

THE ARTIFACTUALITY OF ART : *

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It is a commonplace among aestheticians that a work of art is an artifact and that any attempt to define the expression "work of art" presupposes the notion of artifactuality. A comparatively recent statement of this view is to be found in George Dickie's *Art and the Aesthetic*.¹ Dickie, rebutting Morris Weitz's contention that an artwork need not be an artifact, maintains that artifactuality is a defining condition of art.² In fact, Dickie proposes a definition of art which contains artifactuality as its genus, although he does not attempt to clarify this idea. In what follows I will argue that the conception of artifactuality, upon close inspection, is complex in nature and that the identification of artworks with artifacts, as maintained by Dickie, Margolis and others, is open to question. At the very least the notion of artifactuality deserves a more detailed analysis than it has commonly been afforded in the literature.

Before investigating the concept of artifactuality, it may be useful to distinguish between two important senses of the term "work of art"; these according to Dickie, are the classificatory and the evaluative senses.³ In everyday talk about art the evaluative sense prevails, for in referring to something as a work of art we ordinarily mean to praise it. Thus, the judgment that Picasso's *Guernica* is a "work of art" most likely intends to ascribe artistic value to this painting. On the other

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hand we may use the expression “work of art” merely to identify an object which is *purported* to have artistic value. In referring to Jim Dine’s *Shovel* as a ‘work of art’ we may intend only to identify it as such without thereby raising the question of its artistic merits. Thus, a work may be considered art in the classificatory sense whether or not it possesses artistic value. It would appear then that artifactuality may be advanced as the genus of the definition of “work of art” when this expression is understood in either of the two senses. For example, it is in the descriptive or classificatory sense that Dickie defines a work of art as an artifact upon which an agent, acting on behalf of the art world, has conferred the status of candidate for appreciation.⁴ Similarly, however, art in the evaluative sense could be defined in terms of a theory of artistic value which applies to a certain class of “objects”, i. e., artifacts. In either case, artifactuality is being proposed as a defining condition of the term “work of art”.⁵ In what follows I will argue that artifactuality is neither necessary nor sufficient for certain groups of artworks, and therefore cannot be a defining characteristic of art. This will require, first, an account of the conditions under which it is appropriate to consider anything an artifact and second, a classification of the arts which helps to clarify the different and complex ways in which artworks stand to artifacts.

The Artifact as a Product of Craftsmanship :

Historically, the notion of artifactuality has been tied to the idea of craft or technical skill.⁶ The existence of a craft or body of related technical skills presupposes the existence of an agent whose conscious activity is directed toward the production of an artifact. Thus, Aristotle defines craft or art (*techné*) as a habit or “state concerned with making, involving a true course of reasoning”.⁷ Notice that Aristotle is not speaking of what in later centuries were called the “fine arts”; for him, no distinction exists between the fine and practical arts. The artist is conceived simply as a craftsman and the arts as species of craft. Because an art or craft is concerned with making, it can be defined in terms of the utilization of a set of skills operating on a pre-given material. Because art involves a “true course of reasoning”, its existence presupposes an ability on the agent’s part to reach a deliberate, reasoned conclusion about the product of his activity. An artifact, therefore, may be provisionally characterized as the result of an agent’s reasoned, productive activity. There are four conditions required for the existence of craft and, therefore, for the production of artifacts. These

conditions can be clarified in terms of a corresponding set of logical distinctions which apply to them.⁸

- (1) The distinction between means and ends : the means consist of operations which are traversed in order to reach the end and which are left behind when the end is reached. These operations consist of a set of logically ordered actions which bring the end into being ;
- (2) The distinction between planning and execution which parallels that between means and ends : the employment of craft involves the maker's foreknowledge of the results to be obtained. Without such planning, the production of an artifact would be a mere accident ;
- (3) The distinction in works of craft between raw materials and finished product : in order to exist, a craft requires raw or ready-made materials which are worked upon and transformed into something different — the artifact or finished product ;
- (4) a distinction between form and matter, as applied to the object produced or made : matter is what is identical both in the pre-given material and in the finished product, while form is that which the exercise of the craft changes. Form is what is different, what has been altered in the selfsame material.

It is not claimed that these four conditions exhaust the notion of *techné* or craft. It seems, however, that together they constitute a set of necessary conditions for its existence. These conditions are of two kinds : conditions (1) and (2) apply to the agent who practices the craft : it is the *craftsman* who as efficient cause is responsible for planning and executing the ordered series of operations which bring about the production of an artifact. Conditions (3) and (4), on the other hand, pertain to the 'object' : it is the artifact which has been transformed from raw material to finished product by the craftsman's exercise of *techné* ; it is the artifact which results from the imposition of form upon pre-given material.

This account of the production of artifacts can, I believe, be applied to our understanding of the major arts with the aim determining whether they meet the essential conditions of artifactuality. This task will be facilitated by a classification of the arts into three groups which is intended to clarify the sense in which works of art may be artifacts. In the course of the discussion, we will suggest

certain qualifications of our account of artifactuality which accord better with our understanding of differences among the arts. Finally, George Dickie's claim that artifactuality can be *conferred* upon natural "object" will be examined. I will argue that Dickie's view conflicts sharply in at least one important respect with the traditional account of artifactuality.

A Classification of the Arts :

The intent of our classification of the arts is to clarify the sense or senses in which works of art can be considered artifactual, according to our previous characterization. The arts can be seen to fall within three broad groups.⁹

First, here are the "plastic arts", including painting, sculpture and architecture. These arts are distinctive insofar as their pursuit terminates in the production of an artifact, narrowly conceived as a material object. This artifact or material object is not synonymous with the artistic object, but is distinguishable from it as its material substrate. It is, as its material embodiment, an indispensable condition of the artwork's existence. Thus, there is only one *Mona Lisa* : if the original painting is damaged or destroyed. The plastic arts clearly fit our earlier description of craft or *techné*. They presuppose a human agent who is literally a craftsman or producer.¹⁰ As a craftsman, the artist engages in a process of making whose *terminus ad quem* is a picture, statue, building, etc. We will refer to artworks which are thus embodied in material objects as A-works.

Second, there is a class of artwork which are not strictly artifactual, although they may sometimes appear to be so. This class, referred to here as C-works, includes such 'compositions' as poems, novels, and stories. A C-work exists when it is read, heard, remembered, recited or even composed in the artist's mind. The book or manuscript in which a C-work is recorded is merely a vehicle by which the 'composition, can be reconstructed. It is not itself an artifact in the strict sense for even if all copies of a certain poem were lost or destroyed, the poem itself would not of necessity cease to exist. At the same time, the manuscript may exist, but give no access to the 'composition', since the tools for reconstructing it are lost. An example of this would be undeciphered hieroglyphics. Thus, the criteria for the existence of C-works differ from A-works, since C-works can exist without the existence of a single artifact or group of artifacts with which they can be

identified. Moreover, as we have seen, the existence of an artifact does not insure the existence of the artwork which it "supports".

Finally, a third class of artworks, which we will designate as P-works, are distinguishable from both A-works and C-works. Although the arts which comprise this third type are quite heterogeneous, all are performance of "interpretative" arts. Further, these arts are essentially temporal; a performance is an event in time, a temporal whole. Music, the dance, and theatre are the primary arts which fall into this group. Each of these arts requires an interpretive artist who seeks to realize the conception of the composer, choreographer, playwright, or filmscript writer. Consequently, the performing arts require both an artist-creator and an artist-performer in order to fully exist. The criterion for the existence of P-works is the performance itself which must adhere to certain basic requirements in the case of each specific art.

How does the notion of artifactuality, considered in relationship to craft, apply to the three types of artworks which we have distinguished? As we have seen, the traditional notion of artifactuality is clearest in its application to A-works, for such works presuppose the existence of pre-given materials upon which the artist acts in order to construct an artifact. All four of the conditions of craft are present in the plastic arts, those which apply to the artist as well as those which apply to his work. In the case of C-works, the requirement that the artwork be literally 'embodied' does not hold. A poem or story may, of course, be written or otherwise expressed in material form, but this does not appear to be essential to its existence as a work of art. This point can be supported merely by appealing to the oral traditions of both primitive and civilized societies. A considerable body of myth, legend, etc. exists without the societies in which it is created being able to cast it in any written form. Aside from this fact, we have rejected any attempt to identify C-works with their embodiments in material form. A novel is not identical with the volumes in which it is recorded; a poem is not identical with the marks on paper which constitute the means by which we are able to reconstruct it. Quite simply, a poem or story becomes a work of art only when it is perceived as such; otherwise it is aesthetically dumb. If, however, our account of craft is modified in certain respects, it is possible to view C-works as artifacts. A poet or novelist who has mastered the art of writing will have created a work in which style, sense of form, mastery of language, etc. reveal his technical skill. Thus, the

condition pertaining to the craftsman under (2) above applies to the creation of C-work, for the poet or novelist may execute a preconceived plan. Still, the poet or story-teller does not traverse anything like a logically ordered series of actions which constitute means to the actualization of the artwork as an end. Our conclusion, then, is that the first condition of craft *a parte objecti*, involving the relation of means to ends, need not be realized in the case of C-works and that only the second condition *a parte subjecti* involving planning and execution applies generally to them. Even here, a poem or (possibly) story which has been composed without the benefit of forethought or deliberation constitutes an exception to this second condition of craft.

When we turn to the character of the performing arts (P-works), the notion of artifactuality again becomes problematic. What artifact or artifacts can be identified with a ballet or symphony? Clearly, the artifact must be equated with the performance itself, considered as an event or occurrence of a specific kind. What is required is an extension of the concept of artifactuality from the case of material "objects" in the plastic arts to performances of a certain duration in the performing arts. If this extension is permitted, P-works can be subsumed under the traditional notion of craft. For the performer utilizes his technical skill as a means to the production of a "bodily work of art"; he carries out a logical sequence of actions which constitute means to the end of performance, and which ordinarily require planning. In addition, the art of interpretation presupposes mastery by the artist of a certain "instrument" according to the requirements of his individual craft.¹¹ The situation with respect to P-works is further complicated by the division of labor in the performance arts between creative-artist and performer. While the performer commonly meets the two conditions *a parte subjecti* in our characterization of craft, the two conditions *a parte objecti* do not properly apply. When we consider the artist-creator of P-works, the same difficulties arise as in the case of C-works. The composer, playwright, or choreographer does not make a specific material product as the result of his labors, nor need he engage in a series of ordered actions which constitute means toward the realization of that end which is the play, dance, or musical work. Moreover, a tune, like a poem, may be composed not only without the use of certain materials (pen, paper, etc.) but also without any conscious plan of design. Certainly, any large scale work of art requires planning, but this need not be the case at all for works of a very modest character. As a result, we

are obliged to conclude that non of the four conditions of artifactuality apply unequivocally to the artist-creator in the performing arts.

Can Artifactuality Be Conferred ?

George Dickie has proposed that the status of artifactuality, like that of candidacy for appreciation, can be *conferred* upon natural objects as well as products of human making.² According to him, a work of art is an artifact upon which has been conferred the status of “candidate for appreciation” by an agent or agents acting on behalf of the artworld. Dickie claims that artifactuality and candidacy for appreciation may both be conferred in one and the same action. As an example, he cites the case of a piece of driftwood lying on the shore.^{1 3} The driftwood may be appreciated either in its natural environment or moved to a place where it can be exhibited, such as a home or art gallery. Clearly, the driftwood becomes an aesthetic object in virtue of its being exhibited for the purpose of appreciation, but it is no less an aesthetic object when viewed in its natural setting. Up to this point, we have no quarrel with Dickie : the driftwood in either a natural or artificial setting is constituted as an aesthetic object simply through our appreciation of it. However, it does not follow from this fact that it is thereby an artifact or that artifactuality is conferred upon it in the act of appreciation. The driftwood remains a natural object whether or not it is removed from its environment. Neither its material composition nor its form is changed from its natural state through the actions of a maker or craftsman. The same principle holds for natural phenomena like rainbows or sunsets. The conferral of the status of candidacy for appreciation does not transform them into artifacts, if we understand by artifactuality the product of some kind of human making.

What are we to say of animal paintings ? Under Dickie’s schema, the paintings of chimpanzees may be allowable as artworks, at least if they are exhibited in art galleries as opposed to museums of natural history. But are they also artifacts ? The answer, I maintain, is ‘no’, for they have not been produced under the concept of artifactuality. The efficient cause or agency responsible for their production did not engage in a conscious activity involving any of the four conditions stated earlier. Dickie, I believe, has confused the notion of an aesthetic object with that of a work of art. If every aesthetic object were a work of art, any natural object would be transformable into an artwork by the simple expedient of regarding it appreciatively. Dickie has in effect fastened upon a crucial feature of

aesthetic experience : its capacity to create values where none existed previously. He has then extended the notion of creating artistic value through a kind of performance (conferring the status of candidate for appreciation) to include the possibility of conferring artifactuality itself upon things. But is the creative element in aesthetic experience alone sufficient to give birth to an artifact, as well as to a new artistic creation ? Clearly not, for the following reasons : (1) Artifactuality as such cannot be conferred because an artifact is a product of making which requires work or labour on the part of the maker. Artifacts are produced by transforming a raw material, and not merely by appreciating an object from a distance or even by moving it from one place to another. (2) What distinguishes works of art which are artifacts from artifacts in general is the creative dimension which pertains to art proper. An artifact can be mass-produced while an artwork cannot, because mass-production is the antithesis of creativity. Even a painstaking copy of the *Mona Lisa*, distinguishable from the original only by experts, is rejected as a work of art. (3) Our discussion of artifactuality, as it pertains to the three classes of artworks, has shown that an artwork may, of course, be an artifact, as in the case of A-works, but that art is not *per se* artifactual. Thus there is no necessity for the conferral of artifactuality on an object before it can be granted the status of an artwork, and the rationale for Dickie's position no longer holds.

Recent developments in the arts themselves appear to lend support to this conclusion. Such recent developments as minimal art, junk art, found art, etc. have undermined the traditional conception of the artist as a kind of craftsman. Technical proficiency is not required in these new art forms, for a piece of junk can be removed from a junkyard and exhibited as a work of art without any technical skill whatsoever being demanded of the "artist". The four conditions of artifactuality discussed earlier are invalidated : there is no pattern of actions whereby an agent traverses certain means in order to realize an end ; there need be no execution of a preconceived plan on the artist's part ; there is no transformation of a raw material into a finished product and no imposition of form upon a pre-given matter. What is new in much recent art is the emergence of a concept of art presupposing a certain view of creativity without craftsmanship. In this regard the concept of art has undergone a significant transformation while the concept of artifactuality has not. The technical theory of art has been superseded by a novel account of artistic creativity which dispenses with the idea of art as craft. On this view, there need be no process of making or

fabricating on the part of the artist which terminates in the production of an artifact. The artwork is thus *a factum* because it is the result of a constructive human activity, but is not an *artifacum* because no labor has been undertaken in its creation.

NOTES AND REFERENCES :

1. *Art and the Aesthetic* (Ithaca : Cornell University Press, 1974.) 2. "It is now clear that artifactuality is a necessary condition (call it the genus) of the primary sense of art." *Ibid*, p.27. Dickie's definition of the classificatory sense of art is governed by his conception of the necessary and sufficient conditions of art. However, as one critic of Dickie points out, a definition which satisfies the requirement of stating features of art which are necessary and sufficient may yet fail to capture "philosophically rewarding" characteristics of its subject. Without an in-depth analysis of the concept of artifactuality, however, it is impossible to determine whether Dickie's definition produces insight into the concept of art. Cf. Timothy W. Bartel, "Appreciation and Dickie's Definition of Art", *The British Journal of Aesthetics*, (Winter, 1979), p.52. A useful discussion of the problem of defining art is T. J. Diffey's "On Defining Art" in the same issue of *BJA*, pp. 15-24. 3. *Art and the Aesthetic*, Chapter I. Cf. also George Dickie, *aesthetics : An Introduction* (Indianapolis : Bobbs-Merrill, 1971), pp. 105-113. 4. *Art and the Aesthetic*, pp. 33 ff. According to Dickie, "A theory of art must preserve certain central features of the way in which we talk about art" *Ibid*, p. 40. Apparently Dickie is not offering a mere stipulative definition of art, but it is unclear whether his definition is meant to be a real or essential definition or merely an elucidation of certain important aspects of the way in which the concept of art is used in every day speech. 5. The question will not be raised in this paper whether there is indeed a descriptive function for the expression "work of art" which is not parasitic on its evaluative function. 6. "The idea (of craft) is just that of an organized body of knowledge and skills directed to the production of some work that may be judged by definite technical and non-moral standards." Francis Sparshott, *The Concept of Criticism* (Oxford : Oxford University Press, 1967), p. 22. The context of Sparshott's statement is a discussion of the work of literary criticism as artifact. 7. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, VI,3.1139b14. 8. This account of the logical conditions of craft is based upon R.G. Collingwood, *The Principles of Art* (Oxford University Press, 1938), pp. 15-41, Collingwood discusses a further characteristic of craft which will not be dealt with here : the hierarchial relation among the various crafts. 9. This threefold classification of the arts differs in certain respects from that of Harold Osborne in his book *The Art of Appreciation* (Oxford : Oxford University Press, 1970), pp. 167-9. 10. There may be, of course, a division of labour between the artistcreator and the agency responsible for executing his

design or plan. This occurs frequently in the plastic arts. 11. For a fuller discussion of the role of the "instrument" as a medium in the performing arts, cf. Ronald Roblin, "On Media and Materials in Art", *International Studies in Philosophy*, IX (1977), pp. 121-5. 12. *art and the aesthetic*, pp. 22-27. Cf. also *aesthetics : an introduction*, pp. 98-101. Also relevant are the critical comments on this question by Joseph Margolis in his review of *art and the aesthetic* in the *Journal of aesthetics and art criticism* (Spring 1975), pp. 341-5 and Dickie's reply in the Winter 1975 issue, pp. 229-30. Dickie here admits that his contention that artifactuality can be conferred upon found objects is "tentative" and that the use of "tools" may be a necessary condition of artifactuality. But he does not retract his earlier claim that artifactuality is the genus of a definition of art. 13. *art and the aesthetic*, pp. 22-27. *aesthetics : an Introduction*, pp. 97-101. The example is borrowed from Morris Weitz's well known paper, "The Role of Theory in Aesthetics," *Journal of aesthetics and art criticism* (Fall 1956), pp. 27-35.

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