

# *The Artful Species* (2013) by Stephen Davies: An Answer to Scepticism?

**Elizabeth Burns Coleman**

It seems fair to say that there is a widespread belief that the academic accounts of art and aesthetics of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were fundamentally flawed. Yet there is a more pervasive belief that the theories were not only flawed, but that objects of fine art have no universal or objective value. Let us call this art scepticism. Like religious scepticism, art scepticism expresses doubt about the ‘established facts’ that aesthetic appreciation is some kind of special experience, that it is universal, or that fine art was ‘expressive of humanity’. This doubt appears to have risen at the same time as institutional theories of art have risen to dominance in the social sciences.

Institutional theories of the arts were developed first in the 1960s by philosophers Arthur Danto, in relation to the interpretation of art against the context of art history and theory within an artworld,<sup>1</sup> and George Dickie, in relation to the process by which art works are created.<sup>2</sup> The institutional theory of art holds that art is produced within an institution or practice. Dickie’s problem, the significant problem of philosophy of art at the time, was to attempt to define art. He proposed the institutional theory partly in response to the problems faced by definitions concerning the essence of art. He considered that a major problem for art’s definition was an assumption about its aesthetic value. To call something a work of art suggests it is worthy of contemplation. Dickie argued that, if one thinks that the classification of art is evaluative, and that all works of art are worthy of contemplation, then this suggests that all works of art must be at the higher end of the scale.<sup>3</sup> It suggests that being aesthetically good is a necessary condition for being art. For instance, R. G. Collingwood suggested

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<sup>1</sup> Arthur Danto, ‘The Artworld’, *The Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 61, no. 19 (October, 1964): 571-584.

<sup>2</sup> George Dickie, ‘Defining Art’, *American Philosophical Quarterly*, vol. 6, no. 3 (1969), pp. 253-256; *Art and the Aesthetic: An Institutional Analysis* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1974).

<sup>3</sup> George Dickie, *Art and Value* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), pp. 94-95.

## *The Artful Species: An Answer to Scepticism?*

“bad art” was not art, but the result of someone trying to make art but failing.<sup>4</sup> The institutional theory was offered as a descriptive theory, and so allowed art to be identified independently of whether it was considered good.

Dickie’s development of the concept of an artworld was developed further by sociologists such as Howard S. Becker,<sup>5</sup> who discussed the nature of art as an “institution.” Becker developed Dickie’s model of art into a system of producers, distributors, markets and critics, who cooperatively work together to create art and to establish its value. At the time, institutional theories appeared as a breath of fresh air, offering a new area of programmatic study. Reviewing Becker’s work, Michael Kimmel rejoiced:

Since the Renaissance, art has been understood as a work of exceptional beauty, produced by an exceptionally gifted individual. We know artists by their genius, art by its timeless beauty. Academic art history abounds with effusive prose heralding the work of genius...This view of art is itself an ideology, a social construct, as much a product of its time as the work it describes. And, like other ideologies which as timeless truths, it leads to mystification of the work... So much for genius and beauty.<sup>6</sup>

Aesthetic appreciation is, on this view, clearly subjective, or at best, culturally relative. However, the real crisis perhaps began when Pierre Bourdieu published *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (1984), in which aesthetic appreciation and fine art were identified with the cultural capital of a social class.<sup>7</sup> After all, if artistic and aesthetic value is identical with the ways in which an institutional artworld, or a specific social class, values art, there is little reason for anyone who is not a member of that artworld or that class to agree upon this value. The artworld itself began to be considered as a kind of religion of aesthetics. Bourdieu elsewhere argued that aesthetic appreciation, the disinterested contemplative attitude of the art lover, is a product of history, because the process of aesthetic appreciation is inseparable from the historical appearance of producers of art motivated by artistic intention, and is also

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<sup>4</sup> R. G. Collingwood, *The Principles of Art* (London: Oxford University Press, 1958), pp. 280-281.

<sup>5</sup> Howard Becker, *Art Worlds* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982).

<sup>6</sup> Michael Kimmel, ‘Book Review: *Art Worlds*’ *American Journal of Sociology*, vol. 89, no. 3 (1983), p. 733.

<sup>7</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (Cambridge: Routledge, 1984).

inseparable from the production of fine art as autonomous and as having ends and standards that are found or created by the artist.<sup>8</sup>

Within anthropology, debate raged between those who thought that all people had aesthetic experience and that all cultures had some kind of art, and those who argued that art, and aesthetic appreciation, were culturally specific. Alfred Gell argues that the arts institution is simply a secular religion, writing,

I would suggest that the study of aesthetics is to the domain of art as the study of theology is to the domain of religion...Insofar as modern souls possess a religion, that religion is the religion of art, the religion whose shrine consists of theatres, libraries, and art galleries, and whose priests and bishops are painters and poets, whose theologians are critics, and whose dogma is the dogma of universal aestheticism.<sup>9</sup>

For Gell, aesthetic appreciation could not be studied without participating in this religion. Rather, the anthropologist must adopt a “methodological philistinism,” an indifference to the aesthetic value of art.<sup>10</sup> Similarly, Joanna Overing argued that the fact that the category of ‘aesthetics’ was created by the German philosopher Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten in 1735 shows that its meaning is intrinsically historical and that aesthetic experience is not universal.<sup>11</sup> She has suggested that the art institution or artworld is a kind of cult of the art object, an object which is sacralised and set apart from everyday objects, and she states that, within this cult, artefacts in everyday life could not be beautiful: “it was only when an object had no use that it could be beautiful, only when created for the contemplation of beauty alone that it could thereby become art.”<sup>12</sup>

During the 1990s, Stephen Davies produced his seminal text *Definitions of Art*, in which he clarified the distinction between functionalist and proceduralist (including institutional) accounts of art and carefully weighed the relative strengths of the theories.<sup>13</sup> While proceduralist accounts of art have significant explanatory power in relation to how objects created by the avant garde, such as Duchamp’s *Fountain* (1917), become accepted as art, functionalist accounts of art are better equipped to explain the value of art, based

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<sup>8</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, ‘The Historical Genesis of a Pure Aesthetic’, *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, vol. 46 (1987), pp. 201-210.

<sup>9</sup> Alfred Gell, ‘The Technology of Enchantment and the Enchantment of Technology’, in *Anthropology, Art, and Aesthetics*, ed. Jeremy Coote and Anthony Shelton (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), pp. 41-2.

<sup>10</sup> Gell, ‘The Technology of Enchantment’, p. 42.

<sup>11</sup> A.G. Baumgarten, *Reflections on Poetry* (1735).

<sup>12</sup> Johanna Overing, ‘Aesthetics is a Cross-cultural Category: Against the Motion’ in *Key Debates in Anthropology*, ed. Timothy Ingold, (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 264.

<sup>13</sup> Stephen Davies, *Definitions of Art* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991).

on the distinctive aesthetic experience works of art afford the viewer. At that time, Davies was inclined to prefer proceduralist accounts of art while rejecting the institutionalist account described by Dickie. However, at the end of the decade, Davies began to address non-Western arts in greater detail, exploring the relationship between non-Western art and art's definition<sup>14</sup> and producing an edited collection, *Art and Essence* in which he hypothesised that art should be considered a natural category rather than one purely dependent on arbitrary human conventions based on their apparent universality:

If we were to seek a source for the claimed universality, it would likely lie in our common biology and shared evolutionary circumstances. The suggestion need not be that arts promotes individual or species survival directly or mechanically. It would be sufficient to show that the pleasure we get from making and consuming art derives from, but without being the target of, biological dispositions and cognitive structures that were generated for other evolutionary payoffs they deliver.<sup>15</sup>

If *Art and Essence* represented a turning point for Davies's ideas, *The Artful Species* explores the universality of art, bringing together a vast array of evidence from archaeology, evolutionary biology and psychology, and anthropology, as well as theoretical interpretations of the arts collectively, and in relation to the specific arts of music and literature (the individual arts he has written on most extensively). What is particularly impressive about *The Artful Species* is the breadth of reading and sources that Davies brings together in a remarkable act of scholarship. These sources are not merely mentioned, but analysed in terms of whether they claim aesthetics, or an art form, are connected to evolution, and if so, how. The connection, he argues, can occur in three possible ways: as an adaptation, as a spandrel, or as a technology. If arts are an adaptation, they serve the purpose of making individuals or groups more fit for survival, although arts also could be a by-product of other evolutionary adaptations. If arts are a spandrel, then they would once have served an evolutionary purpose, but do so no longer. If they are a technology, then they are unconnected with human biology, and hence with evolution, though some technologies, such as fire, have significant cultural evolutionary significance. The result of this discussion is a complex book that carefully sifts through these various possibilities.

It is easy to imagine many anthropologists and archaeologists experiencing a feeling of horror towards a re-emergence of any theory connecting art and evolution. In the nineteenth century, it was common for fine

<sup>14</sup> Stephen Davies, 'Non-Western Art and Art's Definition', in *Theories of Art Today*, ed. Noel Carroll (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2000).

<sup>15</sup> Stephen Davies and Ananta Ch. Sukla (eds), *Art and Essence: Studies in Art, Culture and Communities* (London: Praeger, 2003), p. 6.

art to be used as an identifier for the evolutionary superiority of Europeans over other races. However, they should fear not. Peculiarly, the evolutionary theories that appeared to be so frequently adopted in anthropology and archaeology in the nineteenth century must have considered fine art to be a technology rather than an evolutionary adaptation if they were to imply any kind of superiority. But if art is a technology then it cannot be used as a reason for thinking some races or ethnicities are ‘more evolved’ than others. On the other hand, if art is a spandrel, that is, something that once served a purpose of adaptation while no longer doing so, so long as a culture may have a complex art form or institution, we have no reason for thinking that that institution implies superiority or has any intrinsic value. If art is an adaptation, then it must serve some purpose. Still, it is unlikely that there is a single purpose for all arts. Rather, it seems that individual arts might serve different purposes that are connected to human survival. Davies’s interest is in whether it is possible to connect art with evolution as an adaptation based in human biology: if it is, then it must be a universal feature.

The first step for Davies, then, is to argue that art and aesthetics are universal. The second step is to consider how they are considered to be connected with human evolution. Davies concludes that art behaviours are rooted in human biology, but draws no firm conclusion about whether they are adaptations or the by-products of non-art adaptations such as curiosity and intelligence. Either position would connect art with evolution. Davies thinks that art behaviours are universal in the sense that most people are creators or performers at some modest level, and have detailed knowledge and appreciation of a subset of some of the culture’s genres. Moreover, there is no historically recorded culture that does not include practices we acknowledge as artistic, even if those practices are not differentiated from practical concerns. Further, even when art behaviour is carried out for practical concerns and functions, this does not rule out appreciation of how aesthetic and artistic properties contribute to that function. Art behaviours are intrinsically rewarding, and frequently self-motivating, even when the behaviours have a practical function or purpose.

If Davies were to respond to Gell’s or Overing’s comments, it would presumably be something like the response he provides to Larry Shiner’s account of the institutional theory of art.<sup>16</sup> Shiner argues that our concept of art is a product of the eighteenth century and a series of historical changes such as the development of the classification of art, and the rise of a distinction between art and craft, artisan and artist. In addition, many of the institutions of the arts, such as concert halls and museums, were created in this period. However, Davies points out that it is difficult to consider Greek tragedies or the works of

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<sup>16</sup> Larry Shiner, *The Invention of Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).

Renaissance painters or the plays of Shakespeare as something other than art. Similarly, he points out that even while philosophers such as Aristotle and Plato thought of arts simply within the category of the humanly created, they also recognised the existence of a cluster of arts. So, while conceding to Shiner that the economic conditions of the eighteenth century and the rise of the middle class provided the foundations for institutions of art in which art was appreciated for its own sake, Davies denies that this amounts to a new concept of art. While there was more focus on art appreciation, functional works of art and artworks serving religious purposes continued to be produced. Rather than ‘art for art’s sake’ serving as a necessary criterion for art, or as defining feature of it, Davies sees appreciation as a *new* purpose or function to which art was put. Moreover, even if the forms now called art, including dance, poetry, music, sculpture and the like, play ritual or religious roles in many societies, this is not a sufficient reason not to consider them art.

Aesthetic features, such as colour, tone or pattern may serve functional purposes. Davies would not argue against Gell and other anthropologists who focus on aspects of power or magical efficacy associated with aesthetic affects. His point is that these effects are identifiable, and may be appreciated by the observer in relation to that function. For instance, if body painting or dress is undertaken to make the wearer more beautiful or awesome, then that use is aesthetic, though it does not follow that the purpose of the form must be aesthetic. The central feature of aesthetic experience is awareness of beauty or awesomeness. However, he argues against intellectual accounts of aesthetic response, such as Kant’s, which would deny responses to the specific colour of the sky, or a baby’s smile, as aesthetic. His approach is to stretch the concept of aesthetic response beyond the appreciation of formal properties. Still, he is equally concerned to give a sufficiently robust account of aesthetic experience that saves it from triviality, such as the accounts of evolutionary biologists and psychologists who identify aesthetic responses with accounts of pleasure, or equate aesthetic evaluation with sexual attraction. On this account, even shrimps share aesthetic experiences in the selection of a mate. Not all pleasure, he points out, need involve aesthetic interests or concerns. Eating when starving may involve pleasure, but is not aesthetic. Lustful desire and sex may involve pleasure, again without a sense of the aesthetic. While he acknowledges the elaborate courtship displays of animals and birds as involving aesthetic properties, he suggests that the responses to such behaviour are not aesthetic, but a biological precursor to human aesthetic experience. Davies suggests that this proto-appreciation is distinct from the appreciation of art in that it is more primitive and instinctual than other forms of appreciation. Aesthetic experience may be characterised as like emotion in that it is an attention-focussed, value-

charged response to beauty or awe. Such aesthetic emotions do not result only from purposeless contemplation, and they may guide how we navigate and engage in the world, without being purely instinctual responses to it.

This raises the question of how Davies defines art, as well as the idea of an “art behaviour” (p. 184). Davies rejects the idea of considering art as the sum of all art forms. The song ‘Happy Birthday’ and the tune for his local pizza parlour are both music, but he is reluctant to call such behaviours art. He is also concerned about classifying his last waltz, mnemonic rhymes and games of charades as art. These, however, are definitely arts behaviours and, he thinks, evidence for art’s universality. Nor does he adopt a ‘cluster concept’ on the basis that it generally produces an ethnocentric account of arts behaviours and Western arts, for instance by emphasising originality, self-expression and distinctiveness from the everyday, while bypassing tradition and accessibility. Moreover, he argues, cluster concepts cannot help us identify new objects as art, as they do not explain which combination of characteristics are sufficient for something to be art. Many scientists account of art, however, which focus on function, he thinks are too inclusive, for instance by allowing doodling or clumsy graffiti tags to be art. Such accounts, he thinks, make it trivially true that all cultures have arts. Accordingly he attempts to give an account of art that is broader than the features generally set out in cluster concepts, but one that also excludes certain behaviours which, even if the kinds of behaviour that might be associated with an art, do not make the claim that all cultures have arts trivially true. He settles on a multi-stranded account:

something is art (a) if it falls under an established category of art within an established art tradition or (b) if it is intended by its maker/presenter to be art and its maker/presenter does what is necessary and appropriate to realising that intention, or (c) if it shows excellence of skill and achievement in realising significant aesthetic or artistic goals (pp. 28-29).

This is not intended as a definition so much as a means of identifying the behaviours to be included as evidence. His account seems to satisfy both procedural and functional accounts of art, while also allowing for non-Western cultures without a concept of art to create it. This conceptual point is important, as one strategy of anthropologists has been to argue that unless a cultural group has a concept of art, they cannot create something that may be considered art. Davies’s answer to this is that while a person without a word for art could not label something as art, it does not follow that art was not made. Cultures may have the concept, as expressed in behaviour, without having a word for art. All cultures have music, narrative, drama, picturing, dancing and so on, and at least some of this activity is undertaken seriously with interest in, and respect for, the skills of the producer (p. 30).

But do these art behaviours have value beyond that which they are accorded within their culture? Davies's discussion of the views of anthropologist Ellen Dissanayake is interesting here. Dissanayake, like anthropologists persuaded by Bourdieu or Gell, takes the value claimed of contemporary art to be illusory. However, she thinks that the arts are connected to human evolution. Dissanayake argues that arts are a "making special" activity, akin to ritual and play, and emerge as biologically adaptive features of humanity.<sup>17</sup> She suggests this adaptive function is that it promotes community benefits that improve the well-being and reproductive potential for members of a society. However, she also observes that post-eighteenth century art has lost its grip on this evolutionary purpose that gives art significance, becoming an increasingly esoteric and self-referential embellishment that was trivialised through postmodernism and is now (in Davies's paraphrase) "a private predilection consecrated for the unengaged, overly cognitive apprehension of an elite few" (p. 131). That about sums up the charge against contemporary art. So what is his response to Dissanayake, and is it convincing? Davies argues that unless 'modern' art has set itself in opposition to its prior adaptive functions, it is hard to explain why her story of art's origins is relevant to our appreciation of it. Instead of looking to the origins of art to explain its value, we need to look at the changes to art or new ways of employing its features. As he states,

more particularly, if we recognize not only that culture is affected by biology but also how cultural change can bring about genetic change – that is, if we accept some version of gene-culture coevolution – it is quite plausible to suppose that some behaviours may have outstripped their origins to take on new adaptive functions (p. 134).

Narrative fiction, which emerged as a literary form in only the past few hundred years, is widely considered to be an adaptation, and an extension of older, oral forms of storytelling, but there are numerous accounts of its contemporary adaptive functions. And, in arguing against the position that music is a transformational technology, in that the art behaviours associated with music are self-motivating rather than end-driven, Davies notes that if music promotes our fitness, this fact seems incidental to our valuing it (p. 157). Procedural or institutional accounts of the arts are significant in how they inform contemporary practitioners and academics across the humanities and social sciences, and they present a dividing line between what Dickie has called "cultural theories of art," according to which the practices of art derive from collective invention, and "psychological theories of art," according to which art

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<sup>17</sup> Ellen Dissanayake, *Homo Aestheticus: Where Art Comes from and Why* (Toronto: Maxwell MacMillan Canada, 1992).

practices derive from human nature.<sup>18</sup> According to Dickie, psychological theories of art argue that art practices derive from human nature along with other adaptive practices such food gathering, stalking prey, eating, mating, and building shelter. On the other hand, cultural theories deny their relationship with natural kinds, seeing art as purely cultural creations. Davies, however, denies this distinction, arguing that genetic evolution and cultural evolution are connected. For Davies, art behaviours are puzzling, as their cost in terms of effort and skill appear to go beyond what could be considered necessary for mere survival, but also magnificent, in that humans so willingly take on this burden. To the extent that they have a role to play, or important value, it is their relationship with self-definition, self-expression and sociality that Davies finds significant, and the ways in which arts add meaning to people's lives (p. 188).

*The Artful Species* is important for two reasons. Firstly, it analyses ideas that have become such unexceptional, celebratory, motherhood statements about the relationship between arts and humanity, like the idea that we would not be fully human without art, and gives such claims substance. This work of scholarship enables us to assess the available evidence. Secondly, by providing an account of aesthetics that is not hedonistic, he saves the idea from complete triviality. Despite its lack of conclusion regarding whether art is an adaptation, or a product of other adaptive features, Davies does provide reasons for believing that art is connected to human biology and to the universality of aesthetic concerns. This book reminds readers of the breadth of artistic forms, and it is convincing in suggesting that while not all people may be skilled artists, the knowledge of an art or the competence that most people have in at least some art form suggests that the appreciation of art and the practice of art is fundamental to our humanity. People engage in arts for a variety of purposes, but regardless of the purpose to which art is put, its creation is intrinsically rewarding. *The Artful Species* may well be a much needed cure for art scepticism.

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<sup>18</sup> Dickie, *Art and Value*, pp. 3-10.