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Aesthetics Paper #1: The Demotion of Art Through Language

George Dickie's statement in his new institutional theory of art, that "a work of art is an artifact of a kind to be presented to an art world public" is becoming increasingly complicated in today's age. As the art world evolves, so does the language that circulates it. Growing and expanding over time, the language itself changes meaning. The art world is thus in flux. Art movements and concepts in art build off of one another, from A to B, from B to C, and so on and so forth. Through time, the Venn Diagram of art includes more, without expelling what has already been included. Dickie states that the status of artwork is determined by the art world public, but that it is however not a status that is appointed, but rather achieved.

The process of achieving the status of art is at least twofold. An artwork, as Dickie states, must first be an artifact and second must be presented to a qualified public, i.e, the art world. This means that art must share intrinsic qualities with other works of art which thus classifies the work, as a work of art. The first requirement is necessary for the second, but isn't sufficient enough to classify something as a work of art itself. An artifact can exist without being a piece of art, but a piece of art must be an artifact, meaning that it must be something created, or transformed by a human, to be used in some way. Next, the artifact must satisfy the needs and requirements set forth by the "art world." However, the art world is not a formal institution. This is true because art has always existed across time and across the globe even before there was communication across borders and cultures. This implicitly means that art must be

able to exist without a singular formal institution classified as “the art world.” This supports the claim that the status of an artifact isn’t promoted to the status of art, but rather achieved through the means of similarity to other works of art.

One similarity between all art is that it is in fact created by an artist, with regard for a public which will consume it. Dickie notes that much art is never put forth to be seen or consumed, but that it still is however created within the constraints of visual, perceptual, and societal knowledge and therefore is created with a public in mind. The public creates the context in which art is created.

Next the definition of public arises. What is meant by and what are the bounds of “public?” Since we have established that the art world isn’t an established, nor formal, nor singular institution, we can confer that there then must be multiple publics, each then with their own understanding of and rules for, art. An intrinsic quality of art is that it is presented for an art world public, but since there are multiple publics, this means that each art work is subject to conditions stated by the specific public in which it is created within.

The nature of the definition of art is therefore circular. The classification of something as a work of art is dependent on the quality and level of understanding of art by the public sphere. Art is thus dependent on the art world to exist, and the art world cannot exist without art. It is in this idea of codependency that the nature of art rests.

Leo Tolstoy’s theory of art, too revolves around the intrinsic codependent nature of art. Tolstoy puts forth that art is defined through it’s process of communication, and more specifically it’s communication of emotion. “Art causes the receiver to enter into a

certain kind of relationship both with him who produced, or is producing, the art and with all those who, simultaneously, previously, or subsequently, receive the same artistic impression.” “The activity of art is based on the fact that a man, receiving through his sense of hearing or sight another man’s expression of feeling, is capable of experiencing the emotion which has moved the man who expressed it.” For both Tolstoy and Dickie, the status of art is achieved in dialogue with a public, however this is too exactly where Dickie and Tolstoy differ. Tolstoy’s theory, unlike Dickie’s institutional theory, has a gradient of art status. Art, for Tolstoy, is thus judged on the quality and depth of the communication of emotion, whereas, for Dickie, art must fulfill the (measly in comparison) requirements of being made by an artist for a public. Tolstoy’s Theory is however more open, in that art is thus dependent not on a societal requirement but thus on an individual. Art, in both cases must however be created with the intention of it being art, something itself cannot become art without the human intention of it becoming a work of art. A toy, that reminds you of childhood, that triggers a strong emotional feeling is not art just because it had an empathetic quality, however a toy that triggers the same feeling that was intentionally created or appropriated with the intention of it having that effect as a piece of art, is a work of art. The same object can exist in two realms dependent on the sincerity of the intention of the creation of the artifact which is to be elevated to the status of art. Tolstoy expands on his statement of the requirement of the emotive infectiousness of art by qualifying it with 3 sub conditions: 1) the level of specificity of the emotion being communication 2) the clearness / understandability of the emotion and 3) the sincerity of the emotion,

meaning how powerfully the emotion being communicated is itself felt by the artist. A work of art must in some capacity satisfy all 3 conditions, or it becomes a pseudo art.

Circling back to the start of this paper, the concept and definition of art is becoming, rapidly, ever more complicated. As access to the means of production increases, and as we approach Z_n in the A, B, C progression of art, the definition of art begins to fold in on itself. A begins to contradict E, and Z supports A validating A again, just as Dickie and Tolstoy both support and contradict each other. To see how in practice how today the understanding of what is and isn't art is becoming all too complicated, let's take a photo by the esteemed photographer Judith Joy Ross and compare it's status as a work of art to a recent advertisement created by Apple. Let's take one image from Ross' photo series, *Portraits at the Vietnam War Memorial, Washington D.C.* , this one from 1984. (Figure 1) Ross' portraits were of the visitors of the memorial, investigating how we as a people process and memorialize death and war. Ross' photos are taken on a large format view camera to capture extreme levels of detail from the people. Ross too uses the camera's unique ability to capture the volume of the figures and to isolate them from the background. This isolation is a key element to the photo, as it puts in dialogue and in contrast, the "humanness" and humanity of the figures with the cold physicality of the memorial and of death itself. Ross uses the aesthetic quality of a blurry and out of focus background, called Bokeh, for an emotive effect. Her portraits, which were created as a way for her to herself process the war as well as communicate a message to a greater public, satisfy the requirements of both Dickie and of Tolstoy, as Art.

Apple's recent advertisement for a new feature on their phones called "portrait mode" brings the status of Judith Joy Ross' portraits into question, as well as the vocabulary of the art world and of photography itself. The advertisement, in effect reduces the idea of a portrait to purely its aesthetic quality of Bokeh. This ignores the emotional effect and intention of a photo and of the use of Bokeh as a tool for focus. The reason this brings Ross' portraits into question is because the Apple ad itself creates a new vocabulary, a new meaning for the word Bokeh itself and in the process changes the definition of a portrait by conferring Bokeh with a portrait. In the dialogue of the characters in the ad, one woman says "Did you just Bokeh my child?" referring to her friend who as just blurred out the background of an image of her son. In this one line of dialogue, Apple has put forth, to hundreds of millions of viewers, a new definition of the word Bokeh. Bokeh is no longer a noun, but a verb. This means the language and vocabulary surrounding photography for the art worlds changed. As the definition of Bokeh has changed and the new definition of it is understood by millions, the understanding of old artworks would change under this new language. For Dickie, this automatically would result in a demotion of an old work of art from art to mere artifact. However for Tolstoy this wouldn't necessarily result in a demotion because the status of artwork is dependent on the sincerity, clearness, and strength of emotion communicated by the work, thus as long as emotion is still communicated through the portrait by Ross, the work will still qualify as art.

Figure #1



Judith Joy Ross

Untitled, from *Portraits at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, Washington, D.C.*

1984