

Fluxworld: The Non-existent Distinction between Art and Life

“The meaning is the use” - Wittgenstein

Defining the word ‘art’ has triggered millennia of human pursuit and development in every sector of human civilization. We have toiled to understand it, to change it, and even to embody it. Yet, the definition of art is still as, if not more, vague and challenged than ever before. Joseph Kosuth, an American conceptual artist declared that, “the twentieth century brought in a time which could be called ‘the end of philosophy and the beginning of art’” (Kosuth; Harrison & Wood, 853). Art could no longer be defined as pertaining to something outside of itself; what art is will be meaningless unless its definition is established by the creators of art.

The argument to establish why the definition of art should come from the artists rather than the outsiders will be based on the examination of the application of Danto’s institutionalism to the Fluxus movement. The goal of this paper is to prove that Danto’s view on Institutionalism does not adequately define or express the role of art by examining the Fluxus movement as the main example against Institutionalism, for the Artworld as according to Danto is inherently a part of the greater world. First, Danto’s institutionalism will be discussed. Second, what the Fluxus movement consisted of will be evaluated. Third, Danto’s institutionalism will then be applied to the Fluxus movement to demonstrate the inadequacy of the theory in defining art. This will show that the Fluxus movement is one of many other artistic movements to which institutionalism

cannot be applied. To simplify, the argument follows a format of *abductio ad absurdum*; it becomes apparent that the externally applied definition of art cannot be a legitimate definition of art.

Danto's Institutionalism:

Arthur C. Danto has been a leader in new developmental theories of art. In his 1964 essay, "The Artworld", he introduced the institutional theory of art, which states that a work is considered to be art if and only if it has physical properties that relate to the established theories of art so that it exemplifies the "is" of artistic identification. The basic topics that are discussed in "The Artworld" are about the position of the artworld as a legitimate societal group that dictates the culture that represents art. Danto explicitly aligns himself with the idea that true understanding of art comes from envisioning the possibilities of art within the realms of the artworld, just as his title suggests. To be absolutely blunt, Danto's basic claim seems to be that things can be art and appreciated as art if and only if we accept the rules and ideas of the artworld; previous identifications of art are illegitimate and primitive.

Danto begins by introducing the Western philosophy of art with Plato and his idea of mimesis, which defined art for the many centuries. The imitation theory of art is described to be very basic and rudimentary and rightfully so. Imitating reality is not a sufficient condition in the occidental world for art and has not been since Impressionism, a movement that initiated modern art in the history of art.

However, we must first try to understand why Danto seeks to discredit the imitation theory. This path will show ultimately how and why Danto's position takes on

an evolutionary role in theories of art's identity. The imitation theory of art evaluates art by considering how well the art work depicts reality. For example, a painting will be superior to another painting if the subject matter portrayed is a more accurate presentation of reality under the imitation theory of art. So a trompe-l'œil, or trick of the eye, style of painting of grapes will be considered to be better than a painting of grapes that just has clusters of purple circles. Until photography came along, the role of art was to translate reality exactly as it was because art was the only thing that could visually capture the fleeting moment. Art was a necessary tool for humans to record visual reality and that was all that it was allowed to be. Art found its soul when humanity was presented with photography, the perfect imitation of reality. It was time for art to develop a new identity for itself.

A theory that came after the imitation theory is known as the reality theory of art. With the reality theory, the works of art were "not imitations, but new entities" (Danto 29). The art works did not have to mirror reality perfectly to be considered a worthy work of art. Art could finally be freed from the restrictions of the imitation theory. It was no longer a requirement for an art work to depict reality exactly as it is or had to depict reality at all. A trompe-l'œil painting of grapes is not necessarily worthier than a painting of clusters of purple dots as grapes. With this new freedom in theories of art, new directions must be taken. So, to better transmit his idea of reality theory, Danto develops a character, Testadura who goes through various artworks without much understanding or depth, an invitation for Danto to explain how Testadura can learn to view artworks in a more intellectual way through reality theory.

Danto calls Testadura a philistine, but what we must understand is that he represents us, the general population of the world and that everyone, including Danto himself, was once a Testadura. So when Testadura sees nothing but a paint-streaked bed for Rauschenberg's "Bed" and nothing but a misshapen bed in Oldenburg's "The Home", we are forced to see ourselves as beginning learners as well. It is too easy to dismiss the fact that we all were lost once, like Testadura, and still might be, in trying to figure out what art is. We learn from Testadura's mistakes and approach a definite kind of idea called *artistic identification*. Artistic identifications give artwork layers in which it can be viewed, and often they are the ideas and thoughts behind the work, not the physical and literal state of the work itself. Art is identified by means of the "is" of artistic identification, not through the "is" of identity of predication.

For example, when one looks at Gauguin's *Vision After the Sermon*, a Symbolist painting, one must look for clues within the artwork that tells us the difference between real world and vision. Gauguin uses visual representation with the contrast in size of figures and shapes that indicate an unreal environment, the emotionally charged usage of color red, and the simplified portrayal of humans and the landscape as influenced by primitivism. The women who are seeing the vision are stranded in reality because they are not directly looking at the Angel and Jacob fighting. Angel and Jacob are accordingly in a fantasy world of their own which the women can only envision, but cannot concretely be a part of. The painting is not a mirror image of reality in content and in the style of the way it is painted. Thus, under the imitation theory of art it would not be considered to be a very successful piece since in the real world, we do not see biblical figures fighting angels nor do we perceive our atmosphere to be just red. Yet, those

aspects are actually beside the point in considering the worth of Gauguin's *Vision After the Sermon* with the reality theory of art. Gauguin's incorporation of primitivism, religious references, and symbolism all within the work make it a significant and memorable piece of art even today. Thus, it is clear that Gauguin's work is art because it contains intentional usage of "is" of artistic identification through the aforementioned visual indicators of representation that lead to greater symbolic meanings that the work contains.

Still, there are works of art that are harder to explain in such terms because through historical progressions, art became more and more symbolic and representational through theories rather than visual clues from the works. After Symbolism or the Der Blaue Reiter movement, Constructivism appears. Constructivist works cannot be analyzed in the same fashion as Gauguin's *Vision After the Sermon* since they almost always only depicted abstract shapes. The reason they did this was not to imitate anything at all. This notion did not only hold just for Constructivism, but became the overarching aim of modern art. In their 1912 essay, "On Cubism", theorists Gleizes and Metzinger declared that art should "let the picture imitate nothing and let it present nakedly its *raison d'être*" (196, Gleizes and Metzinger). Art was unraveling itself away from the days of mimesis at an accelerating pace.

The institutional theory of art was developed to guide us through the complex world of art and its identity. By the time Dadaism was at its peak around 1916 to 1920, the general public was lost in attempting to understand what art is. Even years after its initiation, most people in this world are still unable to say why Dadaism, with its illogical whimsy and humorous anti-art, was considered art. Duchamp's *Fountain* was just like

any other urinal, except that it specifically was considered to be art, which remains to be counter-intuitive to most people's understanding of art even today. And when Pop art came into the scene in the 1950's, the distinction between art and non-art became even more blurred with works like Andy Warhol's Brillo Box, which was an exact recreation of a common Brillo box. It was as if Duchamp's unaltered common objects known as readymades were not enough to represent art; reality had to be manufactured into exact copies of itself. Objects of reality took on meta-existence, meta-reality in the name of art, as if to declare that intentional mimesis and literal mirror-images that Socrates sought to reject as art did have a place in the artworld. Within this continually evolving idea of the definition of art, most people in this world were and still are Testaduras. The communication between the people and art faltered and the institutional theory of art seemed like the only way to reestablish the long-lost connection.

As Danto declared, "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" (32). With the institutional theory of art, education and experience are absolutely necessary for everyone to understand the "is" of artistic identification and ultimately, the key identity of art as a participant of the modern artworld.

The Fluxus Movement:

Fluxus is an art movement that began in the 1950's and was primarily based in New York. It was part of the overarching conceptual movement known as neo-Dadaism that included vast number of concepts and movements such as Abstract Expressionism, Pop Art, Beat Poetry, and many more that were influenced in varying degrees by

Dadaism (Hapgood, 11). The basic thoughts behind Fluxus were that it emphasized simplicity of ideas and the practice of art-making to show that the line between art and life should be ultimately indistinguishable. It stood for anti-establishment and anti-commercialism like Dadaism which came before it, yet in its theoretical core, Fluxus sought social and political betterment through art at a higher level. The movement encompassed all genres of art such as music, performance art, assemblages, paintings, and more. Fluxus became a world-wide movement that involved artists such as John Cage, Yoko Ono, Nam June Paik, Benjamin Patterson, Allison Knowles, Dick Higgins, Joseph Beuys, Le Monte Young, George Brecht and many more, but the most important figure was George Maciunas. He wrote the Fluxus Manifesto in 1963, in which he defined the goals of the movement:

“PURGE the world of bourgeois sickness, intellectual, professional, and commercialized culture, purge the world of dead art, imitation, artificial art, abstract art, illusionistic art, serial art, purge the world of Europeanism. PROMOTE a revolutionary flood and tide in art. Promote living art or NON-ART-Reality to be fully grasped by all peoples, not only critics, dilettantes, and professionals. FUSE the cadres of cultural, social and political revolutionaries into a united front and action” (Kellein, 72)

Through Fluxus, Maciunas did not just seek social change, but wanted a revolution through artistic means. How this was embodied by the movement itself can be better understood by examining Maciunas’ efforts in bringing the movement together through his pursuit of artistic and social ideals.

Maciunas was originally from Lithuania but he and his family moved to the U.S. during WWII. He first studied design and fine arts at Cooper Union in New York and then eventually graduated with an architecture degree from the Carnegie Institute of Technology in Pittsburgh (Kellein, 21). Although Maciunas’ art education and professional practices in architecture were greatly valuable to the Fluxus movement, he

ultimately chose to give up his career path in architecture to pursue the initiation of a world-wide art movement. The roots of Fluxus were present before Maciunas was involved; John Cage was already practicing and teaching the importance of chance in his experimental composition classes in the late 1950's that were attended by a couple of early Fluxus artists such as George Brecht and Dick Higgins. Also, the interconnected theories of many artists within the greater movement of neo-Dadaism that Fluxus found itself to be a part of were prevalent long before Maciunas.

Maciunas himself was a talented artist and contributed original works to the movement, the most famous one being *In Memoriam to Adriano Olivetti*, which was a performance art that involved a group of people who had to follow simple directions such as lifting and lowering of bowler hats, opening and closing of umbrellas, and making sounds with one's mouth and tongue, all in the order provided by the numbers that the adding machine produced (Kellein, 43). The point of this piece was to demonstrate the "paradoxical coupling of economic order and empty gestures" (Kellein, 43) that was founded on the evident self-irony that the movement itself knowingly possessed. Yet, Maciunas' greatest contribution lies in keeping Fluxus together and giving the movement a definite objective. It was Maciunas who comprehensively gave Fluxus greater social aspirations and a collective identity. His self-declared position of being the chairman of Fluxus was rightfully earned.

Maciunas pursued many ambitious dreams for the sake of Fluxus. To name a few of his numerous projects, he published the works of many Fluxus artists, organized Fluxus festivals, he started a Fluxus cooperative, and he even attempted to obtain a Fluxus island.

After Maciunas left his architectural practices in the late 1950's to focus on art, Maciunas' first project involved a one-man publication of journals and anthologies of avant-garde art done by his colleagues such as John Cage, Dick Higgins, Joseph Byrd, La Monte Young, and Ray Johnson all under the name of Fluxus. Even in Fluxus' formative years, Maciunas firmly held onto his principle of disassociating monetary values from the artworks presented by funding the publications with his own income earned through doing graphic design works for the U.S. Air Force during the early 1960's, which is the reason why Fluxus never became financially successful; Maciunas did not allow the movement to be based on commercial interests. He wanted the movement to succeed on artistic merit and therefore dared to hope that the published works will pay for their production, as well as be a source of reliable income for future projects (Kellein, 41).

The first Fluxus festival happened on June 9th, 1962 in Germany (Kellein, 61). Maciunas made the festival possible by contacting museum directors and important artists in Europe such as Nam June Paik in 1961 about which artists should be involved to best represent the Fluxus movement. In his letter to Paik, Maciunas declared that the "Festival will have to be 'new music' - more post-Cage, less pre-Cage or Cage, more neo-dada, no reactionaries, imitators etc. etc" (Kellein, 57) and in this way, Maciunas influenced the European conception of Fluxus, although the events that were held in Europe were usually under the broader title of Neo-Dadaism as introduced by the organizers and museum directors (Kellein, 62). Maciunas himself declared the motto of the Fluxus to the audience with the statement "Anti-art is life, is nature, is true reality-it is one and all" (Kellein, 62), sharing that the movement sought the end of separation of art and life. Fluxus festivals in the U.S. started in 1963 in New York and many artists like

Nam June Paik and Ben Vautier who participated in the events in Europe came to be a part of the movement.

A Fluxhouse Cooperative began in 1966, when Maciunas took advantage of the “Experimental Housing Bill” that the U.S. government drafted so that artists could have their own studio places in New York. Maciunas advertised that “Fluxhouses were formed in 1966 as cooperatives consisting solely of artists, film-makers, musicians, dancers, designers, etc. seeking adequate combined work and living space” (Kellein, 133) in his flyer. Maciunas put in great effort in renovating, preserving, and recruiting artists for this project, but in the end, he never got the credit he deserved. Fluxhouse did not fully succeed as exactly as Maciunas envisioned. Legal issues about the ownership of the buildings occurred that hindered further developments, the financial and political support that he needed from the National Endowment of the Arts and the city of New York were not fully met or were ignored, and many artists whom Maciunas sought out did not end up purchasing the renovated spaces or were unreliable in their support (Kellein 134). But Maciunas “continued to work at becoming realtor, client, planner, site agent, and book-keeper” (Kellein, 135) for his vision of Fluxus, even though he never received enough credit for all of his struggles. His genuine efforts for the sake of the arts were eclipsed by the involvement of more powerful organizations and groups that did not share the same vision that Maciunas had. To address the unacknowledged significance of Maciunas’ role, his friend and fellow artist, Jonas Mekas wrote in 1994 to the journal *Real Estate* that “So-Ho is here not because of the preservationists or City Planning Commission, but thanks to the vision and persistence of the indefatigable George Maciunas who in 1967, on 80 Wooster Street, established the first So-Ho cooperative building, and by sheer

willpower, by defying the Planners, Attorney General, and preservationists created So-Ho” (Kellein, 141).

However, difficulties that Maciunas encountered did not deter him from envisioning greater aspiration for Fluxus. The movement bloomed in the 1960’s through festivals, publications, and active participation and creation of art by the involved members. Fluxus became a globally recognized art movement due to the raising prominence of certain artists such as Cage, Paik, and Ono, whose marriage to John Lennon of the Beatles even linked Fluxus to the popular culture of the era. Through it all, Maciunas meticulously planned bigger goals for the future of Fluxus. One of his dreams was to purchase an island and call it the Fluxus Island, a place in which all of the artists could live and create their works. He sincerely pursued this dream by making a trip to Europe in 1972 to a couple of islands in the Mediterranean Sea such as Madeira and Azores. In Greece, he received a contract to buy an island for twenty thousand dollars, but the cost of the total operation, which included the cost of building houses, a yacht to access the island, and a Greek cook to accompany the artists, came to be about hundred thousand dollars (Kellein, 128). He actively wrote letters to his colleagues and asked them to be a part of this project by asking for monetary contributions. He even mentioned it to people as late as 1976, but “no one ever showed interest” (Kellein, 129). Maciunas’ ambitions for Fluxus sometimes seemed greater than what the movement itself could contain.

The utopian ideals for art that Maciunas had were bold enough to propel the entirety of the Fluxus movement, even though not all of his projects ended up being successful. Many prominent artists and aspects of Fluxus have not been fully examined

because the focus of the movement for the purpose of this essay needed to be primarily on Maciunas due to the fact that his passion and ideals were the driving force behind the foundation of Fluxus.

Application of Danto's Institutionalism to the Fluxus Movement:

Danto declared that contemporary artworks would not “be artworks without the theories and the histories of the Artworld” (Danto, 34). Based on the aforementioned discussion of the Fluxus movement, this specific claim and Danto's supporting arguments for the claim are what will be contested.

According to Smith, much of modern art in the 1950's and 1960's had “presumptions about the autonomy of art, coupled with an existentialist emphasis on the individual, [which] resulted in a separation of art from social praxis” (Smith 68). Practicing art for art's own sake became the most important and obvious choice for most artists of movements such as Abstract Expressionism, Post-Painterly Abstraction, and 10th Street Abstractionism. Fluxus was unlike any of the movements of the era, due to the fact that for Fluxus art did not just separate itself from social praxis; rather, art became the social praxis. Thus, it attempted to defy even the modernistic approach of viewing art to be autonomous from social conventions with existentialistic self-identity. This was the principle that Fluxus artists followed and Maciunas himself proposed.

Fluxus then can be explained through a Wittgensteinian viewpoint of deriving the meaning through our use of the word in question, or in this case, deriving the meaning from art-making practice in how the word ‘art’ came to be identified within the

movement. The way in which the use became the definition for Fluxus can be understood through Smith's explanation that Fluxus should be identified by its attitude.

What Smith meant by explaining Fluxus through its attitude becomes clear when one considers Cage's rationalization that "the attitude that I take is that everyday life is more interesting than forms of celebration [art], when we become aware of it. That is when our intentions go down to zero. Then suddenly you notice that the world is magical" (Smith). As one of the founding members of Fluxus, Cage was immeasurable in his influence. If Maciunas' efforts became the collective will that drove Fluxus forward, Cage's views gave Fluxus a solid and necessary foundation for the movement's conception. Maciunas also made such attitude integral to Fluxus. He corresponded with over twenty artists about the aims of Fluxus and declared to them that "Fluxus should become a way of life not a profession" (88, Kellein). In light of such principles, Fluxus as an attitude becomes a legitimate claim to make. Life and art should not be distinguished in viewing Fluxus, for in simplest terms, life equals art and art equals life. This attitude can be found in every Fluxus work, event, and even in the most ambitious goals that Maciunas had. For example, *Solo for Sick Man* by Maciunas categorized different sounds that a sick man makes as music, such as "cough", "gargle", "draw air (pitched)", "snore (non-pitched)", "shake pills in bottle", "drop pills over floor", "blow wet nose" (62, Kellein). Other works by prominent members of the movement include pieces like George Brecht's *Exit* simply involved the word 'Exist' written on a chalkboard as a word event, Paik's *Violin to be Dragged on the Street* included a violin attached to a string to be dragged around to show that the sound that is made in such way is also music (Glueck), and Ono's *Concert Piece* that instructs the artist: "when the

curtain rises, go hide and wait until everybody leaves you. Come out and play” (Kellein, 105). All of these works illustrate Fluxus’ attitude towards having art and life become one.

Defining Fluxus through its attitude shows us how the meaning is based on the use. Since art does not get separated from life, the use then is derived from life itself. What distinguishes life in itself from life as art is the acknowledgment that life can be art and that art can become life. This supports the neo-Wittgensteinian view of art as an open concept (Carroll, 210). Weitz wrote that the practice of art, the usage, consists of “ever present changes and novel creations [that] makes it logically impossible to ensure any set of defining properties” (Weitz; Carroll, 210). This position often gets interpreted as just viewing art as an indefinable concept. I would like to propose that there is an additional feature to this claim. It is not the case that art *cannot* be defined, but that art does not *need* to be defined; it is enough for us to be able to identify it. Art is not the only term that often gets defined just through its use. We do not need to grasp a concrete definition of love or happiness to be able to identify or to experience it. Also, we do not have to ask for the definition of everyday objects such as cups or lamps to be able to know what they are (Carroll, 209). Another example is a child’s first utterance in acknowledgement of his or her parent such as “mama” or “dada”, which does not need a specific definition as a prerequisite. The Fluxus movement cannot be understood without its attitude and it is precisely this attitude that does not need to be defined to be known.

As explained above, the meaning of art depends solely on the movement’s attitude when considering art in the context of Fluxus. If one then attempts to apply Institutionalism to Fluxus with this view in mind, it is obvious that Danto’s argument

cannot hold. For Danto, what art was could only be defined through the “theories and the histories of the Artworld” (Danto, 34). A created work was evaluated within the context of the Artworld and through this process it could either be rejected or accepted as art. It is undeniable that Fluxus was conceived through the theories and histories that came before it; its relation to neo-Dadaism and Dadaism is crucial to a complete understanding of the movement. Yet, that is not how art came to be defined. The theories and histories that Danto emphasized are rightfully significant for art, but what needs to be objected to within Danto’s argument is the implicit view that the Artworld exists on a separate level from the real world. Fluxus art denied the Artworld in that they did not see the need to separate the Artworld from the real world. Just as art and life became one, the Artworld and the real world should not be distinguished when considering Fluxus as movement. The attitude that Fluxus artists had goes beyond the boundaries of Danto’s Institutionalism, especially in light of Maciunas’ passion that viewed Fluxus to be found in all spheres of life, in everyday events, in Fluxus house cooperatives as just living spaces, and even in the attempted idealistic vision of a complete change in lifestyle through the Fluxus Island. For Fluxus, “the ultimate goal [was] to alter world history not art history” (Smith).

Danto’s Institutionalism views art and art movements solely through a retrospective lens. Testaduras are not the only ones who can only identify art by constantly relying on the past to provide clues about the meaning of art. Except for practicing artists, all who are in control of the Artworld, such as art critics, art theorists, and art historians also only rely on the past theories and histories of the Artworld to incompletely or even mistakenly identify the constantly evolving concept and practice of

art. Art as it is happening now will never be fully grasped by anyone other than the involved artists themselves. The Fluxus attitude could only be had by the movement's artists; others could only attempt to understand it and could never fully embody it like Maciunas, Cage, Paik, Ono, Brecht, and all other prominent members could. Thus, it can be agreed upon that the artists are only exempt from the category of being Testaduras under Danto's standards. Yet, even this distinction between Testaduras and non-Testaduras then become superfluous, for the Fluxus artists themselves never practiced their art as if they needed to be accepted by the Artworld. The boundaries that separate Testaduras from non-Testaduras were unnecessary and ultimately nonexistent, just like the boundaries between art and life, art history and history, and between the Artworld and the real world. The boundaries only seem necessary when one attempts to understand art through the viewpoint of the institution due to the fact that the institution is solely built on histories and theories of the past.

Fluxus should not be seen as an exception, but as an exemplar of what art is capable of. Danto's Institutionalism does not provide an adequate context to evaluate art, due to the fact that the Artworld cannot embody all of art's possibilities, especially regarding the present changes that art is going through. Fluxus cannot be sufficiently defined through Institutionalism. Danto's *Artworld* mistakenly sees the definition of art as derived from categorizing art through theories and histories; the progress of art cannot and should not be understood retrospectively.

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