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## Subversive Art and Institutional Vulnerability

Kathryn A. Hanzalik

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SUBVERSIVE ART AND INSTITUTIONAL VULNERABILITY

An Honors Thesis

Presented to

the Department of Philosophy  
of the University of New Orleans

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Bachelor of Arts, with Honors in Philosophy

by

Kathryn A. Hanzalik

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## Table of Contents

**iii Abstract**

**4 Introduction – The Issue**

**5 Method and Presuppositions**

**6 The Text’s Argument**

**9 Analysis of the Text’s Argument**

Hierarchy 9

Technocracy 14

Recalcitrance 16

Awesome Dissolution 18

Transgressive Vision: The Adversarial Art of Godfrey Reggio 20

**23 Conclusion**

**26 Bibliography**

**27 Illustrations**

**31 Index of Works Referenced**

## **Abstract**

George Dickie's Institutional Theory of Art satisfies necessary and sufficient conditions for definition, but by leaving evaluation open cannot address artistic capacities to outstrip the usefulness of the theory for appreciating the concept of art comprehensively or meaningfully. Artworks that are known to members of the central and peripheral artworld seep into the general purview of the population at large as known "great works" of art. Upon examination of works that garner significant cultural influence, works broadly appreciated as great works, we find that their resistance to Dickie's concept of "the artworld" and its associated behaviors is that which makes them conspicuously significant.

Keywords: institutional theory, artworld, evaluation, avant garde, technocracy, art theory

## The Issue

Given the insufficiency of earlier theories (the imitation and expression theories of art) to define art comprehensively, George Dickie set out to define art in opposition to some individuals who determined that “art” could not be defined. Unlike earlier attempts, Dickie’s institutional theory of art is broad enough to include any phenomena one can possibly construe under that term. It is inclusive of artworks from all times and places regardless of artist intention, realistic approximation, expression of emotion, or any number of other views philosophers have advanced prior to the institutional formulation. Given this broadly inclusive theory, we may be tempted to satisfaction. The concept of art, as now defined, is a problem that has been solved. Regardless of which works might come along, there exists a theory whose conditions will be sufficient to include it within our understanding of what art is without the need of any major theoretical overhaul.

However, within Dickie’s analysis he admits a potential weakness of the institutional account: it does not reveal everything that art is capable of doing, therefore, does not elaborate on the function of art within society generally outside the institution of the artworld. Additionally, it does not propose a way to determine the relative value of some art works over others. The inclusivity of the institutional theory makes this especially problematical. With so many participants within the artworld, how are we to explain how some works are more highly regarded, attain greater value, and become the centerpieces of the institutions that provide the necessary context for exhibition and appreciation, while others find themselves in less prestigious institutional settings or are relegated to museum vaults and storage rooms?

Herein lies the paradox of the institutional theory of art. In Dickie’s account, it is the most challenging works of art – works that require us to look beyond exhibited artistic properties

– that require an alternative appraisal; this fact lends the most strength to his assertion that we need to appreciate art works within an institutional context. The paradox is that often these works are the least likely to be generally accepted as works of art even by the artworld at their initial reception. Often in hindsight we can see their merits while the artworld of the time cannot. Especially, but not exclusively, with regard to those works whose initial reception was poor but are now held in the highest esteem, great works of art illuminate the paradox within institutional processes generally and within the artworld specifically. If we are to define the artworld and its various component systems as informal social institutions, whose existence is indicated by established rule, custom, tradition, etc., how can one explain the fact that within any given medium works that thwart established practice come to exemplify what is meant by a “work of art”?

My purpose in this essay is to show that an evaluative theory based on the precepts of the institutional theory will more clearly show its provisional nature. Great art is that art which deliberately resists subsumption under existing frameworks for appreciation.

### **Method and Presuppositions**

To demonstrate my claim, I will attempt to establish that institutions, and by extension the artworld, are fundamentally hierarchical. I will then draw out the negative implications of this fact by drawing parallels between Dickie’s concept of artworld and Theodore Roszak’s account of the technocracy, with emphasis on the processes by which institutions constrain that which falls under their purview – in this instance, art – and how this impacts our understanding of the value of art. I will continue this discussion with an appraisal of highly regarded works of art to illustrate that these artworks, and often the artists responsible for them, gain value with regard to their resistance to and criticism of institutional influences. I will then show how works

of art fundamentally question the separation made between artworld and world to demonstrate that the impetus for this separation lies in the institutional motivations to direct and control phenomena within their purview, from artworld to artists and works, for the purpose of constraining art's power to influence life generally. I will conclude with an examination of the problems posed by exceptional works.

I will presuppose that Dickie's first condition for art – that it be artifactual – is unproblematic. I assume that when Dickie briefly mentions the expression theory of art, that he takes it to mean that theory that defines art as an expression of the artist's emotion, and that he finds it insufficient on the basis of other refutations which indicate that other expressions of emotion, embraces, crying, and so on, are not themselves art. I will presuppose that my decision to focus on specific works generally embraced as art under the social/institutional artworld structure is unproblematic. Finally, I presuppose that a relativistic appreciation of art does not impede a theory's ability to explain art.

While my analysis deals only with Dickie's earlier version of the institutional theory, his later revisions do not bear on my analysis.

### **The Text's Argument**

Dickie's first task is a brief demonstration of how earlier theories of art were lacking based on their inability to provide necessary and sufficient conditions, and that the later determination that "art" cannot be defined is incorrect. He characterizes these as the Phases of art. Phase I contains attempts to define art, from the imitation theory on. He claims that within this phase attempts to define art begin and end with "accidental features of art" that merely "[characterize] art at a particular stage in its historical development." (20) The imitation theory

addressed the accidental feature that art during its reign was representational; the visual arts were obviously so, music was “assumed to be in some sense,” and literary arts were so in their representation of life’s familiar scenes. (20) Nonobjective art’s proliferation at the turn of the century nullified this contention. Later, the expression theory of art focused on the relation not between art and life generally but art and the inner life of the artist, which Dickie claims was similarly inadequate; beyond that, “no other subsequent definition has been satisfactory.” (21)

So ends Phase I of art theory’s historical development. The contention that “art” cannot be defined is Phase II. Dickie’s (and any other) attempt to disprove this assertion by providing necessary and conditions is Phase III. It is characterized as the point at which we can define “art” in a way that “avoids the difficulties of the traditional definitions and [incorporates] the insights of the later analysis” (Phases I and II respectively). Dickie contends that Phase II failed to provide a definition of art because there were no exhibited properties of art that could lead to its definition and that an analysis of its nonexhibited properties will lead to a definition that satisfies necessary and sufficient conditions for the concept of art. (31)

Artificiality is the first necessity for a thing to be art. Dickie allows for counterexamples of untreated objects, but claims that these are secondary, derivative cases from the primary or classificatory sense “work of art”; untreated objects become artifacts because human intervention is necessary for their appreciation as art, and that appreciation is predicated on their having some comparative relationship with artifactual works of art. For Dickie, the second condition necessary to define art will be indicated by the alternative treatment of art objects which distinguishes them from other objects. To formulate this condition, Dickie hearkens to Arthur Danto: specifically, to his essay, “The Artworld.”



Danto looks to the nonexhibited properties of artworks and discovers the integrative context of the artworld. That a contextual observation is necessary indicates to Danto the requirement that art be appreciated in terms of its institutional embeddedness; though this is left relatively undeveloped, Dickie claims that Danto's insights are incorporable into the case he makes for the second and final condition necessary to define art. Taken from Danto's essay, this condition, briefly stated, is the artworld – that “to see something as art requires something the eye cannot descry – an atmosphere of artistic theory, a knowledge of the history of art: an artworld” (Danto, 218) and that this pronouncement indicates “the institutional nature of art” (Dickie, 29). “Given the great variety of the systems of the art-world it is not surprising that works of art have no exhibited properties in common. If, however, we step back and view the works in their institutional setting, we will be able to see the essential properties they share.” (31)

The second condition is “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)” (34). This contains four principal components. The first is the requirement of an agent acting on behalf of the artworld. This person performs the major action required by the second component, the conferral of status on an object, whose status is the third component, that of candidacy. The object is thus a candidate for potential appreciation by the artworld – the fourth and final component of the second condition. Agents of the artworld are thus described: the “essential core” of the artworld consists of artists, presenters of work, and immediate audience (goers – theater-goers, museum-goers, etc.). Dickie calls this the “presentation group,” the bare-minimum roles necessary for the existence of the artworld. Agents outside this group are latter members and can only enter the picture after the rudiments of the institution have been established. This nonessential group consists of artists, producers, museum

directors, museum-goers, theater-goers, reporters, critics, art historians, art theorists, philosophers, and “others.” (35-6) These members of the artworld wield the necessary qualifications to function as agents with the capability of conferring the status of “artwork” on an object. They can act individually or as a group in the conferral of status, the purpose of which is to differentiate art objects from objects that are not art; objects that are not art are objects which have not had status conferred on them by agents of the artworld. The status conferred in this process is that of candidacy which necessarily leads to the nature of that candidacy, not necessarily as art, but as candidate for the potential appreciation as a work of art. This appreciation is dependent on the institutional embeddedness of the object, not on the sort of appreciation utilized by the appreciator.

Dickie defines the artworld as “the broad social institution in which works of art have their place” (29) and under which subsystems of art – theater, visual art, and so on – have their place. In describing it as a broad social institution, Dickie distinguishes the character of the artworld as an *informal* institution, rather than a specific kind of established, formal institution which would, unlike the artworld, have “specified procedures and lines of authority” (35), but like the artworld would have the ability to confer status on phenomena under its judgment. Its institutional character is associated but not wedded to concrete establishments, as in the case of established societies or corporations, but is more broadly defined as custom, law, tradition, practice, etc (31). Its purpose is to provide a framework for the presentation and exhibition of artworks. Although Dickie sees that the artworld has, to some extent, marginally achieved formalization, he notes that this is generally perceived as negative by people interested in art – that formalization threatens the “freshness and exuberance” of art (35). However, this is not to say that the artworld concept is a limiting factor. Its value lies in its elasticity in that various

subsystems of art can accommodate innovations under their purview without threatening the broadly inclusive character of the artworld generally.

## **Analysis of the Text's Argument**

### **Hierarchy**

Intimations of institutional hierarchy begin in Danto's initial conception of the artworld. While he claims that individuals have the capacity to identify works of art with the "is" of artistic identification – a skill any child can easily master – he goes on to claim that it is necessary to define art to make explicit what people already know. Artistic complexity in modern works, especially with regard to works that are perceptually indistinguishable from objects that are not art, have put people in a difficult situation in which a theory is required to indicate when one finds oneself on artistic terrain. "To see something as art requires something the eye cannot descry – an atmosphere of artistic theory, a knowledge of the history of art: an artworld" (218). For this reason, theories (and, presumably, theorists) occupy the highest position in the artworld hierarchy, as individuals with the authority to determine what will and will not count as art within the institutional context. Without this determinative structure, "one is unlikely to see [an object] as art...in order to see it as part of the artworld, one must have mastered a good deal of artistic theory" (220).

Dickie does not share the same preference for theory in structuring the artworld, but he nonetheless maintains a hierarchal nature for its structure. At the top, the "presentation group" – artists, presenters, audience - furnishes the "essential core" of the world from which the rest of the attendant agents, including theorists and philosophers, develop. Here the work and its creator are only one of a number of necessary agents who coordinate their activities in the business of

conferring status, candidacy, and appreciation on and of works of art. While Dickie allows within his theory the possible situation of a single individual operating in all of these roles, the rest of his account privileges the conglomerate functioning of the artworld in implicitly claiming that a work is not a work in virtue of being made to be a work of art, and therefore art, but that it gains surer status as art according to whether it satisfies the various functionaries and provides necessary material for the various actors of the artworld for the institution's existence. It is *how* the work comes to be evaluated and appreciated by presenters and audience, not that it has been made with Art in mind, with the *possibility* of furnishing that event, that is important for Dickie. Essentially, even though Dickie describes the presentation group as a tri-part whole, it is the presentation class – presenters, managers, administrators – of the artworld who gain the highest status in his hierarchy. They become the quintessential arbiters of artistic value and status in that world.

In Dickie's institutional theory the expression theory of art is inadequate for unspecified reasons. Although he allows for the single-agent scenario, artists themselves are inherently incapable of determining the value of their own works. Some amount of meaning, value, and/or status is interdependent, making the artworld a requirement for art's definition and, by extension, valuation and interpretation. While ideally this interplay privileges the communications between artist/work, work/audience, and audience/artist, that Dickie divides 'audience' into "goers" and "presenters" leads one to the conclusion that there is some especially necessary role that presenters play in defining art within the artworld. To some extent, this hearkens to Danto's point that theorists play a critical role in determining the boundaries within which art can come to being; they determine the forms of the artworld. For Dickie it is not theorists but the

presentation class who authorize art and the artworld; meaning, value, and status of artworks are beholden to the opinions (well informed, we assume) of the artworld's authorities.

This is presumably a positive development; not just *anyone*, not just *any* art should be included in the *Artworld*, easily accessible to goers of prestigious art museums and whatever other institutions occupy the highest positions within the artworld. There needs to be a filter that separates college tries from serious works. But with the conceptual artworld being so broad, what is it that determines the difference between the High Art of the Met and the Low Art of that which occupies the space under someone's bed or what she keeps buried in her hard drive? Even if we abandon traditional high art/low art distinctions, challenged most desperately in the early years of the film medium's development, how do we come to value some works more highly than others, and how do some works gain higher relative status than other works *as art*?

Shall we rely on measurable figures - how much individuals are willing to pay for some works, in some cases astronomical amounts of money? In this case, it is marketability, specifically marketability as a work of art, which determines relative value of some works over others. However, why should we assume that the people with the deepest pockets or greatest amount of disposable wealth have the requisite capacity to determine what makes great art? Taking film as an example, why should we appreciate works with the highest budget and/or box office return as great art? Surely we want to avoid this as an evaluative method. It runs the risk of valuing *Pirates of the Caribbean as art* more than films made on much lower budgets; Darren Aronofsky's *Pi*, for instance. Even if we avoid this as an evaluative scheme, it is useful as an illustration of the intersection between the artworld and other major institutions – the market, in this case.

To take a more amorphous scheme, let us posit relative cultural value as that which confers higher status on more valuable works of art. To some extent, this would be determined by popularity among the class of artworld agents in the broadest sense. The works we, as a culture, value most highly will find themselves hanging in more prestigious institutions than works we have not embraced so fully – the difference between works that hang in museums rather than low-level art galleries, music performed at Mahalia Jackson Theater rather than Bourbon St., works of cinema that receive honors at the Academy Awards rather than those that screen at the New Orleans Film Festival - Louisiana Shorts program. Implicit hierarchical bias can find its way here too, however. While this kind of measure avoids the problems of a purely market-oriented approach, it serves to reinforce the tastes held by the status quo. Even New Orleans Museum of Art hangs portraits of long-dead aristocratic family members, while other works might enjoy a brief run at a Julia St. gallery and because of their limited exposure do not accord the same relative value, even if they could be judged as “better” works of art.

Those portraits, though – even if the subject matter or content is culturally lacking insofar as they only satisfy the tastes of certain classes, the technical prowess of the artists who paint them is nothing to scoff at and can account for the high regard placed on them by authorities within that segment of the artworld. This prowess is, to some extent, an implicit mechanism of evaluation in Dickie’s institutional theory when he indicates the institutional nature of the artworld as informal. Tradition, ways of doing and behaving, exquisite elaboration of convention in painting, well-mastered appreciation of the rules of painting a portrait – these are accounted for in the conferring of status of these paintings as art rather than mere documentation of someone who once lived and whose family was wealthy enough to pay for the commission.

Unfortunately, this criterion is also problematic. In response to Andrew Sarris' American adaptation of the auteur theory of film, Pauline Kael addressed the problem of technical competence as a criterion for artistic excellence. He claims that to be a great director, one must first be a good director – must have at least the technical competence established in film's convention. Kael's response, and mine, to the criterion of technical prowess in determining relative value of works of art over others:

Sometimes the greatest artists in a medium bypass or violate the simple technical competence that is so necessary for hacks...an artist who is not a good technician can indeed create new standards, because standards of technical competence are based on comparisons with work already done. (Kael, 14)

To continue my illustration of the artworld's hierarchy problems and how they complicate the problem of determining a reliable evaluative scheme, I will now open the ground with Theodore Roszak's *The Making of a Counter Culture: Reflections on the Technocratic Society and Its Youthful Opposition*.

### **Technocracy**

Roszak defines technocracy as a “regime of experts,” that society in which “the scale and intricacy of all human activities – political, economic, cultural – transcends the competence of the amateurish citizen and inexorably demands the attention of specially trained experts.” (6) Its experts are “certified” experts; those who act in service to the highest levels of institutional structures, whether state or corporate (10-11). Their expertise comes from their ability to “[cultivate] an objective consciousness” (208), the only kind of useful consciousness within a technocracy, as it produces things of value – knowledge, solutions to problems, power (53), while that which is “not fully and articulably available in the waking consciousness for empirical or mathematical manipulation” is placed in the “cultural garbage can” of the “negative catch-all

category” of the “purely subjective” (52-3). Its experts are not interested in “inner feelings” until they can be rationalized or controlled; in fact, “those outbursts of fluid, imprecise, distractive imaginings that well up from the ‘irrational’” (225) are the only obstacle to the technocracy’s goal of perfected, centralized organization (18) by means of “[leveling] life down to a standard...that technical expertise can cope with.” (12) It is ideologically invisible; its experts “have risen above ideology...insofar as the traditional ideologies are concerned” (21), its values and assumptions about reality are “as unobtrusively pervasive as the air we breathe” (8) and “have become the buried premises from which intellectual and ethical judgments proceed” (50).

Under Danto’s view, “art-historical complexities must yield before the exigencies of logical exposition” (212) and cannot transcend the competence of what the experts, theorists of art, can deal with. Even so, people are capable of recognizing art when they see it; or they were, before art got too complicated for amateurs, those not grounded in “a good deal of artistic theory” (220), without which they are unlikely to see an object as art. In his view theory not only helps us to determine which objects are art in contrast to other objects, but furthermore is required for art to be possible at all. Some of the first human attempts at art are not even art until a theorist comes along; the brilliant, nameless artists of early cave paintings would not have the capacity to conceive “that they were producing *art* on those walls...unless there were Neolithic aestheticians” (220). Art is impossible until the experts fathom its existence, then confirm its nature for the rest of us. In other words, not until authority was consecrated as a fact of human existence in its civilized, institutional, ultimately technocratic form is art even possible.

One of the great skills mastered by the technocracy is its capacity to assimilate challenges made to its predominance. “Leisure, entertainment, culture as a whole, the unconscious drives, even...protest against the technocracy itself: all these become the subjects of purely technical



scrutiny and of purely technical manipulation” (Roszak, 6). It has an overwhelming capacity to overcome or trivialize challenges to its structure and entrenched influence. To resist the technocracy is to avoid “commercial verminization” and “neutralization” (70) of experimental behaviors that contrast with the status quo - not to submit to the whims of market or culture, or be consumed by them. Resistance emerges “to overcome the commercializing and trivializing tactics of technocratic society...” (72). While Roszak was concerned with the counter-cultural movements of the 1960s, his observations bear equally well on the accounts of the artworld elaborated by Dickie. His “broad institution in which works of art have their place” (29), populated as it is with authorities whose determinations bear on which works will get the most attention, and subsystems with their own established consistencies and boundaries, can change in the same way other institutions – religious, commercial, governmental – can change (30). They adapt to the challenges posed to them by destroying or assimilating the challengers. Therefore, art that flouts narrative film convention becomes “experimental film,” music accommodates new forms by splitting itself into various genres, classical, blues, jazz, each with its own “established [ways] of doing and behaving” (30). What remains intact is the technocracy, and the artworld, respectively. There is no limit to the number of systems to be subsumed “under the generic conception of art” which provides “the elasticity whereby creativity of even the most radical sort can be accommodated” (33). What matters is that we maintain an acceptance of rational delineation of the phenomena under our purview, whether as agents of artworld or technocracy. What matters is that the institutional theory is no threat to creativity, regardless of whether artists concern themselves with the business of philosophers or not. The objective here, laid bare, is that accounting for the art concept, in all its complexity, in terms of how it manifests itself institutionally, only serves to rationalize art in a way that avoids accounting for its impetus and

the content it contains, resistant as they are to formal explication. It is therefore useful to examine works that stretch to the breaking point the boundaries supposedly laid, however loosely, on the informally institutional artworld, as this will shed light on how some works gain an elevated status – as objects that symbolize the spoils of war.

### **Recalcitrance**

Taken from the examples Danto offers, Andy Warhol is one brilliant example of how artists can challenge the institution by defying the established ways of doing and behaving that up to that point had populated the artworld, in visual arts especially but also in film. Taking us further back in art's history we arrive at *Fountain* and Dada generally, also obvious examples of art's persistent attempts to defy classification and definition, even if Dickie defends their activities as perfect examples of how influential, not to say cannibalizing, a concept the institutional theory can be. He does not classify it as great art, but it does provide a great example not just of the theoretical necessity of appreciating art in the context of its institutional manifestation, though it was an obvious protest against the reigning powers. To continue with a reference and description of Walter De Maria's *High Energy Bar* [Plate 1] further highlights my point – while it exists as art within the institutional setting it simultaneously parodies the concept to an unmitigated degree. Even if we would rather avoid classifying these recalcitrant works as Great art, they are consistent exemplifications of the fact that an art object's resistance to institutionally enforced standards is an object that refuses to be classified as anything *but* art. They are not brand advertisements, even if they carry a brand, not celebrations of the institution, but parodies of it, not propaganda for the unchallenged entrenchment of the status quo but rejections of its influence in determining what we can or cannot accept as works of art.

These are examples of works that make their home comfortably within the settings furnished by the various art systems, but our time has supplied ever-more dismissive examples. Banksy, the wildly famous and infamous artist responsible for the explosion of public interest in highly aestheticised works of street art that score high returns for galleries who manage to carve out sections of wall that carry his signature images, is a brilliant example not just of someone thwarting the institutional setting explicitly, but of challenging institutional structures generally [Plates 2, 3, 4]. Lenny Bruce, the firebrand comic, similarly used his art not just to completely revolutionize the medium of stand-up comedy but also to revolutionize what was socially acceptable to discuss on many fronts. Trey Parker and Matt Stone, the irreverent pair behind *South Park*, similarly challenged what is and is not acceptable within the sterilized medium of theater, but most recently in their musical *The Book of Mormon*. These are not just challenges to the artworld institution, but are challenges to the structure under which the artworld institution exists – that of the technocracy. They challenge authority generally. They illuminate the conditions of the world under its control. In this way, works of great art not only test institutional boundaries but question the value of setting them up in the first place; they force us to consider the conceptual dissolution of the world of art from the world itself.

### **Awesome Dissolution**

In responding to the Socratic charge in Plato's *Republic* that art produced under the reign of the imitation theory showed us only what was already apparent and mirrored the world in a distracting, unhelpful way, Danto observes that Shakespeare, through *Hamlet*, recognized that reflective surfaces “show us what we could not otherwise perceive – our own face and form...art, insofar as it is mirrorlike, reveals us to ourselves” (211) and is of some cognitive utility after all. The process the artist undertakes through art is a serious and dangerous business,

one that occasionally threatens to free the human imagination only to have it spill itself out onto life and color the world in a way that shows us our flawed assumptions about the state of things. This is a dangerous business because people often respond to this kind of challenge in a callous way and, every so often, in a blatantly violent way. Take, for instance, Pier Paolo Pasolini's *Salo*, which incited someone to murder the artist, or Alejandro Jodorowsky's *Fando y Lis*, which incited a riot when it premiered in Mexico. When works of art result in this kind of action, it is incumbent on any rational person to question what divide there is between art and the world, and under what circumstances it can dissolve to the point that a metaphorical portrayal of fascism (*Salo*) or sexism (*Fando*) can lead to genuine violence in response to that kind of abrasive cultural defiance. Are these responses only to what is objectively presented, or is there some paradoxical dissolution of the world of the fiction, firmly placed in its artworld setting, and the 'real' world in which we do the rest of our living?

Roszak speaks of the alienative dichotomy as the first requirement in objective consciousness's psychic style. It divides the "In-Here" of the observing consciousness from the "Out-There" of the world. In order to properly measure the world, it considers the two realms as distant as possible from one another, accomplishing this through the "intervention of various mechanical gadgets between observer and observed" and the replacement of "sensuous speech" with "chilly jargons and technical terms." (218) The In-Here is an alternative term he uses in place of subject, ego, intelligence, reason, etc. because these terms "suggest some fixed faculty or psychic entity" where the emphasis here is rather on the very act of contraction, in "the sense of taking a step back, away from, and out of [the natural world, feelings, urges, and imagination]." (220) In this view, "...the In-Here is committed to studying the Out-There *as if* it were completely stupid, meaning without intention or wisdom or purposeful pattern...it must not

attribute to Out-There what cannot be observed, measured, and – ideally – formulated into articulate, demonstrable propositions for experimental verification.” (221-2)

This is in direct contrast to the way an artist approaches the world, and works of great art consistently present this message; that art observes reality as if the subjective In-Here is inextricable from the Out-There of the objective world, and attempts to show to others the middle-ground they have accomplished. No matter what the artist “represents” or “expresses,” no matter what institutional framework comes to house the work, the work consistently elevates the status of the surrounding world with the subject that observes it. There is never a division between the world “out there” and the world “in here” in the work of the artist, except in the degree that they can be inextricable. But Danto reminds us that “the world has to be ready for certain things, the artworld no less than the real one.” (Danto, 220) I think this claim is reasonable enough in light of my earlier examples where the world, nor the artworld, were yet ready to receive the works artists offered. The ironic twist on this situation is that *this* art, that is most difficult for the artworld to immediately subsume under its existing frameworks, is the art that we later come to see as Great art. This kind of art forces change from within the institution..

Of course, every individual is entitled to her own pantheon of great art and great artists; however, I would like to continue elaborating on my contention that great works of art have as their qualification content that radically questions conventional barriers, not only those we place to separate the artworld from the world but that we place between ourselves and the world outside. Danto approaches a provocative territory when he describes the relationship of the artworld to the world as analogous to the relationship between the City of God and those beheld in the world. (220) If we are to take his contention to be a brief explication of the difference between theory and practice, between the ideal and the real, then art that challenges this

boundary is of profound importance to philosophy in its own self-reflection. Roszak makes an observation similar to but to a degree more emotive than Danto's: that "the artist who clings to his impossible vision at least preserves that much of heaven among us; the mad realist who turns from that vision for the sake of another 'practical' measure only takes us one step further into the hell of our alienation." (101)

### **Transgressive Vision: The Adversarial Art of Godfrey Reggio**

Filmmaker Godfrey Reggio was tempted out of the Christian Brotherhood because of conflicts of interest he had with the Catholic Church, but was inspired to extend his religious quest when he elected to transition to filmmaking. His inspiration came from another adversarial figure in the artworld – Louis Bunuel – when he had what he considered a profoundly spiritual experience through Bunuel's *The Young and the Damned*. Like Bunuel, Reggio would present works of cinematic art that challenged established filmmaking conventions. At the recent U.S. premiere of his latest film, *Visitors*, presented at the 2013 New Orleans Film Festival, Reggio opened the film with a number of interesting preludes. He warned the audience: do not come to the experience of this film trying to figure out what it means – you will miss the whole thing; do not expect an arresting narrative – if that's what you want, you should leave; do not expect this to fit into traditional narrative/documentary categories – it is neither.

The film, shot in black and white, is composed of only 74 shots – averaging about 70 seconds per shot, which is unheard of for most individuals in the film world (barring other adversarial figures, e.g. Warhol). Many of the shots are slow-motion images of people – all kinds and looks of people – who stare, often unblinking, into the camera surrounded by a neutral "blackground". It begins with this kind of shot, trained on a gorilla, then moves to human images as well as depictions of the abandoned Charity Hospital and Six Flags in and around New

Orleans, bayou areas of Louisiana, and disembodied hands dancing on invisible screens and keyboards.

Reggio says it is not narrative or documentary cinema but in poetic cinema. Speaking to the meaning of the film, whether or not in contained one, he told the audience that rather than a text, that the better way of seeing the work is as a texture. The importance of these guides, rather than aiming to guide each audience member on the same journey, was that art, properly understood, ought to produce different experiences for each individual; this, he claimed, made it art rather than propaganda or advertisement. The nature of the film's content – seeing into the eyes of others intimately, and for long periods of time, also served as a device that rather than specifying a subject from within the film, made each audience member the film's proper subject – what Reggio described as a “reciprocal gaze.”

My discussion of art's adversarial nature was eloquently mirrored by Reggio during my actual experience of the film, as well as in remarks he made before and after the film's presentation. In the process of “reciprocal gaze” the world of the audience became the world of the film, dissolving the conventional barrier separating the In-Here from the Out-There; simultaneously his claim that each audience member was the subject of the film, and that each would have a different experience of it, mirrors my claim that the business of great art is to dissolve the barrier between world (audience experience pre-film) and artworld (the film itself). Of my claim that art, especially great art, is resistant to its institutionality, Reggio's *Visitors*, like my earlier examples, defies established conventions within its medium. To draw out my claims against technocratic institutionality in reference to Reggio specifically, his later commentary described his work as responding to the detached, abstracted nature of so much of human behavior. What he attempted to do was provide an experience for the viewer not only because

experience is always more powerful than abstraction, but because art, especially artistic images, are extra-mental and have a “beyond-cognitive effect” – that the proper question for a viewer is not “(what) does it make me think?” but “does it move me”?

This is, he claims, what art is all about; like religion, it is a spiritual exercise. Speaking directly to both Danto’s views on artworld as theoretical necessity and Dickie’s implicit embodiment of this view in his need to theorize about the total nature of art, Art, claims Reggio – the resulting expression of it, its manifestation – is always bigger than the concept that goes into it. The process of creating artwork is like taking a long journey, and is opposed to abstraction. For Reggio, and presumably for many other artists, works, and the people that are inspired by them, art’s objective fully understood is to ennoble and release what is trying to be born through the work – it is the act of freeing the collective spirit. This freedom is achieved, I would add, by breaking the boundaries that held it in the first place, set by theories, conventions, institutions, and anything else that would seek to constrain that which will always seek its own expression.

To my claim, Dickie would most likely respond that its objections to the institutional account – though I have not really attempted to overthrow it, just to identify how an evaluative account of art could undermine his foundation – addresses the issues I raise, specifically when he claims that while “species” of art in their various media are subject to change and adaptation while the artworld itself remains essentially unaffected by such perturbation. To this, I would say that when multiple works of art, consistently through time and from multiple “subspecies” of art, all converge in their recalcitrance to institutional frameworks, it is incumbent on the theorist and everyone else interested in art to question the usefulness of relegating art to its artworld sphere apart from the rest of reality.



## Conclusion

My attempt here has been to establish that art is best understood when we engage with extraordinary examples, with works that cannot be understood as anything other than art. These works gain status as great works of art by defying the informal institution of the artworld, characterized as the continuation of tradition, established convention, and the rules of the medium, enforced by the upper echelons of the institutional artworld. This analysis serves to undermine Dickie's claim that no matter what other factors we choose to focus on in discussions of art, that art can be understood in the context the institution of the artworld because this analysis satisfies necessary and sufficient conditions for definition. My claim undermines this view by looking for an evaluative framework from the perspective of the institutional theory. While the theory itself has not been undermined – Dickie makes allowances for “exceptions to the rules” in individual mediums, claims that the artworld can be completely represented by an individual acting in multiple institutional roles, that artists need not fear the strictures of formal institutionality – the character of the theory is undermined when we see that works of great art, first seen as “bizarre” or even “not art” by the artworld, often enough become quintessential examples of “works of art.”

One could counter my claim with the claim that I deliberately cite works that support my theory, rather than making a broad examination of artworks generally. To this claim, I can only say that the point of my examination is to resolve the issue that the artworld defined by Dickie is so broad as to include what any person does in the name of art, whether it comes to significance or not; this leaves the issue too broad for a thorough perusal of all art to find how close or far these works would come to supporting my theory. Nor I or anyone else can really comb the world of art in any thorough way; the terrain is as broad and expansive as the creative and

conceptual world. One could also claim that my theory is flawed in that it attempts to evaluate art in a general way, which is taboo for the reason that each person will bring different tastes and experiences to the works of art they experience and will therefore come away with a different scale, valuing some works more highly than others, in a way that does not at all consider whether the works they like the best are institutionally irreverent. To this, I have no counter-claim; I think it is better to make an attempt at my own reasonable evaluative scheme and leave others to theirs, and leave finer points for a well-lubricated debate, because ultimately I agree with Reggio in his belief that each person should come away from the experience of art with a different experience. I suppose to this I could say that, in each individual case, the art they respond to with exuberance and awe is that which challenges their own inner institution – the conventions and established ways of doing that they have in their own minds.

## **Bibliography**

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Roszak, Theodore. The Making of a Counter Culture. Garden City: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1969.

## Illustrations

Plate 1

*High Energy Bar*

Walter De Maria

1972



Plate 2  
Street Art 1  
Banksy  
2013



Plate 3  
Street Art 2  
Banksy  
2013





Plate 4  
Street Art #3  
Banksy  
2013



## Index of Works Referenced

In order of appearance:

*Pirates of the Caribbean: The Curse of the Black Pearl*. Gore Verbinski, 2003. Film.

*Pi*. Darren Aronofsky, 1998. Film.

*Fountain*. Marcel Duchamp, 1917. Sculpture.

*High Energy Bar*. Walter De Maria, 1972. Sculpture.

*South Park*. Trey Parker and Matt Stone, 1997-current. Television series.

*The Book of Mormon*. Trey Parker, Robert Lopez, and Matt Stone, 2011-current. Musical.

*Hamlet*. William Shakespeare. Stage play.

*Salo, or the 120 Days of Sodom*. Pier Paolo Pasolini, 1975. Film.

*Fando y Lis*. Alejandro Jodorowsky, 1968. Film.

*The Young and the Damned*. Luis Bunuel, 1950. Film.

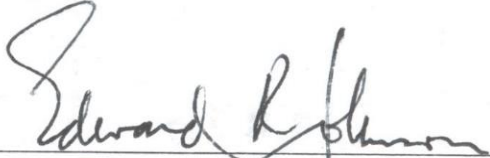
*Visitors*. Godfrey Reggio, 2013. Film.

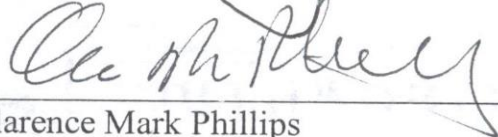


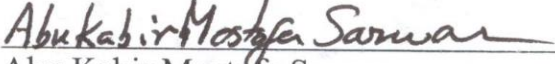
APPROVAL SHEET

This is to certify that Kathryn A. Hanzalik has successfully completed  
her Senior Honors Thesis, entitled:

*Exceptional Art as Institutional Deconstruction*

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Edward R. Johnson Director of Thesis

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Clarence Mark Phillips for the Department

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Abu Kabir Mostofa Sarwar for the University  
Honors Program

December 13, 2013  
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