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## A Critique of Functionalist Definitions of Art

### KEY WORDS

art, artwork, functionalism, critique, contemporary art

### ABSTRACT

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This paper deals with the issue of definition of art and artwork in the sense of functionalist approach. It critically argues with the existing terms and meanings of artwork in that sense and presents them as insufficient and inadequate when speaking of modern art. Furthermore functionalism assumes that a great deal of artworks has a specific function, what we cannot say about a large number of contemporary artistic endeavors. Therefore it is being argued here that this approach, how popular it might have been in the past, must be replaced with a new paradigm of comprehension of esthetics.

Functionalist definitions of art have been discussed for several decades now, and new versions of functionalism have been offered since Monroe Beardsley's original formulation. The core of these theories lies in the claim that objects are art in virtue of a distinctive function they fulfill in the society. The definition of 'art' is thus akin to the definitions of 'weapon' or 'poison' – a thing can be classified as a poison regardless of any physical, historical or contextual properties it might have, as long as it can perform the function of poisoning somebody. The function of art is, broadly speaking, to fulfill people's aesthetic needs.

Beardsley's theory was one of the answers to Morris Weitz's 'The Role of Theory in Aesthetics' (1956). The claim presented by Weitz was very strong – not only did he criticise existing theories of art, but argued that 'art' cannot be defined, due to its ever-expansive and adventurous nature. Although such anti-essentialism seems quite paradoxical (is it essential to art that it has no essence?),

it was soon seconded by other authors (e.g. Kennick, 1958). Weitz was criticized on numerous fronts, but while little might be left from his bold anti-essentialist claims, he managed to point out three important problems: (1) 'art' has not yet been successfully defined, largely because (2) art keeps changing all the time and pushes its own boundaries, and thus (3) any definition which focuses on art's exhibited or intrinsic properties is doomed to soon be out of date. Functionalism attempts to resolve these issues by focusing not on intrinsic properties of art, but on the relation between artworks, artists and the audience. I argue that this attempt has failed, and in fact functionalism is guilty of sins very similar to aestheticism or formalism originally criticized by Weitz.

I will discuss some of the most prominent functionalist definitions of art, focusing mainly on the original version offered by Monroe Beardsley, and reviewing offers by Gary Iseminger and Nick Zangwill.<sup>1</sup> I will consider functional definitions in their classificatory sense only, even though they derive this sense from evaluative treatment of artifacts (i.e. something is classified as art if it performs the aesthetic function well enough, or attains a threshold of merit) (Davi, 1991: 42).

## 1. The definitions

To begin with the first of those definitions, Beardsley claims that

(...) an artwork is either an arrangement of conditions intended to be capable of affording an experience with marked aesthetic character or (incidentally) an arrangement belonging to a class or type of arrangements that is typically intended to have this capacity. (Beardsley, 1982: 299)

I shall briefly focus on the elements of the definition. Firstly, an artwork is an arrangement of conditions – Beardsley writes that what he means by this term is somewhat similar to what is often understood by 'an artefact', but uses a different term to emphasise that some artworks are not physical objects (Beardsley, 1982: 311–312). The difference seems to be purely terminological, however, and

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<sup>1</sup> Very similar criticism is also applicable to Teresa Kostyrko's definition of art, formulated as follows: 'Dzieło sztuki struktura znakowa, która przekazuje wartości światopoglądowe dzięki temu, że zawiera wartości artystyczne, (...) ustrukturalizowana [tak], by sens światopoglądowy właśnie na [tych ostatnich] się opierał' (Kostyrko, 1985: 320).

the terms are in fact coextensive, so in the discussion to come I shall use them interchangeably.

Secondly, an artwork is an arrangement intended to be capable of affording an experience with marked aesthetic character. This is the crux of the theory, and the main difference between functionalism and other views – for example, institutionalists plainly deny that there is any special kind of aesthetic experience, or that anything aesthetic is relevant to classifying art (Dickie, 1964, 1965), and historicists seem to agree that giving rise to aesthetic experience might be an important and even frequent feature of artworks, but it is by no means essential to them (Levinson, 1979). Similarly, in disjunctive or cluster theories it is merely one of the features which can afford an artifact the name ‘artwork’ (Gaut, 2000).

The requirement placed on artworks is not that they actually do afford one aesthetic experiences, but merely that they are capable of doing so. This move ensures that, say, Beethoven’s 9th is still an artwork even if pop-music fans derive no aesthetic pleasure from listening to it, or indeed even if there is no one left to appreciate it. As long as the object is capable of providing aesthetic experiences, then, it does not matter that there are no people capable of receiving them.

Thirdly, an artwork is an arrangement that is intended to perform a certain aesthetic function. The artist can have a number of intentions related to his works, but ‘what makes them art, on this definition, is that the aesthetic intention... is present and operative’ (Beardsley, 1982: 299). The intention is for an object to ‘provide a possible source of aesthetically qualified experience’ (Davies, 1991: 52). However, Beardsley realises that sometimes it is impossible to tell what the author’s intentions were, and in these cases he claims the alternative version of his definition should be used (Beardsley, 1982: 305–306).

Thus fourthly, an artwork can be an arrangement which belongs to a class or type of arrangements which are typically intended to have a capacity to elicit aesthetic experiences. If an archaeologist finds an ancient sculpture, he does not need to wonder what were the intentions of its creator, because clearly being a sculpture places the artefact in a class of objects (sculptures) which were typically intended to provide aesthetic experiences, and thus it is an artwork.

### **Iseminger’s definition**

Gary Iseminger, after reviewing Beardsley’s view and addressing several objections, argued that functionalism would be more plausible if it were more related

to the artworld and the actual practice of art. He hopes that by removing the necessary and sufficient conditions and adding institutionalist elements the definition will lose the remains of essentialism. He claims that:

The function of the artworld and practice of art is to promote aesthetic communication. (Iseminger, 2004: 23)

And supplements it by a valuational thesis which is remarkably similar to Beardsley's own:

A work of art is a good work of art to the extent that it has the capacity to afford appreciation. (Iseminger, 2004: 23)

Iseminger assumes a slightly more naturalistic definition of a 'function', and ties his definition together with the idea of the artworld. His understanding of the artworld is similar to Dickie's, or possibly even more permissive – a person can become a member of the artworld simply because she wants to, but also because others generally view her as one. However, he claims that what makes objects artworks is still the function they have in our society, rather than the society itself. While artistic communication does presuppose the existence of the artworld, aesthetic communication can do without it. Because the definition is given in terms of aesthetic communication, it is not essentially institutional.

Aesthetic communication, the most important element of the definition, typically occurs when a person creates something while intending it to be aesthetically appreciated by someone else and is met with success. However, art is not required for aesthetic communication to occur, as one can appreciate non-art artefacts for their aesthetic properties.

I generally agree with many points of Iseminger's definition, but not with his ultimate conclusion. I will try to show that while it is true that the function of art as it is described by Iseminger is indeed very important, possibly even one of the most important reasons for certain objects to possess the status of art, it does not play the decisive role in them acquiring this status.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> It seems that in his more recent research Iseminger has started to see the institutional element of the definition as more important, and he prefers now to talk about 'institutionalism aestheticised'. A symposium organised by Iseminger at the 2012 American Society for Aesthetics Eastern Division Meeting, had exactly this title.

Because, as Iseminger claims, his theory shares all the advantages of Beardsley's view while escaping its problems, I will review them jointly, pointing out where the refined theory should be treated differently from the original view.

### **Zangwill's definition**

The most recent of the functional definitions is Nick Zangwill's. He first presents the following formulation:

(1) Being a work of art is having an aesthetic function; and (2) each work of art has some specific aesthetic function that is essential to its being the particular work of art it is. (Zangwill 2007: 99)

Following a discussion concerning aesthetic function being dependant on the aesthetic properties of an object, this definition is transformed into a normative one:

(1) Being a work of art is being such that there are some aesthetic properties that it should have; and (2) it is essential to being each particular work that there are some specific aesthetic properties that it should have. (Zangwill 2007: 104)

The definition is somewhat puzzling because it is remarkably similar to Beardsley's, and seems to fall into exactly the same problems as the twenty-five years older original.<sup>3</sup>

Moreover, Zangwill presents a normative account suspiciously close to traditional definitions of art, which were criticised precisely for the fact that through trying to define what art should be they fail to provide an account of what art actually is.

In the following discussion I will not distinguish Zangwill's definition from Beardsley's as, save for some minor details, both can be criticised in the same way.

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<sup>3</sup> Perhaps most puzzling is the fact that while Iseminger tried to specifically address issues which were problematic for the original functionalism and offer a definition which would not fall in the same traps, Zangwill does not even mention Beardsley's name, in fact 'Redefining Art' is not even included in his bibliography.

## 2. (Questionable) advantages of functionalism

There are several meta-aesthetic aims which functionalism tries to achieve. Firstly, Beardsley claims that a valid definition of art 'should mark a distinction that is theoretically significant' (Beardsley: 1982: 299). He claims that his view, unlike for example institutionalism, has the advantage of clearly stating what is art and what is not, and how people can err by calling an object an artwork. Beardsley admits that it is perfectly possible to 'get along' without any proper definition of art, and indeed that there are some extra-artistic interests in ascribing objects the status of art, but argues that such ordinary use of the term 'art' should not be a matter of philosophical enquiry. Thus while the institutionalists are happy to admit that there is no difference between what is called 'art' and what is art, functionalism is said to be able to capture the difference and show how these two sorts of things can fail to coincide.

I completely agree with Beardsley that our ordinary use of the term 'art' in its classificatory sense is of less interest to philosophy than is generally thought. But the conclusion I draw from this is not that we need a theory which uses the term in a more defined way, but that philosophers should keep working on the concept as it is actually used, and accept that what is art is largely determined by culture and society, not philosophical reflection. In my criticism I will show that a rigid application of functionalism gets many things quite wildly wrong. While we can continue to produce definitions which have all the virtues of a good philosophical theory, but little reference to reality, it might be a better idea to focus on what actually exists in the world, and admit that art is a rather messy phenomenon which might require a similarly messy definition. After all, a vague distinction which is mostly right is better than a clear distinction that is mostly wrong.

Secondly, Beardsley wants his definition to 'capture reasonably well a use [of the term 'art'] that has been prominent for some centuries and still persists quite widely today' (Beardsley, 1982: 300). I believe that this is one of the greatest advantages any theory concerning social phenomena can have – capturing and explaining theoretically the pre-theoretical beliefs widely shared in the society. And arguably functionalism does that really well: while it is true that within the artworld anything goes, and that it might be difficult to defend the thesis that all modern audiences expect of artworks is an aesthetic experience, it is also true that a substantial part, or even the majority of the society has serious doubts

about whether even century-old works such as Duchamp's *Fountain* or Cage's *'33'* are in fact art. It is very common for the public to shake their heads and decline them the status of artworks. Indeed, there are examples, with Duchamp being probably the most prominent one, of artists who themselves claimed that their creation is not art but a joke played on those who believe in anything artists tell them (Camfield, 1989).

I believe that such a judgemental approach, as opposed to the more promiscuous proceduralist views, is most appropriate and worth developing. However, as my discussion of functionalism's over-exclusiveness below shows, it has to be taken cautiously.

Finally, Beardsley lists some features of his theory which he believes to be virtues, which nonetheless I would describe as inaccuracies or flaws. Functionalism is said to expose and depend on the link that art has with the aesthetic, which is said to be intuitive. It also aims to provide an account which would explain why things cannot become art in 'midlife' – works do not become art when someone finds them and calls them art, they are either created as art, or they are not art at all. Below I will show that these are in fact very problematic claims, which the functionalist should defend rather than boast of.

### **3. Objections to functionalism**

#### **3.1. Aesthetic experiences and their correctness**

The simplest way to challenge functionalism is to deny that what it prescribes as the function of art actually exists. If there is no special kind of aesthetic experience, or a specifically aesthetic way of attending to or appreciating things, then art cannot have a function which would depend on them (Davies, 1991: 62; Dickie, 1964, 1965, 1997: 85). If this were the case, the experiencing of artworks would not be qualitatively different from the experiencing of other things, and thus no distinctions could be made on the basis of it. I will not discuss this issue in much detail here, as although I am inclined to agree with Davies and Dickie, I believe that it is extremely difficult to actually prove that experiences of this or that kind exist without detailed psychological studies.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> It also seems that Iseminger and Zangwill could avoid this issue, since even if aesthetic experience turned out to be a myth, aesthetic properties can still exist.

But assuming that there is something special about aesthetic experiences, it seems that we should now be told a somewhat more detailed story about when this experience is of the right kind. Surely the facts that a group of people under the influence of drugs can perceive a plastic fork as extremely aesthetically pleasing, and that the manufacturer intended this product to look good, do not thereby make the fork capable of affording aesthetic experiences, or promoting aesthetic communication – and thus an artwork. Are functionalists able to account for whether the person experiencing something aesthetically does that correctly? We should certainly rule out aesthetic experiences under the influence of drugs, but how can we tell the borderline at which we decide whether a person experiences objects correctly? To quote Davies, how many gins is a theatre-goer allowed in the interval (Davies, 1991: 63)?

One solution might be to claim that the borderline is at the point at which the receiver is able to correctly recognise the work's non-aesthetic properties.<sup>5</sup> It seems quite intuitive to say that a person who is not able to recognise the colours on a given painting will not be able to correctly experience it, or judge whether it is aesthetically pleasing or not.



(a) 1899, oil on canvas, National Gallery, London; painted before any symptoms of the cataracts developed



(b) 1918-24, oil on canvas, The Minneapolis Institute of Arts; painted about the time of most severe disability



(c) 1918-24, oil on canvas, Musée Marmottan, Paris; painted after the cataracts were removed

Fig. 1: Claude Monet, *The Japanese Bridge at Giverny*

But is this really so? Famously, Claude Monet suffered from cataracts in his later life, and the paintings he created in that time were affected by his incorrect

<sup>5</sup> I am grateful to Berys Gaut for this suggestion.



experience of the world, his inability to distinguish more vivid colours. Since his paintings from this period have a noticeable reddish tone, present in the vision of people suffering from cataracts, it seems more than probable that they have been affected by his deteriorated sight, and the fact that Monet destroyed most of his works from that time after his cataracts were removed in 1923 suggests that even the author realised they were a result of impaired perception.<sup>6</sup> Thus if Monet himself was unable to correctly recognise the non-aesthetic properties of his Japanese Bridges (Fig. 1), how could he experience them aesthetically, or intend them to be experienced aesthetically by others? He was unaware that he was seeing the world differently from other people, so he must have intended his works to be seen as he saw them. Should a functionalist deny a famous painter the ability to aesthetically experience his own works? Or should he suggest that either we all see these paintings incorrectly, or we should all develop cataracts before we can truly aesthetically experience them?

However, even if this puzzle can be answered, a more difficult one needs to be faced. An aesthetic experience of a given object is not based on its physical or even contextual properties, but (mainly) on its aesthetic properties. But while it is easy to check whether a given person is correctly ascribing non-aesthetic properties to the work, it is a quite different thing to give criteria of correctness for the ascription of aesthetic properties. And even omitting the discussion of whether aesthetic properties can be properly ascribed to objects, such solution would assume that correct recognition of non-aesthetic properties of works is similar to the correct recognition of their aesthetic properties. But since there most likely are no necessary or universal connections between non-aesthetic and aesthetic properties (Sibley 1959), this cannot be that easy. While it might be true that a person unable to tell the colours of a painting could not correctly judge and experience its aesthetic value, it is a different thing to say that a person who can tell colours can thereby give correct aesthetic judgements or have the correct experience.

It seems that a borderline between correct and incorrect experience would have to be drawn arbitrarily, and I agree with Davies that functionalism does not provide a convincing account of how such an arbitrary decision should be in-

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<sup>6</sup> A recent simulation study suggests that the distinctive character of Monet's late works did not result as much from his impressionistic imagination – it was just the way he saw the world (Marmor, 2006).

formed by ‘attending to aspects of the individual’s experience and attentiveness’ (Davies, 1991: 63). But if one cannot tell what kind of aesthetic experiences are relevant for art, one cannot really tell what is art.

### 3.2. Exclusions

My main thesis is this: in its attempt to be discriminative and draw clear distinctions between art and non-art, functionalism becomes extensionally inadequate. Following the conditions for arthood offered by the discussed theories would lead to both including too much and excluding too much. This means that functionalism falls under the same criticism it was designed to avoid – it does not stand against Weitz’s objections to the classical definitions.<sup>7</sup>

The conditions which objects need to satisfy in order to be art are: being (intended to be) capable of affording aesthetic experiences; or, for Iseminger, promoting aesthetic communication; or, for Zangwill, being such that there are some aesthetic properties that it should have. Are these good as necessary conditions?

A large amount of conceptual art or politically involved art does not have the capability to afford us any aesthetic experiences at all, has no more aesthetic properties, and promotes aesthetic communication no more than a political speech would.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, it is quite clear that in many cases the artists do not in fact intend their works to be in any way related to the aesthetic – they are only interested in expressing a message. According to functionalists, we are mistaken in calling such works art.

While Iseminger claims that his theory is free of the issues related to necessary and sufficient conditions because it is not an essentialist definition (Iseminger, 2004: 24), it does seem that it saliently requires artworks to perform some sort of function (be it aesthetic, artistic, or otherwise) which would amount to promoting aesthetic communication. However, a fair amount of artworks, notably conceptual and political art as mentioned above, may not actually present anything that would promote specifically aesthetic communication. Once again,

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<sup>7</sup> This point has been raised though not fully discussed in (Kamber, 1998).

<sup>8</sup> The ‘expansive, adventurous character of art’ has been pointed out by Weitz (Weitz 1956: 32), and the fact that artists are free to completely disregard whatever we claim the essential property of art should be has been also commented on by other authors (cf. Cohen, 1962: 486)

the comments made by Weitz about the ever-changing nature of art are relevant – it might be historically correct, as Iseminger claims, that Diderot and Batteux set up the artworld as an aesthetic institution (Iseminger, 2004: 106ff.), but that does not mean that the artworld is not free to change its function, or acquire more than one function.<sup>9</sup>

Naturally, functionalists are happy to admit that their definitions may not capture the common usage of the term ‘art,’ and to claim that we are often wrong when we call something art. But this position has force mainly when applied to truly controversial pieces of modern art. It is much less persuasive if it can be shown that the theory would exclude some of the most revered and established artworks, or include some wildly problematic objects. It is hard to disagree that a good theory should provide us with a means of saying that some things are classified as art wrongly, but as I will show, the functionalists draw the line in the wrong place, or for wrong reasons.

Following this, it seems that the functionalist definitions are heading close to becoming normative, rather than descriptive in nature, i.e. they attempt to say not what art is, but what art should be. The defenders of the view would certainly claim that there are functional definitions of other things, e.g. weapons, which are clearly not normative, and so is the definition of art. However, there seems to be a vital difference here: determining the function of art is more arbitrary than in the case of weapons. The definition of ‘a weapon’ requires that objects called ‘weapons’ are efficient in harming and destroying persons and things, similarly to how ‘artworks’ are meant to be those objects which efficiently bring about aesthetic experiences, promote aesthetic communication, or embody aesthetic properties. But while the definition of a weapon does include all the objects which are commonly referred to as weapons, the functional definition of art does not encompass all things that we call artworks, notably readymades, conceptual art, etc. It simply seems that the definition wrongly recognises the actual function of art, or instead of recognising it tries to impose one which does not necessarily fit the actual artistic practice as well as the definition of weapons fits combative practice. There is a fine line between being very discriminatory and simply being wrong – theories defining art in terms of beauty or expression clearly

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<sup>9</sup> A similar thought has been expressed by Robert Stecker in his review of *The Aesthetic Function of Art*, (Stecker, 2007: 116–117), and explored in detail in Stecker’s own historical-functional definition of art, which cannot be discussed here in detail; (Stecker, 1996).

crossed that line, and I fear that the functionalists may be following them quite closely.

Let me now focus on the details. The sort of works which functionalism excludes from the domain of art are those which have been created with no intention of making them aesthetic (or with the explicit intention of making them anti-aesthetic), or, were intentionalism dropped, those which have no capacity to afford the audience any aesthetic experiences (or do not promote aesthetic communication, or are not such that they should have aesthetic properties). This has several implications: (1) it excludes anti-art which explicitly tries not to be aesthetic; (2) it excludes readymades, because they were not initially created as artworks, and an object cannot acquire the status of art 'midlife' – it either is art from beginning to end, or it is not art at all; (3) it excludes a lot of conceptual and politically or socially involved art for which the main aim is to shock or pass on a message, in which case the aesthetic function may be insignificant or non-existent. Only the last of these points fully applies to Iseminger's version of the theory, and in what follows I will discuss this part in most detail.

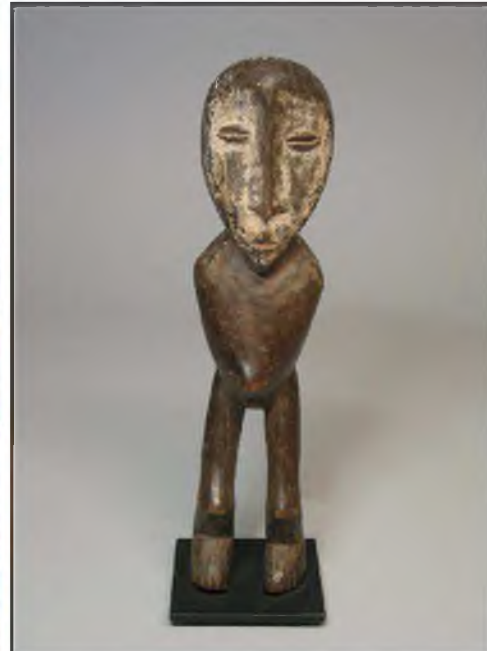
Holding (1–3) excludes much more than just a few borderline examples of modern art. (3) entails that a large amount of religious, political, or tribal works are not art, because they were created to serve a religious, etc., rather than an aesthetic function, and their ability to promote aesthetic communication or possession of aesthetic properties is rather contingent or incidental. It might turn out that such works have about as much aesthetic value as plastic cutlery or political speeches.

A typical functionalist answer to this issue is: although secondary or subordinate, the aesthetic function was still present in religious, etc. art, unlike in some modern works. However, this claim is misguided and easily falsified with historical examples, and likely rests on an unjustified premise which attributes modern aesthetic attitudes to the people of the past. Up until the 18th century (and certainly in Antiquity and the Middle Ages) art served primarily religious, political, social and economic functions, and what could be called the 'aesthetic' experience the contemporaries had of it was quite unlike the aesthetic experience a functionalist requires (Shiner, 2001: 4, 24–7, 34 etc.). Sculptures, paintings and poems were treated with appreciation, but exactly the same sort of appreciation that was given to political speeches, athletic competitions and virtuous persons. There is a great body of evidence showing that the experience of art prevalent up until the 18th Century was nothing like the aesthetic attitude praised by the Ro-

manics, and that even if art's function was tied with what we would call its aesthetic properties, this function was not to elicit the sort of aesthetic response or experience we typically have. Similarly, a great deal of primitive art completely disregards the aesthetic function – the sculptures of the Kalahari of southern Nigeria are valued for their capacity to contain spirits, and 'some evidence suggests that as visual objects, [they] tend to evoke not merely apathy but actual repulsion' (Horton, 1965: 12). For another African people, the Lega, 'carvings are apparently used simply as vehicles for communication and not valued for their intrinsic form.' Moreover, 'if a carving is broken or lost, or taken by an outsider, most initiates are not unduly worried, replacing it with "something that is functional and ... is the semantic equivalent"' (Layton, 1991: 10; after Biebuyck, 1973: 164)



(a) Kalabari Memorial Screen 'Ijaw Duein Fubara', late 19th century, Minneapolis Institute of Arts



(b) Lega human figure 'Kakulu ka Mpito', private collection, example from Sotheby's Kuhn Collection of African Art, 1991 Auction Katalog

Fig. 2: Sculptures of the African tribes

This applies not only to some selected primitive sculptures. Most of the inscriptions, icons, etc. created within the worlds' greatest religious systems were

clearly not intended as much to please the eye as to pass on some sort of message, or to lead the soul to God(s). The writers of icons were not concerned about whether their works looked good, i.e. that they were aesthetically pleasing to humans or God – instead the colours, shapes, composition, virtually every aspect of the work, was determined by the religious message it was to convey. This is why the creation of icons was referred to as ‘writing’ rather than ‘painting’. In fact, similarly to many early Christian artworks, they were judged ugly by the people of the Renaissance precisely because they did not attempt to aesthetically please, but to express a symbolic meaning, or to focus presumed magical or religious powers. It is very revealing to read Vasari expressing his disappointment at Mediaeval and late Roman works, which ‘entirely lost all [the] perfection of design’ of ancient art, and his disgust for the ‘Goths and other barbarous and foreign nations who combined to destroy all the superior arts’ (Vasari, 1963: vol. 1, pp. 6–7).

Similarly, the religious function of sacred music in the Middle Ages completely trumped its aesthetic function. To be sure, the Fathers of the Church whose theory determined the shape of art at the time were fully aware that music could be aesthetically pleasing – they actually explicitly did what they could to make sure that sacred music is not, because it was meant to convey meanings and direct the soul to God, not to worldly pleasures. Knowing full well that music can change one’s mood, please and impress (after all, they read Plato), they specifically forbade what is merely aesthetically pleasant – thus sacred music could use no instruments (which can produce beautiful sounds, but are unable to word a message), could not be composed in the locrian modus (because its root note together with the root note of its plagal modus did not form a perfect fourth or fifth, but a tritone, or *diabolus in musica*), had to be set in a form defined to suit the type of text expressed, etc. (Harman 1988: 2–21). Boethius in his *De institutione musica* did not even consider what he called *musica instrumentalis* (the sounds music makes) as a thing worth enquiring into, almost entirely focusing on the theological and mathematical theory behind it – he did not care what music sounded like, just what meanings it embodied (McKinnon 1990: 85). Such an approach is very akin to (1) – modern anti-art, or at least (3) – political or social art. Especially the latter seems to aim at exactly what St. Basil recommended: ‘God blended the delight of melody with doctrines in order that through the pleasantness and softness of the sound we might unawares receive what was useful in words’ (Harman, 1988: 2). He clearly conceived of music as

simply a form of propaganda, in which the aesthetic attractiveness is merely a convenient aid to passing on a religious message. All this was followed by composers, shaping Mediaeval and influencing Renaissance music – all of which functionalists would certainly include in their canon. Yet while we might praise medieval Christian artworks for their aesthetic value, they were created with no more thought directed towards it than religious sermons which could just as well employ aesthetic means to convey their messages.

What are the consequences for a functionalist, given that past attitudes toward paintings, sculptures, music etc., were not meant, and had no ability, to elicit aesthetic experiences in the modern sense of the word, no more than political speeches, magic rituals and a person's virtue did? To remain consistent, a functionalist would need to either accept that all things which elicited aesthetic experiences in the old sense are art, and thereby become vastly over-inclusive, or if they wish to stick with the modern sense, admit that old and primitive paintings, sculptures and music are not art at all, or became art mid-life, mostly around the 18th Century.

While functionalism might be right in wanting to exclude some objects popularly thought of as artworks from the domain of art, the theory itself does not provide tools good enough to draw the line in the right place. Exclusion of much of pre-18th Century art is simply unacceptable.

### **3.3. Inclusions**

More problems arise with relation to sufficiency. Assuming that art does serve the function of affording us an aesthetic experiences, promoting aesthetic communication, or embodying aesthetic properties it seems that it is not the only source of such experiences.<sup>10</sup> Clearly we can have aesthetic experiences by looking at landscapes, flowers, etc. To avoid this problem, Beardsley limits the sort of objects which should be taken into account to man-made objects, artefacts. However, even with this qualification there is a whole host of non-artwork artefacts which serve the function of giving us aesthetic experiences, and moreover that are created with the very intention of giving us such experiences. Classical furniture, jewellery, lingerie, interfaces of computer programs, horses' gait in

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<sup>10</sup> A similar argument has been presented by Stephen Davies, who points out that there are better means to the effects Beardsley says art has on us (Davies, 1991: 57).

military parades – some claim that even certain chess moves or mathematical proofs can be elegant or beautiful. We are aesthetically impressed by all these things, and yet there seems to be no temptation to include them in the domain of art. Not only can these things be created with the explicit intention of making them aesthetically pleasing, they also often belong to a kind which is typically intended to have this exact function (e.g. most jewellery is there primarily to be aesthetically pleasing). Needless to say, they do have and should have aesthetic properties to serve their function well.

A similar objection can be raised against Iseminger's modification of the theory. He claims that his definition does not mention sufficient conditions, however if this is the case then the charge of indeterminacy against his view is even stronger. If his 'aesthetic communication' is to be understood purely in terms of creating something with the intention of its being appreciated by others, i.e. if 'aesthetic communication' stands for 'communication via aesthetic means', then the above criticism still applies to his theory. An alternative would be to allow the communication to go beyond creating and aesthetically appreciating, and to accept a more common understanding of the term, i.e. 'aesthetic communication' could stand for 'communication about aesthetic facts' via any means. Then the above problem might be solved, as the members of the artworld do not typically discuss cavalry parades and lingerie.<sup>11</sup> But instead it now seems very difficult to tell the difference between objects which are artworks and other objects which amount to aesthetic communication and yet are not artworks, e.g. critical articles on art, photographic reproductions of paintings, or even Iseminger's own book. The issue is further complicated by the fact that there can be artworks which are commentaries on other artworks – thus the escape route through distinguishing the object of aesthetic communication from the tools of communication is inadequate, as some objects can be both. It is very easy to refer to the artworld here and say that aesthetic communication within the artworld is such that it simply distinguishes objects worth appreciating and discussing about. This, however, would make the definition essentially institutional, not functionalist.

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<sup>11</sup> While Iseminger never explicitly states that the communication must happen between artworld members, he writes that it is a 'function of the artworld' and 'consists in someone designing and making an artifact with the aim and effect that it be appreciated by someone else,' suggesting that the people communicating are artists and public, who definitely are artworld members (Iseminger, 2004: 23, 25–26).



A possible solution to this problem is naturally to agree that all the above-mentioned practices are in fact art, and so that bracelets and computer programs should be grouped together with paintings and theatrical performances. Indeed, the artists of the Art Nouveau movement did actually create jewellery and furniture specifically intending it to be art, as did the artists of the Bauhaus movement — Xenakis, too, composed music which represented mathematical equations, and there could be plenty of modern art found which tries to express aesthetic qualities through the medium of computer presentations, performances similar to military parades, and the like. Thus maybe the solution is to accept those practices and their products as art after all?

However, there are numerous problems with such a move. First of all, there is the issue of counterintuitive over-inclusiveness – while we might agree that Mackintosh’s chairs are art, it is very unintuitive to thereby extend the term art to encompass just about any chair. It might be argued that Mackintosh’s chairs are different because, unlike our everyday chairs, apart from providing a sitting surface they attempt to bring about an aesthetic experience, and this is why they should be considered art. Iseminger’s theory would sort this problem out easily – clearly normal chairs do not promote aesthetic communication (assuming that the chair can communicate aesthetic ideas, or that its aesthetic qualities can be an object of communication). However, the problem is not removed here, but merely relegated – we may be able to distinguish between Mackintosh’s chair and another chair, but not between Mackintosh’s chair and its photo, a book that discusses it, etc.

And yet as a matter of fact there are other chairs which are usually regarded as artworks – e.g. chairs produced after Bauhaus designs – which do not attempt to be particularly aesthetically pleasing, but merely functional. They might be far less aesthetically pleasing than many Victorian chairs which were made by ‘mere’ artisans and which, although appreciated, are not treated as artworks (Fig. 3). While it seems possible that Beardsley might simply say that Bauhaus chairs are treated as art unjustifiably, the example shows an important problem – there is a continuum of how much aesthetic experience certain objects can give us, and it is very hard to pinpoint the place in which objects of a certain kind which were not always regarded as art stop being art. Such pinpointing would be actually very easy were one to accept a proceduralist view – then the reason why some chairs are art and others are not is simply because ‘it just turned out that way’ (Dickie 2000: 100); chair-making began to count as an artistic genre (or an art-world system) after the Art Nouveau movement. Such a simple solution is, however, unavailable to the functionalist.



(a) A victorian chair by F.N. Otremba, ordered by the Hawaii Promotion Committee for Mark Twain's new home, 'Stormfield', 1908



(b) Charles Rennie Mackintosh, Ingram Street Tea-rooms chair, 1900, Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum, Glasgow



(c) Marcel Breuer, Wassily Chair (Model B3 chair), 1925, designed in Bauhaus and exhibited e.g. at the The Museum of Modern Art, New York

Fig. 3: Art chairs and non-art chairs

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, such an inclusive treatment is in deep disagreement with Beardsley's most basic aims. His theory was thought of specifically as being able to exclude some objects from the domain of art, and Beardsley was notably quite keen on excluding a fair amount of objects produced by modern artists. Yet the above all-encompassing solution not only allows the inclusion of all of modern art into the domain, it actually extends it even further, into regions questionable even for the most permissive institutionalists, such as lingerie-making and military parades. It seems quite unlikely that Beardsley himself would wish to follow that path.

Functionalist definitions capture a great deal of common intuitions about art, and are definitely an improvement on traditional theories. These theories were clearly extensionally inadequate – a great deal of what we consider art is not representative (virtually all music and architecture), not beautiful (from Peter Brueghel to Andres Serrano artists explored the ugly), and does not convey emo-

tions (Bach's fugues or Kandinsky's abstractions come to mind). Functionalism fares better than that, but not much better. It is probably true that most paradigmatic works of the 18th and 19th Century art had the aesthetic function the theory prescribes, and perhaps even that the artworld, as set up then, had exactly this function. But art is adventurous and keeps changing, as Weitz pointed out, and the exceptions to the rule seem too many to simply ignore them. Further, rigid application of functionalism would mean that a great deal of objects which have an aesthetic function but are not normally treated as art, would be art. Functionalists might say that what is treated as art and what actually is art are two different things, but I believe that at the point in which the differences become so vast as to exclude a great deal of pre-17th Century and modern art, yet to include fancy lingerie and military parades, their theories are no longer discriminatory, they are just wrong. In the end, it seems that functionalists tell us not what is art, but what functionalists would like art to be.

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