

*The Philosophy of Art: The Question of Definition: From Hegel to Post-Dantian Theories*

Tiziana Andina,

Natalia Iacobelli (tr.),

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The book presents a review of selected theories of art from the analytic and continental traditions. It aims to offer an introduction to the subject of defining art, and develop a new definition based on Danto's representational theory.

In the introduction, Andina offers a very broad overview of the subject. The reader is taken from a fictionalised version of Kennick's warehouse thought experiment, through a detailed analysis of the distinction between aesthetics and philosophy of art, discussions of beauty, mimesis and truth in art, to the differences in understanding of social and physical facts. Some of the connections made between analytic and continental philosophy are quite interesting and it is a shame that they are never picked up in the following chapters. The digressive character of this section continues throughout the book, and while it certainly introduces an 'atmosphere of theory', to an analytic reader it seems unfocused. The writing style tries to be light and conversational, but is mostly confusing – though this might be due to translation issues (apart from the style, throughout the book thought experiments are 'mental experiments', Platonic forms are 'ideas', cars are 'automobiles', etc.).

The first chapter begins by introducing the basic form of Andina's definition: 'artworks ... are similar to words' in that they are 'about something' (p. 25). Andina plans to develop her view by showing that 'among a manifold and diverse theories, [it] exhibits the most consistent advantages' (p. 25). This seems like a valid strategy, however, the way in which she proceeds is rather odd. Her discussion of imitative theories, Plato's views, expressivism and aestheticism might be of historical or textbook value, but there is little gain in showing that one's definition is better than views which have been so broadly criticised and have virtually no modern defenders. Meanwhile, little or no discussion is given to much more serious competitors: historical definitions are given a moderate amount of attention, cluster theories make a token two-page appearance, and views such as Stecker's historical functionalism or Iseminger's institutional functionalism are never even mentioned. Finally, the discussions of institutionalism and functionalism, although more substantial, are sometimes quite inaccurate and far from a systematic review of a representative selection of issues they face. If one wants to establish one's theory by showing that it is better than the competition, one should surely show how it deals with a more representative sample of issues faced by a more representative sample of stronger competitors.

The positive arguments in favour of Andina's theory are of more interest. A rather lengthy description of the 'tulip-world' - the practices surrounding the 17<sup>th</sup> Century tulip-mania – leads to interesting reflections on the functions of the artworld, its character as an action-institution or a person-institution, and its relations with economy. However, many of those observations make no further appearances in the book, and the comparisons with the tulip-world are not always helpful (e.g. the roles of artists and tulip growers seem very different).

Dissatisfied with Dickie's understanding of artefactuality, Andina turns to Randall Dipert's more sophisticated account (pp. 69-81). According to his view, artefacts are different not only from natural objects, but also from mere instruments such as an unaltered driftwood used as a spade. It is the intentional modification that makes an artefact, together with the intention that other agents would recognise it as intentionally modified. Works of art and linguistic statements are artefacts which share a common characteristic – they communicate things about other objects (e.g. 'Grisu the Tiny Dragon is brave'). But naturally not all intentionally modified communicative objects are artworks – a regular manufactured box of Brillo soap is such an artifact, but only Warhol's *Brillo Box* is an artwork. Andina tries to resolve this issue by invoking Maurizio Ferraris' normalist theory, according to which artworks are the result of an 'inscribed act', a social act in which an inscription is created. It is not the properties of the artefact itself that make it an artwork, but the fact that it is a 'semantic vehicle' bearing an inscription which is a representation of a subject (p. 146). By creating *Brillo Box* and placing it in a gallery, Warhol inscribed it with a new meaning, and thus his work is a vehicle of inscriptions which are not carried by regular brillo boxes, such as: 'everyday objects can be seen as art.'

Andina moves to ontology to explain how artworks can communicate something about fictional objects. She adapts Meinong's theory to argue that although some objects do not exist, it is still possible to ascribe properties to them. Thus Grisu the Tiny Dragon is a fictional character, yet we can still truly assert that he can fly, is brave, wants to be a fireman, etc. And although Grisu might not exist, his artistic representation can. Further, as a subject of a representation, Grisu can exist as a representation even if he does not exist in reality. Such a representation – and thus an artwork – is an object of a higher order. It is not important for the existence of such *superiora* whether the objects they depict and on which they depend (the *inferiora*) actually exist, or merely exist as representations, splashes of paint on a canvas, or pieces of marble. What is important, is that artworks, as *superiora*, are social objects with relational properties such that their status as artworks depends on how those properties relate to what the work communicates or represents, and people's ability to recognise their properties as artistic communication or representation.

Finally, artworks must be set in a medium that is not transparent. They escape the banality of simply reporting facts, since artists 'have learned to implement complex rhetorical strategies that trace a sort of marker around a work of art, allowing it to be recognized as such by rescuing it from the flux of the ordinary' (p. 164). Now Andina is ready to present her definition. An artwork is

*a social object, an artefact, that embodies a representation, in the form of an inscribed trace upon a medium that is not transparent* (p. 166).

Unfortunately, the book ends two pages after this formulation is presented, and offers no defence against possible objections. Yet it seems that virtually every element of the definition can be challenged. First, Andina argues that Dickie's understanding of 'artefact' is inadequate, because it requires that artefacts are physical objects (p. 67). This is an odd accusation – although it is true that Dickie mainly discusses paintings and sculptures when formulating his theory, he also writes about theatre performances, which involve a manipulation of a medium and thus qualify as

artefacts (G. Dickie, *Art and the Aesthetic*, Cornell University Press, 1974, p. 157 f.). But more importantly, after this critique, Andina proceeds to discussing Dipert and Ferraris, who quite explicitly hold that artefacts are material objects (pp. 74, 115). Although Andina does not simply accept all of their views, neither does she say that this is the element she rejects. If this is the way in which 'artefact' should be understood in her definition, then not only the reasons for rejecting institutionalism become unclear, but the definition entails that symphonies, theatre plays and novels cannot be artworks. Perhaps the Meinongian ontology could be used to broaden the sense in which 'artefact' is understood, but in the discussion it is only used to account for artworks' non-physical relational and communicative properties, and being about non-physical objects.

Secondly, it is somewhat mysterious what an 'inscribed act' is, how it is performed, who is authorised to perform it, what trace it leaves on an artefact, etc. The introduction of Ferraris' documental theory explicitly says that it is not objects, but acts that are inscribed, while the final definition suggests that the inscription is a trace left on the artefact. In the end, the notion seems as vague as Dickie's 'status conferral', and thus it is once again unclear how Andina's theory is an improvement on the existing views.

Thirdly, the transparency claim, accepted by Andina with very little discussion, seems hasty. It is at least possible that some realist paintings, photographs or films are transparent, or at least aim at transparency.

But most importantly, it seems that Andina's definition is either insufficient, or extremely over-inclusive. Consider an average magazine beer advertisement. It is certainly a social object, an artefact, and it represents. Most advertisements are far from simply informing the viewers of the properties of their objects – beer ads promote a lifestyle, establish what is 'cool', etc. – and thus they bear complex inscriptions which are not transparent. It would follow that an average beer advertisement is an artwork. It might be that such inscriptions are unsophisticated, but this would make these advertisements poor art, yet still art. The same could hold for fashionable clothing (inscribed with fashion statements), Christmas decorations (communicating extravagantly consumerist or subtly religious beliefs), or bicycles (promoting ecology and healthy living). Surely not all of those things are art!

The book fares no better if treated as a review of definitions of art. As mentioned before, it is written in a digressive, meandering way, which makes it an odd textbook. The order in which theories are introduced is ahistorical – Andina first discusses imitative theories, then jumps to the institutional definitions, followed by a mix of aestheticism and functionalism, and expressive theories. Only after this knot of essentialist and contextual definitions do we read about Weitz and his argument against essentialism, which gave rise to institutional and functional views. Finally, historical, documental and cluster theories are discussed. Such ordering might serve the development of Andina's definition, but makes for a confusing introduction to the subject.

More importantly, the book is full of omissions and factual mistakes. The 'aesthetic definition' of art is remarkably similar to Beardsley's functionalism, yet Beardsley is not mentioned at all in its discussion (p. 83). Gaut's cluster account is introduced very briefly, yet Andina spends a

paragraph listing the criteria included in the cluster, which Gaut insists are only *prima facie* candidates and not the main point of his theory. It is also suggested that objects are art in virtue of satisfying a certain number of criteria, while actually it is satisfying specific subsets of those criteria that counts (p. 121). Dickie's first formulation of the institutional theory is given in full, but what Andina labels 'the second formulation', is not the formulation offered in *The Art Circle* – instead it's a mix of Dickie's earlier and later theories (p. 61). Dickie also never said that it is the 'institution [that] confers the status of an artwork' (p. 49) – instead *persons* confer the status of a candidate for appreciation, and *on behalf of* the institution. Neither did he say that artworks need to be 'valid candidates for aesthetic appreciation' (p. 44) – in fact he insists that there is no special kind of aesthetic appreciation (Dickie, *ibid.*, p. 40), and wrote extensively criticising the notions of 'aesthetic attitude' and 'aesthetic experience'. A fair part of Andina's criticism of the institutional theories rests on this misunderstanding, as she argues that some ready-mades cannot be appreciated aesthetically (p. 48). Considering these and other factual mistakes and misinterpretations, the book makes for a poor introduction to the subject.

There are elements of interest in *The Philosophy of Art*: the connections drawn between continental and analytic theories, the discussions of ontology, Danto's theory, the nature of artefacts and the artworld. However, it seems that most of these points, together with the development of the definition, could be expressed in a much shorter and precise form. Considering the length of the book, it is surprising how much it does not discuss: especially striking is the lack of a structured discussion of a representative sample of modern definitions of art, and the missing defence of Andina's own definition. In sum, the book offers some interesting points and might be of interest as an alternative take on Danto's representational theory.

Simon Fokt

university of St Andrews

sf343@st-andrews.ac.uk

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