

PHIL 4403: Philosophy of Art  
Prof. Funkhouser  
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Beardsley, "An Aesthetic Definition of Art"

I.

\*Why is it important to have a definition of 'art'?

"...at some point he [the philosopher of art] will want to say why these are examples of art, and how we are to tell what future things his philosophical conclusions are supposed to apply to. The critic of an art may be in a similar case; it should be useful to him to have criteria for deciding what sorts of thing he is to criticize. The historian of an art—of dance, drama, architecture, or whatever—will surely have use for a definition to tell him what belongs in his history and what does not...Even the practical legislator or administrator may have use for a definition, in deciding, for example, which imported objects to exempt from duties, or which allegedly artistic projects should be funded by the National Endowment for the Arts." (55-56)

--Beardsley suggests that we also recognize the anthropological interest in identifying artistic activities and objects in other cultures, and distinguishing them from religious, economic, and other types of activities and objects. (56)

--Beardsley objects to the institutional theory of art toward the end of p. 56. His basic point is that something can be a work of art before it becomes accepted by an institution, so being accepted by an institution is not essential to being a work of art. He also criticizes the sufficiency aspect of the institutional definition by denying that at least some avant-garde works are art just because the artworld accepts them as art.

II.

\*There is an obvious connection between artistic activities and artworks, and if we understand one we can then understand the other.

\*Beardsley begins by searching for an account of *art-production*. Here are two interesting essential properties of artwork, or any other *product*, according to Beardsley:

"What is produced, I think, is always something physical (an object or event) and perceptual, in that it has some properties that can be perceived." (57)

--In order to distinguish art-production from other types of production, Beardsley suggests that we turn to the *intention* with which the object was created.

--But before characterizing this intention Beardsley must say something about *art-reception*. Our artistic reception often involves *aesthetic character*. Here, Beardsley's account is a bit...under-specified:

“Sometimes in this receptive interaction we find that our experience (including all that we are aware of: perceptions, feelings, emotions, impulses, desires, beliefs, thoughts) is lifted in a certain way that is hard to describe and especially to summarize: it takes on a sense of freedom from concern about matters outside the thing received, an intense affect that is nevertheless detached from practical ends, the exhilarating sense of exercising powers of discovery, integration of the self and its experiences.” (58)

--Beardsley's definition of artwork combines the ideas of an intention and aesthetic character (or interest):

“An artwork is something produced with the intention of giving it the capacity to satisfy the aesthetic interest.” (58)

\*This is a liberal definition, allowing many diverse (and innovative) items to count as artworks. Also, the object needn't actually succeed in satisfying the aesthetic interest, so this definition allows for bad (or unsuccessful) art. This definition also captures the social character of artwork. Artworks can be created with other intentions as well, but the aesthetic intention is essential. (And Beardsley suggests, again, that much avant-garde art lacks this intention.)

### III.

\*In this section Beardsley responds to 5 objections to his definition:

1. Even children can create art, according to this definition.  
Beardsley grants this point, and sees nothing objectionable in it.
2. Forgeries become artworks according to Beardsley's theory.  
Yes, some do. But, again, it all depends on the intention with which the works were created. And Beardsley is willing to accept that forgeries made with the aesthetic intention are artworks.
3. Beardsley's definition makes something's status as an artwork permanent.  
Beardsley simply accepts this.
4. It is easy to create art—one cannot fail to produce art so long as one has the correct intention.  
This is true. So long as something is actually produced with that intention, it is judged by Beardsley to be a work of art.
5. This definition permits many bad and tawdry instances of art.  
Beardsley insists on a value-free definition of art, so that we can make sense of the labels 'good art' and 'bad art'.