



1980

## Aesthetics, Aestheticians, and Critics

Howard S. Becker

---

### Recommended Citation

Becker, H. S. (1980). Aesthetics, Aestheticians, and Critics. *6* (1), 58-68. Retrieved from <https://repository.upenn.edu/svc/vol6/iss1/8>

This paper is posted at ScholarlyCommons. <https://repository.upenn.edu/svc/vol6/iss1/8>  
For more information, please contact [repository@pobox.upenn.edu](mailto:repository@pobox.upenn.edu).

---

## Aesthetics, Aestheticians, and Critics

# Aesthetics, Aestheticians, and Critics

Howard S. Becker

## Aesthetics as Activity

Aestheticians study the premises and arguments people use to justify classifying things and activities as "beautiful," "artistic," "art," "not-art," "good art," "bad art," and so on. They construct systems with which to make and justify such classifications as well as specific instances of their application. Critics apply aesthetic systems to specific art works and arrive at judgments of their worth and explications of what gives them that worth.

In this view aesthetics is an activity rather than a body of doctrine. Aestheticians are not the only people who engage in this activity. Most participants in art worlds make aesthetic judgments frequently. Aesthetic principles, arguments, and judgments make up an important part of the body of conventions by means of which members of art worlds act together. Creating an explicit aesthetic may precede, follow, or be simultaneous with developing the techniques, forms, and works which make up the art world's output, and it may be done by any of the participants in that world. Sometimes artists themselves formulate the aesthetic explicitly, although they often develop it only implicitly through their continuing, daily choices of materials and forms.

In complex and highly developed art worlds, specialized professionals—critics and philosophers—create logically organized and philosophically defensible aesthetic systems, and the creation of aesthetic systems can become a major industry in its own right. An aesthetician whose language foreshadows a sociologically based system I will examine below describes what aestheticians do:

Being a member of the Institution of Art . . . does not presuppose any explicit knowledge of the constitutional and regulative rules of the Institution. To find and formulate these is the job of a special kind of officers of the Institution, the aestheticians or philosophers of art, at least if aesthetics is conceived in the modern way as the philosophical discipline that deals with the concepts we use when we talk about, think about or in other ways "handle" works of art. On the basis of their own understanding of the Institution of Art as a whole, it is the task of aestheticians to analyze the ways all the different persons and groups talk and act as members of the Institution, and through this to see which are the actual rules that make up the logical framework of the Institution and according to which the procedures within the Institution take place. . . .

*Howard S. Becker is Professor of Sociology and Urban Affairs at Northwestern University. His recent work has focused on the use of photography in social science, visual sociology, and the sociology of art.*

Within the Institution of Art specific statements of fact—results of a correctly performed elucidation and interpretation of a work of art, say—entail specific evaluations. Constitutive rules lay down specific criteria of evaluation that are binding for members of the Institution. [Kjølrup 1976:47–48]

We need not believe that it works so neatly to see that art world participants understand the role of aestheticians and aesthetics this way.

An art world has many uses for an explicit aesthetic system. It ties the activities of participants to the tradition of the art, justifying their demands for the resources and advantages ordinarily available to people who produce that kind of art. To be specific, if I can argue cogently that jazz merits as serious consideration on aesthetic grounds as other forms of art music, then as a jazz player I can compete for grants and fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts and faculty positions in music schools, perform in the same halls as symphony orchestras, and require the same attention to the nuances of my work as the most "serious" classical composer or performer. An aesthetic shows that, on general grounds successfully argued to be valid, what art world members do belongs to the same class as other activities already enjoying the advantages of being "art."

A well-argued and successfully defended aesthetic also guides working participants in the production of specific art works. Among the things they keep in mind in making the innumerable small decisions that cumulatively shape the work are whether and how those decisions might be defended on general grounds. Of course, working artists do not refer every small problem to its most general philosophical grounding to decide how to deal with it, but they know when their decisions run afoul of such theories, if only through a vague sense of something "wrong." A general aesthetic comes into play more explicitly when someone suggests a major change in conventional practice. If, as a jazz player, I want to give up the conventional twelve- and thirty-two bar formats in which improvising has traditionally taken place in favor of those in which the length of phrases and sections is among the elements to be improvised, then I need a defensible explanation of why such a change should be made.

A coherent and defensible aesthetic, further, can help stabilize values and thus regularize practice. Stabilizing value is not just a philosophical exercise; I am not talking about value in the ordinary sociological sense, but rather about attributes and objects people find valuable. Art world participants who agree on a work's value can act toward it in roughly similar ways. An aesthetic providing a basis on which people can assign the same value to things in a reliable and dependable way makes regular patterns of cooperation possible. When values are stable, and can be depended on to be stable, other things stabilize as well:



the monetary value of works and thus the business arrangements on which the art world runs, the reputations of artists and collectors, and the worth of institutional and personal collections. The aesthetic created by aestheticians justifies the selections of collectors by providing a theoretical rationale for their activity.

From this point of view, aesthetic value arises out of a consensus of the participants in an art world. Without that consensus, or just to the degree that one does not exist, value does not exist in any sociologically meaningful sense. (By this I do not suggest a sociological imperialism over theories of value, but rather the notion that judgments of value not held jointly by members of an art world cannot provide the basis for collective activity which assumes those judgments, and thus do not affect their activities significantly, if at all.) A work is deemed good, therefore valuable, through the achievement of consensus about the basis on which it is to be judged and through the application of the agreed-on aesthetic principles to the particular case.

But many styles and schools compete for attention within an organized art world, demanding that their works be shown, published, or performed in place of those produced by adherents of other styles and schools. Since the art world's distribution system has a finite capacity, all works and schools cannot be presented by it and thus be eligible for the rewards and advantages of presentation. Groups compete for access to those rewards, among other ways, by logical argument proving why they merit presentation. Logical analysis seldom settles arguments over the allocation of resources, but participants in art worlds, and especially the people who control access to distribution channels, often feel that what they do must be logically defensible. The heat arising in discussions of aesthetics usually occurs because what is being decided is not only an abstract philosophical question but also an allocation of valuable resources. Whether jazz is "really" music or photography "really" art, whether free-form jazz is "really" jazz and therefore music or fashion photographs are "really" photography and therefore art are in part discussions about whether people who play free-form jazz can perform in jazz clubs for the already existing jazz audience and whether fashion photographs can be exhibited and sold in important galleries and museums.

Aestheticians, then, provide that element in the battle for recognition of particular styles and schools which consists of making the arguments to convince other participants in an art world that the work deserves, on logically argued grounds, inclusion within whatever categories that world concerns itself with. The conservatism of art worlds, arising out of the way conventional practices cluster in neatly meshed packages of mutually adjusted activities, materials, and places, means that changes will not find an easy re-

ception. Most changes proposed to participants in art worlds are minor, leaving untouched most of the ways things are conventionally done. The world of symphonic music, for instance, has not changed the length of concert programs very much in recent years, for the very good reason that, because of union agreements, it would increase their costs to lengthen the programs and, because audiences expect eighty or ninety minutes of music for the price of a ticket, they dare not shorten them very much. (That was not always the case. Probably as a result of the unionization of musicians, among other things, concert programs have shortened appreciably since, say, Beethoven's time, when *one* concert, for instance, contained two symphonies, a piano concerto, a concert aria and duet for voices, and a period of Beethoven improvising on the piano [Forbes 1970:255].) Nor has the basic instrumentation of the orchestra changed, nor have the tonal materials used (i.e., the conventional tempered chromatic scale), nor the places in which the music is presented. Because of all these conservative pressures, someone must make a strong argument if some substantially new practice, even a minor one, is to infiltrate an existing art world.

Readers of aesthetic works cannot fail to notice the moralistic tone of the writing. Aestheticians take it for granted that their job is to find a foolproof formula by which things which do not *deserve* to be called art are weeded out from the works which have *earned* that honorific title. I emphasize "deserve" and "earn" because aesthetic writing insists on a real moral difference between art and not-art. Aestheticians do not intend simply to classify things into useful categories, as we might classify species of plants, but rather to separate the deserving from the undeserving, and to do it definitively. They do not want to take an inclusive approach to art, counting in everything that might conceivably add interest or value; they take an exclusionary position, rather, looking for a defensible line of reasoning to validate the omission of unworthy work. The nature of the enterprise—the bestowing of honorific titles—requires them to rule some things out, for there is no special honor in a title every conceivable object or activity is entitled to. Since bestowing the title "art" involves moral elements, aestheticians emphasize a foolproof formula; ideally, there should be no ambiguous cases. That aesthetic positions frequently emerge in the course of fighting for the acceptance of something new does not alter the situation. Such positions, too, need to show that some things are not-art in order to justify the claim that something else is. Aesthetics which declare that everything is art do not satisfy people who create or use them in the life of an art world.



## Aesthetics and Organization

The rest of what aestheticians and critics do is to provide a running revision of the value-creating theory, which, in the form of criticism, continuously adapts the premises of the theory to the works artists actually produce. Artists produce new work in response not only to the considerations of formal aesthetics but also to the traditions of the art worlds in which they participate—traditions profitably viewed (Kubler 1962) as sequences of problem definitions and solutions; in response to suggestions implicit in other traditions, as in the influence of African art on Western painting; in response to the possibilities contained in new technical developments; and so on. But an existing aesthetic needs to be kept up to date so that it continues to validate logically what has become important art work in the experience of audiences, and thus keeping the connection between what has already been validated and what is now being proposed alive and consistent.

Since aesthetic principles and systems are part of the package of interdependent practices that make up an art world, they will both influence and be influenced by such aspects of it as the organization of training of potential artists and viewers, the organization of financial and other modes of support, and the modes of distribution and presentation of works. They will especially be influenced by a strain toward consistency that is implicit in the idea of "art."

"Art" is too crude a concept to capture what is at work in these situations. Like other complex concepts, it really is a generalization about the nature of reality, although somewhat disguised. When we try to define it, we find many anomalous cases—cases which meet some, but not all, of the criteria implied or expressed by the concept. In the case of art, we usually mean and understand something like this, at a minimum: a work possessed of aesthetic value, however that is defined; a work justified by a coherent and defensible aesthetic; a work recognized by appropriate people as having that kind of value; a work displayed in appropriate places (hung in museums, played at concerts). In many instances, however, works have some, but not all, of these attributes. They are exhibited and valued but either do not have aesthetic value or have aesthetic value but are not exhibited and valued by the right people. The concept of art suggests that we will find all these things co-occurring in the real world; when they do not co-occur we have the definitional troubles which have always plagued the concept of art. I will return to this problem later when I consider the institutional theory of art.

One reason for the mutual influence between aesthetic theories and the organizations that make up an art world is that some people in art worlds try to minimize these inconsistencies by bringing theory and practice into line so that there are fewer anomalous

cases; others, who wish to upset the status quo, of course insist on the anomalies. To illustrate the point, consider this question: How many great (or excellent or good) works of art are there? I myself am not concerned with fixing a number, nor do I think that the number (however we might calculate it) is important. But looking at that question will make clear those influences.

In 1975, Bill Arnold organized "The Bus Show," an exhibition of photographs to be displayed on 500 New York City buses (Carlson and Arnold 1978). He intended by this means "to present excellent photographs in a public space" and thus to a much larger audience than it ordinarily reaches and to allow many more photographers' work to be seen than would ordinarily be the case. The photographs were to be displayed in the space ordinarily used for advertising; to fill the advertising space on one bus required seventeen photographs of varying sizes, from nine to sixteen inches in height. To fill 500 buses thus required 8,500 photographs. Arnold intended all of them to be current work by contemporary photographers.

Are there actually 8,500 "excellent" contemporary photographs which merit that kind of public display? Asking that question presupposes an aesthetic and a critical position from which we could evaluate photographs, deciding which ones were or were not of sufficiently high quality. Without attempting to specify the content of such an aesthetic, imagine a simplified case. Suppose that quality is a unidimensional attribute so that we can rank all photographs as having more or less of it. (In reality, we would find that competent members of the art photography world, even those who belong to one of its many competing segments, use a large and varied assortment of dimensions in judging photographs.) We can then easily tell whether any photograph is better, worse, or equal to any other. But we would still not know how many of them were worthy of public display, how many merited being called "great" or "excellent" or "beautiful," and how many were worth being included in a museum collection or listed in a comprehensive history of art photography.

To make those judgments requires establishing a necessarily arbitrary cutoff point. Even if we decide that a substantial "break" at some point in an otherwise smooth distribution makes it easy to see a major difference on either side of it, to use such a break as the cutting point would be practically justifiable but logically arbitrary. But aesthetic systems propose and justify such judgments and divisions of existing art works all the time. In fact, the "Bus Show" shocked people by its implication that the line could justifiably be drawn where it would have to be drawn in order to fill all 500 buses, and not where it would be more conventionally drawn (if we wanted to have a show of the best in contemporary photography, we would find our-



selves including, if we followed current museum practice, between 100 and 200 prints).

If aesthetic systems justify dividing art works into those worthy of display or performance and those not, that will influence and be influenced by the institutions and organizations in which such displays and performances occur. Institutions have some flexibility in the amount of work they can present to the public, but not much. Existing facilities (concert halls, art galleries and museums, libraries) have finite amounts of space; existing canons of taste limit the use to which that space can be put (we no longer feel it appropriate to hang paintings floor to ceiling in the manner of the Paris Salon); and audience expectations and conventionalized attention spans impose further limits (more music could be performed if audiences were used to sitting through six-hour instead of two-hour concerts, although the financial problems, given current union wage scales, would make that impossible anyway). Existing facilities can always be expanded, but at any particular time there is only so much space or time, and only so many works can therefore be displayed.

The aesthetic of the world which has such facilities at its disposal can fix the point on our hypothetical one dimension of quality so as to produce just the number of works for which there is exhibition space. It can fix the standard so that there are fewer works to be displayed or rewarded than there is room for (something of this sort happens when a prize-awarding committee decides that no work is worthy of a prize that year). Or it can fix the standard so that many more works are judged adequate than there is room for. Either of the latter two situations produces difficulties, throwing into doubt the adequacy of the art world's institutional apparatus, the validity of its aesthetic, or both. There is, thus, some pressure for the aesthetic to operate on a standard flexible enough to produce approximately the amount of work for which the organizations have room and, conversely, for the institutions to generate the amount of exhibition opportunity required by the works the aesthetic certifies as being of the appropriate quality. These numbers come into further rough agreement when artists devote themselves to work for which there is room, withdrawing their effort from media and formats which are "filled up."

When new styles of art emerge they compete for available space, in part by proposing new aesthetic standards according to which their work merits space in existing facilities. They also create new facilities for display, as in the case of the "Bus Show." Art worlds differ in their flexibility, in the ease with which they can enlarge the number of works which can easily be made available for public inspection in conventional facilities. Modern societies have relatively little trouble accommodating vast amounts of printed material in libraries (although not in easily accessible bookstores [Newman 1973]). Music can similarly be distributed in

recorded performances in large amounts. But live performances of musical works of various kinds have so few outlets that it becomes reasonable for people to begin to compose music solely for recording, even to the extent of relying on effects which cannot be produced live, but require the mechanisms of an elaborately outfitted recording studio.

If aesthetic systems in fact move flexibly so as to continue to have the relationship I have just described with the mechanisms of distribution which characterize an art world, then even the most absolute of them, those which most resolutely draw a strict line between "art" and "not-art," have in practice a kind of relativism which defeats that aim. The problem so created is spoken to in an interesting way by the institutional theory of aesthetics.

### An Institutional Theory of Aesthetics

This paper, focusing as it does on questions of social organization, does not attempt to develop a sociologically based theory of aesthetics. In fact, from the perspective just sketched of the role of aesthetics in art worlds, it is clear that an aesthetic developed in the world of sociology would be an idle exercise, since only aesthetics developed in connection with the operations of art worlds are likely to have much influence in them. (See Gans 1974 for an interesting attempt by a sociologist to develop an aesthetic, especially in relation to the question of the aesthetic value of mass media works.) Ironically enough, a number of philosophers have produced a theory that, if not sociological, is sufficiently based on sociological considerations to let us see what such an aesthetic might look like. Worth inspection on that account alone, analysis of its premises and of the problems that have arisen in connection with it will also clarify some issues considered earlier.

Textbooks in aesthetics typically distinguish and describe several differing, sometimes contradictory, theories by which one can decide what is art, what is not, what is beautiful, what is not. The coexistence of these theories in the texts is not at all surprising, indicating that no one has demonstrated finally, to universal satisfaction, a foolproof way of making those distinctions and that aesthetic theories, like ethical theories, continue to be debated. We might expect what is roughly true, that new theories—rivaling, extending, or amending previous ones—arise when older theories fail to give an adequate account of the virtues of some work which has been widely accepted by knowledgeable members of the relevant art world. When an aesthetic theory cannot legitimate logically what is already legitimate in other ways, someone will construct the theory that does legitimate it. (What I say here should be understood as pseudohistory, in-



dicating in a narrative form some relationships which may or may not have arisen exactly as I say they did.)

Thus, putting it crudely, for a long time works of visual art could be judged on the basis of an imitation theory, according to which the object of visual art was to imitate nature. At some point that theory no longer explained well-regarded new works of art—Monet's haystacks and cathedrals, for instance, even if they were rationalized as experiments in capturing the relationship between light and color, or Van Gogh's late works. A theory of art as expression then found the virtues of works to reside in their ability to express and communicate the emotions, ideas, and personalities of the artists who made them. That theory in turn had to be repaired or replaced so that it might deal with geometric abstraction, action painting, and other works that could not be understood in those terms—just as neither theory nor their analogs would be able to say anything useful about aleatory music, for instance.

The institutional theory aims to solve the problems raised by works that outrage both commonsense and finer sensibilities by showing no trace of the artist at all, either in skill or intention. Institutional theorists concern themselves with works like the urinal or the snow shovel exhibited by Marcel Duchamp, their only claim to being art apparently lying in Duchamp's signature on them, or the Brillo boxes constructed and exhibited by Andy Warhol. The commonsense critique of these works is that anyone could have done them, that they require no skill or insight, that they do not imitate anything in nature because they *are* nature, that they do not express anything interesting because they are no more than commonplace objects. The critique of those with finer sensibilities is much the same.

Nevertheless, those very works gained great renown in the world of contemporary visual art, inspiring many more works like them. Confronted by this *fait accompli*, aestheticians acted boldly to develop a theory that placed the artistic character and quality of the work outside the physical art object itself. They found those qualities, instead, in the relation of the objects to an existing art world, to those institutions and organizations in which art was produced, distributed, appreciated, and discussed.

Arthur Danto and George Dickie have presented the most important statements of this theory. Danto concerned himself with the essence of art, with *what* in the relation between object and art world made that object art. In his famous statement of the problem, he said:

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. [Danto 1964:580]

The theory out of which the idea of making the Brillo box arose, the relation of that idea to other ideas about what makes art works art and to other objects those works inspired—all of these create a context in which the making of the Brillo box and the box itself become art exactly because that context gives them that sort of meaning. In another version:

The moment something is considered an artwork, it becomes subject to an *interpretation*. It owes its existence as an artwork to this, and when its claim to art is defeated, it loses its interpretation and becomes a mere thing. The interpretation is in some measure a function of the artistic context of the work: it means something different depending on its art-historical location, its antecedents, and the like. And as an artwork, finally, it acquires a structure which an object photographically similar to it is simply disqualified from sustaining if it is a real thing. Art exists in an atmosphere of interpretation and an artwork is thus a vehicle of interpretation. [Danto 1973:15]

Dickie deals with the organizational forms and mechanisms. According to his perfected definition:

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). [Dickie 1975:34]

A sizable and interesting secondary literature has grown up around this point of view, criticizing and amplifying it (Cohen 1973; Sclafani 1973a and b; Blizek 1974; Danto 1974; Mitias 1975; Silvers 1976). Sociologists will undoubtedly see a family resemblance between the institutional theory of art and the various sociological theories that make their subject matter the way social definitions create reality (e.g., the so-called labeling theory of deviance), for both make the character of their subject matter depend on the way people acting collectively define that character.

There is a difference, however, and not a surprising one. Philosophers tend to argue from hypothetical examples and with stripped-down references to reality. Thus, the "artworld" referred to by Dickie and Danto does not have a great deal of meat on its bones, only what is minimally necessary to make the points they want to make, and the criticisms made of their positions do not make much reference to the character of existing art worlds or ones which have existed, but rather to matters of logical consistency in the constructs used in the theory. None of the participants in these discussions develop as organizationally complicated a conception of what an art world is as I have elsewhere (Becker 1974, 1975, 1976, 1978, 1979), although I do not think my description is incompatible with their arguments. If we make use of a more extended and empirically based notion of what an art world is, however, we can make headway on some



problems the philosophical discussion has bogged down in, thus perhaps being helpful to aestheticians while simultaneously deepening our own analysis.

*Who?* Who can confer on something the status of candidate for appreciation, and thus ratify it as art? What person or persons can act on behalf of that certain social institution, the art world? Dickie settles this question boldly. He describes the art world as having *core personnel*:

. . . a loosely organized, but nevertheless related, set of persons including artists . . . producers, museum directors, museum-goers, theater-goers, reporters for newspapers, critics for publications of all sorts, art historians, art theorists, philosophers of art, and others. These are the people who keep the machinery of the artworld working and thereby provide for its continuing existence. [Dickie 1975:35–36]

But he also insists:

In addition, every person who sees himself as a member of the artworld is thereby a member. [Ibid.]

That last sentence, of course, alerts aestheticians; Dickie's approach will probably not satisfy their feeling that it is necessary to be able to distinguish the deserving from the undeserving and this definition is therefore going to be too broad. They cannot accept the implication of Dickie's remark, which is that the representatives of the art world who will be conferring the honorific status of art on objects are self-appointed, and express their discontent in a rash of humorous examples. What if a zookeeper decides that he is a member of the art world and, in that capacity, confers the status of candidate for appreciation, and thus of art work, on the elephant he tends? That could not really make the elephant a work of art, could it? Because, after all, the zookeeper really could not act on behalf of the art world, could he? We all know the answers: The elephant just isn't an art work (Dickie 1971; Blizek 1974).

But how do we know that? We know it because we have a commonsense understanding of the organization of art worlds. A relevant feature of organized art worlds is that, however their position is justified, some people are commonly seen by many or most interested parties as being more entitled to speak on behalf of the art world than others; the entitlement stems from their being recognized by the other participants in the cooperative activities through which that world's works are produced and consumed as people who are entitled to do that. Whether other art world members accept these people as capable of deciding what art is because they have more experience, because they have an innate gift for recognizing art, or simply because they are, after all, the people who are in charge of

such things and therefore ought to know—whatever the reason, what gives them the ability to make the distinction *and make it stick* is that the other participants agree that they should be allowed to do it and that this agreement is one of the routine and interdependent activities that make up the art world.

Sociological analysts need not decide who is entitled to decide that things are art (or, to use Dickie's language, to confer the status of candidate for appreciation). We need only observe which people members of the art world treat as capable of doing that and allow to do it, in the sense that once those people have decided something is art, the others act as though it were in whatever ways might be appropriate.

Some common observations made in art worlds show that the philosophical desire to be able to make definitive distinctions between art and non-art objects cannot be satisfied by the institutional theory. For one thing, there is seldom complete agreement on who is entitled to speak on behalf of the art world as a whole. Some people occupy institutional positions which give them the de facto right to decide what will be acceptable. Museum directors, for instance, had the power to decide whether photography was an art because they could decide whether or not to exhibit photographs in their museums. They even had the power to decide what kind of art (e.g., "minor" or whatever the opposite of that is) photography was by deciding whether photographs would be exhibited in the main galleries in which paintings were ordinarily exhibited or whether they would be confined to a special place with less prestige in which only photographs were shown. But some people might argue that museum directors are incompetent to make the judgments they do make, that in a better world they would not be allowed to make such judgments because they are ignorant, prejudiced, and influenced by extraneous considerations. Some might think they are too avant-garde and do not give proper attention to established styles and genres; others, just the opposite (Haacke 1976, *passim*).

Art world members also disagree over whether the decisions of occupants of certain positions really make any difference; this disagreement reflects their ambiguous position in the art world. It is frequently not clear whether a particular critic's decision has any consequences or whether the activities of others will be conditioned by that decision; very often that will depend on a variety of contingencies arising from political shifts and struggles within the art world. Insofar as art world members find this process ambiguous, the status of such people as critics, dealers, and members of prize and fellowship committees will likewise be ambiguous, as will the status of whatever pronouncements they make. The ambiguity is not remediable by philosophic or social analysis; it exists because the people whose deference would ratify the status defer sporadically and erratically.



Thus, we cannot make the all-or-nothing judgments aestheticians would like to make about whether works are or are not art. Since the degree of consensus about who can decide what art is will vary greatly from one situation to another, a realistic view reflects that uncertainty by allowing "art-ness," whether or not an object is art, to be a continuous variable rather than an all-or-nothing dichotomy.

Similarly, we can see that art worlds vary in the kinds of activities carried on by their members that embody and ratify the assigning of the status of art to an object or event. On the one hand, material benefits, such as the award of fellowships, prizes, commissions, display space, and other exhibition opportunities (publication, production, etc.), have the immediate consequence of helping the artist to continue producing work. On the other hand, such intangible benefits as being taken seriously by the more knowledgeable members of the art world have indirect but important consequences for artistic careers, placing the recipient in the flow of ideas in which change and development take place in the world's concerns and providing day-to-day validation of work concerns and help with daily problems—rewards denied those who are merely successful in more conventional career terms.

*What?* What characteristics must an object have to be a work of art? The institutional theory suggests that anything might be capable of appreciation. In fact, in response to a critic who says that some objects—"ordinary thumbtacks, cheap white envelopes, the plastic forks given at some drive-in restaurants"—just cannot be appreciated (Cohen 1973: 78), Dickie says:

But why cannot the ordinary qualities of *Fountain* [the urinal Duchamp exhibited as a work of art]—its gleaming white surface, the depth revealed when it reflects images of surrounding objects, its pleasing oval shape—be appreciated. It has qualities similar to those of works by Brancusi and Moore which many do not balk at saying they appreciate. Similarly, thumbtacks, envelopes, and plastic forks have qualities that can be appreciated if one makes the effort to focus attention on them. One of the values of photography is its ability to focus on and bring out the qualities of quite ordinary objects. And the same sort of thing can be done without the benefit of photography just by looking. [Dickie 1975: 42]

Can anything at all be turned into art, just by someone's saying so?

... it cannot be this simple: even if in the end it is successful christening which makes an object art, not every attempt at christening is successful. There are bound to be conditions to be met both by the namer and the thing to be named, and if they are completely unsatisfied, then saying "I christen . . ." will not be to christen. [Cohen 1973: 80]

Cohen is right: not every attempt to label something art is successful. But it does not follow that there are, accordingly, some constraints on the nature of the object or event itself which make certain objects ipso facto not art and incapable of being redefined in that way.

The constraints that undoubtedly exist in any specific art world on what can be defined as art arise from a prior consensus on what kinds of standards will be applied, and by whom, in making those judgments. Art world members characteristically, despite all their doctrinal and other differences, produce quite reliable judgments about which artists and works are serious and therefore worthy of attention. Thus, jazz players who disagree over stylistic preferences can nevertheless agree on whether a given performer or performance "swings," and theater people likewise make quite reliable judgments of whether a particular scene "works." Artists may disagree violently over which works and their makers should receive support, and marginal cases (especially those in styles just being incorporated into the conventional practice of the art world or those on the verge of being thrown out as no longer worthy of serious consideration) will provoke less reliable judgments. But most judgments are reliable, and that reliability reflects not the mouthing of already agreed-on judgments but rather the systematic application by trained and experienced members of the art world of similar standards; it is what Hume (1854) described in his essay on taste, and it is similar to the way a group of doctors, confronted with a set of clinical findings, will arrive at a similar diagnosis (analogies can be found in every area of specialized work).

In that sense, not everything can be made into a work of art, just by definition or the creation of consensus, for not everything will pass muster under currently accepted standards in the art world. But this does not mean that there is any more to making something art than, to use Cohen's term, christening it. It is also a matter of christening if the entire art world agrees on standards that, if they are automatically applied, some works clearly meet, so that their classification as art is self-evident, and others as clearly fail to meet; the consensus arises because reasonable members of the world will have no difficulty in classifying works under such circumstances. Constraints on what can be defined as art exist, but they constrain because of the conjunction of the characteristics of objects and the rules of classification current in the world in which they are proposed as art works.

Further, those standards, being matters of consensus, change. Much of the running dialogue of artists and other participants in art worlds has to do with making day-to-day adjustments in the content and application of standards of judgment. In the early 1930s jazz players, critics, and aficionados all agreed that electrical instruments could not produce real music. Charlie Christian's performances on the electric guitar



convinced so many people that they were having the same sort of experience from his playing that they did from music played on a nonelectric instrument that the canon was quickly revised.

*How much?* Aestheticians, both the institutionalists and their critics, worry about the effect of aesthetic theorizing on artists and art worlds. They express the fear, for instance, that an aesthetic theory which is too restrictive will be unnecessarily depressing to artists and might perhaps unduly constrict their creativity. This overestimates the degree to which art worlds take their direction from aesthetic theorizing; the influence probably runs in the other direction. But the institutionalists draw one important implication from their analysis: Practicing artists, if they want to have their work accepted as art, will have to persuade the appropriate people to certify what they have done as art. (While the basic institutional analysis suggests that anyone can do that, in practice these theorists accept the existing art world as the one which has to be persuaded to do the job.) But if art is what an art world ratifies as art, then I might suggest an alternative strategy, one I have analyzed in more detail elsewhere (Becker 1975, 1979)—the strategy of organizing an art world *de novo*, which will then ratify as art what one produces. In fact, the strategy has been used often and with considerable success. Others have tried it and failed, but that does not mean it is not a reasonable possibility.

Several difficulties arise in creating a new art world to ratify work which has no home in already existing art worlds. Resources (especially financial support) will probably have been allocated to already existing artistic activities, so that one needs to develop new sources of support, new pools of personnel, and new sources of materials and other facilities (including space in which to perform and display works). Since existing aesthetic theories have not ratified the work, a new aesthetic must be developed and new modes of criticism and standards of judgment enunciated. To say that these things must be done, however, raises an interesting question of the definitional kind that philosophical analysis provokes. How much of the apparatus of an organized art world must be created before the work in question will be treated seriously by a larger audience than that supporting the original group that wanted to create the new world? What it takes to convince people will vary a great deal. Some will require an elaborate ideological explanation. Others—theater managers, operators of recording studios, printers—will ask only for guarantees that their bills be paid.

This question need not, indeed should not, be answered by enunciating criteria. Rather, we should realize that the activities involved can be carried on by varying numbers of people, and without the full-blown institutional apparatus of such a well-equipped world as that, for instance, which surrounds contemporary sculpture and painting or symphonic music and grand opera. When we speak of art worlds, we usually have in mind these well-equipped ones, but in fact paintings, books, music, and all sorts of artistic objects and performances can be produced without all the support personnel these worlds have and are dependent on: critics, impresarios, furnishers of materials and equipment, providers of space, audiences. At an extreme, remember, any artistic activity can in principle be done by one person, who performs all the necessary activities (Becker 1976); this is not common and not a condition many artists aspire to (though one they sometimes yearn for when they have trouble with their fellow participants). As the number of people involved grows, a point is reached at which some stable nucleus of people cooperates regularly to produce the same sort of work; as the number grows larger than that, a point might be reached at which individual artists can produce work for a large audience of people they do not know personally and still have a reasonable expectation of being taken seriously. Call that first point of organization an *esoteric* world, and the latter an *exoteric* one. The names and cut-off points are not so important as the recognition that these are more or less arbitrary, the reality being a variety of points that vary along several continua.

*How many?* Neither Dickie nor Danto is very clear as to how many art worlds there are. Dickie says:

The artworld consists of a bundle of systems: theater, painting, sculpture, literature, music, and so on, each of which furnishes an institutional background for the conferring of status on objects within its domain. No limit can be placed on the number of systems that can be brought under the generic conception of art, and each of the major subsystems contains further subsystems. These features of the artworld provide the elasticity whereby creativity of even the most radical sort can be accommodated. A whole new system comparable to the theater, for example, could be added in one fell swoop. What is more likely is that a new subsystem would be added within a system. For example, junk sculpture added within sculpture, happenings added within theater. Such additions might in time develop into full-blown systems. [Dickie 1975:33]

Blizek (1974) sees that there is an empirical question in this but also sees that the definition of "artworld" is so loose that it is not clear whether there is one artworld, of which these are subparts, or a number of them, possibly unrelated; further, that if there are a number of artworlds they might conflict. Several observations are relevant here.



1 Empirically, we can see that not only are there the worlds of various art media, but that these may be subdivided at times into quite separate and almost non-communicating segments. I have spoken of schools and styles as though they competed for the same rewards and audiences, but often they do not. Instead, members of one group develop audiences and other sources of support from sectors of society that would not have supported those other art world segments with whom they might compete. Thus, many painting worlds rely on the same suppliers as recognized contemporary artists for materials, but have quite separate, and often very successful, arrangements for exhibiting, distributing, and supporting their work. The Cowboy Artists of America, for instance, produce paintings for people who would like to buy works by Charles Russell and Frederick Remington, genre painters of the American cowboy West whose work is exhibited in "real" museums, but cannot afford them or cannot find any to buy:

Despite determined inattention by Eastern art critics, cowboy painting and sculpture are so popular that their prices are inflating faster than intrastate natural gas. Cowboy art has its own heroes, its own galleries and even its own publishing house. [Lichtenstein 1977:41]

Regional segments are not so isolated as this, tending to be oriented to the metropolitan centers of the "big" art world (McCall 1977). Their participants suffer from a lack of exhibition opportunities but even more from the sense that success in their region will do them little or no good in the larger world they aspire to but which is almost totally unaware of them.

2 If we define art worlds by the activities their participants carry on collectively (Becker 1974), we can approach the problem of a general art world by asking what activities a general art world—one which encompasses all the conventional arts—might carry on collectively in such a way that we might want to refer to it as one art world. I can think of two. On the one hand, the various media-oriented subcommunities suffer from many of the same external problems. Thus, a depression might make it harder for all the specific art forms to secure financial support (although the experience of the Great Depression in the United States does not wholly bear this out). A common situation is one in which the government imposes censorship on all the arts in a similar way, so that the experience of people in one arena can be read as a sign of what one can expect in another. Thus a theatrical designer might make his own professional decisions on the basis of what the censors might do about a play he is interested in, arriving at the assessment by hearing about what they have done about a recording by a popular singer, a recent novel, or a new film. Insofar as the participants in all these worlds share experiences,

interpretations, and predictions vis-à-vis the censors, they might be said to be engaging in a form of collective activity and thus to constitute an art world.

In another direction, artists in various media-oriented worlds may find that they want to achieve similar kinds of things in their work and share ideas and perspectives on how to accomplish that. For example, during periods of intense nationalism, many artists may see it as their job to somehow symbolize the character and aspirations of their country or people in the works they create. To do that, they have to find imagery and techniques which will convey the ideas and feelings they have in mind as well as finding the ideas and feelings themselves. Insofar as participants in various worlds debate these questions across media lines, they might be said to be participants in one general art world.

3 Particular artistic institutions often use people from other fields as support personnel for the work that is central in their own field. Thus, visual artists create settings for theatrical and dance performances, writers produce librettos for operas, musicians compose and play backgrounds for films, and so on. Insofar as these activities bring people together across subworld lines, they might be said to be participating in a general art world. Furthermore, because of these possibilities, people from worlds not already connected in this way may find it interesting to contemplate new forms of collaboration, thus creating further links in the general art world. Finally, participants in specific art worlds often come from a limited sector of the enviroing society, for instance, the educated upper middle class or petty aristocracy. They will thus have connections with each other by virtue of having attended school together or coming from families connected by kinship or friendship, and these connections will serve to create a general art world or, at least, to provide the basis in regular associations which might enable them to collaborate in the kinds of activities already mentioned.

The analysis of this problem makes clear that speaking of art worlds means using shorthand. "Art world," remember, is just a way of talking about people who participate in the making of art works in a routine way. The routine interaction is what constitutes the art world's existence, so questions of definition can generally be resolved by looking at who actually participates with whom in doing what. In that way, the logical and definitional problems of the institutional aesthetic theory (which has a strong empirical component) can be resolved by knowledge of the facts of any particular case.



## Aesthetics and Art Worlds

The institutional theory of aesthetics, as we have seen, itself illustrates the process analyzed in the first part of this paper. When an established aesthetic theory does not provide a logical and defensible legitimation of what artists are doing and, more important, what the other institutions of the art world—especially distribution organizations and audiences—accept as art and as excellent art, professional aestheticians will begin to provide the required new rationale. If they do not, someone else probably will, although the rest of the participants might just go ahead without a defensible rationale for their actions. (Whether one is required depends on the amount of controversy, engendered by what they are doing and what they are confronted with.) When earlier theories of art and beauty failed to explain or give a rationale for the enjoyment and celebration of contemporary works widely regarded as excellent, given the amount of argument and competition for space and other resources and honors in the world of contemporary art, and given the number of professional philosophers who might find the problem intriguing, it was a certainty that something like the institutional theory would be produced.

By shifting the locus of the definitional problem from something inherent in the object to some relation between the object and an entity called an art world, the institutional theory makes it once again possible for art world participants to find justification for their activities, and to be able to answer the kind of question leveled at their work that is philosophically so distressing; that is, the question predicated on the failure to find any trace of skill or beauty, thought or emotion, in the works regarded as excellent, and the questions asking if the same works could not have been produced by a chimpanzee, a child, an insane person, or any ordinary member of the society without particular artistic talent. The latter example—that anyone could do it—is perhaps the most damaging. It suggests that artists have no special gift or talent, and thus that the rationale for regarding them as special members of the art world (or the society), entitled by virtue of the display of that talent to special rewards, is fallacious. The institutional theory allows art world participants to define that special talent in the new way, as, for example, the ability to invent imaginative new concepts, thereby conferring legitimacy on the artist's special role and rewards.

Looking at the institutional theory adds some nuances to the description of art worlds. We see that art world officials have the power to legitimate work as art, but that power is often disputed, so that there is room for argument. As a result, the aesthetician's desire for definitive criteria by which to distinguish art from non-art, insofar as those criteria might be found in or be expected to be congruent with the actions of

art world officials, cannot be satisfied. That is of some interest because aestheticians are not the only ones with such a desire. In fact, sociologists often insist that fields such as the sociology of art or religion or science settle on some definitive criterion of their subject matter. If that criterion is expected to be congruent with either popular or official conceptions of art, the sociological wish for a definitive criterion is likewise unsatisfiable.

We see too that, in principle, any kind of object or action can be legitimated as art, but that in practice every art world has procedures and rules for making those distinctions which, while not clearcut or fool-proof, nevertheless make the success of some candidates for the status of art work very unlikely. Those procedures and rules are contained in the conventions and patterns of cooperation by which art worlds carry on their routine activities.

Finally, we see how it might be possible to speak of all the arts as comprising one big art world. Insofar as members of specialized subworlds cooperate in some activities related to their work, that cooperative activity—be it vis-à-vis government censorship, the development of nationalist art, or whatever—can be seen as the operation of one big art world. Such cooperation may be relatively uncommon, and probably is most of the time in any society, so that we might want to say that the operative art worlds are those of the particular media; but this question, like the others, is empirical, and its answer will be found by research.

## Note

- 1 An earlier version of this paper was given at the Fifth Annual Conference on Social Theory and the Arts, Syracuse University, April 1978. It will appear in a slightly different form in my forthcoming book, *Art Worlds* (tentative title), to be published by the University of California Press. Some ideas referred to briefly in this paper are explained more fully in *Art Worlds*, and in my earlier papers as noted in the text.

## References

- Arnold, Bill, and Kate Carlson  
1978 The Bus Show. *Massachusetts Review* 19:710–716.
- Becker, Howard S.  
1974 Art as Collective Action. *American Sociological Review* 39(6):767–776.  
1975 Art Photography in America. *Journal of Communication* 25:74–84.  
1976 Art Worlds and Social Types. *American Behavioral Scientist* 19:703–718.  
1978 Arts and Crafts. *American Journal of Sociology* 83:862–889.  
1979 Stereographs: Local, National and International Art Worlds, *In* Points of View: The Stereograph in America, A Cultural History. Edward W. Earle, ed. Pp. 88–96. Rochester, N.Y.: Visual Studies Workshop Press.
- Blizek, William  
1974 An Institutional Theory of Art. *British Journal of Aesthetics* 14:142–150.



- 
- Cohen, Ted  
1973 The Possibility of Art: Remarks on a Proposal by Dickie. *Philosophical Review* 82:69–82.
  - Danto, Arthur  
1964 The Artworld. *Journal of Philosophy* 61:571–584.  
1973 Artworks and Real Things. *Theoria* 34:1–17.  
1974 The Transfiguration of the Commonplace. *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 33:139–148.
  - Dickie, George  
1971 *Aesthetics: An Introduction*. New York: Pegasus.  
1975 *Art and the Aesthetic: An Institutional Analysis*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
  - Forbes, Elliot, ed.  
1970 *Thayer's Life of Beethoven*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
  - Gans, Herbert  
1974 *Popular Culture and High Culture*. New York: Basic Books.
  - Haacke, Hans  
1976 *Framing and Being Framed: 7 Works, 1970–75*. New York: New York University Press.
  - Hume, David  
1854 Of the Standard of Taste. *Philosophical Works*, Vol. 3:248–273. Boston: Little Brown.
  - Kjølrup, Søren  
1976 Art Broadly and Wholly Conceived. In *Culture and Art: An Anthology*. Lars Aagard-Mogenson, ed. Pp. 45–53. Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press.
  - Kubler, George  
1962 *The Shape of Time: Remarks on the History of Things*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
  - Lichtenstein, Grace  
1977 Cowboy Art Finds Home on the Range. *The New York Times*, 10, February, pp.41,45.
  - McCall, Michal M.  
1977 Art Without a Market: Creating Artistic Value in a Provincial Art World. *Symbolic Interaction* 1:32–43.
  - Mitias, M. H.  
1975 Art as a Social Institution. *The Personalist* 56:330–335.
  - Newman, Charles  
1973 The Uses and Abuses of Death: A Little Rumble Through the Remnants of Literary Culture. *Triquarterly* 26:3–41.
  - Sclafani, Richard  
1973a Art as a Social Institution: Dickie's New Definition. *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 32:111–114.  
1973b Art Works, Art Theory, and the Artworld. *Theoria* 34:18–34.
  - Silvers, Anita  
1976 The Artworld Discarded. *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 34:441–454.