

PHIL 4403: Philosophy of Art  
Prof. Funkhouser  
2/16/05  
Levinson, "Defining Art Historically"

I.

\*Levinson argues against the institutional theory of art. For Levinson, an artwork is an artwork in virtue of being regarded by an individual with a certain intention which is sensitive to the history of art. This historical perspective is supposed to take the place of Danto's artworld.

II.

\*Levinson first raises two objections to the institutional theory of art:

1. The theory requires that art works are made art in virtue of some kind of cultural performance. Levinson objects that there can be private and culturally isolated art.  
"Consider the farmer's wife at a Nebraska country fair who sets an assemblage of egg and shells and white glue down on the corner of a table for folks to look at. Isn't it possible that she has created art? Yet she and the artworld exist in perfect mutual oblivion." (36)
2. The artworld, not the artist, specifies the features of the object that are worthy of aesthetic appreciation.

III.

"My idea is roughly this: a work of art is a thing intended for regard-as-a-work-of-art, regard in any of the ways works of art existing prior to it have been correctly regarded." (36)

\*This account of art is not wholly non-circular, as it cites the history of art. Still, it is informative. Art is essentially backward-looking, respecting a certain tradition.

--A few questions arise immediately, however. First, what accounted for art in the first place (as an infinite regress is implausible)? Second, but related to the first, how does this account allow for genuinely novel categories of arts to emerge? Third, how aware of art history, and their contribution to this tradition, must the artist be?

In response to the third question, Levinson writes:

"Art-aware art makers are thus those who connect their creations to such a conception and, in so doing, make them art. If they do not do this—if their

activities involve no reference whatsoever to the body of artworks preceding them—then I think we fail to understand in what sense they are consciously or knowingly producing art.” (37)

The second question is addressed in section VI; the first question is addressed in section VII.

#### IV.

\*Levinson gives his first pass at a definition of ‘artwork’ on p. 37. There are at least 4 key components to this definition: ownership, an artistic intention, a certain “regard”, and a recognition of the artistic tradition.

--Notice the disagreement with Danto, with respect to the role of the artworld in making (or not making) something art, that emerges on the right hand column of p. 38

#### V.

\*A more rigorous definition, which further explains the nature of the artistic intention as well as the required connection to prior artworks, is presented on p. 39.

--Levinson explains how this definition handles cases of found art and “ahead of its time” art.

Q: Is Levinson correct that facts about the future artworld can determine whether some object created 200 years previous is a work of art? (p. 39, right hand column)

#### VI.

\*Truly revolutionary art must still respect the history of art, if only in a rebellious manner (e.g., consciously flouting the present forms of artistic regard, perhaps with the aim of adding a new type of regard). (41)

#### VII.

\*Note the strength of Levinson’s claim about the role of art history and tradition: “There is thus a deeper continuity in the development of art than is generally noted. Artworks of a given period do more than *follow* their predecessors. They are even more than causally *descended* from them, more even than testimonies to the influence of style, medium, and subject matter. Rather, those predecessors are *necessarily involved* (via the ways in which they have been regarded) in the intentional structure which determines their successors as art. What art becomes depends conceptually, not just causally, on what art has been.” (41-42)

\*The “Genesis-story” of art is told on the left column, p. 42.

### VIII.

\*In this section Levinson distinguishes his theory from the institutional theory of art by answering 2 questions:

“(1) Is art making in essence an *internal* (intention) or *external* (conferral) matter? (2) Need a person have a special *position* in the artworld to create certain sorts of artworks?”  
(43)

### IX.

\*Note how Levinson’s account of art captures its fluidity. Levinson is offering an account of “art at the present time”.

Q: Levinson’s account seems to show the concept of art expanding throughout time (e.g., applying to more kinds of objects)—but can it contract as well?

--Levinson’s account also offers a response to the “intentional fallacy”, as it obviously gives artist’s intentions an essential role in art-making.