

# Two-Dimensional Theories of Art<sup>1</sup>

Thomas N. P. A. Brouwer

*What determines whether an object is an artwork? In this paper I consider what I will call 'social' theories of art, according to which the arthood of objects depends in some way on the art-related social practices that we have. Though such a dependence claim is plausible in principle, social theories of art tend to unpack the determining link between artworks and social practices in terms of intentional relations between the objects in question and the people involved in the relevant practices. This intentionalism has unappealing upshots. Drawing on two-dimensional approaches in social ontology, I show how social theories of art can be done differently, improving their prospects.*

## 1. Social theories of art

The philosophy of art features a long-running debate on what makes something an artwork. Among the various theories of artworks on offer, there is a class of theories which share what I'll call a *social dependence claim*: according to these theories, for any  $x$ , whether  $x$  is an artwork constitutively depends (in some way to be specified) on our art-related social practices. Had those social practices been different, different things would have been artworks. I call such theories *social* theories of art.

Various more specific approaches fall within this class. The most prominent examples are institutional theories of art, but some types of historical and functionalist theories also validate a social dependence claim. In what follows, I am going to make a constructive suggestion with regard to all of these theories. There is a feature that extant social theories almost always seem to have, which I'll call *intentionalism*. This feature is not unmotivated, but is more trouble than it is worth. Using recent work in social ontology, I'll suggest a way of doing without this feature, without losing the explanatory power that it promises.

My initial target for this suggestion will be institutional theories. I will introduce the issue about intentionalism with regard to institutionalism and propose a 'two-dimensionalist' amendment to institutionalism; I will then broaden the scope of the argument to social theories of art generally.

## 2. Institutionalism

Institutional theories suggest that what counts as art depends crucially on our institutionalised practices of making, talking about, and appreciating art, often referred to synoptically as 'the artworld'. While some inspiration for the approach derives from Danto (1964), Dickie (1974) first presented a fleshed-out institutionalist proposal, and it was his theory that properly set the ball rolling. Here is Dickie's original proposal:

---

<sup>1</sup> I'd like to thank Aaron Meskin, Jack Woods and Nick Wiltsher for comments on early versions of this material.

A work of art in the classificatory sense is (i) an artifact (ii) upon which some person or persons acting on behalf of a certain social institution (the artworld) has conferred the status of candidate for appreciation. (Dickie 1974: 34)

Dickie's condition for arthood presents one concrete way of filling out the social dependence thesis, which above was left schematic. Whether objects have artwork status depends on a specific social institution, the artworld, because members of the artworld have the power to *confer* arthood on objects.

Dickie's proposal prompted much discussion. Do artworks always need to be artifacts? What exactly is this 'artworld'? Is it a certain social group, a particular practice, or a kind of context? What is it to act 'on behalf of' the artworld? Can artworld members freely confer this status, or is the conferring constrained by norms? Dickie later offered a new, somewhat different institutional theory (1984), and many others have made amended or alternative proposals (e.g. Binkley 1977, Davies 1991, Matravers 2000, Davies 2004, Graves 2010, Abell 2011, Fokt 2013, 2017). These theories all differ, but because the point I will make is so general, it suffices to use Dickie's as a representative example; the feature of institutional theories that I am interested in is one that all extant versions seem to have in common.

Here is the feature in question. These theories build in the crucial link between the artworks and the institutions on which their arthood depends by appealing to attitudes held towards or actions performed in relation to the objects by artworld members. They are what one might broadly call *intentionalist* theories.

This is, to be clear, by no means a silly thought. If the fact that  $x$  is an artwork depends somehow on the artworld, then surely  $x$  must bear some relation to the artworld. And what relation would that be if not some broadly intentional one? E.g. that  $x$  is considered to be an artwork by the artworld. Or intended to be considered as an artwork. Or presented to the artworld audience as an artwork. Or created to be an artwork. Options abound. But – the thought would be – if you don't build in some such relation between artwork and artworld, what makes it an institutional theory at all? That thought is fair enough.

The intentionalist element has peculiar consequences, though. It becomes hard to explain, for instance, how the extension of the artwork kind can range beyond situations where artworld members are around and available to bear the appropriate relation to the objects in question. It seems we can consider Palaeolithic cave paintings artworks even though there was likely no artworld or concept of art when those were created. Found art and outsider art present similar issues. These seem *prima facie* like bugs in the theory: it threatens to give us false negatives.

There are, of course, responses available. We could consider such things artworks in an extended sense of 'artwork'. We could say they only become art once they've been adopted retroactively into the category of artwork by artworld members. We

could cast around for some relatively undemanding intentional relation, so that we more easily count as bearing it towards the objects in question. Or we could argue that these things, despite initial appearances, really aren't artworks.

We could start unpicking this complicated dialectic at this point. But happily we won't have to, if the reader will grant me this assumption: that the prospects of institutionalism would improve if it could simply allow that there are artworks to which we bear no particular intentional relations. If it could, the above dialectic could be side-stepped altogether. The way that extant institutional theories have been set up does not allow this; so it's worth seeing if we can set them up differently, while still making sense of the social dependence claim. I think we can.<sup>2</sup>

### 3. Two-dimensional social ontology

In social ontology – the study of how social facts, kinds and entities come about – some theories have a similar intentionalist slant. Some theories of artefacts characterise artefacts as things intentionally made to be instances of some type (Thomasson 2007). Some 'conferralist' theories of human kinds (e.g. Ásta 2013) take people to have (say) the gender or race that they have in virtue of them having that gender or race 'conferred upon them' by society, in response to features they are perceived to have.

But for many social facts this approach is a bad fit. If I am *guilty of bicycle theft*, it will be in virtue of having taken someone's bike under such-and-such conditions, specified by the law. It is a social fact, because whether I count as guilty depends on the law, a contingent, conventional institution created by us as a society. But being guilty of bicycle theft is a social property distinct from *being found guilty of bicycle theft*, which is to have been judged to have met the conditions for bicycle theft by the appropriate authority (e.g. a jury or judge). The latter involves attitudes held towards me and my actions; the former doesn't.

A different kind of theory is apt for cases like being guilty of bicycle theft. I'll outline what I call, for reasons which will emerge, a 'two-dimensional' theory. Though the

---

<sup>2</sup> Many worry about the apparent circularity of institutionalist accounts (e.g. Stecker 1986). The worry is roughly that they create a definitional circle involving the notion of an artwork and the notion of an artworld, and provides no understanding of what art is to someone who does not already understand one or the other. I do not worry about this here, for two reasons.

First, I don't here consider institutional theories as attempts to define the concept of art, though that is a common understanding. My more modest metaphysical aim is to understand what sorts of facts about an object determine whether it is an artwork. This doesn't require defining or being able to define the concept. By analogy, I might wonder what makes some creature a dung beetle. Is it its genotype? Its clade? Its morphology? Settling this does not require the ability to define 'dung beetle'. Second, I am unconvinced that 'artwork' admits of an informative definition. This is not for reasons to do with the 'open texture' or indefinite extensibility of the concept (Weitz 1956). It is because our art-making and art-appreciating practice is a historical particular, like the Catholic Church or the English language. An institutionalist's definition of 'artwork' would have to refer to that historical particular, and would not be illuminating to anyone unacquainted with it.

label is new, this style of theory is pretty widespread in social ontology, depending on who you count. Possible examples (depending on interpretation) include Searle's (1995) theory, adaptations and extensions thereof like Thomasson (2003) and Hindriks (2009), Tuomela (2013) and, beyond social ontology proper, Hart's (1961) theory of law. Unambiguously two-dimensional theories include Einheuser (2006) and Epstein (2015). Here I'll present the barest bones of two-dimensionalism. The details are important and interesting, but we can manage without for present purposes.

Let there be *facts* and *conditions* (this is my terminology – Einheuser and Epstein each have their own terms). Facts concern what the world is like; conditions concern what the world should be like for some social fact to obtain. Timmy, let's say, can't go on the roller-coaster. Why? He's 3 foot 8, but the sign says you can only go on if you're 4 foot or over. The social fact that *Timmy can't go on the roller-coaster* is amenable to two kinds of complementary explanation. It's explained by facts about Timmy: that he's 3 foot 8. And it's explained by the conditions for going on the roller-coaster: that Timmy needs to be 4 foot.<sup>3</sup>

Given these two factors, we can distinguish two independent modes of counterfactual reasoning about social facts (hence the term 'two-dimensional'). In one, we entertain non-actual facts; in another, we entertain non-actual conditions. Timmy could have gone on the roller-coaster had he been 4 foot 5. That's varying the facts but holding the conditions fixed. And Timmy could have gone on the roller-coaster if the rule had said 3 foot 5. That's holding the facts fixed but varying the conditions. We can also vary both together in useful ways, but we won't get into that.<sup>4</sup>

According to a two-dimensional social ontology, social facts arise out of a combination of cold, hard facts and contingent, conventional conditions. In principle, the facts that underlie social facts could be of any sort. The fact that *x* is a squirrel pelt could support the fact that *x* is a pound sterling, if that's what the conditions specify. The conditions themselves don't come out of nowhere: any such theory will have a story about how conditions are put in place. Different theorists say different things. But on any such story, what conditions are in place is explained by appealing to our collected thought, talk, and behaviour. That is where the 'socialness' gets in: it isn't that there's necessarily something social in the facts that underlie social facts, it's that these facts arise out of others by way of socially imposed, contingent conditions. The social fact that Timmy can't go on the roller-coaster arises out of the

---

<sup>3</sup> That the example condition is a necessary one is not crucial; we can give examples in which the operative condition is a sufficient one, or a necessary and sufficient one.

<sup>4</sup> The underlying theory can be spelled out variously. Einheuser patterns hers on a Kaplanian theory of context-dependence, swapping out contexts for 'carvings', i.e. complete sets of conditions, which act as functions from worlds-without-social-facts to worlds-with-social facts. Which social facts are actual is relative to both a choice of world (or 'substrate', as she calls it) and a choice of carving. Epstein does things somewhat differently.

non-social, physical fact that he's 3 foot 8, via a condition imposed through a distinctively social mechanism.

Crucially for present purposes, two-dimensionalism can easily explain how the extensions of social kinds range beyond situations which feature the people whose social kinds they are. Was Genghis Khan a war criminal? That social classification wasn't around when Genghis was, so maybe we should say he couldn't be. But it seems to make sense to consider him so.<sup>5</sup> And it can make sense, because it is coherent (even if not always appropriate) to consider what the facts at some other time (or place or possibility) entail in the light of conditions that we, in the actual here and now, have put in place. As above, it's a case of holding the conditions fixed while varying the facts. We consider the facts concerning Genghis Khan's behaviour, and see whether they meet the conditions. Some social classifications (including, arguably, *war criminal*) we freely project across time, space and possibilities; others we are less inclined to. But when we do, two-dimensional social ontology explains how we can.

This explains why the intentional relations we bear towards social objects are often only indirectly relevant to the social kinds they belong to. It isn't necessary for Genghis Khan to be a war criminal that either we or his contemporaries think of him in that way or indeed in any way. What matters is that there are conditions for being a war criminal and that he satisfies them.<sup>6</sup>

#### 4. Two-dimensional institutionalism

Consider a theory of art built within this framework. To be an artwork is to be a certain kind of social entity. If  $x$  is an artwork, that would be because facts about  $x$  meet the conditions associated with the social kind *artwork*. The relevant facts about  $x$  may, for all we have determined, turn out to be of any sort: intrinsic or extrinsic; synchronic or historical; natural or social. For  $x$  to be an artwork, we don't need to believe that those facts obtain, or bear any particular relation towards  $x$ . Nevertheless it is our social practices that put the conditions in place, so the category of artworks is constitutively shaped by us, as a social theory would require.<sup>7</sup>

On this view there is one sense in which an object's arthood does not depend on us and our social arrangements – the sense in which social facts depend on the facts which underlie them. And there is another sense in which it does depend on us and

---

<sup>5</sup> The example is Epstein's (2015: 124).

<sup>6</sup> Searle is sometimes construed, both by those building on his approach (e.g. Abell 2011) and by critics (Torrengo 2017), as more intentionalist than he is: as holding that we must not only collectively accept the constitutive rules that govern social kinds, but also of token objects that they belong to these kinds. I think this construal is incorrect, but nevertheless Searle is more intentionalist than some: Epstein (2015) and Torrengo (2017) deny that even the mechanisms for putting in place conditions would need to involve intentionality.

<sup>7</sup> Little is assumed about the logical features of conditions. The social kind *artwork* may just have an open-ended set of sufficient instantiation conditions and no necessary conditions.



our social arrangements – the sense in which social facts depend on the conditions which govern them. An artwork may be an artwork in virtue of having features which are not in any sense social or intentional. But that it is an artwork still depends on our social arrangements, for those features only have the bearing that they do because our art-related practices have accorded them that role. So the dependence claim is vindicated.<sup>8</sup>

Within this two-dimensional framework, an institutional theory of art would be one that appealed distinctively to the institution of the artworld to explain how the conditions for arthood get put in place. It would say that those involved in the artworld, through their behaviour and interactions, create and uphold an evolving set of standards for treating things as artworks. In so doing, they determine which things count as artworks, but – I stress – indirectly. For it is not the artworlders' treatment of particular token objects that makes those objects into art; rather, whether objects are artworks depends on whether they meet the conditions for arthood – which are what the artworlders' practices determine.<sup>9</sup>

A two-dimensional institutional theory of art can smoothly accommodate such things as Palaeolithic art, outsider art or found art. All such things can be artworks in the fullest sense of the word, just as long as the substantive conditions for arthood that we can glean from artworld practices don't require the kinds of intentional relations that are absent in these cases. And insofar as we *do* think that such things can be art, we shouldn't interpret artworld practices as imposing conditions that rule them out.

## 5. Social theories beyond institutionalism

Two-dimensional social theories of art do not, however, need to be versions of institutionalism. There would be other ways of explaining how conditions for arthood are put in place, and these would lead to two-dimensional theories which are more like versions of historical or functionalist theories of art. As with institutionalism, extant historical and functionalist theories tend to make central use of intentional relations to artworks, with the complications that this brings. So here

---

<sup>8</sup> An example of a theory which arguably fits the description of a two-dimensional social theory of art is Xhignesse's (2020) conventionalist theory of art-kinds. Interestingly, it is motivated by considerations largely separate from the ones I offer here, but Xhignesse observes that his account relies less on individuals' propositional attitudes to explain the arthood of objects than other social theories do.

<sup>9</sup> Implicit here is the two-dimensionalist's response to 'Wollheim's dilemma' (1987) for institutionalism. Either there are no substantive conditions for arthood, and an artwork is just whatever is so dubbed by artworlders. This seems implausibly unconstrained. Or there are substantive conditions for arthood; but then we could give a theory of art just by describing those conditions, and the artworld would play no explanatory role. The two-dimensionalist happily takes the second horn. They hold that there are substantive conditions for arthood, but that they are socially contingent, and could have been otherwise. The conditions do explain what makes for an artwork, but the artworld is needed to explain why the conditions are as they are.

too we benefit by understanding the social dependence claim in a two-dimensionalist manner.

A historical two-dimensionalism would propose that at a time  $t$ , the conditions for being an artwork are those derived – in a manner to be theorized – from the properties exhibited by those objects which are already socially recognised as artworks at times prior to  $t$ .<sup>10</sup> Such a theory would allow objects to be artworks even if no-one bears intentional relations towards them, if they *de facto* exhibit the right properties.<sup>11</sup> It would validate the dependence claim precisely in appealing to these prior social facts of recognition.

A functionalist two-dimensionalism would understand the conditions for arthood to be functional ones – objects would be artworks by having features that make them apt for playing certain functions. It would then validate the social dependence claim by giving a distinctively social account of these functions, one which makes them contingent, in a manner to be theorized, on our social practices.<sup>12</sup>

Thus two-dimensionalism about artworks can be a fairly broad church. It is broad in another respect too, because adopting a two-dimensionalist approach does not by itself pin down very much about what the substantive conditions for arthood are. As noted above, the features required of an object could in principle turn out to be of any sort. Furthermore, different artwork categories could involve distinct conditions, with possibly little substantively in common between them, so that the overall conditions for arthood acquire a disjunctive character.<sup>13</sup> Two-dimensionalism doesn't impose any constraints here, which I take to be a good thing – in discerning the operative conditions, we can be led by first-order analysis of the category or categories of artworks. Two more specific points follow on from this.

First, though we've seen reason to be wary about positing conditions for arthood that involve intentionality, it is worth observing that two-dimensionalism as such doesn't bar us from doing so; it just gives us the freedom not to. Were we to think that, for some specific category of artworks, arthood does constitutively involve intentional relations to members of the artworld, we can hold that intentional relations do show up in the conditions that govern them. And this could be fine, if

---

<sup>10</sup> As with any historical theory, this explanatory structure would iterate, and there would have to be a story about when and how it bottoms out.

<sup>11</sup> Levinson's (1979) historical theory, while intentionalist, approaches two-dimensionalism in a certain respect. He requires that an artwork be intended by its creator to be regarded as artworks have been regarded; but he allows that the creator's regarding-related intentions may map only *de re* onto the way artworks have historically been regarded.

<sup>12</sup> Among functionalist theories, Stecker's (1997) disjunctivist historical-functionalist theory comes closest to two-dimensionalism. On his view, though objects standardly get to be artworks by being made with the intention of fulfilling a function of art, objects outside central art forms can get to count as artworks just in virtue of achieving excellence in fulfilling such a function.

<sup>13</sup> See Lopes (2008) for arguments to this effect, and the above-mentioned Xhignesse (2020).

we're not expecting to have to countenance e.g. Palaeolithic examples of that art-form.

Second, if the conditions associated with the artwork category are imposed by contingent social mechanisms, then – depending somewhat on the details of the theory – we could allow that the artwork category might not be altogether coherent. It might be associated with conditions that make certain things both count and not count as artworks, or conditions that sometimes leave an object's artwork status indeterminate. I take no view on whether this is likely, but the possibility is worth observing, and offers options for dealing with borderline or otherwise problematic cases of artworks (cf. Young & Priest 2016).<sup>14</sup>

## 6. Conclusion

In this paper, I've offered a constructive suggestion to defenders of social theories of art. Incorporating the insights of two-dimensional social ontology into one's theory of art is, I suggest, a cost-free improvement; and I think the flexibility that the approach offers should hold some attraction even for those not moved in particular by concerns about e.g. Palaeolithic art. That it somehow depends on us whether an object is an artwork has long struck many as plausible; but the challenge has always been to add substance to that claim without making the plausibility wear off. Two-dimensionalism, I submit, is the trick we've been missing.

## Funding

The research leading to this article has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (grant agreement no. 818633).

## Bibliography

Abell, Catherine (2011). Art: What it is and Why it Matters. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 85(3): 671-691.

Ásta (2013). The Social Construction of Human Kinds. *Hypatia* 28(4): 716-32.

Binkley, Timothy (1977). Piece: Against Aesthetics. *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 35(3): 265-277.

Brouwer, Thomas (2022). Social Inconsistency. *Ergo* 9: 19-46.

Danto, Arthur (1964). The Artworld. *The Journal of Philosophy* 61: 571-84.

Davies, David (2004). *Art as Performance*. Oxford: Blackwell.

---

<sup>14</sup> See also Brouwer (2022) for a general discussion of inconsistency in social reality.



- Davies, Stephen (1991). *Definitions of Art*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press
- Dickie, George (1974). *Art and the Aesthetic: An Institutional Analysis*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Dickie, George (1984). *The Art Circle*. New York: Haven.
- Einheuser, Iris (2006). Counterconventional Conditionals. *Journal of Philosophy* 127(3): 459-482.
- Epstein, Brian (2015). *The Ant Trap*. New York: OUP.
- Fokt, Simon (2013). Solving Wollheim's Dilemma: A Fix for the Institutional Theory of Art. *Metaphilosophy* 44(5): 640-54.
- Fokt, Simon (2017). The Cultural Definition of Art. *Metaphilosophy* 48(4): 404-29.
- Graves, David (2010). *The New Institutional Theory of Art*. Champaign, IL: Common Ground Publishing.
- Hart, H.L.A. (1961). *The Concept of Law*. Oxford: OUP.
- Hindriks, Frank (2009). Constitutive Rules, Language, and Ontology. *Erkenntnis* 71(2): 253-275.
- Levinson, Jerrold (1979). Defining Art Historically. *British Journal of Aesthetics* 19(3): 21-33.
- Lopes, Dominic McIver (2008). Nobody Needs a Theory of Art. *The Journal of Philosophy* 105(3): 109-127.
- Matravers, Derek (2000). The Institutional Theory of Art: A Protean Creature. *British Journal of Aesthetics* 40(2): 242-250
- Searle, John (1995). *The Construction of Social Reality*. London: Penguin.
- Stecker, Robert (1986). The End of an Institutional Definition of Art. *British Journal of Aesthetics* 26(2): 124-132.
- Stecker, Robert (1997). *Artworks: Definition, Meaning, Value*. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press.
- Stecker, Robert (2010). *Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art*. Plymouth: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Thomasson, Amy (2003). Foundations for a Social Ontology. *ProtoSociology* 18: 269-290.
- Thomasson, Amy (2007). Artifacts and Human Concepts. In: Margolis & Laurence (eds.), *Creations of the Mind*. Oxford: OUP.

Torrenco, Giuliano (2017). Institutional Externalism. *Philosophy of the Social Sciences* 47(1): 67-85.

Tuomela, Raimo (2013). *Social Ontology: Collective Intentionality and Group Agents*. Oxford: OUP.

Weitz, Morris. The Role of Theory in Aesthetics. *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 15(1): 27-35.

Wollheim, Richard (1987). *Painting as an Art*. London: Thames & Hudson.

Young, Damon & Priest, Graham (2016). It Is and It Isn't. *Aeon* 22/09/2016. Permalink: <<https://aeon.co/essays/how-can-duchamp-s-fountain-be-both-art-and-not-art>>.

Xhignesse, Michel-Antoine (2020). What Makes a Kind an *Art-kind*? *The British Journal of Aesthetics* 60(4): 471-488.