

1-2004

Review of “The Art Question”

Steven Ross

The Graduate Center of the City of New York and Hunter College/CUNY

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Recommended Citation

Ross, Steven (2004) "Review of “The Art Question”," *Essays in Philosophy*: Vol. 5: Iss. 1, Article 33.

Essays in Philosophy

A Biannual Journal

Vol. 5 No. 1, January 2004

Book Review

The Art Question, by Nigel Warburton. London: Routledge, 2003; 144 pp.

This is really not a bad little book. Clear, written in very accessible prose, this book is clearly intended to be as something of a companion to a philosophical aesthetics course – and in that respect, let me say unambiguously, it succeeds, especially in so far as that course takes up Bell, Collingwood, and the various problems attending what gets called an Institutional theory of art. The accounts of Collingwood and Bell are quite subtle for so short a book, and are recommended. On the other hand, Warburton’s book, to me, expresses a kind of crises or dead end to one strand of philosophical aesthetics. One feels in the final chapters even Warburton feels the sterility of these by now over familiar, and in my view, no longer very interesting problems.

The book takes up “the art question” – what is it that “defines” a work of art. Well, as all of us know by *now*, any naïve attempt to specify some accomplishment property as giving us necessary and sufficient conditions for art is bound to fail. For any X, (e.g. “expression,” “significant form”) there will be art objects that are not X, and there will be X bearing things that are not art. What to do, what to do? Enter (let us hope briefly) Wittgenstein’s deflationary tonic – the concept of art is stable not in virtue of instantiating some single property but via its presenting a vast family resemblance among its members. Of course, as we *also* know by now, this move, initially so salutary, turns out not to be at all helpful, leaving us unable to say why, once we start, the picking out of “family resemblances” does not extend everywhere, leaving our concept with no border at all. Why not extend the strand of economic value say to include stock certificates, or the strand of size and weight indiscriminately so that we rope in household appliances? This is hardly a promising strategy. But not only is a family resemblance approach to the definition of art philosophically unsatisfactory, recent art history itself would seem to reject it, or pose a challenge to which the family resemblance view cannot possibly be the right reply. After all, one of the great moments of twentieth century art (certainly in any aesthetics course) is the appearance of Duchamp’s *Fountain*, (or any other readymade) which boldly poses the question: why is this thing art, and the counterpart identical twin not? If there is one thing a “family resemblance” view clearly cannot even *begin* to do, one might think, it would be specifying why A is included and A* is not, when A and A* are presentationally identical.

Enter the Institutional Theory, here, largely Dickie; to a much lesser extent (unjustifiably so, in my view), Danto. Dickie’s view of art – X is art only if the artworld pronounces it so – is more or less like Ayer’s view of ethics; one of those views we tend to take more seriously inside the classroom than we would anywhere else, and I fear Warburton spends far too much time on this very thin idea. There are two serious difficulties. There is the rather obvious circularity to Dickie’s central conception: artists are of course members of the artworld, but one is an artist just in case one makes art, and X is art just in

case the artworld says so, and so the original idea of the artworld, intended to do so much explanatory work, now seems hopelessly porous. More important to me is Wollheim's deeper point: any view that allows us to say that an object might be impressive in all sorts of ways (e.g. as a poem, as a landscape) and *still* have it quite "open" whether or not it is art (as the artworld has presumably not yet spoken) cannot be right. And this point about the idea of *accomplishment* raises what is to me the central weakness in Warburton's treatment of the "definitional issue" throughout. He is a bit too taken in by the surface cuteness of Danto's point and fails to see that Danto's argument, which stresses that it is "theory" that enables e.g. a readymade to be art, is actually a subtle, elliptical one. Theory enables a Brillo box, or a urinal, to be "art" because theory, or a particular bit of art history and its accompanying justification stories, is part of the story by which some particular object becomes *interesting*. A certain story, being so, is how it is that this presentationally modest object is in fact the bearer of interesting intentions, features that we in turn, with some help, can now see and experience in the work. Unless a certain kind of *engagement* was forthcoming, unless certain sorts of "regard" were possible, the claim that X bears art status will of course always remain truly mysterious, which is to say, it remains mysterious what we are *saying* (or adding) when we say this status is so. It is a puzzling and frustrating fact that philosophers in aesthetics often balk at taking up the most central feature of our relation to art – that an object offers, or purports to offer, a certain sort of *involvement*. Of course this engagement story has a history, shades into the sorts of involvements other things offer, is not by any means uniform, and is often controversial. So what? Failure to take it up, to include it in a book of this kind, has two rather predictable outcomes: first, we inevitably have far too much of Dickie, and second, it seems *natural* that no progress is made in our philosophical account of art. I want to suggest that this obsession with definition, like Platonism everywhere in value, is in the end something of a strategic mistake. And it is an interesting fact that only in philosophical aesthetics does this question have the currency it appears to have here. Are moral philosophers concerned with "defining" morality? Or political philosophers with "defining" the just state? I do not think so. Instead, what we have is a certain ease with soft borders (does anyone worry about specifying hard lines between e.g. morality and law, or morality and etiquette, and talk about how only a good "definition" might lead us out of this morass? I think not), and interesting issues with respect to central cases are taken up. So it should be here. For example, there are certain accomplishments that are distinctive to art, and to our involvement with art – consider the nature of expression in music, or the representation of psychological states over time in fiction, and consider also how hard it is to give a satisfactory account of these things. There are certain phenomena of general philosophical interest, such as the relation between intention and its object, or the relation between reasons and generalizations, that have particularly interesting contours in art and art criticism. But the well worn concern with "defining" art, and the accompanying excessive attention to readymades and Brillo boxes ("gosh, this makes it *hard!*") I think by now should be recognized as a somewhat tedious dead end. To the extent that this stuff *is* interesting, Danto has explained why. Period. Philosophers would be well advised, I think, to turn their attention, as they have elsewhere in value theory, to other more central concerns, which is to say, concerns that would intelligibly arise *however* any "definitional" matter were settled. And so: Warburton's book provides the reader with a good account of Bell, Collingwood, and, it must be said, Dickie. But, as it is all too faithful to a self-limiting project, it fails to develop our sense of art, or our philosophical reflections on art, to any great degree.

Steven Ross

The Graduate Center of the City of New York and Hunter College/CUNY
