YNHUI PARK

THE ARTISTIC, THE AESTHETIC AND
THE FUNCTION OF ART

What Is an Artwork Supposed to Be Appreciated For?

Every artwork is simply an object like other objects, but even if it were physically and perceptually indistinguishable from other objects, it would be an object of a peculiar kind. While the value of all other objects is intelligible only instrumentally and thus extrinsically in terms of their specific functions, the significance of an artwork can be explained in terms of its predisposition to be intrinsically enjoyable. Whatever else an artwork may be thought to be, it is an object primarily for appreciation. Paintings, sculptures, songs, plays and poems exist necessarily as objects to be appreciated. As Wollheim points out, part of the meaning of an artwork is it's being "an object for appreciation." We visit museums, go to theaters, and read literature, it is assumed, primarily and ultimately in order to appreciate these works.

It is not clear, however, specifically what we are supposed to appreciate in all artworks, and only in them. This question assumes that all works of art share a common and unique property, or properties, to be appreciated because they are not found in other kinds of objects. This claim would be quickly rejected on the grounds that different people appreciate the same artwork objects differently. Thus, most recently philosophers like Eaton and Davies take as self-evident that what we value and appreciate in an artwork is neither universal nor fixed, but relative and changeable because it is culturally, historically and traditionally determined.

However, if that were true, then the same word "artwork" must in reality mean quite different things to different cultures, in which case even though we might be saying "artwork," we would be in reality talking about quite different things in different cases, and different values according to the different culture, historical period and context. This implies that if we want to discuss "artwork" in a classificatory sense meaningfully, we must find common criteria for the expression, i.e., "artwork" as artwork.

What, then, should we look for when appreciating an artwork? What particular value do we expect from it? A satisfactory philosophical theory

of art must answer these questions. In this paper I want (I) to argue that all the theories of art now available to us fail to answer these questions, (II) to show that the distinction between the concept of what I call “the artistic” and the concept of what I characterize as “the aesthetic” is essential if a better answer is to be found, and finally (III) to propose my own answer.

I. A CRITIQUE OF CLASSICAL THEORIES OF ART

In his recent book, Davies distinguishes between the functionalist and the proceduralist definitions of artwork. The functionalist defines an object or an event as artwork in light of the specific role it plays, whereas the proceduralist defines a thing or an event as artwork if it has undergone a certain procedure deemed necessary to obtain the status of artwork within a particular tradition. According to Davies, there is a sort of dialectical relationship between the two processes. 3

As we all are aware of, one of the most important philosophical debates which has taken place in recent decades, more specifically within the tradition of analytic philosophy, concerns the definition of artwork. Our interest here, however, lies not so much in the definition of artwork itself, as it does in the nature of the values assigned to that class of thing already defined as artwork. In order to pursue our interest here, we must determine the proper function of an artwork, because the value of a given artifact can be made intelligible only to the degree to which its function is fulfilled.

It might be suggested that the search for this function is misguided because an artwork has many functions and different artwork has different functions. Of course, there is some truth in this observation. Nevertheless, it does not address the actual intent of our question. We are not denying that an artwork, just as any artifact, could and in fact does, function in different ways for different purposes. However, to recognize any artifact, say, a bicycle, is to have perceived the unique function particular to that class of object which distinguishes itself from other classes of objects. The reason why an object is called a “book” must be related to its purported proper function, so it is only in light of this function that the value of an artifact within a particular class of objects can be assessed. Since our problem is to know for what we are supposed to appreciate an artwork and thus assess its value, we must know what the function of artwork should be.