

**Theses of the university doctoral dissertation (PhD)**

# **The Institutional Theory of Art**

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## I. Introduction

One passage from Kafka's *The Castle*<sup>1</sup> made a particular impact on me. In the scene Olga reveals her brother's, Barnabas's particular attraction towards Klamm, and depict the mystic atmosphere which surrounded Klamm. We are a witness of Olga's and Klamm's dialogue, hearing Olga's voice: "... we do sometimes talk about Klamm. I have never seen Klamm myself, you know, Frieda doesn't much like me, and would never have given me a glimpse of him, but of course it's well known in the village what he looks like, a few people have seen him, everyone has heard of him, and it seems as if a picture of Klamm has been built up out of rumours and certain ulterior motives which distort that picture, yet in outline it is probably correct. But only in outline. Otherwise it is apt to change, perhaps not even so apt to change as Klamm's real appearance. It's said that he looks different when he comes into the village and when he leaves it, different before and after he has drunk a beer, different awake and asleep, different on his own and in conversation, and it is quite understandable, with all this, that he looks almost entirely different up in the castle. Even within the village, quite wide differences are reported: differences of size, bearing, figure, of his beard, it's only when the accounts come to his clothes that luckily they tally; he always wears the same thing, a black coat with long tails. Of course all these differences aren't the result of some magic trick, but they are easy to understand, arising from the mood of the moment, the degree of excitement, the countless nuances of hope or despair felt by those who are privileged to see Klamm, and then again, in general they catch only a brief glimpse of him."<sup>2</sup> It is supposed that Barnabas went into Klamm's service: "'Barnabas knows the stories of Klamm's appearance,' Olga went on, 'and he has collected and compared many of them, perhaps too many, he himself once even saw Klamm through a carriage window, or thought he saw him, so he was well enough prepared to know who he was, and yet—how would you explain this?—when he went into an office in the castle, and one official among several was pointed out to him, and he was told that was Klamm, he didn't recognize him, and for a long time afterwards he couldn't get used to the idea that the official had been Klamm."<sup>3</sup> But Barnabas' worry is not over yet, as he is not sure whether he has really met the real Klamm.

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<sup>1</sup> Franz Kafka, *The Castle* (Oxford World Classics), Transl. Anthea Bell (Oxford University Press 2009.)

<sup>2</sup> p. 156.

<sup>3</sup> p. 157.

Klamm appeared to me as *the analogy of the definition of art*. In paying close attention to the passage cited above, it can be noticed that amongst the features that were attributed to Klamm by the villagers, only the feature of having a *long sleeved, double-breasted coat* remained constant. It is surprising that various measures of height and body structure were attributed to Klamm. Is it possible, by using our common sense, that somebody changes his height, one day being tall, the other short, then tall again on the third day. By seeing a short man on the first day, then a tall on the second, and the only similar feature between the two is both having long sleeved, double-breasted coat, would not be surprised by hearing that someone's saying that both are one and the same man? It seems that the officer pointed at Klamm saying: There you are, he is Klamm!; *but are we confined to believe his claim?* Is Barnabas' anxiety completely without grounds as to the question of whether he has really met Klamm? What guarantee can be given for the claim that the officer said the truth, as Klamm's supposed appearance does not fit his previously made opinion.

We have to put the essential question: *Is there such a person as Klamm?* All the people are talking about him, many people have already seen him, and some pointed at him. Are we confined to believe them if our intuition is against this view? Klamm's identity rests on an *accidental feature*, all of his *essential features* – such as his height – are constantly changing which is against our common sense. I think it is not completely without grounds to ask whether there is the person called Klamm? This is, however, a high-risk question as his being is grounded in *consensus*. *Essence is being hidden by appearance, if there is such an essence.*

I think that the enterprise of defining art is oscillating between the two horns of the dilemma discussed by the passage. Some say that the art cannot be, or should not be defined, other say just as firmly the opposite, art can be and must be defined. The tradition of the philosophy of art supply us with many examples for the success or failure of this enterprise (whether it count as success or failure depends on the perspective from which these 'findings' are interpreted). Instead of making general remarks we are going to examine particular texts. In this work our aim is not to formulate more significant results than the material under examination can supply.

Some definitions are valid only for a limited time and slowly making their ways into forgetting which does not mean at all that at a later time they cannot be the centre of the attention again. Here I would like to forego a possible objection, this work is not trying to formulate a definition. This is not about it. I am concerned with a particularly interesting situation which is similar to that of Ingarden: "It is a very interesting fact that we are

concerned with literary works every day, we are reading them, hold by them, we like them or not, appraise and discuss them, making various judgments, writing articles on them, dealing with their histories, they are like an atmosphere in which we live; so it seems as if we are completely familiar with them. If one, however, puts the question what the work of art is, we are confined to admit with a kind of surprise that we are not able to give a satisfactory answer to the question.”<sup>4</sup> I am, however, not concerned with the presuppositions of literature but of a more general term, the phenomena of art.

There can be many motivations for defining art. Avant-garde and later art movements obviously presented many *anomalies*. Let me mention only a few: Yves Klein presented an empty space in Galerie Iris Clert of Paris, Armand Fernandez alias Arman filled up a gallery with two vans of rubbish, Goldsworthy, Andre and Guber presented snow balls, bricks and doughnuts as statues, Gilbert and George presented themselves as “living statues” and Chris Burden shoots in his arm during a performance act. *The art of the twentieth century inevitably puts the question of the essence of art, the nature of art*. It is not the case *the nature of art* became the object of examination during this period only. This claim would be unhistorical. However, art’s ever changing character seems to be a characteristic feature of this period. Thus one essential feature of understanding the art of the twentieth century should be the examination of the nature of art. According to the reading of Noël Carroll the history of analytic philosophy of art constantly gives theoretical explanations for the deeds of modern art by which new works can be identified as artworks. *Clive Bell* was the defender of neoimpressionism, *Robert Collingwood* was that of Joyce, Stein and Eliot, *Suzanne K. Langer* was that of modern dance, *George Dickie* was that of Dadaist artworks and *Arthur Danto* was that of those artworks which are indiscernible from the everyday real objects. Questioning the truth of the idealist theory (eg. Croce) was intensified by the art practice itself. *The question of the nature of art can be stemmed from the art practice, some art movements put – e.g. concept art – the question, but also from the theoretical demand of the recipient who examines the nature of art from a theoretical point of view*.

The literature of the philosophy of art left various definitions and this tradition is still being created by contemporary theories. *In viewing this proliferation one can put the question whether the various definitions can supply us with a point of view from which the various definitions can have any coherence?*

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<sup>4</sup> Roman Ingarden, *The Literary Work of Art* (Northwestern University Press 1974) (The cited passage is my own translation from my Theses written in Hungarian.)

If the examination concerning the essence of art will result in a negative answer then this result does not necessarily involve the consequence of rendering all of our definitions useless. Many theorists – e.g. Morris Weitz, Arnold Isenberg – call our attention to the fact that a definition also demonstrates the perspective the recipient has. We can put ourselves into a certain perspective by which our understanding of the artwork in question can be more fruitful. For example, Bell's and Fry's formalist theory is conditioning us, so to speak, to put emphasis on the formal components of the neoimpressionist artworks.

*One aim of this present work is to contribute to make more accessible the Anglo-Saxon tradition of the philosophy of art.* With respect to George Dickie, for example, much information which are accessible in Hungarian cannot be said to be adequate. In his *Pragmatic Aesthetics* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 2000) Richard Shusterman takes George Dickie's earlier theory to be the main thesis of the institutional art. However, many theses were corrected in Dickie's *The Art Circle* which was published in 1984. For *The Theory of Art* was published three years after Danto's book, Danto's *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* also cannot be regarded as an adequate source for Dickie's theory.

It is a commonplace that depicting the context of a given theory contributes to the broader understanding of the given theory. Context can be interpreted as a question to which a theory was formulated as an answer. To understand the answer it is necessary to be familiar with the question itself. I had this in mind in making the chapter on antiessentialism. *At the same time I tried not only to reproduce an already told story but also to integrate the point of view of a philosophical tradition which is not concerned only with the aesthetic tradition but goes beyond it, so the aesthetic tradition can be examined from a different perspective of philosophy.* Not all of the potentials hidden in Morris Weitz's *The Opening Mind* have been realized so far. Weitz mentions all of those who made his path toward the birth of '*The Role of Theory in Aesthetics*'. I am going to introduce the views of these thinkers in order to gain insight into the literature of conceptualism and to get more means to make the interpretation of the examined aesthetic tradition more effective.

The chapter on essentialism is followed by the chapter on George Dickie's institutional theory. As to my knowledge, the secondary literature on the institutional theory has not been as detailed so far as my chapter on this issue. The number of those publications which misunderstood George Dickie's earlier or later point of view is surprisingly huge. In some cases the lack of carefulness concerning the primary texts is evident. It is often the case that one claim is taken out of the context of which it is an integrated part with which the claim is open to nearly any interpretation. The meaning of a constituent of a rather closed structure

is determined by the position the constituent itself has in the structure. Partly these misunderstandings led me to give a more adequate and more detailed account of the earlier and the later institutional theory of Dickie. As to the structure for the introduction of the theory I have chosen the structuring elements of the primary text. However, as the reconstruction of the structural intention of the text itself could be done only by repeating the complete text exactly as it is, the structure of this chapter was also determined by the secondary literature on the issue. This secondary literature puts special emphasis on some parts of the theory.

The chapter on the institutional theory is followed by a detailed examination of the secondary literature. This is the most essential part of this work. Of course, leaving out some works was necessary. I was not concerned with those works which were concerned with the earlier version of the theory. Exceptions were those the opinions of which became also relevant with regard to the later version of the theory (e.g. the condition of artifactuality), or if I had for some other reason for doing so.

*In spite of the fact that Dickie himself regards The Art Circle the later version of the institutional theory, Dickie has been published many articles since then (e.g. 'Defining art: intension and extension'). These articles can also be seen as interpretive means to The Art Circle but it is also true that some passages only increase the blurriness of the theory. Hopefully I can demonstrate all of these in this present work.*

## II. Methods

*As to introducing the text the research method is the close reading. In the present case it means to remain as close to the meaning of the text as possible. This is not identical with the process of reconstruction; the aim is not to reconstruct the meaning of the text. Reconstructing the meaning of the text could be achieved only by repeating the text itself. Our introduction is rather a selection. To be more precise, it is a selection done from the perspective of the interpreter.<sup>5</sup> The concepts which form the essential part of the process of interpretation – essence, meaning, artifactuality, differentia specifica, institution, status,*

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<sup>5</sup> “Thus we are certainly interested in the subject matter, but it acquires its life only from the light in which it is presented to us. We accept the fact that the subject presents different aspects of itself at different times or from different standpoints. We accept the fact that these aspects do not simply cancel one another out as research proceeds, but are like mutually exclusive conditions that exist by themselves and combine only in us. Our historical consciousness is always filled with a variety of voices in which the echo of the past is heard.” - Hans-Georg Gadamer, Truth and Method (Continuum International Publishing Group Ltd.; New Ed edition 2004) p. 285.

evaluation, aesthetic object, necessary and sufficient conditions) are partly taken from the secondary literature which is concerned with different aspects of the institutional theory – e.g. Arthur Danto, Richard Shusterman), and partly from the structural elements of the text itself – e.g. chapter titles, concepts in chapter titles, most often used terms, the strongest elements of the text. For this reason, the meaning is the meaning of text resulted from the dialogue between the interpreter and the text. For the sake of conceptual clarity this grammatical formulation can be said to be the meaning of the author. It must be emphasized, however, that this meaning is not necessary identical with the view of the material author.

The meaning unfolded from the text does not necessarily reveal a coherent meaning. Close reading is used with an ontological premise according to which the meaning unfolded from the text can result in spreading the meaning more or less. In this dissertation I tried to demonstrate those passages which can not be reconciled with other passages. For this reason, these inconsistencies are against the author's - as the narrator's - explicit view of consistency.

Those terms of the earlier and the later versions of the institutional theory which are examined by the primary literature in a sufficient degree – necessary and sufficient conditions, essence, artifactuality, institution, tradition etc. - are intersections moving beyond the text toward external perspectives of examination. These external examinations must be done in order to determine in a more precise way the most essential terms. In doing so, the semantic inconsistency can also be reduced. One aim of the dissertation is to depict some of these perspectives without claiming that an exhaustive enumeration of the perspectives has been done.

At this point we can turn to the method applied *during the critical examination* of the work. The close reading made the empirical material for a *hermeneutical investigation* which tried to demonstrate the premises of the conceptual framework. In this sense, this investigation is a movement in two directions – being faithful to the meaning of the Greek term *hermeneuein* - , toward outside and inside. It is a movement toward outside as the Spirit is trying to determine the inner meaning of the text (expression) but also a movement toward inside as far as the spirit is trying to demonstrate the implicit premises of the text (interpretation). What is at stake is to make the text meaningful, to make it intelligible. As to the first chapter (Expansion of the Antiessentialist Point of View) the question is demonstrated to which the institutional theory can be seen as an answer. I tried to demonstrate the institutional theory in the dynamics of questioning-answering highlighting those points of connection where the institutional theory can be seen as a faithful follower of the tradition, as

well as those points where the institutional theory offered new answers to the traditional questions of the philosophy of art. Texts of George Dickie are having a conversation with those texts, written in the fifties, sixties and the seventies, which were concerned with ontological questions of art – e.g. Jerome Stolnitz, Eliseo Vivas, Monroe C. Beardsley, Morris Weitz – as well as with questions of the earlier tradition of the philosophy of art – such as Plato, Hutcheson, Burke, Hume, Kant, Edward Bullough.

### III. Results

The first part of the dissertation (Expansion of the Antiessentialist Point of View) tried to describe the context for understanding George Dickie's theory, as a prerequisite for understanding, in which the question of defining art, whether it can be defined at all, appeared as a crucial question. Introducing the reader to the theories of Charles Leslie Stevenson, Friedrich Waismann, Karl Popper and Ludwig Wittgenstein I tried to highlight the fact that the language and the questions of an ontological investigation fits neatly in a more broad linguistic investigation. The question of meaning, definability, conceptualism and use of language all revolve around the essential aspects of grammar. Such authors as Morris Weitz (1.2.3.) or Maurice Mandelbaum (2.1.3.) are moving, in a perceptible way, within this framework while developing their claims.

The fact that George Dickie begins developing the early version of the institutional theory in party opposing Morris Weitz and using Maurice Mandelbaum's insights demonstrates well that *Dickie is connected in an organic way to the analytical tradition of the philosophy of language*. Presenting the early version of the institutional theory I tried to justify this connection but also *tried to demonstrate those points, those elements of the early theory which meant an original contribution to the Anglo-Saxon ontology of art*. This has been achieved by the rehabilitation of the essence of art – and essence in general – (2.2.1.1.), by introducing the institutional character, placing the main emphasis on it (2.2.1.6.), by eliminating the subjective factors in the process of evaluation (or, it is more precise to say, by making an effort to make them eliminated) (2.2.1.8.) and by interpreting art as a status (2.2.1.7.) I found necessary to introduce the earlier version of the institutional theory in detail because, I think, many readings give only a broad and sometimes inadequate description of the early theory.



The description of the earlier version of the institutional theory is followed by a more specific description of the later theory. In light of the more significant contemporary criticisms (e.g. the philosophical critics on the general question of definability, Richard Shusterman's pragmatist critics) I agree with these critics. *As to the later theory the conceptual applicability of the necessary and sufficient conditions in the field of art seems to be a weak element in the institutional theory.* It has already been showed that those necessary and sufficient conditions which were elaborated by Dickie must be limited to only to a small fragment of the twentieth century art. *In the chapter which discusses the definition (3.1.) I tried to show that in discussing the praxis of art it is an essentially wrong strategy to approach the question with the necessary and sufficient conditions.*

The other weak point of the theory is, I think, is the arbitrary interpretation of artifactuality. I try to show that such an arbitrary interpretation cannot be hold without serious consequences. As far as I see *Dickie's opposition to the historicity of art compelled him to make a rigid picture of the praxis of art in his institutional theory, with which his theory is rightly have been placed within the extension of the "wrapper" definitions described by Shusterman.* The historicity of art has been discussed many times during the 70s and the 80s along the lines of the opposition pair of extension and intension taken the philosophy language (3.2.1.1.-3.2.1.4.). Dickie was familiar with this tradition, his latest works testify it. However, whether this conceptual framework is an adequate way for dealing with issues of the ontology is art is beyond the scope of my dissertation.

## IV: Publications and Papers on Conferences

### **Publications:**

**(8) George Dickie 'The Institutional Theory of Art'** (translation, Kellék 2010, accepted)

**(7) The Institutional Theory of Art** (Kellék 2010, accepted)

**(6) Morris Weitz 'The Role of Theory in Aesthetics'** (translation, Kellék 2010, accepted)

**(5) Indefinable Art** (Kellék 2010/1. accepted)

**(4) The Expansion of Antiessentialism** (In Huszonöt Fennsík - A művészetektől a tudományokig, Ed. Bujalos István, Valastyán Tamás, Debreceni University Press, 2011, pp. 31-49., accepted)

**(3) Aspects of Power of the Art World** (Nagyerdei Almanach 2010/1. pp. 1-6.)

**(2) The Kripke-Putnam View of Art** (ELPIS 2010/1. pp. 5-24.)

**(1) George Dickie 'Defining Art'** (translation, Szkhonion 2007/2. pp. 40-47.)

All publications were published in Hungarian.

**Papers on Conferences:**

**(11) Richard Shuterman's Concept of Historicity**

Conference: Aesthetic and Historicity

Date: 26/11/2010

Location: Hungary, DAB, Debrecen

**(10) Bioethics – Theory and Practice**

Conference: Perspectives of Applied Ethics

Date: 23/11/2010

Location: Hungary, DAB, Debrecen

**(9) Aspects of Power in the Art Word**

Conference: Politics of art, art of politics

Date: 26/06/2009

Location: Hungary, Department of Philosophy, University of Debrecen, Debrecen

### **(8) The School of the Art World**

Conference: Civil Competencies

Date: 25/05/2007

Location: Hungary, Department of Philosophy, University of Debrecen, Debrecen

### **(7) Dialogue or Monologue – Artworks from a Hermeneutical Point of View**

Conference: Conference of István Hatvani College

Date: 24-25/04/20003

Location: Hungary, University of Debrecen, Debrecen

### **(6) Understanding Artworks**

Conference: VIII. István Hatvani Conference

Date: 11/05/2002

Location: Hungary, University of Debrecen, Debrecen

### **(5) Linguistic Experience of Artworks in the Early Roman Period**

Conference: III. Széchenyi Conference

Date: 25/04/2002

Location: Hungary, University of István Széchenyi, Győr

### **(4) View of Artworks of Later Pliny**

Conference: II. Kerényi Conference

Date: 12-14/04/2002

Location: Hungary, Pécs

### **(3) Narrative Models in the Roman Art**

Conference: VII: Bolyai Conference

Date: 2/03/2002

Location: Hungary, Bolyai Special College, Budapest

### **(2) The Role of Reception in Vitruvius' *De Architectura***

Conference: IV. Hatvani István Conference

Date: 1-2/12/2001

Location: Hungary, University of Debrecen, Debrecen

### **(1) Aesthetic Concepts of the Greek Church Fathers**

Conference: I. Hatvani István College

Date: 16/02/2001

Location: Hungary, University of Debrecen, Debrecen