Definitions of Art. STEPHEN DAVIES. Cornell University Press, 1991. Pp. x, 243.

Stephen Davies focuses on a topic that has remained a vital issue in discussions of art since Plato sought to regulate its impact on society in ancient times. In this volume, Davies traces the recent history of the interest in defining "art" through the writings of Anglo-American philosophers that follow Morris Weitz' well-known 1956 essay, "The Role of Theory in Aesthetics." Influenced by the writings of Wittgenstein, Weitz led a move against essentialism in theorizing about art; Davies thoroughly canvasses the literature inspired by Weitz, categorizing definitions as either functional, procedural, historical or intentional. Davies' ultimate goal is to develop a version of the procedural approach inspired by the institutional theory of art of George Dickie. In spite of recent trends to the contrary (for example, Arthur Danto's speculations on the end of art, and a redirecting of attention away from definitions to other issues in aesthetics), Davies succeeds not only in adding clarity and insight to the varieties of definitions that persist, he also rejuvenates the project of defining itself.

The two halves of the text complement each other: the first part focuses on types of definitions, setting up the dichotomy between procedural and functional; Part II introduces basic ontological questions surrounding the art object as a uniquely human creation, weaves the issue of contextuality into the discussion of definitions, and entertains the notion that artistic intentions play a role in creativity that supercedes "impersonal" artistic conventions (p. 118). Oddly enough, the overall conclusion is understated given the scope of the analysis; Davies does not end up with "a new theory" (p. ix) nor a "formulaic definition" but simply with a set of observations that best "characterize" art (p. 218).

Chapter 1 grounds the book in Weitz' well-known objections to defining art: a project Davies ultimately judges to be philosophically unsuccessful in spite of its lingering impact on the field. In reviewing the well-rehearsed arguments against Weitz, Davies points out how the essay redirected attention away from the search for intrinsic, exhibited, defining characteristics of art to a consideration of complex, nonexhibited relational features, thereby opening the door to definitions which sought the essence of art in features other than observable ones (like imitation, beauty, or significant form).

Definitions which subsequently arose came to be primarily of two types: functional (where arthood is a status an object attains in virtue of its fulfilling a function) and procedural (where status is attained in accord with certain artworld rules and conventions). The former is most aptly exemplified by Monroe C. Beardsley's writings on art (primarily his 1958 work, *Aesthetics: Problems in the Theory of Criticism)* which defines a work in terms of the rewarding aesthetic experience one derives from art, while the latter is exemplified by the institutional theory of art as it has evolved in the writings of George Dickie (beginning with his 1974 *Art and the Aesthetic: An Institutional Analysis* and his subsequent 1984 *The Art Circle: A Theory of Art*). Davies devotes an entire chapter to each of these approaches (Chapters 3 and 4) after taking some time in Chapter 2 to establish the dichotomy as operative yet overlooked in the literature of the past several decades.

It is important to note that, as with many twentieth century writings on art, Davies is attempting to explain "the hard cases," such as the paradigm *objet trouvé* by Marcel Duchamp entitled *Fountain*, the piece of driftwood removed from the beach and turned into art discussed by Dickie, and recent incarnations of 1960s

conceptual art. These cases serve both as the motivation and the focal point for a calculated reinvigoration of "art" since these objects become art by falling into a "gap left by the separation of the function of artworks from the procedures used in their creation." (p. 39) By deliberately setting out to thwart the aesthetic pleasure upon which an object's status as art once depended, they undermine the functional approach. They can be accomodated on the procedural approach, however, since all that is required is that such pieces be created in accordance with the practices already established by the artworld. Their status as art is controversial because they exhibit an inherent "tension" that only a procedural approach can resolve. Hence, Davies' preference for a procedural definition like Dickie's.

Part II moves the proceduralist agenda forward by considering two questions of ontology: Chapter 5 asks whether artifactuality is a necessary condition for art (a condition which, coincidentally, is shared by both Beardsley and Dickie and many others) while Chapter 6 explores the indissolubility condition. Weaker than the artifactuality condition, it requires that an artwork be embodied in a physical object, thereby guaranteeing its indissolubility with "human 'forms of life'"(p. 117). In both cases, Davies refreshingly breaks with the dominant view. He argues that an artwork need not be an artifact, in the traditional sense of the term, whereby "artifact" is defined as "that which is modified by work, by contrast with that which occurs in its natural state" (p. 123). Because a piece of driftwood which is moved to an art gallery is considered art without its being modified or worked on, it can only be considered an artifact in the sense that it "has significance for the members of a culture" (p. 124), that is, as it acquires social meaning and importance. Similarly, Davies is unpersuaded by the necessity of the indissolubility condition. Calling upon the work of Richard Wollheim and Arthur Danto, the most that he is willing to acknowledge is the weaker claim that "our concept of art would not be what it is were it not for the fact that most art making in the past has involved the physical embodiment of artworks and/or their instances" (p. 156). Thus, although artworks have traditionally been artifacts embodied in physical objects, it does not follow that they necessarily are. Most importantly—especially when it comes to determining the status of "the hard cases"—they can be successfully distinguished from natural objects in virtue of their connection to artistic practices without without relying upon the artifactuality and indissolubility conditions.

Following quite naturally from the attempt to locate art in its social context, Davies presents an overview of the historicist definitions of Lucian Krukowski, Noël Carroll, and Jerrold Levinson in Chapter 7. Although he is sympathetic to the role that the continuity of art practices has played and continues to play in objects acquiring art status, he worries that too strong an historicist view (for example, Krukowski's) may lead to a nominalist rather than a functional or a procedural account. (By "nominalist" Krukowski intends the view "that what is art is what is consistent with what has been called art in the past and will be called art in the future" (p. 166).) Carroll's narrational theory, on the other hand, "aims to steer a path between a purely functionalist definition of art and the nihilism of nominalism" (p. 168) by locating artworks in a tradition of practices that, at its core, defines art functionally. But the "narration" that serves to connect artworks on the periphery to those at the core lacks structure, and falls short of the formalized rule-governed practices central to a procedural approach like the institutional theory. Only Levinson offers an account that connects the artwork to something outside the continuum of practices, namely, to "an independent individual who makes ref-

erence via his intentions to the history of art" (p. 169), although his intentional account also remains unsatisfactory, for some of the same reasons raised against the narrational theory plus the fact that he sees intentions as both necessary (as in Dickie's theory) *and* sufficient (too strong a claim for Davies). Davies acknowledges the potential these theories have to offer in positing something *like* the formalized structure of the institutional theory as he turns, in the final two chapters, to the role that intentionality and conventions play in objects acquiring the status of art.

Chapter 8 is the most stimulating and original part of the book: its core and apex. In rejecting the intentional fallacy, Davies asks provocative questions about artists' intentions, not all of which are fully answered: how they "filter down" to levels at which they might determine a work's aesthetic properties, how they affect the interpretation(s) yielded by a work, and most importantly, how they interact with what he calls "impersonal" artistic conventions (p. 182). Again, he resists the dominant view (in particular, Susan Feagin's critique of the institutional theory which sees intentions and conventions in competition with each other) and argues instead for a symbiotic relation between the two in which artistic conventions—as institutionalized within the artworld—take "logical primacy" over intentions (p. 204). Thus, although intentions are "critically relevant" to an object's status as art, it does not follow that they must be "treated as autonomous determinants of the conventions in terms of which critical practice structures its interpretations of artworks" (p. 119). Rather, artistic conventions capture and constitute the practices of the artworld; "art making and art interpreting are activities structured by social practices and conventions" which are necessarily "institutionally structured," that is, "art is necessarily, and not merely incidentally, social" (p. 217). In his final chapter, Davies unsurprisingly defends his reformulation of the institutional theory as a type of procedural definition and concludes that the functional and intentional approaches pale by comparison.

Davies presents the reader with a sterling review of the literature and a stimulating discussion of the role of conventions in the making and appreciating of contemporary art. His emphasis on the *social* nature of art leads one to wonder how other recent inquiries into the multilayered contextuality of the artistic enterprise might fare under his perusal, for example, feminist critiques of traditional definitions of "art," challenges to the elitist makeup of the Artworld (he argues that the successful expansion or alteration of conventions must be by an agent with a "recognized, established position of prominence with the Artworld" (p. 221)), and opposition to his very choice of paradigms: in addition to Duchamp, the "hard cases" include works by John Cage, Andy Warhol, Olivier Messiaen, Jorge Luis Borges, and Gerald Hoffnung. *Definitions of Art* is essential reading for anyone interested in the history of aesthetics and as it informs the current dialectic on art.

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