

Change takes place, as succeeding chapters show, both because artists whose work does not fit and who thus stand outside the existing systems attempt to start new ones and because established artists exploit their attractiveness to the existing system to force it to handle work they do which does not fit.

## 5 • Aesthetics, Aestheticians, and Critics

### AESTHETICS AS ACTIVITY

Aestheticians study the premises and arguments people use to justify classifying things and activities as "beautiful," "artistic," "art," "not art," "good art," "bad art," and so on. They construct systems with which to make and justify both the classifications and specific instances of their application. Critics apply aesthetic systems to specific art works and arrive at judgments of their worth and explications of what gives them that worth. Those judgments produce reputations for works and artists. Distributors and audience members take reputations into account when they decide what to support emotionally and financially, and that affects the resources available to artists to continue their work.

To talk this way describes aesthetics as an activity rather than a body of doctrine. Aestheticians are not the only people who engage in this activity. Most participants in art worlds make aesthetic judgments frequently. Aesthetic principles, arguments, and judgments make up an important part of the body of conventions by means of which members of art worlds act together. Creating an explicit aesthetic may precede, follow, or be simultaneous with developing the tech-

niques, forms, and works which make up the art world's output, and it may be done by any of the participants. Sometimes artists themselves formulate the aesthetic explicitly. More often they create an unformalized aesthetic through workaday choices of materials and forms.

In complex and highly developed art worlds, specialized professionals—critics and philosophers—create logically organized and philosophically defensible aesthetic systems, and the creation of aesthetic systems can become a major industry in its own right. An aesthetician whose language foreshadows a sociologically based system I will examine later describes aesthetics and aestheticians this way:

Aesthetics is . . . the philosophical discipline that deals with the concepts we use when we talk about, think about or in other ways "handle" works of art. On the basis of their own understanding of the Institution of Art as a whole, it is the task of aestheticians to analyze the ways all the different persons and groups talk and act as members of the Institution, and through this to see which are the actual rules that make up the logical framework of the Institution and according to which procedures within the Institution take place. . . .

Within the Institution of Art specific statements of fact—results of a correctly performed elucidation and interpretation of a work of art, say—entail specific evaluations. Constitutive rules lay down specific criteria of evaluation that are binding for members of the Institution. (Kjorup, 1976, pp. 47–48)

We need not believe that it works so neatly to see that art world participants understand the role of aestheticians and aesthetics this way.

An art world has many uses for an explicit aesthetic system. It ties participants' activities to the tradition of the art, justifying their demands for the resources and advantages ordinarily available to people who produce that kind of art. To be specific, if I can argue cogently that jazz merits as serious consideration on aesthetic grounds as other forms of art music, then I can compete, as a jazz player, for grants and fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts and faculty positions in music schools, perform in the same halls

as symphony orchestras, and require the same attention to the nuances of my work as the most serious classical composer or performer. An aesthetic shows that, on general grounds successfully argued to be valid, what art world members do belongs to the same class as other activities already enjoying the advantages of being "art."

As a result, the title "art" is a resource that is at once indispensable and unnecessary to the producers of the works in question. It is indispensable because, if you believe art is better, more beautiful, and more expressive than nonart, if you therefore intend to make art and want what you make recognized as art so that you can demand the resources and advantages available to art—then you cannot fulfill your plan if the current aesthetic system and those who explicate and apply it deny you the title. It is unnecessary because even if these people do tell you that what you are doing is not art, you can usually do the same work under a different name and with the support of a different cooperative world.

Much work in all media is carried on as something other than art. As we will see later, people draw and photograph as a part of enterprises devoted to the production and sale of industrial products, make quilts and clothing as a part of domestic household enterprises, and even produce work entirely on their own, with a minimum of cooperation from others and with no socially communicable justification at all, let alone a philosophically defensible aesthetic.

To return to the uses of an aesthetic for an art world, we can note that a well-argued and successfully defended aesthetic guides working participants in the production of specific art works. Among the things they keep in mind in making the innumerable small decisions that cumulatively shape the work is whether and how those decisions might be defended. Of course, working artists do not refer every small problem to its most general philosophical grounding to decide how to deal with it, but they know when their decisions run afoul of such theories, if only through a vague sense of something wrong. A general aesthetic comes into play more explicitly when someone suggests a major change in conventional practice. If, as a jazz player, I want to give up the



conventional twelve- and thirty-two-bar formats in which improvising has traditionally gone on for those in which the length of phrases and sections are among the elements to be improvised, I need a defensible explanation of why such a change should be made.

Furthermore, a coherent and defensible aesthetic helps to stabilize values and thus to regularize practice. Stabilizing values is not just a philosophical exercise. Art world participants who agree on a work's value can act toward it in roughly similar ways. An aesthetic, providing a basis on which people can evaluate things in a reliable and dependable way, makes regular patterns of cooperation possible. When values are stable, and can be depended on to be stable, other things stabilize as well—the monetary value of works and thus the business arrangements on which the art world runs, the reputations of artists and collectors, and the worth of institutional and personal collections (see Moulin, 1967). The aesthetic created by aestheticians provides a theoretical rationale for the selections of collectors.

From this point of view, aesthetic value arises from the consensus of the participants in an art world. To the degree that such a consensus does not exist, value in this sense does not exist: judgments of value not held jointly by members of an art world do not provide a basis for collective activity premised on those judgments, and thus do not affect activities very much. Work becomes good, therefore valuable, through the achievement of consensus about the basis on which it is to be judged and through the application of the agreed-on aesthetic principles to particular cases.

But many styles and schools compete for attention within an organized art world, demanding that their works be shown, published, or performed in place of those produced by adherents of other styles and schools. Since the art world's distribution system has a finite capacity, all works and schools cannot be presented by it and thus be eligible for the rewards and advantages of presentation. Groups compete for access to those rewards, among other ways, by logical argument as to why they deserve presentation. Logical analysis seldom settles arguments over the allocation of

resources, but participants in art worlds, especially the people who control access to distribution channels, often feel that what they do must be logically defensible. The heat in discussions of aesthetics usually exists because what is being decided is not only an abstract philosophical question but also some allocation of valuable resources. Whether jazz is really music or photography is really art, whether free-form jazz is really jazz and therefore music, whether fashion photographs are really photography and therefore art, are discussions, among other things, about whether people who play free-form jazz can perform in jazz clubs for the already existing jazz audience and whether fashion photographs can be exhibited and sold in important galleries and museums.

Aestheticians, then, provide that element of the battle for recognition of particular styles and schools which consists of making the arguments which convince other participants in an art world that the work deserves, logically, to be included within whatever categories concern that world. The conservatism of art worlds, arising out of the way conventional practices cluster in neatly meshed packages of mutually adjusted activities, materials, and places, means that changes will not find an easy reception. Most changes proposed to art world participants are minor, leaving untouched most of the ways things are done. The world of symphonic music, for instance, has not changed the length of concert programs very much in recent years, for the very good reason that, because of union agreements, it would increase their costs to lengthen the programs and, because audiences expect eighty or ninety minutes of music for the price of a ticket, they dare not shorten them very much. (That was not always the case. Probably as a result of the unionization of musicians, among other things concert programs have shortened appreciably since, say, Beethoven's time, as figure 13 shows [Forbes, 1967, p. 255].) The basic instrumentation of the orchestra has not changed, nor have the tonal materials used (i.e., the conventional tempered chromatic scale) or the places in which the music is presented. Because of all these conservative pressures, innovators must make a strong argument in defense of any substantially new practice.



TODAY, WEDNESDAY, APRIL 2nd, 1800, Herr Ludwig van Beethoven will have the honor to give a grand concert for his benefit in the Royal Imperial Court Theatre beside the Burg. The pieces which will be performed are the following:

1. A grand symphony by the late Kapellmeister Mozart.
2. An aria from "The Creation" by the Princely Kapellmeister Herr Haydn, sung by Mlle. Saal.
3. A grand Concerto for the pianoforte, played and composed by Herr Ludwig van Beethoven.
4. A Septet, most humbly and obediently dedicated to Her Majesty the Empress, and composed by Herr Ludwig van Beethoven for four stringed and three wind instruments, played by Herren Schuppanzigh, Scheiber, Schindlacker, Bar, Nickel, Matauschek and Dietzel.
5. A Duet from Haydn's "Creation," sung by Herr and Mlle. Saal.
6. Herr Ludwig van Beethoven will improvise on the pianoforte.
7. A new grand symphony with complete orchestra, composed by Herr Ludwig van Beethoven.

Tickets for boxes and stalls are to be had of Herr van Beethoven at his lodgings in the Tiefen Graben, no. 241, third story, and of the box keeper.

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PRICES OF ADMISSION ARE AS USUAL.

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THE BEGINNING IS AT HALF-PAST 6 O'CLOCK.

FIGURE 13. Program of a concert given by Ludwig von Beethoven, April 2, 1800. Concert programs were longer in Beethoven's time than they are today. This program for a concert in Vienna is taken from Forbes, 1967, p. 255.

Writers on aesthetics strike a moralistic tone. They take for granted that their job is to find a foolproof formula which will distinguish things which do not *deserve* to be called art from works which have *earned* that honorific title. I empha-

size "deserve" and "earn" because aesthetic writing insists on a real moral difference between art and nonart. Aestheticians do not simply intend to classify things into useful categories, as we might classify species of plants, but rather to separate the deserving from the undeserving, and to do it definitively. They do not want to take an inclusive approach to art, counting in everything that conceivably might have some interest or value. They look, instead, for a defensible way to leave some things out. The logic of the enterprise—the bestowing of honorific titles—requires them to rule some things out, for there is no special honor in a title every conceivable object or activity is entitled to. The practical consequences of their work require the same exclusionary approach, for distributors, audiences, and all the other participants in an art world look to aestheticians for a way of making hard decisions about resources in a clearcut and defensible, rather than fuzzy and arguable, way.

Aestheticians might well argue that they do not intend to make evaluative judgments at all, but simply to arrive at a clearcut delineation of the categories of art and nonart. Since all the societies in which aestheticians engage in this activity use *art* as an honorific term, the very making of the distinction will inevitably assist in the evaluation of potential candidates for the status of art work. Aestheticians need not be cynical participants in art world conspiracies for their work to have this utility.

That aesthetic positions frequently arise in the course of fighting for the acceptance of something new does not alter the situation. Such positions, too, need to show that some things are not art in order to justify the claim that something else is. Aesthetics which declare that everything is art do not satisfy people who create or use them in the life of an art world.

#### AESTHETICS AND ORGANIZATION

The rest of what aestheticians and critics do is to provide a running revision of the value-creating theory which, in the form of criticism, continuously adapts the premises of the



theory to the works artists actually produce. Artists produce new work in response not only to the considerations of formal aesthetics but also in response to the traditions of the art worlds in which they participate, traditions which can profitably be viewed (Kubler, 1962) as sequences of problem definitions and solutions; in response to suggestions implicit in other traditions, as in the influence of African art on Western painting; in response to the possibilities contained in new technical developments; and so on. An existing aesthetic needs to be kept up to date so that it continues to validate logically what audiences experience as important art work and thus to keep alive and consistent the connection between what has already been validated and what is now being proposed.

Aesthetic principles and systems, being part of the package of interdependent practices that make up an art world, will both influence and be influenced by such aspects of it as the training of potential artists and viewers, financial and other modes of support, and the modes of distribution and presentation of works. They will especially be influenced by a pressure for consistency implicit in the idea of art.

Art is too crude a concept to capture what is at work in these situations. Like other complex concepts, it disguises a generalization about the nature of reality. When we try to define it, we find many anomalous cases, cases which meet some, but not all, of the criteria implied or expressed by the concept. When we say "art," we usually mean something like this: a work which has aesthetic value, however that is defined; a work justified by a coherent and defensible aesthetic; a work recognized by appropriate people as having aesthetic value; a work displayed in the appropriate places (hung in museums, played at concerts). In many instances, however, works have some, but not all, of these attributes. They are exhibited and valued, but do not have aesthetic value, or have aesthetic value but are not exhibited and valued by the right people. The generalization contained in the concept of art suggests that these all co-occur in the real world; when they do not co-occur we have the definitional troubles which have always plagued the concept.

Some participants in art worlds try to minimize these inconsistencies by bringing theory and practice into line so that there are fewer anomalous cases. Others, who wish to upset the status quo, insist on the anomalies. To illustrate the point, consider this question: How many great (or excellent, or good) works of art are there? I am not concerned with fixing a number myself, nor do I think the number (however we might calculate it) is important. But looking at that question will make clear the interaction of aesthetic theories and art world organizations.

In 1975, Bill Arnold organized The Bus Show, an exhibition of photographs to be displayed on five hundred New York City buses (Arnold and Carlson, 1978). He intended by this means "to present excellent photographs in a public space" and thus to bring good art photography to a much larger audience than it ordinarily reaches and to allow many more photographers' work to be seen than ordinarily would be (see figure 14). The photographs were to be displayed in the space ordinarily used for advertising; to fill the advertising space on one bus required 17 photographs of varying sizes from nine to sixteen inches in height. To fill five hundred buses thus required 8,500 photographs, all of them to be current work by contemporary photographers.

Are there actually 8,500 excellent contemporary photographs which merit that kind of public display? To ask the question presupposes an aesthetic and a critical position from which we could evaluate photographs, deciding which ones were or weren't of sufficiently high quality. Without attempting to specify the content of such an aesthetic, imagine a simplified case. Suppose quality is a unidimensional attribute such that we can rank all photographs as having more or less of it. (In fact, competent members of the art photography world, even those who belong to one of its many competing segments, use a large and varied assortment of dimensions in judging photographs.) We can then easily tell whether any photograph is better than, worse than, or equal to any other. But we would still not know how many were worthy of public display, how many merited being called "great" or "excellent" or "beautiful," how many de-





## The Bus Show

There will be an exhibition of photographs in 500 New York City public buses in May of 1975. The purpose of the show is to present excellent photographs in a public space. All prints will appear with the photographer's name and the picture's title.

Photographs accepted for the exhibition will become part of the permanent collection of the Library of Congress. Send duplicate prints of each photograph you wish to submit; one print will go on a bus, the other to the Library of Congress. You must state what rights you grant to the Library of Congress with each photograph: loan, reproduction, or neither without your specific approval.

You may submit photographs to be considered for one person shows or as part of the group exhibit. Since the photographs will be placed in the interior advertising space of the buses there are certain size requirements, and in the case of one person shows, a specific number of photographs are needed to fill the available spaces. If you are submitting for group exhibition, send us any number of photographs in any of the size categories. For one person shows, you must submit the exact number of photographs needed to fill a bus, in each of the size categories. The size requirements and number of photographs for each bus is as follows: 14 photographs with an image height of 9 inches; one horizontal photograph with an image height of 13 inches; two verticals with an image height of 16 inches. Photographs not accepted for one person shows will automatically be juried as part of the group exhibition.

All work must be unmounted and untrimmed. Remember to submit duplicate prints of each photograph. Work not accepted will be returned if postage is included. On the back of each print write your name, the picture's title, and the rights you grant to the Library of Congress. Enclose a 3" x 5" file card with your name, address, and phone number. Mail prints to: Bus Show, Photography Department, Pratt Institute, Brooklyn, New York 11205. For information call (212) 636-3573. The deadline for submission is March 1, 1975.

This exhibition is made possible with support from the New York State Council on the Arts. Poster © 1975 by Pratt Institute. Photograph by Bill Arnold.

*FIGURE 14. Poster advertising The Bus Show. The Bus Show, organized by Bill Arnold in 1975, proposed to exhibit 8,500 contemporary photographs of high artistic quality in the advertising spaces on New York City buses. Arnold gathered material for the show by advertising to art photographers. (Courtesy Bill Arnold.)*

served inclusion in a museum collection or mention in a comprehensive history of art photography.

To make those judgments requires establishing a necessarily arbitrary cutoff point. Even if a substantial break at some point in an otherwise smooth distribution makes it easy to see a major difference on either side of it, using such a break as the cutoff point would be practically justifiable but logically arbitrary. But aesthetic systems propose and justify such judgments and divisions of existing art works all the time. In fact, The Bus Show shocked the photography world by implying that the line could justifiably be drawn where it would have to be drawn in order to fill all five hundred buses, and not where it would more conventionally be drawn (if we wanted to have a show of the best in contemporary photography we might include, if we followed current museum practice, one to two hundred prints).

If aesthetic systems justify dividing art works into those worthy of display or performance and those not, that will influence and be influenced by the institutions and organizations in which such displays and performances occur. Institutions have some leeway in the amount of work they can present to the public, but not much. Existing facilities (concert halls, art galleries and museums, and libraries) have finite amounts of space, existing canons of taste limit the use to which that space can be put (we no longer feel it appropriate to hang paintings floor to ceiling in the manner of the Paris Salon), and audience expectations and conventionalized attention spans impose further limits (more music could be performed if audiences would sit through six-hour instead of two-hour concerts, although the financial problems, given current union wage scales, would make that impossible anyway). Existing facilities can always be expanded by building and organizing more, but at any particular time there is only so much space or time and only so many works can be displayed.

The aesthetic of the world which has such facilities at its disposal can fix the point on our hypothetical one dimension of quality so as to produce just the number of works for which there is exhibition space. It can fix the standard so that there are fewer works to be displayed or rewarded than there



is room for (as when an award committee decides that no work is worthy of a prize this year). Or it can fix the standard so that many more works are judged adequate than there is room for. Either of the latter two situations throws into doubt the adequacy of the art world's institutional apparatus, the validity of its aesthetic, or both. There is, thus, some pressure for an aesthetic standard flexible enough to produce approximately the amount of work for which the organizations have room and, conversely, for the institutions to generate the amount of exhibition opportunity required by the works the aesthetic certifies as being of the appropriate quality.

The distribution system itself requires materials to distribute, generating a further pressure for changes in aesthetic judgments in the form of rediscoveries of works and artists hitherto not rated very highly. Moulin points out that Old Masters and other "consecrated" paintings of unquestioned value increasingly move into private and museum collections and disappear from the market made by dealers and galleries. She quotes a French dealer:

It is impossible to make money selling Renoir if you do not belong to the great dynasty of dealers. Since they can only be found with difficulty, the paintings still in circulation reach such prices that it is impossible to build up a stock of them. Dealers then become the intermediaries between two collectors or between a collector and a museum. Rediscoveries are due to the fact that what has already been discovered can no longer be found. (Moulin, 1967, p. 435, my translation)

A rediscovery consists of a campaign to call to the attention of potential buyers artists whose work is still relatively available and thus sells at a reasonable price.

Moulin points out the role of specialists in aesthetic judgments in this process:

The revaluation of certain styles and certain genres is not independent of the efforts of specialists, historians or museum curators. . . . [There is an] involuntary collaboration between intellectual research and commercial initiatives in the rediscovery and launching of artistic values of the past.

The judgments of connoisseurs give authority, but successive generations of specialists do not illuminate the same sectors of the past. Many factors can contribute to changing the direction of their curiosity. . . . The mercantile aspects are situated at the level of consequences, not causes. Historians turn away from fields already well swept by erudition where, in the present state of research, attempts to overturn chronology and appreciation are condemned to defeat. They are attracted to the zones of shadow. (Moulin, 1967, p. 430, my translation)

So art historians discover value in previously unstudied painters just as dealers look for such works to sell. Moulin mentions exhibits devoted to the friends of already famous artists and quotes the following:

Kikoïne, born on May 31, 1892 in Gomel, was part of the famous group of the Zborowski Gallery, of whom he and Kremegne were, at the time, the most expensive. Since then, the other members of the group—Modigliani, Pascin, Soutine—have died and their works can only be found at very high prices. The Gallery Romanet will devote large exhibits to the two survivors: the first to Kikoïne, at the beginning of June, the second to Kremegne, during the 1957–58 season. (Moulin, 1967, p. 438, quoting from *Connaissance des Arts*, no. 64, June 15, 1957, p. 32, my translation)

A further rough agreement between the amount of work judged interesting or worthwhile and the amount of room in the distribution system comes about when artists devote themselves to work for which there is room, withdrawing their efforts from media and formats which are "filled up." Insofar as aesthetic systems change their criteria to produce the number of certified works an art world's distributive mechanisms can accommodate, even the most absolute of them, those which most resolutely draw a strict line between art and nonart, in fact practice a relativism which defeats that aim.

When new styles of art emerge they compete for available space, in part by proposing new aesthetic standards according to which their work merits display in existing facilities. They also create new facilities, as in the case of The Bus





FIGURE 15. *The Bus Show, installed. Because no one could know where any particular photograph was at any particular time, The Bus Show could not really be reviewed, and no artist could gain much in reputation from participating in it. (Courtesy of Afterimage, Visual Studies Workshop.)*

Show (see figure 15). (New facilities do not do all the jobs people want them to do. The Bus Show had the great disadvantage that it could hardly help build anyone's reputation. Since no one knew where the bus carrying the work of specific photographers was at any particular time, critics could not review them, unless they happened on the work by accident, and friends and fellow artists could not see it either.) Art worlds differ in their flexibility, in the ease with which they can increase the number of works easily available for public inspection in conventional facilities. Modern societies have relatively little trouble accommodating vast amounts of printed material in libraries (although not in easily accessible bookstores [Newman, 1973]). Music can similarly be distributed in recorded performances in large amounts. But live

performances of musical works of various kinds have so few outlets that it becomes reasonable for people to compose music solely for recordings, even to the extent of relying on effects which cannot be produced live, but require the mechanisms of an elaborately outfitted studio.

#### THE INSTITUTIONAL THEORY OF AESTHETICS: AN EXAMPLE

This book, focusing as it does on questions of social organization, does not attempt to develop a sociologically based theory of aesthetics. In fact, from the perspective just sketched, it is clear that developing an aesthetic in the world of sociology would be an idle exercise, since only aesthetics developed in connection with the operations of art worlds are likely to have much influence in them. (Gans, 1974, is an interesting attempt by a sociologist to develop an aesthetic, especially in relation to the question of the aesthetic value of mass-media works.)

Ironically enough, a number of philosophers have produced a theory that, if it is not sociological, is sufficiently based on sociological considerations to let us see what such a theory might look like. This institutional theory of aesthetics, as it has come to be called, can serve as an example of the process just analyzed—the development of a new aesthetic to take account of work the art world has already accepted. Perhaps equally ironically, a more sociological conception of an art world than that theory contains provides solutions to some of its problems, and I have detoured from the main line of my argument long enough to suggest those solutions. (For a more abstract sociological explication of the theory, see Donow, 1979.)

The preceding analysis suggests that new theories, rivaling, extending, or amending previous ones, arise when older theories fail to give an adequate account of the virtues of work widely accepted by knowledgeable members of the relevant art world. When an existing aesthetic does not legitimate logically what is already legitimate in other ways, someone will construct a theory that does. (What I say here should be understood as pseudohistory, indicating in a nar-

*detour  
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revisited*



orative form some relationships which may or may not have arisen exactly as I say they did.)

Thus, putting it crudely, for a long time works of visual art could be judged on the basis of an imitative theory, according to which the object of visual art was to imitate nature. At some point that theory no longer explained well-regarded new works of art—Monét's haystacks and cathedrals, for instance, even when rationalized as experiments in capturing the relationship between light and color. An expressive theory of art then found the virtues of works in their ability to communicate and express the emotions, ideas, and personalities of the artists who made them. That theory in turn had to be repaired or replaced so that it could deal with geometric abstraction, action painting, and other works that did not make sense in its terms (similarly, neither these theories nor their analogues would be able to say anything useful about aleatory music).

The institutional theory aims to solve the problems raised by works that outrage both commonsense and finer sensibilities by showing no trace of the artist at all, either in skill or intention. Institutional theorists concern themselves with works like the urinal or the snowshovel exhibited by Marcel Duchamp (see figure 16), whose only claim to being art apparently lay in Duchamp's signature on them, or the Brillo boxes exhibited by Andy Warhol (see figure 17). The commonsense critique of these works is that anyone could have done them, that they require no skill or insight, that they do not imitate anything in nature because they are nature, that they do not express anything interesting because they are no more than commonplace objects. The critique of those with finer sensibilities is much the same. *artistic nostalgia*

Nevertheless, those works gained great renown in the world of contemporary visual art, inspiring many more works like them. Confronted by this fait accompli, aestheticians developed a theory that placed the artistic character and quality of the work outside the physical object itself. They found those qualities, instead, in the relation of the objects to an existing art world, to the organizations in which art was produced, distributed, appreciated, and discussed.

*historia 100*



FIGURE 16. Marcel Duchamp, *In Advance of the Broken Arm*. Duchamp's "readymades," created when he signed some already-existing artifact, outraged both commonsense and critical sensibilities. (Yale University Art Gallery, Gift of Katherine S. Dreier for the Collection Société Anonyme.)





FIGURE 17. Andy Warhol, Brillo. Pop Art works provoked the criticism that anyone could have done them, that they did not require or embody the special gifts of the artist. (Photograph courtesy of the Castelli Archives.)

Arthur Danto and George Dickie have presented the most important statements of the institutional theory. Danto dealt with the essence of art, with what in the relation between object and art world made that object art. In a famous statement of the problem, he said:

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, 1964, p. 580)

The theory out of which the idea of making the Brillo box came, the relation of that idea to other ideas about what

makes art works art and to the other objects those works inspired—all of these make a context in which the making of the Brillo box and the box itself become art because that context gives them that sort of meaning. In another version:

The moment something is considered an artwork, it becomes subject to an *interpretation*. It owes its existence as an artwork to this, and when its claim to art is defeated, it loses its interpretation and becomes a mere thing. The interpretation is in some measure a function of the artistic context of the work: it means something different depending on its art-historical location, its antecedents, and the like. As an artwork, finally, it acquires a structure which an object photographically similar to it is simply disqualified from sustaining if it is a real thing. Art exists in an atmosphere of interpretation and an artwork is thus a vehicle of interpretation. (Danto, 1973, p. 15)

Dickie deals with organizational forms and mechanisms. According to his definition:

A work of art in the classificatory sense is (1) an artifact (2) 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). (Dickie, 1975, p. 34)

A sizable and interesting secondary literature has grown up around this point of view, criticizing and amplifying it (Cohen, 1973; Sclafani, 1973a and 1973b; Blizek, 1974; Danto, 1974; Mitias, 1975; Silvers, 1976). (Sociologists will see a family resemblance between the institutional theory of art and the various sociological theories which make their subject matter the way social definitions create reality (e.g., the so-called labeling theory of deviance [see Becker, 1963]), for both see the character of their subject matter as depending on the way people acting collectively define it.)

Philosophers tend to argue from hypothetical examples, and the “artworld” Dickie and Danto refer to does not have much meat on its bones, only what is minimally necessary to make the points they want to make. Nor do the criticisms made of their positions often refer to the character of existing art worlds or ones which have existed, emphasizing in-



stead logical inconsistencies in the constructs used in the theory. None of the participants in these discussions develops as organizationally complicated a conception of what an art world is as does this book, although my description is not incompatible with their arguments. If we use a more complicated and empirically based notion of an art world, however, we can make headway on some problems in which the philosophical discussion has bogged down, thus perhaps being helpful to aestheticians and simultaneously deepening the analysis of the role of aesthetics in an art world.

### *Who?*

Who can confer on something the status of candidate for appreciation, and thus ratify it as art? Who can act on behalf of that social institution, the art world? Dickie settles this question boldly. He describes the art world as having core personnel who can act on its behalf:

A loosely organized, but nevertheless related, set of persons including artists . . . , producers, museum directors, museum-goers, theater-goers, reporters for newspapers, critics for publications of all sorts, art historians, art theorists, philosophers of art, and others. These are the people who keep the machinery of the artworld working and thereby provide for its continuing existence. (Dickie, 1975, pp. 35-36)

But he also insists that:

In addition, every person who sees himself as a member of the artworld is thereby a member. (Dickie, 1975, p. 36)

That last sentence, of course, warns aestheticians that Dickie's approach will probably not help them distinguish the deserving from the undeserving; this definition is going to be too broad. They cannot accept the implications of Dickie's remark, that the representatives of the art world who will be conferring the honorific status of art on objects are self-appointed, and express their discontent in a rash of humorous examples. What if a zookeeper decides that he is a member of the art world and, in that capacity, confers the

status of candidate for appreciation, and thus of art work, on the elephant he tends? That couldn't really make the elephant a work of art, could it? Because, after all, the zookeeper really couldn't act on behalf of the art world, could he? We all know the answers: the elephant just isn't an art work (Dickie, 1971; Blizek, 1974).

But how do we know that? We know it because we have a commonsense understanding of the organization of art worlds. A relevant feature of organized art worlds is that, however their position is justified, some people are commonly seen by many or most interested parties as more entitled to speak on behalf of the art world than others; the entitlement stems from their being recognized by the other participants in the cooperative activities through which that world's works are produced and consumed as the people entitled to do that. Whether other art world members accept them as capable of deciding what art is because they have more experience, because they have an innate gift for recognizing art, or simply because they are, after all, the people in charge of such things and therefore ought to know—whatever the reason, what lets them make the distinction and make it stick is that the other participants agree that they should be allowed to do it.

Sociological analysts need not decide who is entitled to label things art (or, to use Dickie's language, to confer the status of candidate for appreciation). We need only observe who members of the art world treat as capable of doing that, who they allow to do it in the sense that once those people have decided something is art others act as though it is.

Some common features of art worlds show that the philosophical desire to be able to decide definitively between art and nonart cannot be satisfied by the institutional theory. For one thing, participants seldom agree completely on who is entitled to speak on behalf of the art world as a whole. Some people occupy institutional positions which allow them, de facto, to decide what will be acceptable. Museum directors, for instance, could decide whether photography was an art because they could decide whether or not to exhibit photographs in their museums. They could even de-



cide what kind of art (e.g., "minor" or whatever the opposite of that is) photography was by deciding whether photographs would be exhibited in the main galleries in which paintings were ordinarily exhibited or confined to a special place with less prestige in which only photographs were shown. But other participants argue that museum directors are incompetent to make the judgments they do make, that in a better world they would not be allowed to make such judgments, because they are ignorant, prejudiced, or influenced by extraneous considerations. Some think they are too avant-garde and do not give proper attention to established styles and genres, others just the opposite (see Haacke, 1976). Many participants find institutional officials unacceptable arbiters because of substantial evidence which shows that they represent the rich and powerful of the communities they serve (see Catalog Committee, 1977; Haacke, 1976; Becker and Walton, 1976), their decisions thus representing class bias as much as aesthetic logic.

Art world members also disagree over whether the decisions of occupants of certain positions really make any difference. This disagreement reflects the ambiguous position of those people in the art world. It is frequently just not clear whether a particular critic's decision has any consequence, whether others base their own activities on that decision, and very often that depends on a variety of contingencies that arise from political shifts and struggles within the art world. Insofar as art world members find the status of whatever pronouncements they make ambiguous, the status of such people as critics, dealers, and prize and fellowship committees is equally ambiguous. The ambiguity, not remediable by philosophic or social analysis, is there because the people whose deference would ratify the status defer sporadically and erratically.

Thus, the institutional theory cannot produce the all-or-nothing judgments aestheticians would like to make about whether works are or are not art. Since the degree of consensus about who can decide what art is varies greatly from one situation to another, a realistic view reflects that by

allowing art-ness, whether or not an object is art, to be a continuous variable rather than an all-or-nothing dichotomy.

Likewise, art worlds vary in the kinds of activities by their members which embody and ratify the assigning of the status of art to an object or event. On the one hand, such material benefits as the award of fellowships, prizes, commissions, display space, and other exhibition opportunities (publications, productions, etc.) have the immediate consequence of helping the artist to continue producing work. On the other hand, more intangible benefits, such as being taken seriously by the more knowledgeable members of the art world, have indirect but important consequences for artistic careers, placing the recipient in the flow of ideas in which change and development take place and providing day-to-day validation of work concerns and help with daily problems, things denied those who are merely successful in more conventional career terms.

#### *What?*

What characteristics must an object have to be a work of art? The institutional theory suggests that anything may be capable of being appreciated. In fact, in response to a critic who says that some objects—"ordinary thumbtacks, cheap white envelopes, the plastic forks given at some drive-in restaurants"—just cannot be appreciated (Cohen, 1973, p. 78), Dickie says:

But why cannot the ordinary qualities of *Fountain* [the urinal Duchamp exhibited as a work of art; see figure 18]—its gleaming white surface, the depth revealed when it reflects images of surrounding objects, its pleasing oval shape—be appreciated. It has qualities similar to those of works by Brancusi and Moore which many do not balk at saying they appreciate. Similarly, thumbtacks, envelopes, and plastic forks have qualities that can be appreciated if one makes the effort to focus attention on them. One of the values of photography is its ability to focus on and bring out the qualities of quite ordinary objects. And the same sort of thing can be done





FIGURE 18. Marcel Duchamp, *Fountain*. Aestheticians disagree about what qualities a work of visual art must have to be art. Can the physical properties of a work like *Fountain* be appreciated? (Photograph courtesy of the Sidney Janis Gallery, New York.)

without the benefit of photography just by looking. (Dickie, 1975, p. 42)

Can anything at all be turned into art, just by someone's saying so?

it cannot be this simple: even if in the end it is successful christening which makes an object art, not every attempt at christening is successful. There are bound to be conditions to be met both by the namer and the thing being named, and if

they are completely unsatisfied, then saying "I christen . . ." will not be to christen. (Cohen, 1973, p. 80)

Cohen is right: not every attempt to label something art is successful. But it does not follow that there are therefore some constraints on the nature of the object or event itself which make certain objects ipso facto not art and incapable of being redefined in that way.

The constraints on what can be defined as art which undoubtedly exist in any specific art world arise from a prior consensus on what kinds of standards will be applied, and by whom, in making those judgments. Art world members characteristically, despite doctrinal and other differences, produce reliable judgments about which artists and works are serious and therefore worthy of attention. Thus, jazz players who disagree over stylistic preferences can nevertheless agree on whether a given performer or performance "swings," and theater people make similarly reliable judgments of whether a particular scene "works" or not. Artists may disagree violently over which works and their makers should receive support, and marginal cases (especially those in styles just being incorporated into the conventional practice of the art world or those on the verge of being thrown out as no longer worthy of serious consideration) will provoke less reliable judgments. But most judgments are reliable, and that reliability reflects not the mouthing of already agreed-on judgments, but the systematic application of similar standards by trained and experienced members of the art world; it is what Hume described in his essay on taste, and resembles the way most doctors, confronted with a set of clinical findings, will arrive at a similar diagnosis (analogies can be found in every area of specialized work).

In that sense, not everything can be made into a work of art just by definition or the creation of consensus, for not everything will pass muster under currently accepted art world standards. But this does not mean that there is any more to making something art than christening it. The entire art world's agreeing on standards some works meet so clearly that their classification as art is as self-evident as the way others fail to meet them is also a matter of christening;



the consensus arises because reasonable members of the world have no difficulty classifying works under those circumstances. Constraints on what can be defined as art exist, but they constrain because of the conjunction of the characteristics of objects and the rules of classification current in the world in which they are proposed as art works.

Furthermore, those standards, being matters of consensus, change. Much of the running dialogue of artists and other participants in art worlds has to do with making day-to-day adjustments in the content and application of standards of judgment. In the early 1930s jazz players, critics, and aficionados all agreed that electrical instruments could not produce real music. Charlie Christian's performances on the electric guitar convinced so many people that his playing produced the same sort of experience as music played on nonelectrical instruments that the canon was quickly revised.

#### *How Much?*

Aestheticians, both the institutionalists and their critics, worry about the effect of aesthetic theorizing on artists and art worlds. They fear, for instance, that a too-restrictive aesthetic theory would unnecessarily depress artists and might unduly constrict their creativity. This overestimates the degree to which art worlds take their direction from aesthetic theorizing; the influence usually runs in the other direction. But the institutionalists draw one important implication from their analysis: if practicing artists want their work accepted as art, they will have to persuade the appropriate people to certify it as art. (While the basic institutional analysis suggests that anyone can do that, in practice these theorists accept the existing art world as the one which has to be persuaded to do the job.) But if art is what an art world ratifies as art, an alternative exists, one analyzed in more detail in a later chapter, the strategy of organizing de novo an art world which will ratify as art what one produces. In fact, the strategy has been used often and with considerable success. Many more people have tried it and failed, but that doesn't mean it is not a reasonable possibility.

Several difficulties arise in creating a new art world to ratify work which finds no home in existing art worlds. Resources (especially financial support) will already have been allocated to existing artistic activities, so that one needs to develop new sources of support, pools of personnel, sources of materials, and other facilities (including space in which to perform and display works). Since existing aesthetic theories have not ratified the work, a new aesthetic must be developed, and new modes of criticism and standards of judgment enunciated. To say that these things must be done, however, raises an interesting definitional question of the kind philosophical analysis provokes. How much of the apparatus of an organized art world must be created before the work in question will be treated seriously by a larger audience than the original group who wanted to create the new world? What it takes to convince people will vary a great deal. Some require an elaborate ideological explanation. Others—theater managers, operators of recording studios, and printers—only ask that their bills be paid.

The question of how much institutional apparatus is required to satisfy the definition need not, indeed should not, be answered by setting some specific criterion or precise point on a continuum. The activities involved can be carried on by varying numbers of people, and without the full-blown institutional apparatus of such well-equipped worlds as surround contemporary sculpture and painting or symphonic music and grand opera. When we speak of art worlds, we usually have in mind these well-equipped ones, but in fact paintings, books, music, and all sorts of other artistic objects and performances can be produced without all the support personnel these worlds depend on: critics, impresarios, furnishers of materials and equipment, providers of space, and audiences. At an extreme, remember, any artistic activity can be done by one person, who performs all the necessary activities; this is not common and not a condition many artists aspire to (though one they sometimes yearn for when they have trouble with their fellow participants). As the number of people involved grows, the activity reaches a point where some stable nucleus of people cooperates regularly to pro-



duce the same sort of work; as the number grows larger, it may reach a point at which individual artists can produce work for a large audience of people they don't know personally and still have a reasonable expectation of being taken seriously. Call the first point of organization an esoteric world and the latter one exoteric. The names and the cutoff points matter less than the recognition that they are arbitrary, the reality being a variety of points that vary along several continua.

### *How Many?*

Neither Dickie nor Danto is very clear as to how many art worlds there are. Dickie says:

The artworld consists of a bundle of systems: theater, painting, literature, music, and so on, each of which furnishes an institutional background for the conferring of status on objects within its domain. No limit can be placed on the number of systems that can be brought under the generic conception of art, and each of the major subsystems contains further subsystems. These features of the artworld provide the elasticity whereby creativity of even the most radical sort can be accommodated. A whole new system comparable to the theater, for example, could be added in one fell swoop. What is more likely is that a new subsystem would be added within a system. For example, junk sculpture added within sculpture, happenings added within theater. Such additions might in time develop into full-blown systems. (Dickie, 1975, p. 33)

Blizek (1974) sees that this is an empirical question, but also sees that the definition of "art world" is so loose that it is not clear whether there is one art world, of which these are subparts, or a number of them possibly unrelated and, furthermore, that if there are a number of art worlds they might conflict. Several remarks are relevant here.

Empirically, the subworlds of the various art media may be subdivided into separate and almost noncommunicating segments. I have spoken of schools and styles as though they competed for the same rewards and audiences (and will again, in discussing processes of change in art worlds), but

often they do not. Instead, members of one group develop audiences and sources of support from sectors of the society that would not have supported the other art world segments with which they might compete. Many painting worlds rely on the same suppliers as recognized contemporary artists for materials, but have separate, and often very successful, arrangements for exhibiting, distributing, and supporting their work. The Cowboy Artists of America, for instance, produce paintings for people who would like to buy the work of Charles Russell and Frederick Remington, genre painters of the American cowboy West who are exhibited in "real" museums, but can't afford them or can't find any to buy.

Despite determined inattention by Eastern art critics, cowboy painting and sculpture are so popular that their prices are inflating faster than intrastate natural gas. Cowboy art has its own heroes, its own galleries and even its own publishing house. (Lichtenstein, 1977, p. 41)

At an extreme, much of the apparatus of an art world can develop around the work of a single artist, in relative isolation from the larger, recognized world of that medium. All that is needed is someone to provide the resources. Consider the case of Edna Hibel. Although her work has been exhibited in a number of reputable places over the years, she does not have a major reputation among contemporary artists or collectors. Nevertheless, an entire museum is devoted to her work:

The Hibel Museum of Art, Palm Beach, is the inspiration of Ethelbelle and Clayton B. Craig. Long Edna Hibel's foremost collectors, the Craigs conceived the Hibel Museum to be the permanent repository for their world famous collection of Hibel art. . . . On their first visit [in 1961] to the then newly opened Hibel Gallery in Rockport, Massachusetts, Ethelbelle and Clayton Craig fell in love with Edna's art, and bought five Hibel paintings for their already extensive collection of art. . . . As the Craig collection grew, and their understanding and appreciation of the artist and her work deepened with the passing years of friendship and mutual respect, the Craigs' home became a virtual museum of Edna Hibel's art. . . . The



Craigs determined not to allow Edna Hibel's work to become so scattered that students, scholars and admirers would be deprived of the opportunity to view a significant cross section of her work in one location. From that moment on, they increased the tempo of their collecting, and broadened the scope of their acquisitions of the Hibel masterworks. . . . At long last, the Craigs' dream has been realized and the Hibel Museum of Art is a reality. The Craig Collection is the nucleus of an already growing body of Edna Hibel's work contributed by her enthusiastic admirers. Located in Palm Beach, the Hibel Museum stands as a living tribute to the Craigs' generosity, foresight, and dedication. (Hibel Museum of Art, 1977)

Regional segments, not so isolated as this, are usually oriented to the metropolitan centers of the "big" art world (McCall, 1977). Their participants suffer from a lack of exhibition opportunities, and even more from the sense that successes in their region will do them little or no good in the larger world they aspire to, a world almost totally unaware of them.

If we define art worlds by the activities their participants carry on collectively, we can ask what activities a general art world—one which encompasses all the conventional arts—might carry on collectively so that we might want to refer to it as one art world. I can think of two.

First, the various media-oriented subcommunities suffer from many of the same external constraints, which pose the same or similar problems for them. Thus, a depression might make it harder for all art forms to secure financial support (although this was not the experience of the Great Depression in the United States). A government might censor all the arts in a similar way, so that the experience of people in one area could be read as a sign of what could be expected in another. Thus a theatrical designer might decide what projects to undertake on the basis of whether he thought the censors would allow them to be staged, arriving at that assessment by hearing what they had done to a recording by a popular singer, a recent novel, or a new film. Insofar as the participants in all these worlds share experiences, interpretations, and predictions vis-à-vis the censors, they engage in

a form of collective activity and thus constitute an art world. Should they combine to combat or protest ensorship, or cooperate to circumvent it, they would in that way as well be engaging in the collective action that constitutes an art world.

2) Second, artists in various media-oriented worlds may try to achieve similar kinds of things in their work and may share ideas and perspectives on how to accomplish them. During periods of intense nationalism, artists may try to symbolize the character and aspirations of their country or people in their work. To do that, they have to find imagery and techniques which will convey the ideas and feelings they have in mind as well as finding the ideas and feelings themselves. Insofar as participants in various worlds debate these questions across media lines, they might be said to participate in one general art world.

Organizations for one medium often use people from other fields as support personnel for the work that is central in their own field. Visual artists create settings for theatrical and dance performances, writers produce librettos for operas, musicians compose and play backgrounds for films, and so on. When artists cooperate in that way across subworld lines, they might be said to be participating in a general art world. Furthermore, because of the possibility of such collaboration, people from worlds not already so connected may find it interesting to contemplate new forms of collaboration, thus creating further links in a general art world. Finally, participants in specific art worlds often come from a limited sector of the surrounding society, for instance the educated upper middle class or the petty aristocracy. They may have attended school together or come from families connected by kinship or friendship, and these connections will serve to create a general art world or, at least, to provide the regular interaction which might enable them to collaborate in the kinds of activities already mentioned.

The analysis of this problem makes it clear that speaking of art worlds means using shorthand. The term *art world*, remember, is just a way of talking about people who routinely participate in the making of art works. The routine in-

cooperate to combat or protest censorship (55) - not so

obscure + administrative

imagery + techniques

Lyndora Edna Hibel  
address AW  
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amerit

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Waco Texas  
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S. E. Pomeroy  
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teraction is what constitutes the art world's existence, so questions of definition can generally be resolved by looking at who actually does what with whom. In that way, the logical and definitional problems of the institutional aesthetic theory (which has a strong empirical component) can be resolved by knowledge of the facts of any particular case.

### AESTHETICS AND ART WORLDS

The institutional theory of aesthetics, then, illustrates the process analyzed in the first part of this chapter. When an established aesthetic theory does not provide a logical and defensible legitimation of what artists are doing and, more important, what the other institutions of the art world—especially distribution organizations and audiences—accept as art, and as excellent art, professional aestheticians will provide the required new rationale. If they don't, someone else probably will, although the rest of the participants might just go ahead without a defensible rationale for their actions. (Whether one is required or not depends on the amount of argument over what they are doing they are confronted with.) Imitative and expressive theories of art and beauty failed to explain or give a rationale for the enjoyment and celebration of contemporary works of visual art widely regarded as excellent. Given the amount of argument and competition for resources and honors in the world of contemporary art, and the number of professional philosophers who might find the problem intriguing, it was almost certain that something like the institutional theory would be produced.

By shifting the locus of the definitional problem from something inherent in the object to a relation between the object and an entity called an art world, the institutional theory provided a new justification for the activities of contemporary artists, and an answer to the philosophically distressing questions leveled at their work, which asked for a demonstration of skill or beauty, thought or emotion, in the works regarded as excellent, and which wanted to know if the same works could not have been produced by a chim-

panzee, child, insane person, or any ordinary member of the society without particular artistic talent. The latter suggestion—that anyone could do it—was perhaps most damaging. It implied that artists have no special gift or talent, and thus that the rationale for regarding them as special members of the art world (or the society), entitled by virtue of the display of that talent to special rewards, was fallacious. The institutional theory allows art world participants to define that special talent in a new way, as (for instance) the ability to invent imaginative new concepts, and thus gives legitimacy to the artist's special role and rewards.

Our analysis of the institutional theory adds some nuances to the description of art worlds. We see that art world officials have the power to legitimate work as art, but that power is often disputed. As a result, the aesthetician's desire for definitive criteria by which to distinguish art from nonart, criteria congruent with the actions of art world officials, cannot be satisfied. That is of some interest because aestheticians are not the only ones with such a desire. In fact, sociologists often insist that fields like the sociology of art or religion or science settle on some definitive criterion for their subject matter. If that criterion is expected to be congruent with either popular or official conceptions of art, the sociological wish for a definitive criterion is likewise unsatisfiable.

We see, too, that in principle any object or action can be legitimated as art, but that in practice every art world has procedures and rules governing legitimation which, while not clear-cut or foolproof, nevertheless make the success of some candidates for the status of art very unlikely. Those procedures and rules are contained in the conventions and patterns of cooperation by which art worlds carry on their routine activities.

We see how one might speak of all the arts as comprising one big art world. Insofar as members of specialized sub-worlds cooperate in some activities related to their work, that cooperative activity—be it vis-à-vis government censorship, the development of nationalist art, or multimedia collaboration—can be seen as the operation of one big art world. Such cooperation may be relatively uncommon, and probably is

*Reder  
"inspecting" talent*

*100% of art  
is produced  
by the  
state*

*voice of the people*



most of the time in any society, so that we might want to say that the operative art worlds are those of the particular media. However, this, like others, is an empirical question, whose answer will be found by research.

We see, finally, that aestheticians (or whoever does the job) provide the rationale by which art works justify their existence and distinctiveness, and thus their claim to support. Art and artists can exist without such a rationale, but have more trouble when others dispute their right to do so. Art worlds, as they develop, therefore usually produce that rationale, whose most specialized form is aesthetics and whose most specialized producer, the philosopher.

2  
12e produkcija  
bez legitimacije

## 6 • Art and the State

States, and the governmental apparatus through which they operate, participate in the production and distribution of art within their borders. Legislatures and executives make laws, courts interpret them, and bureaucrats administer them. Artists, audiences, suppliers, distributors—all the varied personnel who cooperate in the production and consumption of works of art—act within the framework provided by those laws. Because states have a monopoly over making laws within their own borders (although not over the making of rules privately agreed to in smaller groups, so long as those rules do not violate any laws), the state always plays some role in the making of art works. Failing to exercise forms of control available to it through that monopoly, of course, constitutes an important form of state action.

Like other participants in the making of art works, the state and its agents act in pursuit of their own interests, which may or may not coincide with those of the artists making the works. Many states regard art as more or less a good thing—at the very least, as a sign of cultural development and national sophistication, along with modern highways and a national airline—and make laws and regulations