one would expect Dickie to answer in the negative, for it fails to meet his first necessary condition, "artifactuality." Dickie apparently does not want to draw this conclusion. Thus, he says: "Natural objects which become works of art in the classificatory sense are artifactualized without the use of tools—artifactuality is conferred on the object rather than worked on it."[20] The reader's confusion is anticipated, so he adds: "Many may find the notion of artifactuality being conferred rather than 'worked' on an object too strange to accept." Indeed. It is strange, but I suppose one could come to accept it. The real problem, however, then becomes—why did Dickie introduce the criterion in the first place? If artifactuality is a property that can be conferred on natural and other non-manmade objects by the social institution of the artworld, then it is, contrary to Dickie's original claim, no real "genus" and not a necessary property of art objects at all. The criterion is rendered superfluous since it collapses into the only remaining necessary and sufficient condition, namely, the social institution conferring art status.

Status of art conferred only by the "artworld."

This tells us that any object whatsoever may be an art object—if and only if its status as such is (or could be) conferred by the social institution, the artworld. And no amount of further restriction to this status is permitted by the theory. Yet Dickie seems not to recognize this consequence. Thus Dickie, following Danto, claims that fakes could not be art, that they could not achieve this status. Yet why not; there is nothing in Dickie's definition requiring "originality"? (What kind of "originality" does a piece of driftwood have? Would a "fake" piece of driftwood be excluded?) One could install Van Meegeren's fake Vermeers in an art gallery in an exhibit called "Fakes as Art" and this act could constitute the conferring of art status upon them. Dickie seems to think this would be acceptable so long as they do not bear Vermeer's signature. Yet

[20] "What Is Art?" 441.

one cannot see why. Not only could this be possible, but one could even imagine these fakes being conferred the status of art *precisely because* these fake works bore Vermeer's false signature—they were *genuine fakes* that could not really be "fakes" without the false signature and consequently could not be exhibited in a show called "Fakes As Art." (Naturally one could pursue this further:—one could mount an exhibit of fake "fakes," for example, and these would be fake because they fail to have van Meegran's false Vermeer signature or perhaps because they were really genuine signed Vermeers.) Thus, again, nothing can in principle be excluded from the classification of art if status is simply conferred by the social institution called the artworld.

In practice, "artworld" can be a single person.

Everything, then, seems to depend upon the social institution called the "artworld," and this term will shortly bring us to Danto. But first let us consider its further consequences in Dickie's theory. The "social institution," Dickie admits, can be constituted by (or in other words, the artworld can be represented or "acted on behalf of" by) a single individual and this may even be a not yet existent individual. What appeared at first reasonable as a contextual relativization of the concept "art" to a cultural milieu of shared meanings, which would allow for a cultural diversity in what could count as art, now appears far less reasonable when it takes the form of a radical relativization to just anyone (even a hypothetical or eventual anyone). But, Dickie would retort, as the definition requires, it must be someone who acts on behalf of the "artworld." But what constitutes "acting on behalf of" except the claim by an individual to be doing so (or the claim of some other individual that he or she is doing so justly)? And what, after all, is the "artworld"?

"Artworld" is the covert reference for the "social institution" that confers art status, for, without naming *which* social institution, Dickie's definition would allow, say, such social institutions as the penal system or professional sports to confer art status.[21] But if "artworld" itself cannot be specified without reference to "art,"

[21] Among other objections to Dickie's theory, Stephen Davis notes that, not only is the relevant nature of the institution left unspecified, but Dickie's account or usage of the term "institution" fails in most important respects to capture its actual meaning. For example, social "institutions" have histories, they have hierarchies of individuals, and the like; but these do not play any role in Dickie's account, where all members are equal and can act alone and at any time to represent "the institution."

"Artifactuality" reduced to a conferral by the artworld.

then the definition is circular. The one independent term that might have helped is "artifactuality"; but, as we have seen, that has now itself been reduced to a conferral by the artworld. Robert Stecker has already noted some of the problems Dickie has in dealing with these questions, specifically the circularity and consequent lack of informativeness of Dickie's definition and his entire argument.[22] As Stecker points out, by claiming now that he offers no definition, but only an "essential framework," Dickie has not escaped from his dilemma, because either this means that there is no definition of art (and Weitz was correct) or that, insofar as it is informative at all, it does not enable us to make the crucial distinction between artifact and art, that in Dickie's "definition" or "framework" one cannot escape reference to (or the implication of) "artistic intentions," and that for these reasons his theory remains circular and essentially uninformative.

While I agree with the Stecker's net appraisal, I think the situation with Dickie's theory is much worse than Stecker allows. From what I have shown above, it is not merely the case that Dickie's theory cannot distinguish between art and artifact, it cannot distinguish between art and any object whatsoever. Consequently, while Stecker allows that artworld certification is a necessary condition for *some* objects being artworks, but not a sufficient condition for an object to be art and not a necessary condition for some works,[23] I think it is clear that Dickie's theory provides neither a necessary nor sufficient condition for art in any significant sense. This is what I meant when I said in the beginning that Dickie's certificative context for art status is unlimited, all-inclusive. In the end, since everything and anything is (or is potentially) art for someone, then nothing is (or is potentially) art for someone, for nothing has been said by saying of anything it either is or is not art.

Since some of these same dilemmas reappear in Danto, whose work was, after all, the inspiration for Dickie's Institutional Theory, let us now turn to Danto.

Danto's D-Theory

Certainly it needs to be said that Danto highlights two impor-

[22] See passage referenced in note 20 above.

[23] "It is hard to see that a conclusion about the necessity of such a framework for all art follows. All that follows is that certain things would not be works of art if they had not come into existence inside this framework." Stecker, 131.

tant points about art. First, that when looking at an artwork there is far more present in the experience than what is merely seen with the eyes, that *seeing as* is made possible by what is not seen and that this fact is often not even noticed. Nelson Goodman makes the same point, citing Gombrich, in asserting: "there is no innocent eye. The eye comes always ancient to its work, obsessed by its own past and by old and new insinuations."[24] Indeed, the various extrapolations on this issue as negotiated by various contemporary philosophers constitute probably one of the most insightful and fruitful developments of twentieth-century art theory. The second insight is that in those instances in which we encounter something that we do not recognize as art, we can possibly come to discover or recognize such a thing *as* art by referencing an art history or art theory we had not previously countenanced. These claims are, I think, indisputable. They do in fact hint at fruitful paths one might tread in pursuit of solutions to the problems with which contemporary art confronts contemporary art theory. These claims do not constitute an art theory, however. Danto tries to derive a theory—the Artworld Theory—from them. The theory fails.

As noted, Dickie's inspiration for the Institutional Definition was Danto's landmark article, "The Artworld." It is not surprising, then, that we will find similar irremediable difficulties—namely, those stemming from the use of the term "art" in compound terms introduced ("art-institution," "artworld," "art-relevant") to define the category "art," the inability to specify what "representing" an institution or world requires, and the consequent circularity and vacuity of the definition. While it may appear that the essential difference between Danto and the Institutional theory is that Danto thinks there is a need to use art theory and art history *in order to confer* art status (whereas the Institutional Theory does not) and therefore appears to be a more restrictive theory, in fact this turns out to be an irrelevant restriction/criterion, because (if for no other reason) it is self-negating.

While Danto is justly famous for his seminal "Artworld" piece, he has sometimes suggested that his "artworld theory" is not actually a *theory*; and his latest book, *After the End of Art: The Pale of*

[24] Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art*, 2d ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1976), 4-5. I should note that to assert that there is no "innocent eye" does not necessarily imply—though it is often mistakenly thought to imply—that there are no such things as objective aesthetic properties.

History, as Noel Carroll has recently pointed out, peculiarly does not make use of the artworld theory (suggesting perhaps that Danto himself has now come to abandon it).[25] Nevertheless, *not* to treat it as a theory, indeed, as *the* theory for which Danto's entire *oeuvre* is most noted, would be disingenuous.

Danto unable to distinguish between ordinary things and art objects.

But just so that we may dismiss the possibility that Danto has (or can have at any point) a coherent theory of art that does *not* include the "artworld" concept and by way of introducing certain problematics that recur later in our argument, let us look briefly at Carroll's analysis of the consequences of supposing "artworld" no longer a condition of art-status for Danto. Carroll notes that *After the End of Art* provides only two conditions for art—"aboutness" (a referential or denotative characteristic) and "meaning-embodiment" (what appears to be an expressive or connotative quality of what usually constitutes their form). These, Carroll says, are the "two necessary conditions for art status, and [Danto] makes no claim for joint sufficiency."[26] In abandoning (or ignoring) his former condition of "artworld certification," however, Danto's theory is unable (as Carroll shows) to distinguish between ordinary things and art objects. (A sportscar is about and embodies speed, for example, in all the relevant senses.) As Carroll puts it: "Danto's new definition of art fails to supply the philosophical wherewithal to differentiate a lowly Brillo box from one of Warhol's, thereby failing to answer what Danto himself believes is the central question of the philosophy of art. . . . [W]ithout the requirement of artworld theories and narratives, his position becomes overly inclusive. Indeed, it fails what Danto has identified as the central task of a philosophy of art—differentiating real things from artworks that are perceptually indiscernable from them." And he goes on to remark, "if indiscernables are not required to answer the question of the nature of art, then the philosophical history of art that Danto propounds would appear to evaporate. . . . Furthermore . . . if Danto drops essential reference to art theories from his account, one wonders how he hopes to generate a philosophical history of art. In Danto's earlier writings,

[25] Arthur Danto, *After the End of Art* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1997), and Noel Carroll, "Danto's New Definition of Art the Problem of Art Theories," in *The British Journal of Aesthetics,* Vol. 37, no. 4 (October 1997), 386-91; hereinafter cited as Carroll.

[26] Carroll, 387.

it seems to me that whatever necessity attached to Danto's theory of art was there because of the dialectical relationships that obtained between the historically existing theories of art that motivated stages in art history. . . . It is difficult, then, to see how Danto hopes to generate a philosophical theory of art if he eschews references to art theories as a requirement for art status."[27]

Thus, if it is indeed true that Danto has abandoned, for whatever reason, his "artworld" theory, then he has no theory at all. Certainly he has no theory that can explain and define what an artwork *is* (or, as he puts it, that can explain "the *is* of artistic identity"). It is simply necessary to retain the "artworld" concept and Danto's usages of art history and art theory as parts of his own theory or Danto will not have an art theory. If these components cannot be eliminated, let us see the consequences of retaining them, of staying with the original "Artworld" theory. And, if these consequences are indeed unacceptable, as I think they are, and if, as I intend to show, they in fact lead to the same impasse, then, while one may understand why Danto may have abandoned these notions, he cannot have it both ways. Really, he can't have it either way.

Danto proposes a theory of art.

Does Danto's "The Artworld" propose a theory of art? Surely it seems to do so. Its central claim is that in order to recognize something *as an artwork* we must do so (and we have always done so) in the context of some implicit theory of art (whether or not we realize this fact and even if we understand "theory" to mean nothing more than "seeing as"). As Danto puts it, "It is the role of artistic theories, these days as always, to make the artworld, and art, possible"; "to see something as art requires something the eye cannot descry—an atmosphere of artistic theory, a knowledge of the history of art: an artworld."[28] While I think this is true in some minimal sense, I think it is false in the maximal sense in which Danto construes it and especially in the implications he draws from it. It isn't saying much to say we see things *as*. And certainly it does not provide us with the necessary and sufficient conditions for a definition of art. But Danto tries to derive these from it.

The concluding section of Danto's article presents his main argument. This is provided by use of the term "art-relevant predicate." All artworks must have art-relevant predicates. This is what it means (what it boils down to) to be seen *as* art in the context of

[27] *Ibid*., 390.

[28] "The Artworld," 431.

an *artworld*. Thus, for example, representational expressionistic (e.g., Fauvism); representational non-expressionistic (Ingres), non-representational expressionistic (abstract expressionism), and non-representational non-expressionist (hard-edge abstraction)[29] are usages of these art-relevant predicates in both their attributive and negative forms.

For Danto, having art-relevant predicates necessary and sufficient condition for art.

Should we construe Danto as providing here the necessary and sufficient conditions for artwork status? I think that is his intention. Danto states, "a necessary condition for an object to be of a kind K [artwork] is that at least one pair of K[artwork]-relevant opposites be sensibly applicable to it." Surely, given the above citations, Danto thinks the presence of at least one art-relevant predicate is a necessary condition for an artwork being seen as an artwork. But he also speaks in such as way as to clearly imply that this is also a sufficient condition. Speaking of Warhol, he remarks: "What in the end makes the difference between a Brillo box and a work of art consisting of a Brillo box is a certain theory of art. It is the theory that takes it up into the world of art, and keeps it from collapsing into the real object."[30] Again, he speaks of "whatever is the artistically-relevant predicate in virtue of which they [artworks] gain their entry [to the artworld]." In his later article, "Artworks and Real Things," he expresses the same view—that artworld conditions are the only sufficient conditions necessary to transform any ordinary object into an artwork, that the only difference between *any* "non-entrenched object" (a kind of thing that is not among the categories of real objects that inhabit our world) and a particular non-entrenched *art* object is whether there exists an artworld ready to receive it as art—i.e., "it enters at a phase of art history when the consciousness of the difference between reality and art is part of the difference between art and reality."[31] So, having art-relevant predicates apparently constitutes the necessary and sufficient condition for art status. Let us examine both claims.

"Art-relevant" is not a sufficient condition first of all because the phrase itself begs the question. In the citation given above, Danto speaks of an object's art-relevant predicates being "sensibly applicable to it." But what is meant by "sensibly relevant" is what is at issue in the first place. Surely he does not mean "per-

[29] *Ibid.*, 432.

[30] *Ibid.*, 431.

[31] "Artworks and Real Things," 246.

ceived by the senses" here, but "reasonably" or "appropriately." Yet there is no independent standard for establishing the "reasonableness" of a given predicate *per se*. "Waterproof" or "to be shot at sunrise" could in some theoretical context or against the background of some history of art be art-relevant; and indeed any predicate could be. Even if we limit our thinking about the meaning of "art relevant" to what is "normal" in talking about paintings, for example, predicates such as "is painted," "hangs on a wall" or "is framed" are not sufficient to differentiate art works from walls, nails, draperies, letters and certificates, family photos and the like.

Being "art-relevant" insufficient to make an object art.

Danto would likely reply that what makes any predicate art-relevant is the artworld in which it is applied. But that simply shifts the question to what constitutes the artworld—other than predicates, that is. Surely this is people, as in Dickie's theory. But which people, who? One cannot say that it is those who know how to apply art-relevant predicates, because this would again beg the question.

Others have already noted this dilemma, one which is encountered by both Danto and Dickie and any D-theory. They have noted that it takes the form of Euthyphro's problem—is "piety" whatever is loved by the gods and is that fact (its being loved) what gives "piety" its worth or, rather, is piety something that because of its intrinsic worth is loved by the gods, and if the former, what if the gods disagree about the objects of their affection?[32] The *reductio*, so far as D-theory is concerned—with an object both being and not being art because it is loved by some but not by others—can only be avoided by allowing for the possibility that a single individual within the artworld can be sufficient to confer art status. Dickie claims this. And Danto clearly also allows for the possibility of a single artist fulfilling the role of the "who" of the artworld, for he says:

> Suppose an artist determines that H shall henceforth be artistically relevant for his paintings. Then, in fact both H and non-H become artistically relevant for *all* painting, and if this is the first and only painting that is H, every other painting in existence be-

[32] See Plato's *Euthyphro* 6-11 and discussions by T. J. Diffey, *The Republic of Art* (New York: Peter Lang, 1991); Melvin Rader, "Dickie and Socrates on Definition," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 32 (1974); Stephen Davies, *Definitions of Art* (Ithaca: Cornell, 1991), ch. 4; and James O. Young, "Artworks and Artworlds," *British Journal of Aesthetics*, Vol. 35, no.4 (October 1995).

comes non-H, and the entire community of paintings is enriched, together with a doubling of the available style opportunities.[33]

Status-granting an infinite regress.

James Young—a recent defender of a version of D-theory—believes that this solution is satisfactory, so long as the single person qualifying the object as art is himself "accepted as a fully qualified member of the art world" by other members of the artworld. But this will not do. It merely shifts the subject of qualification from the object's qualifications to the qualifications of the qualifiers.[34] Suppose the members of the artworld disagree about one another's qualifications? (They often do.) Again we have an infinite regress of status-granting by those whose status needs to be granted. Young does not seem to notice this, but does seem to think that some notion of a "critical mass" is necessary in the artworld to grant art status and this could even be "the single member of the artworld . . . the artist who created the work . . . so long as the critical mass for non-art status is the entire artworld."[35] Where Young does see a problem is in finding any standard for a critical mass that isn't arbitrary and doesn't lead to a *reductio* when taking into account the fact that the authority to grant art-status also is the authority to grant non-art status. Yet he thinks this can be solved by what amounts to what I view as simply relativizing art-status still further. That is, art objects are granted (or not granted) their status as art not merely to *the* artworld (or to *an* artworld) but to different contemporaneous artworld*s*, such that relative to the contemporary *avant garde* artworld Duchamp's *Fountain* is an art object, but relative to some conservative artworld it is not. Thus, "there is no single artworld *tout court*. An artwork is always an artwork for some artworld or other."[36] But, like every other attempt to save D-theory, this simply begs the question in a different form. To say that "only by recognizing the relativity of arthood can the institutional theorists avoid the reduction of their position to absurdity. . . . The only consistent position of the institutional theorist to adopt is the view that both artworlds can confer arthood and non-arthood, but only

[33] "The Artworld," 432.

[34] "Artworld-relevant" turns out to be as arbitrary as "art-relevant," since the mat cutter in the neighborhood frame shop, the director of Sotheby's Old Master sales, the chimpanzee who has been taught to finger-paint, and the tourist who buys a seascape with seagulls at sunset are all related to some artworld.

[35] Young, "Artworks and Artworlds" 333.

[36] *Ibid.*, 330.

within their own purlieus"[37]—this only underlines the absurdity. The vacuities of relativism are not to be redressed by a proliferation of further arbitrary relativisms. In the end, if we are faced with an object "Q" about which one asks "Is it art?"—if one responds: "according to X-artworld 'yes' but according to Y-artworld 'no'"—how does this really differ from saying that Q is both art and not art? (Shall we now ask which is the "authoritative" artworld, X or Y?) Consider now object R which is not art in X-artworld but is art in Y-artworld; and object S which is art in neither X nor Y artworlds but is in Z-artworld, and object T which is art in both Z and Y artworlds but not in X-artworld. Again, anything could be art in some artworld. The artworld requires only one member—properly speaking two, the qualifier and the object he qualifies—assuming he does not qualify himself as the art object. Conceivably, then, every object could be the sole artwork in its very own artworld and an ordinary object in every other. While this sort of theorizing might be fine for some hypothetical systems in which, say, 2+2=5, it has no relevance for any practical context in which people really and seriously discuss art.

Danto's criterion completely unrestrictive.

But I think the absurdity and vacuity of Danto's claim should be evident from the start if one merely thinks about what he is saying—that once some artist determines that H shall henceforth be artistically relevant for all paintings *eo ipso* the entire community of paintings becomes enriched. There is a certain preposterous counterfactuality to this claim when one considers its possibilities. If a given "artist" decides to *Plasticwrap* his paintings, this means that Botticelli's works are more richly experienced hereafter *because* when I see them again I shall know that the predicate non-*Plasticwrapped* applies to them. I suppose that is possible, but I doubt that anyone would actually think of it. If so, I suspect that the enrichment of Botticelli's works would be slim at best. Similarly, another artist decides that some arbitrary characteristic, being umbrella-like, let us say, will henceforth be definitive for art, while another nominates a natural object, Lake Henshaw, as art-relevant. One may well imagine further enrichments to one's Botticelli experience—his *La Primavera* is not umbrella-like, not Lake Henshaw. Hence, while it seems at first that Danto's criterion of art-relatedness is more restrictive than Dickie's and sup-

[37] *Ibid.*, 336.

plies a sufficient condition for art status, in fact it is completely unrestricted and, since anything might be selected as art-related, it is insufficient as a condition.

Danto's theory certifies validity of its own negation.

Let us now consider the "art-relevant predicate" as a necessary condition. Having an art-relevant predicate is surely itself an art-relevant predicate. Suppose an artist, wishing to make a name for himself by refuting Danto's theory (by artistically disenfranchising the theory in his art objects) takes as the art-relevant predicate for his works "has no art-relevant predicates." In this case, not only is having an art-relevant predicate not a necessary condition for all art works, but it would become an impossible predicate for his artworks. In this way Danto's theory certifies the validity of its own negation. Danto seems to think that negating traditional art-predicates is what is especially modern about contemporary art; that many contemporary artists view this process as "essentializing" art (and this, Danto says, explains how "more is less" and therefore how a black square by Rauschenberg is art *because* it *isn't* a Titian), so the hypothetical cases I have suggested are not so far-fetched as might at first appear. Our putative artist should view his art-denominated object with no art-relevant predicates at all as the most essentialist of all artworks. To put the matter in a fuller context:—if a natural ("real") object is an art object only because it is an object experienced in "an atmosphere compounded of artistic theories and the history of recent and remote painting," and if it is this atmosphere (artworld) that alone provides us with our list of all art-relevant predicates (i.e., what establishes different art "styles"), and if an artwork can be said to be an artwork merely by having a series of these predicates (positively or negatively) attached, and if one now adds Danto's theory (and its negation) to the list of art-relevant predicates, then a work making a statement in the historico-theoretical atmosphere of Danto's theory precisely by having no art-relevant predicates would be an artwork without having anything in common (and *because* of its not having anything in common) with any other artwork. The work would be art because it isn't art. And thus artworks again could be anything and nothing.

Danto speaks as if when we see artworks as artworks this *seeing as* is made possible only on the basis of what is not seen—*viz.,* an atmosphere of theory. As I have said, I think that there need only to be some concept of "art" (and therefore an artworld of

some kind) within a culture for anything to be able to be *seen as* art. But saying this does not provide the sufficient and necessary conditions, but at best *a* necessary condition for "art." And it is a minimal and not very informative condition, if all we are talking about is the ability to classify any kind of thing whatever, art or otherwise. It is a necessary condition for art only insofar as it is a necessary condition for classifying anything.

An artworld isn't even necessarily a culturally relative or exclusive condition of classification. Moreover, a necessary condition for having a concept ("art") is not necessarily a condition for having an object (art) that satisfies that condition. Thus, I am convinced, for example, that Bernini's *Ecstacy of St. Theresa* would have been recognized as (*seen as*) art and appreciated for its aesthetic properties in Han China just as Albrecht Dürer recognized this character in Emperor Montezuma's quetzal feather headdress—even if (and we do not know whether) the Aztecs had no conception, much less a theory of, art *per se.*

That they be tied to some pre-established theory with appropriate categories does not provide the necessary or sufficient conditions for the art status of objects. It is not this that, as Danto would have it, "transfigures the commonplace" into art. Danto's belief that "being subject to an interpretation" is the singular characteristic distinguishing art objects from real objects is simply false.[38] In fact, the "real" objects from which he is so concerned to distinguish artworks are also *seen as* (recognized to be what they are, i.e., "interpreted") in the same manner. If the "artness" of art objects is entirely attributable to their being granted this status by at least one member of the artworld, we have no reason not to believe that the "realness" of real objects is entirely attributable to their being granted this status by at least one member of the real world. No one has believed in pure sense data for at least half a

[38] "Art Works and Real Things," 249. Even Danto's latest book, *After The End of Art,* still clings to the idea that the interpretation—the narrative account—makes the art. But because most things—if not everything—we experience are seen against the background of a world of interpretation, i.e., are ultimately dependent on some explanation or account, "having an account rendered" is hardly the singular condition for art. Otherwise an account of how Wellington defeated Napoleon would turn a war-event into a performance art and we should view Fermat's Last Theorem as, after several centuries of being merely a mathematical conundrum, suddenly having been transformed a few years ago into an art object when a satisfactory solution (an account) was finally provided.

All things are "subjects of interpretation."

century. Nothing is encountered in some culturally naïve, unconditioned "in-itself-ness." The perception (the "seeing as") of artworks certainly appears to involve a greater density or complexity of category/theory baggage than the perception ("seeing as") of the "real things" in nature or the perception of equipmental things in our daily use-world. But it isn't a unique or exclusive perception. All things are "seen as," i.e., they are "subjects of interpretation."

Joseph Margolis claims, further, that since "the sensory perception of the physical world is every bit as theory-laden as the perception of artworlds,"[39] being atmosphere-tied or being theory-laden is not unique to artworks, doesn't make them less real than real objects, and doesn't enable us to distinguish between real things and art. Thus, there can be no "transfiguration" at all by Danto's conditions. Margolis remarks:

> Apparently for Danto, it is only by the *rhetorical imputation of certain* non-discernable attributes that we are justified in treating 'mere real things' (things that are *not* artworks) *as* artworks. *Nothing really exists as an artwork* . . . . [H]e voluntarily abandons the existence of artworks as such, and with that, the literal relevance of ever speaking of the perceptual discernability of '*their*' properties.[40]

Danto's argument becomes nonsensical.

As a consequence, Danto's argument becomes nonsensical because, while Danto pretends (or intends) to talk about two objects (one an artwork and another a real thing) sharing "perceptually indiscernable properties," in fact, by Danto's own theory, "it is rather that we are *never* perceptually confronted with more than the properties of real things" because being an artwork has nothing to do with perceptually discriminable properties but only with an attribution by the artworld. Thus there exists no genuine "choosing between" situation and therefore "Danto's famous puzzle cases evaporate. . . . indiscernability never arises as a *real* puzzle."[41]

Danto and Dickie's—D-theory's—attempt to define "art" by ascription through contextualization and thus a relativization that vainly hopes to avoid all reference to "inherent discernable properties" and/or conditions of response in a subject, fails in every

[39] Joseph Margolis, "Farewell of Danto and Goodman," *British Journal of Aesthetics*, Vol. 38, No. 4 (October 1998), 370.

[40] *Ibid*., 365. Italics in the original.

[41] *Ibid*., 368-69.

direction. Ultimately, the failure may stem from the anti-realistic metaphysic—at least *vis-à-vis* artworks—that underlies the theory. And if this is the case, then the theory—*insofar as* it proposes a definition of art—has no way of avoiding circularity, vacuity, self-contradiction, and triviality.

Conclusion

Danto begins his "Artworld" article with a discussion of the nature of theories and how they need to make adjustments to new sorts of facts. Theories are supposed to be about facts. I should point out that, in this way, theories are like artworks, which Danto rightly reminds us have an essential "aboutness" about them. In both cases it is not the *what* of the about but the *how* of it that makes a theory a theory and makes an artwork an artwork. But for every artwork and every theory there must also be some sort of *what* that it is "about." Boyle's Law of Gases is a theory *both* because of the form that it takes (its "how") *and* because of the subject matter it characterizes (its "what"). If we attempt to apply this theory to daffodils we shouldn't be surprised if it does not work. If we insist that it must, we would have to think of modifying it greatly so as to be so inclusive. And if we persisted, I wouldn't expect much would be left of the theory as a consequence of these adjustments. In wishing to sustain a daffodil-friendly theory so as not to exclude daffodils from our theory, we would surely end up with a vacuous theory. One must not think of this as being unkind to daffodils—to say they are *not gasses* (and therefore cannot be encompassed by our theory)—or (as our present case requires) *not art*. This is especially so if, as Dickie and Danto both *claim*, at least, their theories are merely classificatory and not evaluative. In the end, art theory is subject to the conditions of all theoryhood. A theory of anything at all isn't a theory of much and can't be much of a theory.

Surely, Danto does make an important point regarding how, if some object is *not already* recognized as art, we can be enabled to look at what *appears not* to be art *as in fact* art by appealing to history and theory so as to bring to bear upon our experience additional factors that add to or modify what we "look at" in the most ordinary sense. Furthermore, it is certainly true that works which *are already* well-recognized as works of art (a Renaissance masterpiece by Raphael, for example) may come to be better (more fully)

understood by art-relevant predicates and art theories that have developed over the course of history but were not part of the art-consciousness at the time of that work's creation ("representational" vs. "non-representational," or "linear" vs. "painterly," for example). But this description of what sometimes occurs in our aesthetic experience is insufficient in Danto's argument to provide us with a theory or definition of art—and he is an essentialist, i.e., he hopes to construct a definition, after all.[42] The same point Stecker makes about Dickie applies to Danto—an artworld "framework" may be appealed to as a basis for enabling certain objects to be seen as art that are not being seen that way—and, I would add, it may in some way illuminate, refresh, or enrich objects long recognized as art—but this conception or insight hardly establishes a necessary and sufficient condition for all art.[43]

The problems with D-theory ultimately stem from its subject-matter as currently produced—contemporary art—as I note at the outset.

Art theories used to differ only in their account of art's causes and conditions.

Heretofore, art works were produced and were understood as individual and unique addresses in the form of sensuous, material presences through our senses to our feeling and understanding.[44] Consequently, philosophical theories about art works reflected this common understanding. *How* art did this was always the relevant or primary philosophical subject of inquiry—at least since the advent of modern aesthetics in the mid-eighteenth century. Such philosophical inquiries almost always included some form of a phenomenological analysis of the existential encounter with the art object experienced as their starting point. Some have taken the Kantian view that art succeeds through the stimulation of our cognitive faculties to engage in free play with our imagination, or some variation on this theme of subjective "faculty analysis" (such as an "aesthetic attitude" or "psychical distance"). Others have taken the Hegelian view that art's aim and mark of success was some perfect union of form and matter (a configuration of meaning/truth and sensuous embodiment such that art

[42] See Danto, "Art, Essence, History, and Beauty," in *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 54 (1996), 284-87; and *After the End of Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 95, 195.

[43] Stecker, 131.

[44] When and if they succeeded in achieving this effect they were usually said to possess the quality of "beauty."

works a dialectical resolution of the contradiction between mind and nature) or some more modern formulation along these lines (one thinks of Rudolph Arnheim's "isomorphic correspondence between what is said and how it is said" ["a play of vision and thought" as two aspects of one experience] or even of Heidegger's "rift-design" [a configuration of the strife between earth and world, whose radiance (beauty) manifests truth]).[45] But until this last century, art theories, assured of their subject matter, differed only in their accounts of art's causes and conditions. Now the question has become whether what passes for art has any relation to these conceptions at all. And hence the question "what is art?" Passing beyond the limits that made it what it always was, art appears to have dispersed itself into oblivion.[46]

The death of "art" induced by death of "art theory."

Hence the situation and status of art theory at the outset of the millennium and why I have asserted that contemporary art theory is dead. Contemporary art theory is dead because *in general* the conditions for establishing a theory (call it "the theory of A") are no longer extant. There can be no "theory of A" when it is no longer possible to establish a realm of entities of a certain type "A" because there is nothing that can be established as "non-A." The artworld accepts all things into its realm. In this way the death of "art"—as something that can be denoted by the term with sufficient certainty and exclusivity—has induced the death of "art theory."

Insofar as D-theory is *the* quintessential contemporary art theory, the paradigm case, its failure merely demonstrates what must *a fortiori* be true—though I could not argue this case here—for all the other contemporary art theories insofar as they have attempted to be "relevant to contemporary art products."

D-theory is simply the most blatant casualty in the collective death of contemporary art theories. Yet from another perspective

[45] For an alternative account in this latter mode see my "The Ontological Integrity of the Art Object from the Ludic Viewpoint," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 34, no. 3 (1976): 323-36. On Arnheim see "Art and Thought" in *The Philosophy of the Visual Arts*, ed. Philip Alperson (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 157-70; for Heidegger see especially "The Origin of the Work of Art," in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), 15-87.

[46] As Octavio Paz has observed, contemporary art "keeps shifting back and forth from the negation of meaning for the sake of the object to the negation of the object for the sake of meaning." See his "Use and Contemplation," in *Philosophy and the Visual Arts*, 404.

it can, rather, be said to be a theory that was still-born. That is, it did not "die" after it had outlived its time, as for example the "imitation theory of art" can be said to have "died"—either because art works over time became more than just imitations (and a better or more comprehensive theory was needed) or because art works were at last recognized always to have been more than imitations. D-theory never really lived because it never even overcame its internal contradictions and numerous other inadequacies sufficiently to comprehend the realm of art objects it presumed it could identify and be able to explain.

Art theory reduced to circularity, infinite regress, and self-contradiction.

The wide currency and respectability of the Artworld and Institutional theories are merely proof of (1) how desperate the artworld is for any theory (or presumptive theory) that will justify its existence and justify the practices of presumptive artists and (2) how far art theory has failed in its fundamental task—to explain art—so that finally it can say only that art is whatever any art theory whatsoever (indeed any hypothetical person) says it is.[47] To put it another way, in terms of the consequences of two reductions leading to a third: artworks have been reduced to art theories by artists, "art" has been reduced to a theory of art by art theorists, art theory has been reduced to circularity, infinite regress, and self-contradiction. That is a sadly vacuous end to art theory.

I should perhaps end by saying that I hope that genuine art theory will return. I am certain that the theories I have taken as paradigmatic of current art theory—D-theory—are wrong, that they are dead and dead ends. I cannot imagine where art theory will go from D-theory's demise because I cannot imagine art theory abandoning its insistence upon "counting *in*" much of what "counts *as*" art in the contemporary artworld and I do not know the remedy for saving art theory from this insistence.[48]

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[47] If one wishes to sociologize philosophy—and one shouldn't—one could easily see these theories as further variations on the contemporary inclusivness trends which require just the sort of extreme relativism we have described. It is also consistent with such currently enshrined notions as the social construction of reality.

[48] Perhaps one way to revive art theory would be to develop a new theory of beauty. To do so would entail overcoming the *callilogophobia* of the current age and returning to discussions of art in terms of the real perceptual properties that art objects have. I attempt to do something of this sort in the book I am currently completing on *The Aesthetic of the Antique.*