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History and the Philosophy of Art

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Abstract

In this essay I trace the role of history in the philosophy of art from the early twentieth century to the present, beginning with the rejection of history by formalists like Clive Bell. I then attempt to show how the arguments of people like Morris Weitz and Arthur Danto led to a re-appreciation of history by philosophers of art such as Richard Wollheim, Jerrold Levinson, Robert Stecker and others.

Keywords

history, aesthetics, philosophy of art, formalism, representation, expression, Bell, Weitz, Danto, Wollheim, Levinson, Stecker, narrativism, form of life, Neo-Wittgensteinians

I Introduction

In the beginning of the twentieth century, Anglo-American philosophers of art regarded history as virtually irrelevant to their concerns. For the formalist, Clive Bell, significant form was the defining feature of art and significant form was not dependent upon history.¹ Indeed, focus upon the history of art might have even been considered to be the antithesis of aesthetic appreciation for some formalists. However, by the end of the twentieth century, history began to figure in an increasing number of attempts to answer the central question of Anglo-American philosophy of art, namely the question of “What is art?”

¹ Clive Bell, *Art* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1914).

In this essay I will try to clarify the initial obliviousness toward and subsequent interest in history on the part of Anglo-American philosophers and also to chart some of the leading contemporary efforts devoted to using history for the purpose of identifying art.²

II The Backstory

A leading, if not *the* leading, preoccupation of Anglo-American philosophy of art from the beginning of the twentieth century and arguably into the present has been the question of discriminating artworks from everything else. This project was perhaps spurred and abetted by the continuous innovations of what is generally called modern art. However, even if its provenance was practical, it has been pursued by philosophers as a purely theoretical affair, most frequently as the quest for an ahistorical definition of art.

Whereas philosophers of the art in the Continental tradition, undoubtedly due to the influence of Hegel, usually bring historical awareness to the philosophy of art, throughout most of their history, Anglo-American philosophers have attempted to theorize art under the assumption that it possessed an eternal essence. Of course, the earliest theory of art in the West – the imitation theory – was also ahistorical in this way.

Introduced by Plato and Aristotle, it is taken to have proposed that something is an artwork only if it is a representation, where being a representation was thought to be an easily recognizable property transhistorically. Variations of this theory persisted into the eighteenth century, where a necessary condition for membership in the modern system of the arts was that the candidate in question be engaged in the imitation of the beautiful in nature. Although this sort of theory remained roughly adequate for many centuries, its comprehensiveness began to be severely challenged by various developments in the arts from (approximately) the nineteenth century onwards, including the rise of absolute music and the proliferation of certain avant-garde movements. That is, music without words and/or programs as well as distorted and/or abstract painting and then ready-mades

² In the Anglo-American tradition, answering the question “what is art?” can be understood in terms of identifying artworks, since the aforesaid question is typically taken to be asking “What is an artwork?”

could not be accommodated under the concept of art as representation. So, alternative criteria for categorization as art needed to be discovered.

However, the competing suggestions regarding the essence of art were also, like the imitation theory, strongly ahistorical. This is perhaps most evident in the aforesaid formalist theory of art as propounded by Clive Bell. For Bell, something was a work of art if and only if it possessed significant form. With respect to painting, significant form was understood as an arresting play of lines, colors, shapes, vectors, and so forth. On the formalist view, that which the painting represented – its content – was strictly irrelevant to its status as art as well as to its aesthetic value. David's *Oath of the Horatii* was neither art nor aesthetically valuable as a celebratory representation of patriotic virtue but instead for the ways in which the painting was centripetally organized – the eye driven to the epicenter of the painting by the manner in which the crossing swords of the heroes compose a compelling X in the heart of the picture.

For the formalist, not only is content irrelevant to art status; so is history. Works by Neo-Impressionists and Romanesque artists could be appreciated by the same transhistorical standards. This gave formalism a certain advantage. It could recognize as art the products of non-European cultures that would have been ignored by the imitation theory of art. But the theory also had the liability of failing to have the means for negotiating artworks, such as realist novels, that had content as an essential dimension of the sort of artistic achievement toward which they aspired.

Another alternative to the imitation theory was the expression theory. On this view, something is an artwork only if it is an expression of its creator. Typically what is taken to be expressed here includes feelings, emotions, and points-of-view. Undoubtedly, this philosophical approach to the nature of art owes much to Romanticism. However, it has often been worked up into a rigorous philosophical theory, perhaps most notably by R.G. Collingwood.³

Like the imitation and formalist theories of art, the expression theory is ahistorical. Artists from different periods are all involved in the same transhistorical endeavor, the expression of (most typically) emotions, which emotions, it usually seems to be presupposed, are also fundamentally temporally generic.

³ R.G. Collingwood, *Principles of Art* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1938).

Needless to say, the expression theory manages to apply to a great deal of art. But it is not perfectly comprehensive. It fares badly in the face of avant-garde art that seeks to erase the trace of the artist from the work (by means, for example, of aleatoric strategies) and that stresses intellectual and even theoretical content over feelings, while also lacking the resources to deal with art devoted solely to the play of form, including decorative art aimed at nothing more than the dance of delightful patterns.

By the first half of the twentieth century, formalist and expression theories of various stripes dominated Anglo-American philosophy of art. Each was confronted with problems specific to the way in which each of them was formulated. But, in addition, a general criticism arose that applied to the very presupposition of the style of philosophizing presumed by imitation, formalist, and expression theories alike and this criticism, often referred to as neo-Wittgensteinianism eventually led an appreciation of history as a potential key to answering the question “What is art?”

III Neo-Wittgensteinianism and the Turn to History

As we have seen, despite their differences, the various rival theories of art emerging from the eighteenth century to the middle of the twentieth had at least one thing in common: they all endeavored to answer the question “What is art?” in terms of an ahistorical definition intended to cover everything from Paleolithic cave paintings to abstractions by Kadinsky in terms of such manifest properties as representation, form, and expressiveness. The repeated failure of this sort of theory predictably led to the suspicion that there might be something deeply flawed in this way of approaching the philosophy of art. Emboldened by Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations*, especially his analysis of games, philosophers, perhaps most notably Morris Weitz, argued that the attempt to define art in terms of necessary and/or sufficient conditions is conceptually mistaken.⁴

Earlier theories of art – including the imitation, formalist, and expression theories – treat the concept of art as a closed concept, one amenable to definition in terms of necessary and/or sufficient conditions. That is, art could be characterized by means of real or essential definitions. However,

⁴ Morris Weitz, “The Role of Theory in Aesthetics,” in *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, volume 15 (1956), pp. 27–35.

Weitz argued, art is not a closed concept; art is not condition-governed; it is an open concept. In other words, art is an arena where innovation and experimentation is always a permanent possibility. Art is expansive, often pushing the envelope. Thus, because it is perpetually evolving, art cannot be defined. To attempt to define art is logically at odds with the expansionary, creative dimension of art. Although Weitz did not put it this way, his objection was a historical one. Since art evolves historically, it cannot be defined as an eternally fixed species.

But even if art cannot be defined transhistorically, the philosopher must nevertheless account for the way in which we go about identifying candidates as artworks. To this end, Weitz mobilized Wittgenstein's notion of a family resemblance. With respect to games, Wittgenstein maintained that we include things under that category on the basis of the resemblance that some candidates bear to antecedently acknowledged candidates. Video games are games, for example, because they resemble football in virtue of, among other things, players, competition, and scoring.

Of course, not all games resemble all other games in every respect. Some games resemble others in virtue of having boards; some with respect to employing balls; and so on. The *family* of games is held together by discontinuous strands of similarity. Games resemble each other putatively in the way family members do: Mary has her grandmother's hair color, her father's eyes, and her mother's chin whereas her brother has his uncle's nose, his aunt's ears and his grandfather's temper.

Not all members of a family resemble each other in every way. Rather there are discontinuous strands of resemblance distributed across the family. Ditto games, according to Wittgenstein. Ditto art, according to Weitz.

That is, we do not group candidates together as artworks in virtue of a real or essential definition in terms of necessary and/or sufficient conditions. We judge candidates as artworks in virtue of their resemblance to antecedently acknowledged works of art – paradigms universally regarded as artworks. Thus a German Expressionist work, like Georg Grosz's *Circe*, can be advanced as art in virtue of its expressive use of distortion, a strategy it shares with works by Grunewald and El Greco, for example. Something is an artwork, in other words, in virtue of the similarities it bears to paradigms already considered to be artworks.

The family resemblance approach to the central question of the philosophy of art in the Anglo-American tradition did not itself lead directly to

the field's turn to history. Nevertheless, one of the most devastating criticisms of it did.

One defect with the alleged family resemblance method for identifying art, as Maurice Mandelbaum observed, is that the kind of resemblances that Weitz invoked were not really family resemblances, since genuine family resemblances are not merely a matter of manifest surface similarities, but of underlying generative mechanisms.⁵ Consequently, Mandelbaum argued, that the family resemblance analogy did not truly show that defining art was not an option, since the Wittgensteinian analysis of games as extended to the concept of art did not preclude the possibility that the concept of art was unified in terms of certain necessary, non-manifest, generative features. That is, even if there are no shared manifest properties that could serve as the defining conditions in a theory of art, there might be non-manifest, generative features – features the eye could not descry – that marked a candidate as a work of art. That possibility, of course, was then seized upon by Arthur Danto whose conception of *The Artworld*, made history a major player in the conversation of Anglo-American aesthetics.

IV Arthur Danto

Arthur Danto's article "The Artworld" constituted a major turning point in the practice of Anglo-American aesthetics. Previous theories of art searched for the essence of art in the perceptible properties of artworks – representation, form, and expressiveness. Danto, deeply impressed by the work of Andy Warhol (and especially *Brillo Box*) came to the conclusion that art could not be defined in terms of manifest properties. What made something art, he argued, was something that the eye cannot detect. Although he was later to work out what he took to be the quiddity of art in various different ways, in "The Artworld," he maintained that

⁵ Maurice Mandelbaum, "Family Resemblances and Generalizations Concerning the Arts," in *The Philosophy of Art: Readings Ancient and Modern*, edited by Alex Neill and Aaron Ridley (New York: McGraw Hill Publishers, 1995), pp. 193–201.

something was art in virtue of “something the eye cannot decry – an atmosphere of artistic theory, a knowledge of the history of art, an artworld.”⁶

That is, something is art only if it is connected to an artworld. An artworld is a body of artistic theories and histories which enfranchise candidates as art works. In Danto’s own writings, he particularly emphasized the work that artistic theories did in enfranchising artworks. This led to a great deal of persuasive criticism in terms of the existence of much un-contested art that lacked any associated art theories, including, presumably, Paleolithic art, folk art, the art of tribal cultures, and so forth. However, even if these objections hit their mark – which they frequently did – they did not conclusively defeat Danto’s suggestion, since it left a major component of Danto’s conception of The Artworld available for enabling the task of identifying art, namely, the history of art.

Moreover, since Danto’s introduction of the notion of The Artworld various attempts have been made to use history to solve the Anglo-American philosopher’s obsession with discriminating art from the non-art.⁷

V Defining Art Historically

The problems with the family resemblance model led to a renewed interest in the project of defining art. These definitions took advantage of Mandelbaum’s insight that the family resemblance approach did not foreclose the possibility that art might be defined in terms of non-manifest, relational and contextual properties, including historical ones. Perhaps the most discussed attempt at defining art in the nineteen-seventies was George Dickie’s Institutional Theory of Art which though, it had a more sociological conception of the Artworld than Danto’s, nevertheless was at least implicitly historical.

However, philosophers, such as Jerrold Levinson and Robert Stecker, embraced Danto’s invocation of history more explicitly. In his seminal article “Defining Art Historically,” Levinson maintains that is an artwork if and only if it is created by a person who 1) has a proprietary right over

⁶ Arthur Danto, “The Artworld,” in *The Philosophy of Art: Readings Ancient and Modern*, edited by Alex Neill and Aaron Ridley (New York: McGraw Hill, 1995), p. 209.

⁷ In a subsequent attempt to define art, Danto includes historical context as a necessary condition for art status. However, I will not review that attempt in this article because history supplies only one of four other conditions for being an artwork.

the work in question and 2) who nonpassingly intends the work in question to be regarded as an artwork – that is, in one or more of the ways that artworks have been regarded in the past.⁸ The first condition in this definition seems poorly motivated. Why if David Salle illegally painted a mural on a municipal building he did not own would that disqualify his composition as a work of art?

A more serious objection to Levinson's position – especially from our point of view – arises with the second condition in the theory. The problem here is that the theory is not actually historical because it makes no provision for the possibility that art might evolve in such a way that certain art regards that were correct in the past become, over time, obsolete.

Consider verisimilitude. For centuries, making a painting intended to be appreciated for its likeness to its referent was an acknowledged artistic ambition. However, nowadays almost anyone with a cell phone can produce a picture whose verisimilitude would stun Varsari. Suppose a tourist takes a picture of her family in front of the Empire State Building. She intends it to be regarded as an accurate visual representation of the family's activities in New York City and she owns her cell phone. Thus, on Levinson's theory, her picture, and millions of others like hers, are works of art. But surely this is an unacceptable result, precisely because it does not acknowledge the fact that past art regards – past ways of correctly regarding artworks – can cease to be viable.

Stecker's theory – which he calls historical functionalism – contends that something is a work of art if and only if it is created in central artform at time t and it is made with the intention that it fulfill one of the standard or correct functions of that form OR it is an artifact that succeeds in achieving excellence in fulfilling one of the functions of one of the central artforms at time t .⁹

Historical functionalism is both too inclusive and too exclusive. That it is too inclusive can be seen by recalling that one of the social functions of art has traditionally been to signal social status. However, if signaling status is one of the functions of art, then giant SUVs would appear – altogether incongruously – to count as artworks. The problem here is that Stecker

⁸ Jerrold Levinson, "Defining Art Historically," *British Journal of Aesthetics*, volume 19 (1979), pp. 232–250.

⁹ Robert Stecker, *Artworks* (University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania University Press, 1997).

does not have an obvious, noncircular way of excluding things which share nonartistic functions with central artforms from the order of art.

Historical functionalism would also appear to be too exclusive, specifically because it would appear to have no way to handle certain innovative artforms. Think of readymades by Duchamp, such as his infamous work *Fountain*. At the time of its presentation it was not an example of a central artform, nor, it may be argued, was it discharging a recognized function of an existing central artform. Thus, the historical functionalism is compelled to deny its art status – a deeply problematic consequence, since this work is probably one of the most important artworks of the twentieth century. Maybe, the historical functionalist will contend that once the practice of the found object becomes entrenched, he will be able to enfranchise *Fountain* as an artwork retrospectively. But this seems very *ad hoc*; certainly *Fountain* was an artwork at the moment that Duchamp christened the relevant commode.

VI Back to Wittgenstein

If problems with the family resemblance approach encouraged a return to the attempt to define art, difficulties with definitions incorporating history in their theory of art suggest that it might be valuable to explore nondefinitional strategies for identifying art. One such endeavor was initiated by Richard Wollheim and has subsequently been developed by the present author.¹⁰

Wollheim's nondefinitional approach to identifying art begins with a return to Wittgenstein, although not to Wittgenstein's notion of family resemblances, but to the idea of a *form of life*. Wollheim asserts that "Art, in a Wittgensteinian sense, is a form of life."¹¹ For Wollheim, this entails that art is essentially historical. In other words, the way in which to understand an evolving form of life – the way in which to comprehend its unity – is through its history. The upshot of this for the purpose of

¹⁰ Richard Wollheim, *Art and Its Objects*, Second Edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), sections 45–65. And Noël Carroll, "Historical Narratives and the Philosophy of Art," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, volume 52 (1993), pp. 313–326.

¹¹ Wollheim, pp. 104–105.

identifying candidates as artworks is that we do so by connecting them to the history of the artworld form of life.

Wollheim recommends the following method for identifying emerging artworks as legitimate members of an artworld: “first, pick out certain objects as original or primary works of art and . . . then set up some rules which, successively applied to the original art, will give us (within certain rough limits) all subsequent or derivative works of art.”¹² Arguably, with some modifications, Wollheim’s suggestion provides us with a very serviceable method for identifying art, indeed, a method that we can observe in the actual practices of the contemporary artworld.

Clearly, subsequent artworks, including present ones, are related to earlier ones by various processes of descent, including, as Michael Baxandall itemizes: being drawn upon, appropriated from, being adapted, referred to, engaged with, reacted to, quoted, assimilated, copied, absorbed, parodied, distorted, resisted, simplified, reconstituted, elaborated upon, developed, subverted, transformed extracted from, being aligned with, imitated, and so forth.¹³ What Wollheim is proposing is that by limning historical connections like these between candidates and their predecessors, one establishes the membership of subsequent works as belonging to the artworld. Wollheim appears to think that it is best to characterize these lines of descent in terms of rules. But perhaps it might be more fruitful to think of them as narratives, specifically historical narratives.

One example of the kind of process of descent that Wollheim has in mind is what he calls *supersession* of which he says “. . . in the art of our day one work of art generates another by supersession of its most generative or its overall properties, e.g., Pont-Aven as the successor of Impressionism, hard-edge painting as the successor of abstract expressionism.”¹⁴ Though Wollheim thinks of supersession here as a generative rule, as I have already suggested, it is probably more accurate to think of it as a scenario or narrative type or genre of story form, one which we might dub “the reaction formation,” which is one of the most frequently rehearsed sagas in the modern artworld.

¹² Wollheim, p. 143.

¹³ Michael Baxandall as quoted in Arthur Danto, “The Shape of Artist Pasts: East and West,” in *Subversive Strategies in Contemporary Chinese Art*, edited by Mary Bittner Wiseman and Liu Yuedi (Boston and Leiden: Brill, 2011), p. 359.

¹⁴ Wollheim, pp. 145–146.

As I understand Wollheim, he believes that we identify candidates as artworks – such as early hard-edge paintings – by means of art historical narratives. Historical narratives, that is, supply the solution to the philosophical question of how we go about discriminating the art from the rest. Of course, supersession is not the only narrative of descent that we employ to establish the membership of candidates in the artworld form of life. Some others include repetition, hybridization, amplification, and repudiation.

The most basic art historical narrative of descent is that of repetition. A later artwork emerges from earlier art by repeating the established *données* of a given practice. Successive generations of Modern Architecture remained true in their commitment to the principle that form follows function along with their preference for modern materials, like concrete, steel, and glass. The notion of repetition here may sound like a reversion to the family resemblance approach, yet it is not, because the point is not simply that the artworks in question resemble each other, but that that resemblance is a matter of the earlier art causally influencing the later art.

Artworks may not only imitate earlier works in their own artforms; they may imitate works from other artforms. We can call this form of repetition the interanimation of the arts. Often when new artwork appears that seems to deviate from past work in the pertinent artform, the explanation is that the new work is borrowing ideas and structures from adjacent artforms, especially where those ideas and structures are considered to be cutting-edge. Thus, one would explain the geometric choreography of Lucinda Childs in the nineteen seventies as descended from the aesthetic of minimalist painting and sculpture.

Artists may engage with their predecessors not simply by imitating one tendency in the art of the past. They may create new works by mashing-up several previous artistic tendencies including apparently conflicting ones. We can call this process hybridization. A noteworthy example of hybridization would be some of the films of Jean-Luc Godard in the nineteen-sixties which melded together the supposedly rival stylistics of Italian Neo-Realism, Soviet montage, and the long-take, deep-focus camera approach favored by André Bazin.

Of course, subsequent art may not only repeat the past; it may also expand upon it. Often artists in later generations produce arresting new work by solving the antecedent problems besetting their artforms. That is, they find new ways of implementing the aims of their artforms, often by

abandoning previous stylistic strategies and inventing new ones in their stead. In this way, the subsequent art proceeds from its predecessors by way of amplification. An example of this might be D.W. Griffiths' perfection of the technique of parallel editing in order to heighten suspense.

So far we have been adding to Wollheim's notion of supersession a list of further art historical scenarios that may be used to establish that successive candidates for art status belong to the same artworld to which predecessor art belongs. For clearly, there are more processes of artistic descent than supersession. However supersession, or, as I prefer to label it, *repudiation* is undoubtedly one of the most recurrent art historical stories of modern times.

Repudiation involves emerging artists making work that rejects reigning art practices and their assumptions, biases, and associations in favor of a new artistic regime as when the Surrealists abjured the canons of rationality in order to put audiences in touch with what they believed were deeper levels of reality. Repudiation is at the core of revolutionary art. However, it is key to understanding the historical nature of the artworld that one remember that even the most revolutionary art does not eschew the past entirely. At the same time that Brecht renounced "Aristotlian theater," he claimed affinities with Chinese theater.

Practitioners of repudiation not only assault the dominant artforms of the present, but, at the same time, forge allegiances with selected art of the past in order to recover dimensions of that art that had been allegedly neglected or even repressed in the art that the emerging artist desire to dethrone. Thus, the art historical narratives that track artistic repudiations not only illuminate what the candidates for art status reject, but these narratives also illuminate the connection between the innovative work and its predecessors (albeit often temporally distant ones) as a way of establishing the unity and the continuity of the evolving artworld form of life.

Claimants to the status of artwork, then, may be categorized as genuine members of the the artworld by means of various sorts of historical narratives, including narratives of repetition, artistic interanimation, hybridization, amplification, and repudiation.¹⁵ For obvious reasons, we may call this view narrativism. Narrativism identifies a candidate for art status as an

¹⁵) I would not want to argue that this list is exhaustive nor that the items on it are necessarily exclusive. More work needs to be done here.

artwork in terms of the way in which the new work has been generated out of the causal context of preceding art works and their history.

One objection to narrativism is that it is simply a reversion to the discredited family resemblance approach. However, this is not so, since narrativism does not identify something as an artwork simply on the grounds of some association with earlier works. Rather, that association has to be rooted in actual historico-causal processes, such as influence and/or the anxiety thereof.

Another objection to narrativism is that it makes art status too easy to secure, since one can probably tell a just-so story about any candidate-artwork imaginable. But since narrativism charts art status in terms of the descent of present work from past artworks, the scenarios that narrativism takes seriously are only genuine historical narratives, not invented ones.

In favor of narrativism, on the other hand, is the fact that it is particularly suited to evolutionary nature of art as a practice. It ties potential members to that practice by emphasizing the way in which later work historically evolves from earlier work through the operation of generative processes. Thus, via narrativism, at present history has come, for a number of Anglo-American philosophers of art, to be regarded as a privileged vehicle for identifying and establishing candidate works to be artworks, one reflected in the commentary of contemporary art writers, curators, and presenters.

VII Summary

Throughout much of the twentieth century, Anglo-American philosophers of art have wrestled with the question of how to discriminate art from nonart. During that period, the leading tendency was to approach that problem in terms of ahistorical, essentialist definitions of art. That changed as a result of Neo-Wittgensteinism and its aftermath, which resulted in Danto's historically sensitive conception of the Artworld. Since Danto, several attempts have been made to deploy history as a means of determining which candidates are genuine artworks including Levinson's historical definition of art, historical functionalism, and narrativism (the view favored by the present author).