

What is the Institutional Theory of Art?

Have you ever paused before a piece of art and asked yourself, 'What exactly makes this art?'

This head-scratching curiosity taps into a longstanding debate among philosophers and art critics about the essence of art, and the results of this debate comprise what we refer to today as Institutional Art Theory.

The Institutional Theory of Art posits that an object is considered art primarily based on its recognition and acceptance by the “artworld” — a collective network that includes institutions, artists, critics, curators, and other stakeholders in the art community.

Championed by philosophers like George Dickie and Arthur Danto, this theory emphasizes the role of societal structures, conventions, and context in determining what qualifies as art. Instead of focusing solely on inherent aesthetic qualities or historical criteria, the Institutional Theory underscores that art’s definition is a product of its positioning and acknowledgment within a broader albeit established art framework.

This article delves into the foundational concepts laid out by these two philosophers, highlighting their lasting impact on how we engage with contemporary art.

Avant-Garde Movements and the Definition of Art

The avant-garde, with its penchant for subverting expectations and norms, played a crucial role in redefining artistic boundaries. Dadaists, for example, introduced found objects into the art context—most famously, Marcel Duchamp’s “Fountain” (1917), a urinal presented as art. This act challenged the notion that art must be crafted by skilled hands or beautified in traditional ways.

Similarly, conceptual artists of the 1960s, like Sol LeWitt and Joseph Kosuth, shifted focus from the physical creation to the ideas and concepts behind the artwork, suggesting that the artistic concept itself could suffice as art.

For example, LeWitt's use of vague instructions for others to execute his artworks challenges traditional notions of authorship and creativity, prompting us to question what constitutes art and the role of the artist's hand in its creation.

These avant-garde movements questioned the very essence of art: Must art be a unique, beautiful object created by an artist? Or could anything chosen by an artist be considered art if placed in an art context?

These questions highlighted the inadequacies of classical aesthetic theories in addressing the complexities of contemporary art, creating a vacuum for new theoretical frameworks.

The Theoretical Foundations by Dickie and Danto

In response to this evolving artistic landscape, philosophers George Dickie and Arthur Danto sought to articulate theories that could encompass these radical forms of art. Dickie introduced the institutional theory of art, suggesting that art is defined not by inherent qualities in the object itself but by the social institutions (galleries, museums, critics) that recognize it as art. This theory helped to formalize the role of cultural and institutional endorsement in elevating objects to the status of art.

Arthur Danto further expanded on these ideas through his concept of the "artworld," a framework that emphasizes the critical role of narratives and theories provided by the art community in defining art.

For Danto, anything can be art if the artworld has a narrative that gives it context and meaning, as seen in his analysis of Warhol's Brillo Boxes, which visually replicated commercial products yet were presented in an art context.

George Dickie: Laying The Framework of Institutional Art

George Dickie's academic journey, rooted in the philosophical investigation of aesthetics, led him to explore the dynamics of art beyond its visual or tactile properties. Dickie was particularly interested in the evolving nature of art and its societal functions, and his work came at a time, during the late 1960's, when the art community was actively debating the essence and boundaries of what could be considered art.

The Concept of Artefact and Appreciation

At the heart of Dickie's institutional theory is the relationship between the artifact (an object made or modified by a human hand) and its appreciation as art, and their definitions are broken down by Dickie as follows:

Artifact: In institutional art theory, an artifact is any object that is presented as a candidate for appreciation. This broad definition allows for a variety of objects, including non-traditional and non-visual objects, to be considered art as long as they are positioned within an art context.

Appreciation: Appreciation refers to the recognition and contemplation of qualities considered worthwhile or aesthetically significant within an artifact.

Basically, an object (or artifact) becomes art when it is appreciated not merely on a personal level but within the frameworks and conventions established by art institutions.

This means that an object is considered art not inherently because of its physical properties, aesthetic value, or creator's intent, but because recognized authorities within the art community—the institution of art if you will, such as curators, critics, gallery owners, and other influential figures in the arts—declare it to be art.

Here's a breakdown of what the Institutional side of art entails:

Endorsement: The artworld is a network that includes various stakeholders like artists, galleries, museums, critics, and academic institutions. According to Dickie, for something to be recognized as art, these players must acknowledge and treat it as such.

Social and Institutional Construct: This approach views art primarily as a social construct. It emphasizes the role of cultural institutions and norms in shaping and defining what is considered art at any given time.

Authority and Power: The theory highlights how power dynamics within the artworld influence artistic recognition and valuation. Those with authority in the artworld have the power to elevate certain works to the status of art, thereby shaping artistic trends and tastes.

Formal Acknowledgment: This theory implies that formal acknowledgment by an artworld institution can be more significant in defining art than the creative process or the finished work itself. This acknowledgment can come through actions such as displaying the work in a prominent gallery, discussing it in scholarly articles, or including it in important exhibitions.

In other words, Dickie's theory shifts the focus from individual aesthetic judgment to collective and institutional validation, suggesting that the identity of something as art is largely determined by the cultural and institutional context in which it is presented and recognized.

Dickie's institutional theory fundamentally reshapes our understanding of how art is identified and valued, emphasizing the power of cultural institutions in shaping artistic landscapes. It acknowledges that what we often celebrate as art is deeply embedded in social constructs and institutional endorsements.

Arthur Danto and His Contributions to Art Theory

While Dickie provided the structural framework of the institutional theory of art, Danto delved deep into the philosophical intricacies of art's nature.

Arthur C. Danto (1924-2013) was a professor of philosophy at Columbia University and a notable art critic for "The Nation" magazine. With a scholarly focus that spanned across aesthetics, the history of philosophy, and philosophical psychology, Danto was particularly renowned for his incisive analysis of the nature of art and its relationship with history and culture.

The Artworld

Danto's claim to fame within institutional art theory is his introduction to the concept of the "artworld". In his 1964 essay "The Artworld," he posited that something becomes art when the artworld has a theory or a narrative that contextualizes an object as art.

His theory proposed that art is an embodied meaning, shaped and recognized through the interpretative actions of the artworld. According to Danto, an artwork is both about something and projects some attitude or point of view, usually by means of a rhetorical ellipsis, which requires context and a theoretical backdrop to be understood.

For me, I like to break down Danto's theory as follows:

The artworld can be understood as a fiction, a constructed narrative, founded on the collective belief that art is a valuable object of our attention and contemplation. It is maintained by the active involvement of its participants—artists, critics, curators, and others—who collectively promote this narrative.

These participants (myself included) are not merely passive observers but dynamic actors who help sustain the illusion that art is an essential tool for understanding and reinterpreting our reality.

In this sense, the artworld functions as a collaborative fiction, wherein each actor plays a crucial role in upholding and evolving our perception of what art is and what it can be. This construct of the artworld allows us to continually rediscover and reshape our world through the lens of artistic expression.

The Indiscernibility of Identicals and the Role of Interpretation

The "Indiscernibility of Identicals" is a philosophical principle stemming from classical logic, often summarized as: if two things are identical, then they share all the same properties.

Arthur Danto applied this principle in a nuanced way within the realm of art criticism, particularly in his discussions about the nature of art and how art is distinguished from ordinary objects. His exploration centered around how artworks that are visually indistinguishable from ordinary objects (like Andy Warhol's Brillo Boxes, which look identical to actual Brillo soap pad boxes) can still be understood as art due to the context and interpretation they are given within the artworld.

A fascinating example of product-related art that challenges traditional notions of what art can be, akin to Warhol's Brillo Boxes, is Tom Sachs' intricate sculptures and installations that recreate modern icons and commercial products using everyday materials.

In this series, Sachs recreates the familiar figure of Hello Kitty using unconventional materials such as plywood, steel, and resin, which diverges from the mass-produced, smooth plastic typically associated with the character's merchandise. This artistic intervention transforms a ubiquitous commercial product into a unique art object, challenging the viewer to reconsider the boundaries between high art and popular culture.

While each sculpture retains the recognizable form of Hello Kitty, Sachs' handcrafted approach and material choice bestow a new, singular identity upon each piece. This manipulation underscores Danto's idea that it is not the visual identity but the context and presentation sanctioned by the artworld that confer the status of "art" upon an object.

Sachs' sculptures exemplify how the same visual signifier—Hello Kitty—can oscillate between being a mere commercial product and a significant artistic creation, depending on the intention behind its re-creation and its presentation within the artworld.

Thanks to Danto, this idea is central to his institutional theory of art, which posits that art is whatever the artworld (a network of artists, critics, museums, galleries, and art historians) accepts as art. The theory underscores that it's not the inherent properties of an object but the meanings, contexts, and narratives imposed by observers and critics that confer the status of "art" onto an object.