

BOOK REVIEWS

George Dickie, *The Art Circle: A Theory of Art*, Haven Publications, New York, 1984, pp. 116.

The Art Circle was published in 1983, the result of a series of attempts by Dickie to define art or rather, the expression "work of art", which began with an article entitled "Defining Art" in 1969 and continued through the publication of the book *Art and the Aesthetic* in 1974 and culminated with *The Art Circle*. What is the background of Dickie's work in aesthetic theory?

First of all, Dickie reacted to the influence of a number of aestheticians such as Morris Weitz and Paul Ziff who in the 1950's argued that no definition of art was possible. Reacting to the influence of Wittgenstein, Weitz maintained that the concept of art is analagous to the concept of a "game". While many games have certain common characteristics, such as winning or losing, there is no one *essential* feature which all games possess and which sets them off from other classes of things. Weitz, in particular, exploited Wittgenstein's notion of "family resemblances", holding that while certain games, such as chess and bridge or baseball and cricket, share important resem-

blances, there is no one feature which is necessary and sufficient for any thing to be a game.

Secondly, Weitz argued, perhaps less persuasively, that any definition of art must foreclose on the creativity and inventiveness inherent in the process of artmaking itself. Art, he insisted, is an 'open concept' if for no other reason than that the historical development of art cannot be anticipated beforehand; new artistic forms and genres will undoubtedly come into existence which will modify, perhaps in radical and certainly unforeseen ways, our present conception of art.

In the second place, Dickie was convinced of the bankruptcy of traditional attempts to define art. In his book *Aesthetics: An Introduction*, Dickie traces the emergence of the modern system of the arts together with the developments in aesthetic theory which accompanied this rise in the arts themselves. Beginning with the theory of art as imitation in Plato, Dickie records the movement in aesthetic theory in the 19th century to the view that art is the expression of the artist's personality, and thence to the more current developments such as formalism and

Langer's view of the artwork as a symbol of human feeling.

The trouble with all of these theories, Dickie believes, is that they are easily defeated by counterexamples. For example, the prominence of 'non-objective' painting and sculpture in contemporary art gives the lie to the imitation theory-- the old fashioned view that the function of art is to imitate or represent nature. Similarly, but less obviously, aestheticians have argued persuasively that expression artistic form, and the view that artworks symbolize human feelings, however important in much art, are simply not universal features which can be applied to each and every work of art. As a result, Dickie rejects traditional theories, claiming that they are partial and one-sided. These theories, as Weitz maintains, point clearly to the theorists' idea of what is important in works of art, but overlook other features which may be just as significant or even more so in other works.

However, Dickie is not convinced that the traditional attempt to define art is misguided. Like the traditional theorists, he seeks to uncover the necessary and sufficient conditions for something's being a work of art. However, he is convinced that a new theory must be contrived which is so broadly based that it cannot be defeated by

the extraordinary diversity among the arts and developments within the artworld itself.

In order to complete this background sketch of Dickie's institutional theory, we must cite the work of Arthur Danto, whose important article "The Artworld" had, by Dickie's own admission, a critical influence on his own theorizing. In "The Artworld", Danto singles out the social and cultural matrix within which every work has its place. In so doing, Danto points to the *atmosphere* in which artworks are created; this atmosphere is not an *exhibited property* of works of art, such as their representational or formal qualities, but is non-exhibited, that is, visible not to the human eye but rather to the awareness of the social and historical setting of art. This means that art is essentially institutional in nature; like religion, science, and other, institutions of our society, art can best be understood by its place in society as a whole. Dickie clearly follows this lead when he regards art as an "informal institution" and the artworld as a name for the background and milieu which surrounds each and every work of art.

Moreover, Dickie also utilizes an important argument from Danto which he calls the "Indistinguishable Objects Argument". Suppose that

you are confronted with two objects whose empirical properties are exactly the same, such as a piece of driftwood lying on the beach and an identical piece of driftwood which is exhibited in a gallery as a work of art. In Dickie's view, the "natural driftwood" is not an objet d'art while the exhibited driftwood clearly is. What makes the crucial difference here is the framework or atmosphere in which each has its place, despite their empirical similarity- The exhibited driftwood, by virtue of the position it holds in the artworld, has become a piece of sculpture, while the natural driftwood, untouched by human intervention, remains a bit of nature. This argument, Dickie believes, is sufficient to demonstrate the necessity of an artworld context or framework without which works of art cannot be identified as such.

Let's turn now to a basic distinction drawn by Dickie as a basis for his definition of art. Dickie distinguishes between the classificatory and evaluative senses of the expression "work of art". It is only art in the classificatory sense which Dickie is trying to define. Art in its classificatory sense covers the entire spectrum of works which inhabit the artworld--whatever their individual merits. Dickie insists that his definition is intended

to encompass not merely great or good art, but works which are mediocre, inferior and even worthless. The evaluative sense of art, according to Dickie, occurs when we are criticizing the merits or demerits of specific works, and it is this sense which occurs most frequently in everyday discourse. It is quite natural for us to say, "This painting is a fine work of art," thus praising it, but it would be redundant to say, "This painting is a work of art," because we have identified it as such merely by referring to it as a painting. Only in unusual situations in which we wish to call attention to something's being a work of art is the classificatory sense being used. However, according to Dickie, it is this sense which is deeply imbedded in the ways in which we think and talk about works of art.

Dickie's attempt to define art in the classificatory sense has two parts, each of which he claims is necessary for a work to be art and which together are sufficient for arthood. The first condition, artifactuality, refers to anything which is a product of human making. Dickie claims to do no more than cite the dictionary definition of artifactuality in *The Art Circle*. By characterizing artworks as artifacts, Dickie is trying to bring under a single umbrella arts diverse as poetry, the novel, operas, improvised

dances, etc. Apparently, any of these things can be innocently considered an artifact, and there is thus no reason to inquire into the ontology of different forms of art. At the same time, Dickie's discussion of artifactuality centers on the visual arts, as he is concerned to distinguish between works like Duchamps' *Fountain*, which possess artifactuality (but just barely) and ordinary junkyard objects which never achieve the status of art.

In *Art and the Aesthetic* Dickie maintained that artifactuality can be "conferred" on an object. His reason for making this claim harks back to the driftwood example mentioned earlier. Dickie regarded the untouched driftwood as a natural object, but wanted to claim that a piece of driftwood which is exhibited as art possesses artifactuality despite the paradox that virtually no "work" has been done on the driftwood. Similarly, Dickie wished to allow a Place in the artworld for such phenomena as junkyard art, and for the same reason he insisted that *Fountain* is a work of art notwithstanding the fact that Duchamps did little more than inscribe a urinal in a junkyard and attempt to exhibit it in a gallery.

The problem is how to account at one and the same time for work which have an accepted

position in the artworld but involve virtually no crafting or making on the part of the artist. Under the harsh criticism of Joseph Margolis, among others Dickie withdrew the notion of "conferred artifactuality" in *The Art Circle*, agreeing that artifactuality cannot simply be conferred on objects but must be achieved by at least a minimum amount of crafting or technical skill. As a result; he is somewhat ambivalent about works like *Fountain* and its ilk in *The Art Circle*, claiming that perhaps the minimal amount of crafting required to make an object into art is present in *Fountain*. However, Dickie is now at pains to reject the claims of much modern art actually to be art, including minimal and conceptual art, on the grounds that such works are not artifactual. In addition, he asserts that works like Robert Barry's conceptual art lack a medium as well as the craft necessary to achieve arthood.

In my view Dickie's attempt to establish the old-fashioned notion of artifactuality as a criterion of arthood is unsuccessful. On the one hand, he is unable to deal with borderline cases like *Fountain*; on the other, he is obliged to dismiss a wide range of contemporary art which has become firmly entrenched within the artworld.

So much for Dickie's use of the concept of the artifactuality to

distinguish art from non-art. However unsuccessful this part of his definition, it is the second part, that which bears on the artworld as a social institution, which is most critical to his theory. First, though, let's examine Dickie's definition of a work of art in *Art and the Aesthetic*. There he writes: "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)."

This earlier characterization of the artwork is complex in its formulation and needs to be analyzed into some of its component parts. First by "a set of aspects of a work of art", Dickie merely means point out that not every aspect of an artwork; such as a painting or a play, belongs to the specifically artistic dimension of the work. The frame of a painting, for example, is not intrinsic to the work itself; nor is the backside of the painting. Similarly, the work of the stagehands behind the curtains is not part of the play itself. Thus Dickie is at pains to distinguish intrinsic from extrinsic aspects of the work.

Now, the following words in his definition refer to the conferral of the "status of candidate for

appreciation" upon certain aspects of the work. It is this notion which Dickie modifies later work in the light of criticisms by Monroe Beardsley. Just as Dickie had earlier spoken of conferring artifactuality and then withdrawn this claim, he now withdraws the claim that the status of candidate for appreciation can also be conferred. Dickie notes that because the artworld involves an informal kind of activity, it is inappropriate in his definition to use such phrases as "conferred status" and "acting on behalf of". Such phrases, he writes, "typically have application within formal institutions such as states, corporations, universities, and the like." Beardsley considers it a mistake to use the language of formal institutions to try to describe an informal institution or "established practice" which Dickie conceives the artworld to be.

The last part of the definition refers to "some person or persons acting on behalf of a certain social institution (the artworld)". This notion of a person or agent acting against the background of the artworld now becomes the focal point for Dickie's new theory. Instead of speaking of "conferring status" Dickie now characterizes the artists relationship to the artwork as *presenting* his work to an appreciative public. In an article

composed just prior to *The Art Circle*, Dickie defined a "work of art" as "an artifact of a kind created to be presented to an artworld public". In *The Art Circle*, he expands this definition into a fourfold characterization involving the terms "artist", "artworld", "public", and "artworld systems". In each case, he defines one of these terms utilizing one or more of the *other* terms in the set, thus giving rise to a circular definition-- "the art circle". For example, an artist may be defined as an agent of the artworld who presents his work to an artworld public. And the artworld is an "established practice" consisting of artists, members of the artworld public (including critics, aestheticians, museum curators, etc.), all of which comprises the totality of "artworld systems" (literature, music, the visual arts, etc.). Thus, each of these pivotal concepts in Dickie's definition bend in on, presuppose, and support one another. The circularity of the definitions, according to Dickie, has the merit of exhibiting their interdependency-- they reveal that "art-making involves an intricate, correlative structure which cannot be described in the straightforward, linear way envisaged by the ideal of noncircular definition."

There are several difficulties with Dickie's interlocking definitions of

"work of art". The most obvious is whether the circularity involved in the definition is vicious or not. Perhaps there are no *a priori* reasons against circularity as such in a definition, although a circular definition is logically incapable of explicating a concept in terms of other distinguishable concepts. If we waive this requirement, which incidentally was met by many of the traditional theories of art, we are left with the question of whether Dickie's definition is sufficiently informative, to be philosophically respectable. In defense of Dickie, we can allow that he has attempted to do no more than characterize the minimal framework within which something can be a work of art. The question is: does a framework consisting of elements such as the artworld public, artworld systems, etc., provide enough insight and elaboration of works of art to be the basis for an acceptable aesthetic theory?

The answer, I think, is "no". Almost the sole virtue of Dickie's definition is its utilization of a few concepts which he relates to a social and cultural framework. There are no revelations, certainly, about the fact that art-making is an established practice and that there is a receptive public, critics, and others who function as agents of the artworld. Beyond these platitudinous

ideas, there is virtually nothing to excite the aesthetic theorist. In effect, Dickie has all but surrendered to the anti-theorists whom he claims to rebut. We are left finally with little more than the barest description of the institutional character of art: Perhaps we can expect a more interesting and philosophically significant development of the artworld in other writers, such as Arthur Danto, among others. At best, Dickie's work is a stepping stone to the elaboration of a more insightful and penetrating theory of art.

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Cleo Mc Nelly Kearns, *T. S. Eliot and Indic Traditions: A study in Poetry and Belief*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1987, pp. XIII + 286.

The influence of Indic philosophy on the poetry of T. S. Eliot has been viewed as a baffling issue. Ever since *The Waste Land* appeared with its Sanskrit endings and *Four Quarters*, with its introduction of the Gita episode, different critics have, in their own way, analyzed the relevance or irrelevance of these Indic sources to the body of the work. While critics like Matthiessen, Helen Gardner and B. Rajan are not happy

with Eliot's incorporation of these Indian elements, Philip Wheelwright defends Eliot's such practice. In his view, it enables Eliot in explicating his philosophical themes. However, Professor Cleo Mc Nelly Kearns' approach sounds strikingly fresh, original and unique. Although Prof. Kearns is well aware of the obvious hazards one ought to face while undertaking such a study, ("... this understanding involves travel over some rather distant frontiers of language, literature, and religious practice...") she has been considerably successful in developing profound insights into the ever-intriguing problem. The author argues that the importance of the Indic sources in structuring the system of Eliot's belief and art, should not be approached as a mere source study or case study. Instead, she discusses the important ramifications of Indic philosophy for Eliot's religious growth, for his formulation of artistic theories, and their practice. The author examines the influence of such thinkers as Irving Babbitt, Paul Elmer More, F.H. Bradley, William James and Bertrand Russell on Eliot, and simultaneously suggests how the realist-idealist debates in western philosophy patterned Eliot's perception and assimilation of Indic thought. The author's final view is that Eliot was more interested in comparing texts and traditions than

in synthesizing various traditions. The juxtaposition of the different traditions and cultural context gave rise to manifold dimensions to Eliot's work, It served to enlarge his sense of the boundaries or what he called the 'frontiers' between many ways of speaking and many kinds of texts. Kearns strongly declares that Indic texts acted not only as a repository of images and allusions for Eliot. Rather, they operated as catalyst for fundamental changes in his thought and style. The major classics of Hindu and Buddhist traditions enabled Eliot to find some definite perspectives, and he intersected them with his own growing religious convictions and his mode of writing.

The second chapter of part I is devoted to the study of Hindu

tradition, and, in particular, to the ideas contained in the Vedas and the upanishads and the Gita. The theories of Shankara, Paul Deussen, Patanjali and James Woods are presented with a remarkable precision and clarity. Similarly, Chapter three in the same section concentrates on the ideas represented by Buddhist tradition. These discussions aim at our understanding of Eliot's theory of art and practice in a more comprehensive way.

The book speaks for itself with an eloquence which comes from its own merits. It has been planned both soundly and comprehensively. The treatment has been increasingly meticulous and sensible, fulfilling the promises implicit in that plan.

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