Critical Contextual Aestheticism

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Introduction

According to Thomas Adajian (2018), modern definitions of art typically fall into three categories: (1) 'functionalist' definitions, which argue what makes something an artwork is whether it provides a distinctive aesthetic experience; (2) 'institutionalist' definitions, which argue that, rather that aesthetic experiences that make art, it is artworld institutions that baptize something as art; and (3) hybrid theories that seek to combine functionalist and institutional aspects.[1] Functionalist and institutionalist definitions of art prima facie conflict. Functionalists assert that artworks must possess aesthetic properties, making these properties essential in deciding if something is an artwork. In contrast, institutionalist definitions maintain that aesthetic properties are not critical for determining if something is an artwork.

Both perspectives have faced considerable criticism. Functionalist theories are criticized for being both too broad, as they may include objects not typically considered artworks owing to their possession of aesthetic properties (beautiful sunsets, for instance), and too narrow, as it may exclude the possibility of bad art because aesthetic properties account for both artistic status *and* artistic goodness (see Hanson 2017 on 'definition-evaluation parallelism'). Institutionalism faces different issues, mainly with respect to defining the appropriate boundaries of who and what should be properly considered part of the artworld. However, both theories also have obvious merits. Functionalism acknowledges and argues that artworks are a privileged category, distinct from non-art objects insofar as their aesthetic properties give rise to some function – e.g., eliciting an aesthetic experience – while institutionalism recognizes the inherently social nature of artmaking, artworks, and the artworld.

Given the tension between the merits and drawbacks of these positions, I cautiously propose a reconciliation. This alternative— which is presented here as a summary of an argument I advance in Chapter 5 of my monograph, *What Art Does: Using Philosophy of Technology to Talk about Art* (cf. Wittingslow 2023)—is in principle similar to previous attempts to reconcile functionalist and institutionalist perspectives on art, such as Gary Iseminger's appreciation account (2004), Francis Longworth and Andrea Scarantino's disjunctive properties account (2010), or Dominic McIver Lopes' network account (2018), in that we're all trying to account for both the social and the aesthetic features of artworks, albeit in different ways. However, my tack also significantly deviates from these approaches, in that my response to this dilemma draws from recent research in philosophy of science rather than philosophy of art. Inspired by Helen Longino's 'critical contextual empiricism', I argue that art arises from social epistemic procedures that encompass both aesthetic functions and institutional practices. Within these procedures, aesthetic functions are developed, validated, and enforced through institutional practices, rather than being solely tied to the artistic outcomes of those practices. I call this approach 'critical contextual aestheticism'.

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[1] Adajian is by no means the first to speciate definitions of art; Stephen Davies makes a similar, influential, distinction between 'functionalist' and 'proceduralist' definitions of art in his "Functional and Procedural Definitions of Art" (1990).

Three Approaches

In philosophy of art, the term 'art' is used in at least three distinct ways. These include: (1) artmaking, referring to the processes and methods by which artworks are created; (2) art identification, focusing on how to distinguish artworks from non-artworks; and (3) the artistic canon, encompassing the collection of objects considered as art. Functionalists and institutionalists approach these aspects differently.

1. Artmaking

Functionalist and institutionalist perspectives diverge on the processes involved in creating artworks and the extent to which these processes are necessary or sufficient for determining something as an artwork. For example, Nick Zangwill — a philosopher I take to be broadly representative of the functionalist view — argues that it is the function of artworks to have aesthetic properties, and that these aesthetic properties supervene upon the non-aesthetic properties of those artworks (2001, 9–23). Zangwill then proposes a normative theory of art that is based on a process guided by meeting specific success criteria. This process consists of three principally distinct stages. First, the artist must have the insight that it is possible to evoke desired aesthetic properties by creating non-aesthetic properties. Second, the artist must intend to achieve these desired aesthetic properties through the identified non-aesthetic properties. Finally, the artist must successfully fulfil their intention to produce the desired aesthetic properties using the identified non-aesthetic properties (2007).

Institutionalists, on the other hand, focus on art-making practices that account for how objects are accepted as artworks by a given public. Institutionalists typically explain artwork creation by situating the process within the 'artworld'. They emphasize the role of the 'artworld', a term coined by Arthur Danto (1964), and further developed by George Dickie (1974, 1997) and others, in determining art status. Danto introduces the 'artworld' to clarify how we distinguish art objects from seemingly identical non-art objects. How else can we make sense of Andy Warhol's *Brillo Box* being considered art, for instance, despite being visually indistinguishable from a non-art Brillo box? Danto believes we need a story that prevents Warhol's *Brillo Box* from merging with the actual Brillo box: something that accounts for the unique identity of artistic recognition. This 'something', Danto suggests, is the artworld (1964). Dickie develops Danto's account further. Further reducing Danto's account, Dickie argues that to be a work of art is to be an artist-created artefact of a kind created to be presented to an artworld public.

For institutionalists, art-making practices are unrelated to the successful expression of aesthetic properties. Rather, the process of artmaking is founded on a productive relationship between an artist's intention to produce an object of a specific class, the object itself, and an artworld public's readiness to accept the object as part of that class. Within this productive relationship, artmaking is unencumbered by the processes and normative criteria that functionalists like Zangwill require. Instead, artworks are merely artefacts of a type created for presentation to the appropriate audience, with no additional requirements concerning meeting evaluative or substantial aesthetic standards.

2. Art Identification

The second meaning of art is 'identification': that is, how an individual can distinguish art objects from non-art objects. Identification is a three-term relation involving a subject or subjects, a theory by which artworks can be accurately identified, and an art object. Through this relation, we emphasize a virtuous interaction between a subject's (p) beliefs about an

object's art status, the artwork (w) itself, and the art theory by which the subject can justify holding those beliefs. Fulfilling these three conditions signifies that 'p identifies that w is art'. While this general characterization applies to both functionalists and institutionalists, they each handle the matter of justification differently.

Functionalists assert that the correct identification of aesthetic properties justifies the attribution of something as an artwork. This is evident in Zangwill and other functionalists' work on art (besides Zangwill 2001, 2007, see Beardsley 1982; Eldridge 1985; DeClerq 2002; for a general overview of both functionalist and institutionalist definitions of art, refer to Adajian 2018 and Davies 1990): if the function of artworks is to possess aesthetic properties, and if the presence of those aesthetic properties is what makes something an artwork, then accurately identifying aesthetic properties is a necessary condition for properly identifying an artwork as an artwork.

Institutionalists, on the other hand, adopt a position about art identification that is neutral concerning the proper identification of aesthetic properties. Instead, justification is linked to an artwork's relationship with a specific artworld public. Firstly, the artwork must be the sort of thing intended to be presented to an artworld public; secondly, the artworld public in question must be "prepared in some degree" to understand the thing intended for presentation, per Dickie: "A public is a set of persons the members of which are prepared in some degree to understand an object which is presented to them" (Dickie 1997, 81).

Without shared aesthetic criteria against which artwork status can be attributed, this means that the public in question is entirely responsible for creating and enforcing the definitional and evaluative criteria by which potential art objects are assessed and validated. A consequence of this assertion is that, if artworld publics are fundamentally accountable for the standards under which artworks are recognized as artworks, and these standards are not tied to normative aesthetic criteria, then there is no requirement for theories of art to be consistent between communities. As a result, institutionalists tend to be pluralists about justifiability in a way that functionalists are not.

3. The Artistic Canon

Lastly, the third aspect of art is the artistic canon: that is, the complete collection of artworks available to us, encompassing paintings, sculptures, dance, literature, poetry, theatre, or anything else we might commonsensically describe as art. This canon cannot be attributed to a single individual, nor is it associated with a specific time or place. Instead, it is simply the sum of all things included in the category of artworks: everything housed in museums or private collections; every winner of any award; every work recorded in auction records or possessing copyright protections, and so on. For the functionalist, this collection is the total of all things identified through the normative art-producing and identification processes mentioned earlier. Meanwhile, for the institutionalist, the art collection consists entirely of whatever a particular artworld public believes to be accurate.

The Problem

Neither functionalism nor institutionalism adequately addresses the complexities presented by artworks. Functionalism neglects the importance of art's connections to histories, institutions, and egos, while institutionalism fails to fully capture the intertwined nature of normative aesthetic criteria and our understanding of art objects and their functions (indeed, one major criticism of institutional theories is that they do not give us an account of why or

how we value art see, e.g., Abell 2012). However, both theories get some parts of the story right.

Functionalists appreciate that, for us to have a definition of art that captures the way we talk about art in ordinary language, we need a robust and non-relative conception of discussing the role of normative aesthetics in art. This is because aesthetic experience is a fundamental part of how we describe and evaluate artworks. Moreover, we ask these aesthetic questions of those artefacts precisely because they are artworks rather than some other kind of artefact. The very 'art-ness' of art invites us to reflect on its aesthetic nature. Without trying to make too much of this claim, I think it's clear that recognizing something as an artwork is to be invited to reflect on its aesthetic qualities.

However, the institutionalist narrative holds real power. By characterizing art as a thing with a social ontology—a thing produced and ratified by the complex web of individuals, galleries, universities and schools, governmental organizations, private institutions, and many other components that make up the artistic enterprise in its entirety—institutionalists can become sensitive to social facts about artists and artworks that are either invisible or irrelevant to functionalists: facts about race, gender, social inequality, education, technique, capital (whether institutional, political, or economic), or anything else. These social facts can and should be considered as part of a comprehensive analysis of an artwork, given that they influence both the creation and reception of works of art.

Institutionalists are also much better equipped to deal with the problem of 'bad art'. It would certainly contradict ordinary language use of the word 'art' to claim that artefacts must meet certain normative aesthetic criteria to be properly considered artworks; in common sense, an object need not be intentionally beautiful, elegant, grotesque, or anything else, to be deserving of the attribution. Instead, when we talk about bad art, we are not discussing objects that have failed to meet the relevant aesthetic success criteria and thus fail to be art. Rather, we mean that, while the object in question is very much an artwork, it is just not a very good example of an artwork. Failure to meet normative aesthetic criteria compromises an object's quality as an artwork without compromising its character as an artwork.

I have mixed feelings about this issue. I am inclined to endorse the functionalist view on the importance of aesthetic experience, as I take it to be the case that any definition of art that downplays the significance of aesthetic interpretation misses the trees for the forest: what is art, if not an aesthetic enterprise? However, I also think that institutionalism is essentially correct about the social ontology of art. This is not only because it is evident that different communities have different standards for what constitutes art, but also because institutionalism is better equipped to account for the contingent facts underlying the creation and reception of artworks.

A Solution

Helen Longino offers an approach that might help to resolve this issue. In her works *Science as Social Knowledge* (1990) and *The Fate of Knowledge* (2002), she contends that philosophy of science is marked by a similar divide between 'rationalizers' and 'sociologizers'. Rationalizers focus on the normative epistemic criteria used to evaluate whether an observation or prediction should be deemed scientific knowledge. Sociologizers, meanwhile, argue that scientific knowledge is a social fact: a socially mediated product of certain knowledge-making institutions (2002, 77–89).

These factors lead rationalizers and sociologizers to hold radically different views on knowledge, as well as on how these perspectives interact (cf. 2002, 89–96). Generally, rationalizers support an individualist (knowledge doesn't require community sanction), monist (assuming there is a single correct, complete, and consistent account of facts), and non-relative (justification is not arbitrary) conception of knowledge. In contrast, sociologizers broadly believe that knowledge is non-individual (ratified by groups), non-monist (no assumption of a single correct, complete, and consistent account of facts), and relative (justifications are arbitrary but socially mediated).

Longino believes both the rationalizing and sociologizing perspectives on science are incomplete. The former overlooks the idea that science is fundamentally a human endeavour, driven by histories, institutions, and egos as well as facts, observations, and measurements. The latter fails to capture that science is as much about normative standards as it is about social facts. More precisely, Longino doesn't think sociologizers are wrong in characterizing scientific knowledge as something sanctioned by the complex web of entities that comprise the scientific enterprise in its entirety. Nor does she think sociologizers are wrong in stating that knowledge is non-monist; she believes it is possible for different communities to have equally valid yet irreconcilable descriptions of a given situation. However, rationalizers get one part of the story right: the scientific enterprise, when properly understood, requires a non-relative conception of what makes science unique.

Longino suggests the solution to this dilemma lies in the procedures governing scientific communities. Although science is indeed a social practice, it is also a social practice in which epistemic norms are *part of that practice*.

More specifically, she argues that normative epistemic criteria are not applied to scientific outputs. Contrary to the rationalist perspective, there are no procedure-independent criteria for assessing the justifiability of a given claim; we don't reach the end of the peer review process (for example) and then check if the normative epistemic criteria have been applied. Instead, the critical discursive interactions that typify science – procedures like peer review – integrate the desired normative epistemic criteria into the very fabric of the social procedures by which scientific knowledge is produced and sanctioned. In this way, Longino's 'critical contextual empiricism' is a productive blend of rationalizer and sociologizer positions: science is a non-individual, non-monist, and non-relative enterprise conducted by a knowledge-producing community.

So, what can Longino's critical contextual empiricism reveal about the qualities, procedures, and institutions of art? I believe it can teach us a great deal. While I do not wish to diminish the real differences between science and art, I think this narrative can offer insights when developing a definition of art. Not only does Longino's account provide a valuable understanding of how the scientific enterprise is both normative and social, it can also help to unpack the ways in which the artworld is both aesthetic and institutional. Although science and art are clearly subject to different normative criteria and are constituted by different entities, there are meaningful parallels between Longino's philosophy of science and the conventions and norms governing our successful production and identification of art objects.

I argue that while art and science are subject to different normative criteria (i.e., epistemic versus aesthetic criteria) and possess distinct institutions, histories, and methods, they share procedural similarities. Just as Longino posits that scientific knowledge is not merely ordinary knowledge 'except better' (2002, 124) artworks are not simply non-artworks 'except beautiful.' Instead, artworks constitute a privileged class of objects. This privilege is not a result of the aesthetic virtues of the artwork in question. Rather, it manifests in the ways we

interact with artworks: we interrogate, analyze, and are moved by them in part because we expect to engage, scrutinize, and be affected by objects of this privileged class.

This process succeeds or fails depending on whether a given public recognizes a given artwork as art. The process by which we recognize something as art is multifaceted and influenced by a confluence of overlapping factors: whether we can place the work within the history of art (that is, whether it resembles or has some causal relationship with other works of art); the institutional context in which the work is encountered (whether the work is found in an art gallery, a motel, or a nightclub bathroom); what artworld tastemakers (critics, curators, collectors, etc.) think of the work; the artist's perceived intentions, and so on. These procedures are fundamentally socially and institutionally mediated.

However, the fact that these procedures are socially and institutionally mediated does not mean there are no aesthetic criteria involved in creating and subsequently recognizing artworks. (If that were the case, this would be little more than a conventional institutionalist account.) Aesthetic purpose is not independent of the procedures by which artworks are ratified as artworks. Instead, for an artefact to be understood as an artwork by an art public, that artefact must, on some level, align with what the art public considers aesthetically purposive about works of art. It is my view that the aesthetic criteria to which artworks are subject are built into the institutional, historical, and social procedures governing the production of artworks, much like epistemic criteria are built into the procedures governing the production of scientific knowledge.

Consequently, I propose a productive blend of the functionalist and institutionalist positions: while art has a social ontology, this social ontology is rooted in commonly shared notions of aesthetic purpose. I call this position (with apologies to Longino) 'critical contextual aestheticism'.

Conclusion

What I put forward here is obviously not a fully developed theory of art; for now, at least, it is too vague and imprecise to properly fulfil that role. It also, I believe, raises intriguing questions for specific types of work that we conventionally might regard as artworks, despite not being considered artworks at the time of their creation: certain religious or sacred objects, for instance. Nevertheless, I trust that the account I have presented here is adequate to clarify what a modified form of Longino's critical contextual empiricism can contribute to a theory of art: a new hybrid theory of art that can capture the strengths of both functional and institutional theories of art.

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