



**Limits of Institutional Theory of Art**  
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## LIMITS OF INSTITUTIONAL THEORY OF ART

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The aim of this paper is twofold: to investigate the limits of the institutional theory of art and examine the impact of radical art (sometimes called radical politics) in the artworld. It was Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* and his famous rope analogy which convinced many aestheticians in the 1950s that the search for necessary and sufficient properties of art (and defining art by a description of these properties) was a futile exercise. Since then, many attempts were made to reinstate the essentialist definition of art, the most prominent being the institutional theory of Danto and Dickie. Dickie's version categorizes a thing (or activity) as art if it is an artifact and has been conferred the status of candidate for appreciation by some (e.g., artists, art critics, and art museums) acting on behalf of the artworld. However, this theory is inadequate for explaining new works that satisfy the conditions stated by Dickie but somehow never got accepted as art (which means the theory fails as an essentialist definition of art, that is, judged insufficient despite having mentioned the necessary conditions of art). To reinforce my point, I refer to activities which some people call radical politics or radical art. I will argue that there are simply no special criteria (or a special set of value-conferring features) for evaluating radical politics as artworks or aesthetic activities. In order to judge the success or failure of a radical protest activity (even as an art activity), we have to fall back on its ability to achieve its political or social aims—in other words we are forced to conflate the criteria for evaluating it as art with the criteria for judging its success as a political protest. Hence it is quite redundant to identify radical politics as art or aesthetics (we might as well continue to call them political protests). Their function as art is not recognizable from their role as political protests. And I will argue that we still (at least mentally) make a distinction between art and non-art—even if this distinction has become quite blur in recent decades. There is therefore a good likelihood that the artworld would reject radical politics as art, even though it clearly satisfies Dickie's conditions of artifactuality and the existence of attempts

to confer on it the status of candidate for appreciation (by art commentators and editors who try to categorize it as aesthetics). The likelihood of rejection of works that satisfy these two conditions shows that Dickie may not have successfully laid out the sufficient conditions of art (assuming that these conditions exist).

*Keywords:*

*Art, Institutional Theory, Radical Art, Radical Politics, Art Theory*

### **The Institutional Theory of Art**

In order to fully understand the purpose of the institutional theory of art, one must return to the anti-essentialist aestheticians who believed that art cannot have necessary and sufficient properties because it is an ever-expanding concept. One of the best known anti-essentialist theorists is Morris Weitz. Weitz (1956, 32) argues that art is an open concept which defies essentialist definition. Weitz expands Ludwig Wittgenstein's classification (in his *Philosophical Investigations*) of open concepts like games. Certain activities are classified as "games" but not on the basis of a set of necessary and sufficient characteristics present in all games. Common characteristics may be present in some games (e.g., ball games require balls, card games require cards, and chess games require chess pieces) but there is no one common characteristic in all games. We recognize games by their family-resemblances (i.e., overlapping characteristics such as the common feature in card games, a different common feature in ball games, and maybe some similar features between some card games and ball games) but there is no one or set of common characteristics in all games. Similarly in art, there may be a common feature in paintings, another in dramas, another in music, and there may be some similarities between some dramas and paintings, or some music pieces and dramas, but there is no one common characteristic (or set of characteristics) in all artworks. Like games, art is an open concept allowing for the continuous inclusion of new things which may not have similarities with most previous artworks (cf. Weitz 1956).

One theory that challenges this anti-essentialist position is the institutional theory of art, introduced by Arthur Danto and George Dickie. It is true that essentialist theories have, in the past, focused on perceived characteristics or properties in works of art—but the common characteristic in all artworks is not something that can be extracted by looking at works of art. If there is a common characteristic, this can only be found in some kind of relationship that art has with certain institutions in society (or some kind of action by

someone, which then allows us to see something as a work of art). Danto and Dickie therefore focuses on this “relational property,” rather than on characteristics which can be seen on (all) artworks.

Danto argues that we can distinguish art from non-art because there exists “an atmosphere of artistic theory, a knowledge of the history of art” (Danto 2007, 214). Danto expounds on this in his discussion on Brillo cartons displayed by pop artist Andy Warhol (cf. Danto 2007, 214- 215). Now why are Brillo cartons displayed by Warhol considered as art, while similar cartons in a nearby supermarket are not? In order to see the distinction one requires knowledge of both theory and history of art. According to Danto:

What in the end makes a difference between a Brillo box and a work of art consisting of a Brillo Box is a certain theory of art. It is the theory that takes it up into the world of art, and keeps it from collapsing into the real object which it is (in a sense of *is* other than that of artistic identification). Of course, without the theory, one is unlikely to see it as art, and in order to see it as part of the artworld, one must have mastered a good deal of artistic theory as well as a considerable amount of the history of recent New York painting. (Danto 2007, 215)

Notice that for Danto, the artworld consists principally of our knowledge of art theory (or theories) and art history. If one is to be able to see something as art, one must have adequate knowledge of art theory (theories) and art history. In order to see Marcel Duchamp’s urinal (a ready-made object titled *Fountain*, 1917) as art, we must know something about the relevant art theory (an ordinary object, including one normally placed in a toilet, may be viewed aesthetically, in the same way that usual art objects like paintings and sculptures are viewed aesthetically), as well as art history (in western art, there is the tradition of challenging established aesthetic values and beliefs, which Duchamp is doing by exhibiting ready-mades in an art museum). If the knowledge of the relevant theory and history were taken away, Duchamp’s urinal would just be considered an ordinary urinal which rightfully belongs in a men’s toilet. As editor Thomas E. Wartenberg (2007, 206) elegantly wrote while explaining Danto’s notion of artworld, “to be an artwork requires that the object occupy a place in the history of art, something that it does in virtue of the presence of a theory (or interpretation). Without a prior understanding of art history and theory—in short, of the artworld—a viewer could not see an object *as* a work of art”. Any

art object (or art activity) has a proper location within the history of art—as new art theories are developed and introduced and accepted in this environment of art history. Duchamp’s urinal will probably be rejected as art in the Renaissance Period (for no theory existing at that time could ever accommodate it as art); it can only be accepted as art from the early twentieth century onwards, for it was only then that new theories have been developed that enable us to perceive art in new ways, and extend the concept (of art) to include radically new things like ready-mades. Theory and history are therefore the necessary conditions for anything to be accepted as art.

Dickie seems to use the concept “artworld” with a broader meaning. He considers the artworld as an institution, which means that it has certain established practices—practices governing the display and presentation of artworks, reactions of the audience, and acceptance of something as a work of art. According to Dickie:

This institutional behavior [in theater] occurs on both sides of the “floodlights”: both the players and the audience are involved and go to make up the institution of the theater. The roles of the actors and the audience are defined by the traditions of the theater. What the author, management, and players present is art, and it is art because it is presented within the theatre-world framework. Plays are written to have a place in the theater system and they exist as plays, that is, as art, within that system. (Dickie 2007, 221)

Dickie’s notion of artworld consists not only of art theories and art history (as in Danto’s case), but also of conventions (or established practices) governing the presentation of artworks, the management of artworks (e.g., they are often kept in art museums), and our reactions to artworks (e.g., what the audience of a theater could or could not do while a play is being staged). But this artworld is only a part of his much broader definition of art. In Dickie’s (2007, 223) definition, a work of art “in the classificatory sense is (1) an artifact (2) a set of the aspects of which has had conferred upon it the status of candidate for appreciation by some person or persons acting on behalf of a certain social institution (the artworld).” “Artifact” suggests that artworks are man-made and not naturally present, but it must be capable of incorporating a natural landscape or rock which someone (e.g., the artist) has proclaimed as a work of art—in this way it is better to describe “artifact” as something which is the product of human conception, so that the description can include something that occurs

naturally but given the status of an artwork by the artist or critic. In doing so we get into Dickie's second condition (i.e., certain individuals representing or acting on behalf of the artworld have the capacity to confer the status of art on new or novel cases that are being introduced from time to time). Dickie argues that this conferring of status for appreciation (or art) is usually carried out by the artist:

In one sense a number of persons are required but in another sense only one person is required: a number of persons are required to make up the social institution of the artworld, but only one person is required to act on behalf of the artworld and confer the status of candidate for appreciation. In fact, many works of art are seen only by one person—the one who creates them—but they are still art. The status in question may be acquired by a single person's acting on behalf of the artworld and *treating an artifact as a candidate for appreciation*. Of course, nothing prevents a group of persons from conferring the status, but it is usually conferred by a single person, the artist who creates the artifact. (Dickie 2007, 224)

Dickie then goes on to argue that there is a difference between simply presenting an object for appreciation and actually conferring on it the status of object for appreciation (which, in this context, makes it an artwork). A plumber may display a urinal which he has repaired for our appreciation, but unlike Duchamp's *Fountain*, it will not be classified as art (Duchamp presented his urinal as a candidate for appreciation in 1917, and it has subsequently been accepted as art). The reason, according to Dickie (2007, 225), is that "Duchamp's action took place within the institutional setting of the artworld and the plumbing salesman's action took place outside of it". The artworld (in Dickie's scheme) consists principally of "established practice," or a set of conventions and rituals pertaining to works of art—how an artwork is presented (e.g., it should be presented in an art museum or gallery or some space which has been declared as appropriate for presenting an art activity), the accepted or "institutionalized" behavior of the spectators and actors, the roles of the management, actors, artists, and spectators. In other words, Duchamp's urinal was presented within this set of conventions, while the plumber's urinal was outside of it—which was why the former is art while the latter is not. But surely Dickie's artworld must also incorporate art history and theory (which were emphasized by Danto), for art conventions and rituals are certainly determined by history and theory. In fact one cannot overstate the role played

by art theory in the inclusion of Duchamp's *Fountain* as art, and the rejection of the plumber's urinal into the category. It was the emergence of new theory (and new thinking about art) that enabled us to accept as art things that are readily available (or ready-mades) and not created by the physical skill of the artist.

### Who Really Confers the Status of Art on New Cases?

Dickie's view on how we confer the status of art or "object for appreciation" (on certain objects or activities) is relevant to my discussion of radical politics (or radical art) later in this paper. While discussing radical art, I will be referring to works, especially those in *Aesthetics and Radical Politics* (edited by Gavin Grindon). I will argue that this book can be construed as an attempt to confer the status of art (or art activity) on all those political and semi-political activities which it describes. After all, the artworld also contains art critics and aestheticians, and their published writings can play a role in conferring the status of art on certain radical political activities.

Dickie (2007, 223, 224), however, argues that although the artworld is made up of people with different functions and skills ("painters, composers, writers, producers, museum directors, museum-goers, theater-goers, reporters for newspapers, critics for publications of all sorts, art historians, art theorists, philosophers of art, and others"), it is usually the artist, or creator of the artifact (and not the others who made up the artworld), who confers the status of "object for appreciation" on his work. He insists that although "nothing prevents a group of persons from conferring the status [of object for appreciation on an artifact] ... it is usually conferred by a single person, the artist who creates the artifact." There are at least two possible objections here. First, in conferring the status of "object for appreciation," the roles played by some (if not all) of the other elements of the artworld are as important as that played by the artist. One must not ignore the important role played by the art critics, theorists, aestheticians, and art historians (as emphasized by Danto). It is true that Duchamp was responsible for placing a urinal in an art exhibition in 1917, and naming it *Fountain*, as well as signing on it. At this stage, it may be said that Duchamp has proposed his ready-made as a work of art, or as an "object for appreciation." In other words, it is not yet being conferred the status of art until all or most of the other elements of the artworld (especially the art theorists, critics, and art historians) accept it as art. Now, if all or the vast majority of art critics, art historians, theoreticians and spectators had

rejected Duchamp's work as art—and continue to reject it—the *Fountain* may not have ended up as a work of art today. It must be noted that not every attempt by an artist to confer the status of “object for appreciation” on his work is successful. A relatively unknown artist who tries to introduce something completely radical and new will probably not succeed. In 1974 a young artist named Redza Piyadasa returned from Hawaii and attempted to introduce conceptualism to Malaysia. His exhibition titled “Towards a Mystical Reality” did not receive any attention from either the local or foreign press. The works in this exhibition were finally mentioned in a locally-published book on modern Malaysian artists, a book that was jointly written by the artist (Piyadasa) and his good friend Kanaga Sabapathy. After that, no one bothered to mention the exhibition or the works that were in it (newer books on modern Malaysian art completely ignored them), and the Malaysian artworld appears to have almost forgotten them. So the artist alone cannot sufficiently confer the status of object for appreciation on his work, and neither would the support of one or a few relatively unknown writers be sufficient. Duchamp's *Fountain* was able to enter the realm of art because of sustained support in the writings of well-known art critics and historians through many decades—a feat which Piyadasa's works were not able to achieve. Second, some works are conferred the status of art even though their creators never intended them to be so (e.g., stoneware bowls, bronze lamps, and porcelain flower pots, which were in the past used as household utensils but have been elevated to “objects for appreciation” in art museums). Such elevation of the status of ordinary household items from the past can only be achieved by a shift in aesthetic beliefs and tastes, and the publications of art critics and aestheticians may play a great role in changing beliefs to allow the conferring of the status of art on these objects. It is therefore not always necessary for the maker of the object to confer the status of “object for appreciation” on his artifact—sometimes the artifact could be elevated to this status without the effort or consent of its maker. We cannot say that the effort of the maker (artist) is always more important than the views of art critics and changes in art theory.

### **On Knowledge of Art Theory and History**

I have so far directed my criticisms mainly at Dickie's version of the institutional theory, but Danto's version has similar weaknesses. Instead of stressing the role of institutions conferring the status of art, Danto emphasizes knowledge of theory and history—in order to recognize and understand an

object (or activity) as art, one needs knowledge of both art theory and history (only by knowing the relevant art theory may we know what place or position it occupies in the history of art). But this may not sufficiently explain why certain works that satisfy the twin criteria of theory and art history may yet fail to gain acceptance as art. Take again Piyadasa's experiment with conceptualism in Malaysia in the 1970s. Like Warhol's brillo box (Danto's example to show that one needs knowledge of the relevant theory to see something as art), one needs at least some knowledge of the writings of the conceptualists to recognize Piyadasa's wooden chair, human hair, and hung iron bird cage as "art." Furthermore, Piyadasa's works can be said to occupy some sort of position in Malaysian art history—artists and scholars have been sent to Europe and America from the early 1960s and returned with challenging new ideas that altered and transformed traditional Malaysian art in various directions, and Piyadasa's introduction of conceptual works may be seen as one of these influences that transform the rich landscape of Malaysian art in the 1970s. However, while many of these foreign influences have today been accepted and incorporated into the rich tapestry of Malaysian art, Piyadasa's conceptual works appear to have been deliberately left out. Maybe it was local religious sentiment that excluded Piyadasa's works (if he exhibits real chairs and human hair, may he not also exhibit real cats and humans which are the creations of God?). Whatever the reason, there are surely many artists around the world whose works fully satisfy the twin criteria of theory and art history but (for some reason) fail to get recognized as art. Danto's theory (like Dickie's) may have failed to describe the sufficient conditions of art (if those conditions really exist).

I wish to return to Dickie's theory so that I may focus on his claim of institution conferring the status of art (on certain artifacts). Firstly, I am not pretending there are no other criticisms thus far of the institutional theory—though my criticism may be the only one that directly shows its inability to describe the sufficient conditions of art (if such conditions really exist)—hence its inability to function as a proper essentialist theory. There are other criticisms that are equally (or even more) destructive. For example, Alexander Erler points out that Dickie's theory amounts to nothing more than a sociological report, and is therefore not a true art theory—this is because it only describes what society "dominantly considers to be art, rather than a statement of what art actually *is*, no matter what the prevailing view may be about it in the artworld" (Erler 2006, 114). A proper art theory is normative in nature, and will offer

good grounds for what art ought to be—now even if a particular theory acknowledges that the concept of art evolves from decisions made by powerful representatives of the artworld, such decisions must be supported by reasons that can conform with our intuitions of what is or is not art—and the theory must reveal or discuss these reasons (Erler 2006, 114-115). To ignore the normative aspect makes Dickie's theory completely inadequate as an art theory.

Erler may have a powerful criticism of Dickie's theory, but I wish to return to a different weakness in the theory. I will employ examples to demonstrate that Dickie's theory does not sufficiently describe the conditions for distinguishing art from non-art. To do this I will first discuss certain recent trends, especially activities which are called radical politics. I will then argue that even though these activities could fulfill Dickie's two conditions, there is still a chance (or possibility) that they may not, in the long run, be accepted as art by society at large.

### **Bringing Radical Politics into the Realm of Aesthetics**

Now, since the beginning of the twentieth century we have encountered new or emerging art movements in the West that challenge aesthetic beliefs held by the majority of people in society—a good example is the Dadaist revolution (and particularly Duchamp's ready-mades). Their challenges have often expanded the category of art to include a variety of new things and activities—perhaps most people within the art circle now expect this expansion of the concept of art to carry on indefinitely in the future. This, however, does not imply that everything (or every activity) introduced by emerging art movements will necessarily be accepted into the category of art. In fact there are many instances of the so-called new art (or new art activities) that have not yet been fully legitimized by society at large, or even the artworld (I will henceforth use the term “artworld” in the same manner as Dickie's). It is here that Dickie's institutional theory reveals a glaring weakness (i.e., it is not able to explain why some attempts to confer the status of “object for appreciation” fail. In other words there can be new cases (introduced by the more creative artists) that satisfy all the conditions of art stated by Dickie, and yet fail to be regarded as art—which means that Dickie's theory has failed as an essentialist definition for not adequately describing all the sufficient conditions of art. I will support this point by referring to what has been labeled as “radical politics” or “radical art” by some writers.

I will discuss radical art by referring to a book on aesthetics (although it is more accurately considered as a collection of papers presented in a conference). In *Aesthetics and Radical Politics* (edited by Gavin Grindon, 2008), scholars discuss what I believe are two different groups of activities. Both groups are lumped together in “radical politics,” which are considered here as aesthetic activities. The two groups are: (1) activities or works that have already been accepted by society or the artworld as art; and, (2) activities that are probably not accepted (or at least not yet accepted) as art activity by society or even the artworld. Examples of the former group include discussions on Alexander Trocchi’s works (Gardiner 2008, 70-71) and Joseph Beuys’s actions, including one entitled “How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare,” which was conducted in a New York gallery (Ekstrand and Wallmon 2008, 46). Examples of the latter group include the Berlin and Hamburg Umsonst activities (Kanngeiser 2008), the SOMA exercises (conducted in the conference) which are classified as an anarchist experiment (Goia 2008), and attempts at explaining anarchism (Gordon 2008). It is the second group that is problematic—and which we will now focus on. But let me first say a few things about the first group. *Invisible Insurrection of a Million Minds* is a collection of Trocchi’s literary pieces compiled by Andrew Murray Scott in 1991 (several years after Trocchi’s death in 1984). As a collection of fictional or literary pieces, Trocchi’s work will have no problem being accepted by the artworld as a literary work of art (no matter how rebellious Trocchi might be in establishing societal values; and no matter how lowly skeptics might rate the quality of his literary pieces). Beuys’s actions may challenge traditionally and commonly held notions on art (e.g., he proclaims that everyone is an artist, and art activities can function to dismantle our senile social welfare system) (Ekstrand and Wallmon 2008, 50), but they were about art and the role of art, and held in art galleries which were (and still are) regarded as proper platforms for displaying or channeling art to the public. Most members of the artworld will not have problems accepting his actions as art-activity, given that they were performed in the proper context (the art gallery) and were concerned with issues relating to art (or what art should be). However, the second group (of activities) does not have these characteristics that can make them recognizable as art (or art activity). The artworld would probably be very reluctant to accept the activities of the Berlin and Hamburg Umsonst as art because: (1) the objective of these activities was social and economic in nature, that is, to ensure that luxuries like swimming pools, art galleries, and exclusive supermarkets “should not be denied to those who cannot afford them and have an interest in them,” and the struggle to make them available for all “should be placed alongside the struggle for basic

material necessities such as food and housing” (Grindon 2008, xiii); (2) the participants do not think (nor were aware that) they were engaged in any activities related to art—they participated principally to achieve their goal of bringing greater fairness to society; and, (3) the environment in which they participated—occupying spaces like swimming pools and exclusive supermarkets—were not then considered as part of the art context, in the same way exhibits displayed in an art museum or gallery can be said to have taken place within an art context. These points can also be made on the soma anarchist experiments conducted in the conference (Goia 2008).

At this stage one could ask why *Aesthetics and Radical Politics* has included discussions on this second group of works. There are two possibilities: (1) this book classifies all the works discussed in it as art (including those political activities which have not yet been accepted as art by the majority in the art circle); and, (2) this work only wants to show that all these activities it discusses can be viewed or appreciated from an aesthetic perspective. Now, in order to get a clearer picture of its objective, I refer to an assertion made by Gavin Grindon in the book’s introduction:

Within the realm of aesthetics, the situation is particularly that—as the case studies presented by the articles in this volume demonstrate—this movement [of critical young scholars] often seeks to aestheticise politics, or rather, to treat the aesthetic as a directly political terrain.... (Grindon 2008, vii)

Based on Grindon’s claim (above) as well as from the essays in the book, it is still not clear how these young scholars seek to “aestheticise politics.” The confusion here lies in the difference between considering an activity as “art” or simply viewing it from the aesthetic perspective. Any object or activity can be approached from the aesthetic perspective, but this does not make it an art object or art activity. We can admire the aesthetic beauty of the space shuttle or a football match without at the same time treating these things as works of art in the strict sense. On the other hand, a clear-cut case of art (e.g., Michelangelo’s *David* or an activity performed by a conceptual artist) will demand that we adopt an aesthetic approach when criticizing or commenting on it—which we need not do in relation to the space shuttle or football match. As to those who “seek to aestheticise politics,” it is often unclear whether they choose only to approach such activities from the aesthetic perspective (in the same

way that we can approach a gymnastics display from the aesthetic angle), or consider them as clear-cut cases of art (or art-activity).

If we treat all the activities described in *Aesthetics and Radical Politics* as art (or art activity), then we will face the problem that some of those activities (e.g., the Hamburg Umsonst activism described by Anja Kanneiser, or the Soma experiments described by Jorge Goia, or the discussion on anarchism in Gordon's work) are either not art per se, or have yet to be accepted by the artworld as art. On the other hand, if we regard this book as simply employing the aesthetic approach to viewing and discussing certain socio-political activities, then it must explain why it employs this approach to both activities that are clearly not art as well as those which are clear-cut cases of art or art activity (e.g., Trocchi's "Invisible Insurrection of a Million Minds" or even Beuys's action *How to explain pictures to a dead hare* which at least was conducted in an art context, that is, in a gallery in New York)—or at least the artworld would have no difficulty accepting these as art. If the aim is to show that the aesthetic approach can be employed for viewing radical socio-political activities, then incorporating clear cases of art activity will serve no purpose, as they are meant to be appreciated from the aesthetic angle anyway.

However, I believe this book (*Aesthetics and Radical Politics*) cannot be (simply) an attempt to view certain radical political activities from the aesthetic perspective. The fact that both clear cases of art (e.g., Trocchi's works) as well as questionable cases (e.g., the Hamburg Umsonst activism) are packaged in the same book already suggests that they are (both) meant to be seen as belonging to the same category: "art." In other words, it may be argued that this book wants to be seen as one of the agents which, acting on behalf of the artworld, attempts to confer on those political activities (mentioned in the book) the status of candidates for artistic appreciation. In short, this book is an accepted agent (representing the artworld) for legitimizing these activities as art (or art activities). We will discuss whether this and other such attempts to confer the art status on radical political activities can be successful.

### **Will Attempts to Confer the Status of Art on Certain Radical Political Activities be Successful?**

I have pointed out that *Aesthetics and Radical Politics* must be seen as an attempt to confer the status of art (or "activities for appreciation") on those

activities described in the book. Or it must at least be construed as a proposal to view those activities as art-activities. But I have also asserted that this book (or the essays in it) describes both clear-cut cases of art as well as those which probably have not yet been accepted by the artworld. The question is: will this inclusion of clear cases of art necessarily influence the reader into accepting the more contentious cases as art? Firstly, those who initiated the Berlin and Hamburg Umsonst protest activities do not see themselves as artists, nor do they see their campaigns as art (or art-activities). Kanneiser has elegantly phrased their intention(s) in the following question: “why should we be denied ‘luxuries’ just because we don’t have the financial resources required to take part?” (in Grindon 2008, 6). The slogans of the Umsonst activists also make their intention clear: “everything for everyone,” and for free too (In Grindon 2008, 10, 12). The intention of the participants is political, social, and economic in nature: to enable poorer segments of society an equal opportunity to enjoy expensive and exclusive facilities—swimming pools, exclusive supermarkets, and other such luxuries (Grindon 2008, xiii). Like the anti-capitalist Occupy Wall Street international movement in 2011, the Hamburg Umsonst activists never had intentions or goals that were aesthetic in nature. As stated earlier, this is unlike Beuys’s social sculptures, which were presented in art galleries as art performances (i.e., the artist intended for his works to be seen as art), and the audience who visited the gallery to see Beuys’s exhibition will expect to see some form of art or art performance. The same can be said for Duchamp’s—his ready-mades were intended to be seen as art (i.e., they were introduced in an art context). Furthermore, the ready-mades were meant to challenge traditional views on art (which was why they were exhibited in art galleries)—and this implies that they were meant to provide some sort of aesthetic function. Hence, the Hamburg and Berlin Umsonst protest activities are contentious because: (1) they are not intended by the organizers as art-activities; (2) their organizers and participants do not see themselves as artists; (3) the protest activities do not appear to have any aesthetic function; and, (4) the audience, or those who witness the protests, do not expect to see an art performance (they probably saw them as political or social protests). These points can also apply to the soma anarchist therapy performed at the venue of the conference. The declared aim of soma anarchist therapy is to help participants develop skills for horizontal relationships, in order to resist vertical relationships based on domination by others in everyday life (in Grindon 2008, 58, 61). Despite Goia’s insistence that soma is a form of “life art,” its aim is essentially social and political in nature; and the fact that it was carried out in the conference does not imply that it operated within the art context (the conference is an

arena for academic discussion and exchange of ideas). Hence, most elements in the artworld will be reluctant to call these exercises art activities.

One possible objection is to say that I am simply employing one form of essentialist notion of art to deny these activities the status of art. In order to explain this objection we must first restate the four conditions above in a positive manner: (1) the artist must intend to present his activity as art; (2) organizers of, and participants in, the activity should consider their performance as art; (3) the activity must have an aesthetic function; and, (4) the spectators must consider the activity as art. The objection is that I have rejected the Umsonst activities and *soma* exercises as art simply because they failed to fulfill these conditions. It can then be argued that my position is weak because these conditions cannot be considered as the necessary and sufficient conditions of art; one can easily think of examples which do not satisfy one or some of these conditions (e.g., Ming porcelain bowls that have been elevated to the status of art and are now kept in art museums may not satisfy the first two conditions). Firstly, I want to stress that the conditions above are not meant to be necessary and sufficient conditions, but rather as what Wittgenstein (1958, 32) calls family resemblances. None of these is necessary to art, but if a work lacks too many of these family resemblances, we can legitimately doubt its status as art. However, I have yet to discuss the strongest reason for doubting these political protest activities as art (which I shall do in the conclusion below).

### **Radical Politics and Elimination of the Distinction Between Art and Its Surrounding Environment**

I have so far taken an anti-essentialist line, labeling conditions/ characteristics above as “family resemblances” rather than necessary and sufficient conditions of art. There is, however, one condition which (at least at the present moment) is still necessary, if not sufficient. That is, we still make a distinction between art and non-art; or there is at least some way we distinguish between art and non-art. This distinction may not always be clear (some have argued that new movements and creations constantly blur the distinction), but this does not imply we no longer expect the distinction to exist, or we do not make the distinction when we deal with new art forms. If this distinction is ever obliterated, one wonders if art need continue to exist at all. I will now proceed by arguing that: (1) radical politics could have obliterated the physical separation (or line of demarcation) between art and its environment but this does not by itself destroy the distinction between art and non-art (for we can

still mentally maintain the distinction between the two categories); however, (2) radical politics also obliterates our mental separation between art and non-art (which happens when the criteria of evaluation for the two activities completely overlap), and this will make the existence of art completely redundant.

Now, art traditionally employs devices or means to separate itself from its surrounding environment so that it is not viewed as an extension of daily life. The framing of pictures, the use of pedestals in sculptures, the employment of melody and elevated diction in drama, and the utilization of stage and props in opera are meant to delineate the artwork from the surrounding environment so that it is not seen as an extension of normal activities in daily life. This enables the artwork to be seen as an intelligible and coherent whole, without being connected in any way to events in its surroundings. But this separation has been challenged early in the twentieth century when playwrights or actors invited members of the audience to perform in their drama—improvisation was needed as these spectators added their performances to the drama. Although this may erode the separation between actors and spectators (for spectators are taking over the role of the actors), it does not really affect the traditional separation between art and daily life. The spectator was simply acting upon taking the stage to perform (i.e., temporarily entering the realm of art), but the same spectator re-enters the realm of daily life after leaving the stage or after “acting.” Indeed, there exists a separation between art and its surrounding environment.

Radical artists (radical politics) are working to eliminate the distinction by making art activity an extension of daily life. Let us consider the Berlin and Hamburg Umsonst protest activities as example. Kanngieser (2008: 5) describes the Umsonst activities as “collective playful interventions and appropriations which focus on everyday realm as their contextual frame.” I will later discuss the employment of “collective interventions and appropriations” and focus first on (what is meant by) “everyday realm.” Kanngieser refers to Alistair Bonnet’s description of everyday life as what was left in a day’s activities after discounting all “specialized activities.” She then explains “specialized activities” with Bonnet’s claim that it refers to “those activities commonly held to be responsible for the innovative, imaginative qualities attributed to literature, buildings, paintings, films and so on.” In Bonnet’s view, “everyday space ... is that space in which creativity is conventionally absent” (in Kanngieser 2008, 5). So everyday space includes whatever activities one is engaged in, as long as

it is not in production of the arts. It is not unreasonable to consider this “space” as the routines of daily life. How, then, does radical art break into this routine of daily life, hence destroying the traditional distinction between art (or art activity) and daily life? The Umsonst activists engaged in what they call “play” (or what Kannegeiser calls “collective playful interventions and appropriations”) and it is this which allows us to see their activities as extensions of daily life. In other words, the activists try to engage the spectators in fun, laughter and jokes, and also encourage them to participate in their activity. When invading Kreuzberg Badeschiff swimming pool in Berlin, the activists came in inflated boats. Kannegeiser (2008, 12) says that:

The laughter provoked by the Badeschiff action, the revelry inspired by the laughter of the activists and the reciprocity of laughter from the spectators, acts as a contagion for generating relationships. Laughter may act to prompt a feeling of reciprocity, of something shared. This spontaneous shared-ness can in turn invoke a certain sense of participation from within. (Kannegeiser 2008, 12)

Activists sometimes ran rings around the police who came to restore order, provoking laughter and participation from the spectators (see Kannegeiser 2008, 10-11). The important thing here is there is no longer the need for suspension of disbelief. Now, we need to suspend disbelief while watching a drama, reading a novel, or contemplating the action in the painting. Suspension of disbelief is needed because these traditional art forms create their own space and time—we can only enter this created space and time zone if we suspend disbelief and follow the action (in a drama or novel or movie) as if it were real. Furthermore, it is our willingness to follow the events (or the action) as if it were real, that allows the relevant emotions to be aroused in us (the spectators). It is our suspension of disbelief that allows a tragic drama, such as Sophocles’s *Oedipus Rex*, to evoke pity and fear in us. If a spectator completely disbelieves the action in the drama, movie, or novel, the emotions which are expressed in the artwork will not be aroused at all. On the other hand, spectators in the Umsonst protests need not suspend disbelief largely because they did not create another space and time zone—the spectators and protestors interact in real time and space. The spectator need not suspend disbelief in order to be provoked to laughter, or feel togetherness and affinity with the protestors. It is in this way that radical art intrudes into daily life—as a spectator interacts with the protestors, this interaction becomes a part of his daily life (he is not acting, as

in the case of the spectator who was called to stage to act his part). And this obliterates the traditional physical separation between art and its surrounding environment—with radical art we can no longer determine the boundary between art and non-art; we no longer know where it begins and where it ends.

But this obliteration of the physical boundary between art and its environment does not necessarily mean we can no longer distinguish between art and non-art. We can still mentally make the distinction between the two categories; even with the Umsonst activities (e.g., I can say that anyone who was in the crowd but does not believe in the motto “the luxuries of cultural and aesthetic life should be made available to the masses” is not part of the art; or anyone in the crowd who does not actively participate in the protest action is not part of the artwork). Radical politics may have made it difficult to physically demarcate the “art activity” from its surroundings, but this does not stop us from constructing a mental distinction between the two. What can really obliterate our mental distinction is the overlapping of the criteria for assessing the activity as “art” and as political protest (i.e., “non-art”).

### **Conclusion: The Consequences of Obliterating the Distinction Between Art and Non-art**

How do we judge the success or failure of radical politics as art (or as art activity)? In other words, what kind of value-conferring features do we look for when we wish to analyze it aesthetically? We certainly cannot employ criteria for assessing the more traditional art forms, like the presence of unity, harmony, balance, expression of certain emotional or mental states, and representation of certain objects. Neither can we employ criteria traditionally used for drama or the literary works, such as the presence of plot, revelation of character, employment of elevated diction including the use of metaphors, and appropriateness of the chorus or background music. These features are either absent or completely inappropriate when viewing a radical protest. One may say we could analyze the beauty of poems that were read to the protestors, or the expressiveness of songs sung in the protest. But these are only incidental parts of the entire protest, which could have proceeded without poems or songs. Besides, there are many purely political protests that contain poems and songs, but having these features does not make them works of art—for example the Thai redshirt protests of 2010. What we want are aesthetic features that are peculiar to radical politics. One may argue that we should look for entirely new criteria when evaluating radical protests (or radical politics) as art; after

all, it is supposedly a new art form. But what new criteria may emerge from this search? Ultimately we may be forced to conclude that the “new” criteria do not exist, or return to the objectives of the protest and view its success or failure in achieving them. We may then employ criteria which can be phrased in questions like: How effective was this protest in gaining support from the general population? How effective was this action in changing people’s views on inequality in society? How successful was the Hamburg Umsonst protests in raising awareness that the working class is equally entitled to the luxuries of life? In other words, the criteria employed for assessing a radical protest activity from the (so-called) aesthetic perspective will be completely similar to those we employ for viewing it from the angle of politics. In terms of criteria for evaluation, radical art is exactly the same as political activism (viewing it as art activity is no different from seeing it as political protest). From the angle of evaluation then, there is no reason to call these activities “art” (or even “aesthetic activities”), they might as well retain their status (or continue to be known) as political protests. Once art loses its distinctiveness in this way, it could become pretty redundant.

There is therefore a good possibility that the artworld may reject radical politics as art. Now I am not saying that the artworld will certainly reject radical politics, for there is no way to accurately predict what changes or transformation the artworld may undergo in the future. But given that we presently still make a distinction between criteria for aesthetic analysis and those which are not for aesthetic judgment (to talk about whether Michelangelo’s *David* can be effectively used as an infantry weapon in medieval warfare is not to judge it from the aesthetic perspective), there is a likelihood that radical politics may not enter the realm of the art despite attempts by certain quarters to confer upon them the status of “arthood.” And as long as that possibility exists, I can assert that Dickie’s definition may not have laid out the sufficient conditions of art—for something that is an artifact and which has had conferred upon it the status of candidate for artistic appreciation by someone acting on behalf of the artworld (e.g., a book like *Aesthetics and Radical Politics*) may still not qualify as art in the long run. The best examples are activities in the realm of radical politics (which have been discussed in this paper).

The major problem with the institutional theory of art (especially the one proposed by Dickie) is its inability to explain failures that have satisfied all the conditions described in its definition. Radical politics as art satisfies Dickie’s two conditions of artifactuality (they are certainly products of human

conception or agency) and the presence of attempts to confer the status of art-hood on them—but they would probably end up being overlooked or ignored by the artworld for reasons that I have stated above. The institutional theory has failed as an essentialist definition because it has neither supplied the complete list of sufficient conditions of art, nor has it identified the true essentialist features of art. Or perhaps the anti-essentialists are right: There are no necessary and sufficient conditions of art.

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