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## CONTEXTUALIZED FUNCTIONS: POSSIBLE TENSIONS IN STECKER'S DEFINITION

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Stecker's revised definition of art in *Artworks: Definition, Meaning, Value* is stated thus:

" $w$  is a work of art at  $t$  if and only if (a)  $w$  has form  $c$  which is a member of  $C$  and the maker of  $w$  intended it to fulfill a sub-set of functions  $f_1 \dots f_n$  of  $F$  such that  $f_1 \dots f_n$  are functions of  $c$  or (b)  $w$  is an object which achieves excellence in fulfilling a function in  $F$ "<sup>1</sup>

where:  $w$  is an artwork;

$t$  is a time;

$C$  is the set of central art forms at  $t$ ;

$c$  is a member of the set  $C$ ;

$F$  is the set of functions standardly or correctly regarded as belonging to  $C$  at  $t$ ;

$f_1 \dots f_n$  are members of the set  $F$ .

Some immediate observations about this (rather complex) definition: Firstly, it is *disjunctive*, so that meeting either clause (a) or clause (b) suffices to make an artwork and neither (a) nor (b) are individually necessary to produce an artwork. Secondly, as

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<sup>1</sup> Stecker, R. (1997), p.56.

stated (a) provides a *intentional* limit on artworks, whereas (b) provides a *functional* limit.<sup>2</sup>

The tension I will explore in this paper occurs when the intentional and the functional clash. My claim is that this results from cases in which the functional excellence for art claim abuts against either (i) an object's functional excellence as a non-artwork or (ii) the intentional limits of non-art practices. The result is either that Stecker's functional excellence claim is reliant on a further premise which is false or that the functional claim has to be interpreted within a procedural framework.

Alternatively Stecker has to provide a characterisation of 'achieving excellence in a function in F' which qualifies the circumstances under which an object can achieve excellence in fulfilling a function in F which protects him from these situations. However, my further claim is that this entails that the characterisation of a function becomes procedural. Hence, in either case, Stecker's definition as a whole stops being functional - its first disjunct is intentional and its second turns out to be functional within some kind of non-functional framework.<sup>3</sup>

The individual sufficiency of the second disjunct of Stecker's theory - that *w* is a work of art if *w* "is an object which achieves excellence in fulfilling a function in F" - permits that any object not made as an artwork becomes an artwork if it excels in meeting one or some of the functions of art at some time at or after it has been made. Stecker holds that objects, such as furniture, made in non-central art forms can be artworks if they, as well as being furniture, achieve excellence in one of the functions of art, either at the time they were made or at some later time. This allows for our continual recognition of objects as artworks as the history, and functions, of art develop.

Stecker is vulnerable to arguments that posit the possibility of objects that are indiscernible in respect of their achievement of functional excellence but only one of which is an artwork. I will not pursue this argument further here because of the difficulty of succinctly cashing out how objects might be indiscernible in respect of a

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<sup>2</sup> Stecker (1997), p.46. For Anderson (2000) pp.65-92, Stecker's definition provides one disjunct setting out a descriptive sense of art, whilst the other sets out an evaluative sense. Anderson (2000) provides (p.87) a definition of a work of art that has the same basic structure as Stecker's but with an explicitly aesthetic component attached to intentions and functions.

<sup>3</sup> For a sympathetic but critical discussion of some of the commitments in Stecker's first disjunct see Stock, K. (2000), pp.479-491.

function without utilizing intuitions that beg the question against functionalism. For the record I think that this *is* possible and is actually entailed by Stecker's position that objects from non-central art forms can become artworks in terms of the functions of art either at the time they were made, or at some later time.<sup>4</sup>

The explicitly functional disjunct entails that no kinds of objects are *precluded* from possibly becoming artworks, if they can achieve excellence in an artistic function. Many things not made as artworks can undeniably achieve excellence in an artistic function: a brilliant goal in football may show grace, demonstrate skill and even provide an insight into human psychology; certain pieces of comedy are practically indiscernible from performance art; some engineering achievements could easily be artworks, just as some artworks are engineering projects. On Stecker's theory, it appears that each would be an artwork through excelling in meeting some function(s) of art.

Stecker, would say, I think, that these are instances of 'art-football' or 'art-comedy', and that an instance of 'art-football' is simply an instance of football, which through the functional excellence of its properties has become an instance of art. There is no suggestion that if they become art they *stop* being something else. However, the 'art-instance' suggestion will not meet the objection that there may be examples in which 'being an object of kind X' and 'being an artwork' are incompatible for some reason. An essay for instance,<sup>5</sup> if sufficiently well-crafted and in possession of literary qualities, could become an artwork, even if the subject of the essay, and the proposition it put forth, was the fact and argument that it was *not* an artwork.<sup>6</sup> Whilst this is a somewhat forced example it stands emblematic of a wider concern.

The concern is that the explicitly functional disjunct of Stecker's definition can claim as artworks objects that their creators would demur, deny, or even object to calling artworks themselves and objects that might not be artworks because some other limit overrides their functional excellence. In these cases, it is unclear whether their functional excellence in respect of artistic functions can, or should, override the facts

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<sup>4</sup> See Stecker (1997) pp.53-54 for this commitment. Stecker (1998) makes it clear that this is the type of instance he envisages falling under the explicitly functional disjunct.

<sup>5</sup> At Stecker (1997) pp.51-52 Stecker uses the example of an essay as something that was once a central art form but no longer so.

<sup>6</sup> I expand on this possibility elsewhere. Anderson in Carroll (ed.) (2000) has an example of a philosophical essay becoming an artwork through its literary qualities.

that not only were they not made to be, or be viewed as artworks but they were made specifically as *something else other than an artwork*. These thoughts generate my general claim that: for any artistic function, or set of artistic functions at *t* these can be displayed in objects without thereby necessarily making those objects artworks. Therefore, excelling in a function of art at *t* is *insufficient* to make an artwork at *t*.

The reasons for my claim are more than simply stating a question begging set of intuitions. My argument is that each object mentioned above was, in effect, a product of the first disjunct of Stecker's theory, applied to sport, comedy or engineering respectively.<sup>7</sup> They are each in a central form and were intended to fulfill a, or the, central function of a *different* ongoing social practice - football, comedy or engineering, and this has consequences for the scope of Stecker's disjunct.

Stecker has the example of sculptures being used as doorstops<sup>8</sup> - just because an artwork excels in some function does not permit its appropriation as an object that has to serve that function nor in its identification as an instance of that explicitly functional object. So, an artwork that achieves its status through being within one of the central art forms does not lose its artwork status because of its excellence in a non-art function at *t*. The question I pose is why this trumping, or addition, to an object's descriptions occurs so that objects that are intentionally made as non-art, can become 'art' if the converse cannot happen.

This gets to the nub of this objection to clause (b) of Stecker's definition: the structure of the overall definition could not be applied generally throughout a society since it would permit the achievement of functional excellence to re-classify any object into any other – and this would result in an infinity of competing claims for multiply efficacious objects. Stecker's explicitly functional clause requires the one-way appropriation of objects that are functionally excellent as artworks. This requires an additional premise, unstated within the definition, that the functions of art at *t* outweigh the functions (or other claims) of other practices so that an object's achievement of functional excellence in an artistic function will ensure that it is an artwork. Moreover, the disjunct as stated requires that this can occur irrespective of whether it was made as

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<sup>7</sup> At Stecker (1997), p.59, Stecker states that institutional accounts of central art forms are plausible, so presumably the same would apply to other practices.

<sup>8</sup> Stecker (1997), p.55

an intended object central to, intended to be made within, and achieving functional excellence within, another practice. This premise, I claim, is untrue, or at least is subject to widespread challenge and not, as Stecker's functional disjunct requires, universally true.

My claim is that sometimes the claim of the non-artwork functions and the intentions with which it was made have as much, or a greater claim on an object than art's functional claim. Furthermore, the pre-existence of an existing practice or activity with its own established culture and classification criteria (and indeed sometimes explicit functional aims) for what counts as instances, is a factor which needs to be taken into account when considering objects that achieve functional excellence as artworks. In some cases, this can even preclude objects from becoming an artwork if that artwork status conflicts with properties those objects have as a result of being made within that different practice.

There would seem to be two related ways in which a non-art claim can impinge on the claimed artwork status of a functionally excellent object. Firstly, situations in which the claim would involve a violation of social, legal or moral norms within a society (such as the perfect murder), or which conflict with an object that has rights (such as designating a person as 'my' artwork). These are cases in which the kind of object or action which is functionally excellent would have some barrier to its inclusion within the first disjunct of the definition because it was not the sort of thing that could be intended to be made as an artwork. Secondly, there are cases in which there is no such barrier why an object might not be made as an artwork, but where, in this case it just wasn't - it was made as a central instance within a form of another social practice. In these cases someone can just say "I know you say it's art but I explicitly didn't make it as art, I made it as something else". They made the object and they just do not want it to be artwork. Given the range of objects that can be artworks now this claim will in some instances have force.

The tension caused by these cases is revealed when we consider that how an object is treated within a society can be affected by its claimed status as an artwork. The tension is especially apparent if actions which are appropriate for objects of type X – perhaps of consumption or utilitarian enjoyment - become inappropriate if these objects are

artworks. For instance, a tension will emerge if the person who made an object wants to continue using it in its completely normal way, but where this will entail its loss of the properties that entail its achievement of functional excellence or even entail its destruction. In these cases an object X could be an artwork and entail a set A of appropriate responses and the same object as a non-artwork could entail a set B of appropriate responses and the sets A and B could contain incompatible members.

In all these instances, what is true is that a decision is forced on us in terms of an object's further use, regard, function or value, of whether it is an artwork or not. However this is not possible on Stecker's disjunct, since these objects will be artworks simply through excelling in an artistic function. He would have to say we're forced into a decision about their *use* when they are artworks and that these objects are artworks but are not used or valued or regarded in the same way as objects intended as artworks.

I would suggest rather that the issue is whether an object's identification as an artwork caused by its achievement of functional excellence as an artwork can *trump* its identifications under different descriptions. If it can, then in conflict cases, an object will become an artwork, if not, and its purported achievement of functional excellence as an artwork does not prevent it being used in ways incompatible with its status as an artwork, then identifying that object as an artwork will be a mistake or, at least a failed claim that it achieves excellence in an artwork function. Without the premise that artistic excellence necessarily trumps other considerations, there is room for the non-art claim to win out and locate the object as a non-artwork - this is enough to demonstrate the insufficiency of Stecker's functional disjunct.

Art, like all other practices, must find its level within a community. The doorstep sculpture cases means that there cannot be a principle of parity between social practices – a community weights some more than others. In some instances art can superimpose itself on objects made outside the central art forms and these *will* be those that become artworks. On other occasions it's claim on the basis of an achievement of functional excellence can itself be trumped by the claims of other social practices. Whether or not objects become artworks is to be decided on a case-by-case basis depending on a range of factors, which need appropriate weighting in each case and any of which might compromise the claimed fact that it is an artwork. These might include moral, legal or

proprietary concerns;<sup>9</sup> whether it excels more in meeting functions within a non-art practice; or whether it is demonstrably made to be a central instance within a recognised form within another practice.<sup>10</sup> This last problem is especially severe if the object was made by an agent who also makes artworks and who demonstrably chose *not* to make this object as an artwork. If any of this is true this provides a *non-functional limit* on what can be included as an artwork within the explicitly functional clause within Stecker's definition.

Stecker I think realizes these problems and the need to fill out the functional disjunct so that it permits him to avoid them. He perhaps does this through his elaboration of the notion of achieving excellence in a function. In Stecker (1997)<sup>11</sup> he defines an object having a function thus: "an artifact has a function F if, relative to a context, it has the present ability or capacity to fulfill a purpose, with which it is made or used of F-ing or fulfills such a purpose." When applied to the functional disjunct in Stecker's definition, this produces something along the following lines;

*w* is an artwork at *t* if *w* is an object which, relative to a context, has the present ability or capacity to achieve excellence in fulfilling an artistic function in F or actually achieves this excellence in an artistic function in F.

(In addition defeating conditions for a context at *t* need to be set out, which would presumably be similar to those above – i.e. conflict with any properties the object possesses as a result of being an intended instance within a central form of another social practice etc.).

The requirement of fulfilling a function within a context permits Stecker to reply to all the above instances that the object did not have the capacity or ability to meet that function within that context and so does not become an artwork. He can say that if any of the aforementioned limits are operating on objects in any particular instance that they

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<sup>9</sup> The property right condition is of course a restraint on what can be an artwork for Levinson. See Levinson (1979).

<sup>10</sup> A similar point is made in Krukowski (1981), p.187: "... the status of 'artwork' can be lost through the demonstration of an incompatibility – perhaps inconsistency – between the continuation of such status and the application of another, more insistent interpretation of the object in question."

<sup>11</sup> Stecker (1997), p.31

do not have the ability or capacity to fulfill a function of art at  $t$ . The practical application of this principle is entirely due to the strength or weakness of a particular case.

However this comes at some considerable cost. There are two main points: The first is that this drastically reduces the scope of the application of Stecker's disjunct (b), since the re-statement of (b) including a relevant context in which an object can achieve excellence in an artistic function severely restricts its application. This indicates that it might not be what Stecker intended. Stecker (2000) bases the need for an explicitly functional disjunct within any definition of art on the difficulties of 'first art' for historical definitions. Since there is no, or no clear, other practice within which 'first art' was made their functional excellence as art is *all* we have to go on. However, the examples set out here have other descriptions, on non-functional bases, available to them. It is debatable therefore, to what extent, clause (b) in its contextualized version, will apply to objects that are made contemporaneously to a practice which recognizably contains our concept of art, or which is contemporaneous to the known history of art.

Secondly, and most fundamentally, whilst it might save the functional disjunct of the theory from itself being ring-fenced with a non-functional limit, this kind of context dependent ability or capacity to fulfill a function, or actual achievement of a function amounts to a procedural definition of a function. Now, an object fulfills a function if certain other necessary procedural strictures are met. More particularly an object does not necessarily achieve excellence in fulfilling a function of art *because* of the functions of an art form at  $t$ , rather it fulfills a function if it is not prevented from doing this by its context at  $t$ . This is *not* a functional limit per se – it's a functional limit provided through a procedural characterisation of a function. Given that Stecker's other disjunct in his definition is intentional, this reveals his definition as a whole not to be functional - the first clause is intentional and the second clause is either (i) functional ring-fenced within a non-functional framework or (ii) has to define functions procedurally. I conclude by tentatively suggesting that *any* functional definition of art including a claim for the *sufficiency* of meeting a function or functions irrespective of how an object was made,



will have to recognize similar constraints on its application within either intentional, procedural or institutional limits.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Hence I think Stecker is on the right track in Carroll (ed.) (2000) when arguing that any definition of art must be disjunctive.

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