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## Art and audience

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Gary Iseminger

## Art and Audience

### I

In his book *Aesthetic Creation*<sup>1</sup> Nick Zangwill observes that 'most theories of art make some kind of essential reference to an audience', (128) and cites the theories of many of the most widely-respected Anglophone aestheticians of the last fifty years, philosophers of widely different persuasions, including Monroe Beardsley, Nelson Goodman, Arthur Danto, George Dickie, and Jerrold Levinson (with Tolstoy thrown in for good measure.) Seen against this background, perhaps the most striking claim in the book is that 'art has nothing essential to do with an audience'. (127) 'Reference to an audience in a theory of the nature of art is unnecessary'. (159) In this paper I want to consider Zangwill's attempted refutation of what he calls Audience Theories in the light of his Aesthetic Creation Theory and of my own account in *The Aesthetic Function of Art*,<sup>2</sup> which I did not there but will here describe as an Aesthetic Institution Theory.

### II

Zangwill aims to give an account of the essence of art in the traditional sense – an account of the separately necessary and jointly sufficient conditions for something's being a work of art. He does not take this to be a matter of conceptual or linguistic analysis, especially not of a concept that embodies what Kristeller called 'the Modern System of the Arts', comprising, on Kristeller's telling, painting, sculpture, architecture, music, and poetry.<sup>3</sup> Zangwill thinks that there is no such concept, or at least that it does not pick out a set of things that can be interestingly grouped together. Accordingly, he engages in some fairly serious gerrymandering, excluding from the class

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<sup>1</sup> Nick Zangwill, *Aesthetic Creation* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2007). Numbers in parentheses refer to pages in this book.

<sup>2</sup> Gary Iseminger, *The Aesthetic Function of Art* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2004).

<sup>3</sup> Paul Kristeller, "The Modern System of the Arts," in *Renaissance Thought and the Arts* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965).

of works of art such things as 'purely narrative' films, plays or novels and including such 'everyday creative activities' as 'industrial design, advertising, weaving, and whistling'. (78)

Such inclusions and exclusions are justified as yielding 'a class of things with an interesting unifying principle', (81) as follows:

Something is a work of art because and only because someone had an insight that certain aesthetic properties would depend on certain nonaesthetic properties; and, because of this, the thing was intentionally endowed with some of those aesthetic properties in virtue of the nonaesthetic properties, as envisaged in the insight. (36)

This claim is further spelled out as the claim that works of art have an 'aesthetic function' in the sense that they were made with the aim, at least in part, that they embody aesthetic properties, (99) where aesthetic properties are characterized by a list of *substantive* aesthetic properties – daintiness, dumpiness, elegance, balance, and the like, and (at least) two *verdictive* or *evaluative* aesthetic properties – beauty and ugliness. Furthermore, not only do the substantive aesthetic properties *supervene* on nonaesthetic properties, as is clear in Zangwill's statement of the theory, but the verdictive aesthetic properties *supervene* on the substantive ones. (38) Just as the gracefulness of a certain picture supervenes on its exhibiting a certain design, so that exhibiting that design is a way of being graceful, so beauty may *supervene* on gracefulness which is then a 'way of being beautiful'. (3)

If one accepts Zangwill's theory of art, then, it seems on its face that 'reference to an audience in a theory of the nature of art is unnecessary'. Where there is a work of art, there must only be somebody making something with certain kinds of properties on the basis of certain insights and with certain intentions – no audience, nor any thoughts of an audience, required. But Zangwill recognizes that matters are not so simple. This quick way with the idea that reference to an audience *is* necessary in a theory of art is blocked by the recognition that someone who makes this move must be assuming that aesthetic properties are what might be called *intrinsic* properties, while there is, as Zangwill is well aware, a long tradition of understanding them as *dispositions*, in particular, dispositions to provide certain kinds of experience *to an audience*. His argument against audience theories, which will be my main subject in this paper, tackles this problem head on.

### III

Before turning to this argument, let me make a few remarks about my aesthetic institution theory.

The Modern System of the Arts as described by Kristeller is an historical arrangement that arose in Western Europe in the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century in which some visual works, musical works, verbal works and others were grouped together as works of (Fine) Art and distinguished from such things

as mathematical theorems, scientific theories, and political speeches. There were, of course, controversies about possible additions and exclusions even as the system was forming, and have been even more as new technologies and other practices have made their cases that they are producers of works of art. But I think it is fair to say that 'our' concept of art – including mixed works such as operas, works of photography and phonography, weaving indeed (but perhaps not whistling) – is a recognizable development of this grouping. Thus the practice of art along with the attendant informal institution of the artworld, comprising chiefly people and formal institutions which recognize one another as participants in this practice – artists, critics, audiences, dealers, museums, orchestras, schools, and so on – was born about 250 years ago. (The distinct practices of painting, poetry, music, etc. with their attendant 'worlds' are obviously much older.) And in whatever way historical practices and informal institutions have a life-span the practice of art and the artworld still live (though opinions differ as to whether they thrive or are moribund).

What is the nature of this practice? Reflection on theoretical treatises that attended its birth and on claims for inclusion since made on behalf of additional sub-practices not originally included in it (often because they did not yet exist) support the thought that what all those sub-practices have in common was that they are all in some sense centrally concerned with the aesthetic, however that might ultimately be conceived. In *The Aesthetic Function of Art* I have tried to flesh out the sense in which all these practices, and hence the practice of art and the artworld, are 'aesthetic', as follows:

The function of the artworld and practice of art is to promote aesthetic communication',<sup>4</sup>

where an instance of aesthetic communication is paradigmatically somebody making something for someone else to appreciate (aesthetically), and appreciating something (aesthetically) is finding the experiencing of that thing to be valuable in itself.<sup>5</sup>

Aesthetic communication has, of course, existed in many cultures and over many millennia, not only prior to the artworld, but prior as well to any world of poetry or of painting; it becomes artistic communication

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<sup>4</sup> Gary Iseminger, *The Aesthetic Function of Art*, op. cit., 22.

<sup>5</sup> After using the phrase 'aesthetic appreciation' in an earlier version of this account, I changed it to 'appreciation' simpliciter in *The Aesthetic Function of Art*. My reason for doing this was to avoid the suspicion that I needed to give a prior account of the notion of the aesthetic, when the idea of appreciation as I explain it is the beginning of my account of the aesthetic. Nonetheless this choice has understandably occasioned misunderstanding. Noël Carroll is right to say that I have 'defined appreciation simpliciter in terms which many philosophers reserve for aesthetic appreciation' but wrong to suggest that I did not recognize that I was doing this and intend to do so. See Noël Carroll, 'On the Aesthetic Function of Art,' *The Philosophical Quarterly*, vol. 58 (2008), 736. See also *The Aesthetic Function of Art*, op. cit., 34–35.

– an artist creating a work of art for an artistic audience to appreciate  
 – when the artworld exists and this activity is in some appropriate way related to that artworld. This occurs most obviously when the artist and audience (and other members of the artworld) recognize one another as fulfilling appropriate roles in the practice of art. A work of art is thus paradigmatically something created within the artworld to be appreciated by an audience.

The connection between work and world, however, may be considerably weaker. Clearly many paintings and sculptures that we now admire in museums, many pieces of music that we hear in concert halls, many of the poems that we study in literature classes, were made outside of the artworld or on its fringes, or even wholly unaware of its existence, either because they were made before it existed or at some cultural distance from it. But the artworld is a capacious and welcoming institution and has no difficulty accommodating Homer and Dickinson, Bach and Ives, Rembrandt and Adolf Wölfli, Hiroshige and Li Bai. And on my view the artworld does well to assimilate artifacts made by people such as these, whatever other religious, social, etc. purposes they may serve or have served and wherever and whenever they may have been made, just to the extent that they reward appreciation in the sense that I have described it. And to that extent it is wholly appropriate for us to suppose that, unlike natural objects and scenes, they were made, at least in part, *to be* appreciated, so that we as part of an audience can be the recipients of acts of aesthetic communication by their makers, who are thereby artists and whose products are thereby works of art.

One can then say that the *practice* of art has an aesthetic function even more plausibly, though not in quite the same sense, as Zangwill claims that all *works* of art have an aesthetic function. This seems to me to be an historical fact, but it does not seem that such practices as art (and corresponding informal institutions – in this case, the artworld) have an essence in any strong sense; one can imagine the artworld getting out of the aesthetics business. (Some people think it already has, and some of these people even think that that's a good thing.)

This, then, is not a theory of the essential nature of works of art, but rather of the actual historical nature of a practice and informal institution – art and the artworld. It is obvious that any such theory will make copious and essential reference to an audience. The members of the artworld include members of audiences as surely as they include artists (and critics, and dealers, and presenters, and scholars, and etc.)<sup>6</sup> To the extent that the existence of works of art depends on the existence of the artworld (however tenuous the relation may be in particular cases), then, that existence depends on the existence of an audience.

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<sup>6</sup> If anything like what I've just said is right, then, though it certainly seems true (and it is not at all surprising) that the vast majority of works of art have an aesthetic function in something like Zangwill's sense, having such a function is not *essential* to being a work of art.

Furthermore, if the fostering of aesthetic *communication*<sup>7</sup> – people making things for *others* to appreciate – is the function of the artworld, part of its function is to provide the ‘others.’ ‘Audience-building’ is as important a part of what the practice of art strives to achieve as the fostering of creativity in artists.

The thesis that the function of the practice of art and the informal institution of the artworld is to promote aesthetic communication is thus in more than one way committed to a theory of what works of art are that makes essential reference to an audience. All the more reason to take seriously Zangwill’s argument against audience theories, to which I now turn.

#### IV

Zangwill begins his argument, which constitutes Chapter 6 of his book, by considering several possible counter-examples – novels that Kafka intended to have destroyed after his death, sculptures intended to be buried in tombs, private poetry, sketches for paintings. He finds the second two more convincing than the first two, but, not surprisingly, he does not put much faith in intuitive appeal to counter-examples. ‘An argument of principle would be better’. (133) The argument he constructs is summarized at the end of the chapter, thus:

We must attribute to art properties that are intelligibly held to be valuable properties. But once we do so, artists’ thoughts about those valuable properties can rationally explain why they made one work of art rather than another, or none at all. Either the valuable properties are dispositions with respect to an audience, or not. If not, the audience drops out immediately. But if the valuable properties *are* dispositions to affect an audience, we then lose the rationality of making a work of art in cases where artists have no concern for others.... So...a concern with another’s experiences...can[not] explain the creation of many artworks. It follows that purely dispositional audience theories fail the rationality requirement. I conclude that reference to an audience in the theory of the nature of art is unnecessary. (158–159)<sup>8</sup>

The final step is made clearer if the following earlier remark is thought of as being interpolated just before the last sentence quoted above:

If the creation of art can sometimes be rationally explained without any reference to an audience’s experience, then we cannot maintain that a relation to an audience’s experience is part of the essence of art. (140)

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<sup>7</sup> Zangwill at one point observes that an emphasis on communication is a natural background from which Audience Theories often emerge.

<sup>8</sup> I here omit a part of the argument involving the claim that related considerations also rule out an explanation in terms of the artist’s own experiences.

## V

Here is a regimentation of the argument, with just enough exposition of the premises along the way to facilitate understanding.

Suppose, first, where A is an artist who creates work of art W, and S properties are significant properties in the sense that they can intelligibly be 'valued or thought desirable', (135) that:

(1) A believes that W has S properties.

Beethoven might have believed, for example, that the slow movement, *Adagio molto e cantabile*, of his *Symphony No. 9* was beautiful in a noble and restrained way.

Suppose, next, that:

(2) There is a sufficient rational explanation of W's existence.

Zangwill here invokes a distinctive view about the aims of philosophical theories, namely, that they should not be primarily concerned to capture the extension of the notion at issue, if only because it is often not clear at the margins what that extension is. (Recall his willingness to gerrymander the class of works of art.) Rather they should aim to account for '*much that we independently believe*' [original italics] concerning what we are theorizing about, in this case, works of art. (19) Now some of these beliefs may be beliefs about extension – about which things are and which are not works of art. But more important, in his view, is our belief in the *value* of our artistic activities, chiefly that producing and consuming works of art are good things to do. A theory of art should aim to explain these activities by showing how they are 'rational and worthwhile, or at least how they seem rational and worthwhile to us'. (2) In this sense, then, a *rational explanation* of a human product or activity is one that shows why it is rational for people to produce it or to engage in it, and a successful theory of that product or activity will underwrite such an explanation.

Thus a candidate for such a rational explanation of the existence of the slow movement is Beethoven's belief that it has the S properties of being beautiful in a noble and restrained way, and, supposing that it, or something like it, is true, the strategy of Zangwill's argument is to show that such an explanation requires no reference to an audience or thoughts of an audience on Beethoven's part.

Now S properties, may or may not be dispositional in the specific sense of being explicable only as dispositions 'to produce experiences in a certain audience'. (142) (Call dispositional properties of this sort D properties).<sup>9</sup> If they are not, then Beethoven's believing that the movement is beautiful

<sup>9</sup> Zangwill does not restrict S properties to aesthetic properties, because the argument depends only on their being valued properties, whatever else they might be. But the properties of

seems to be a sufficient rational explanation of his composing it; if one takes it that something one can make will be valuable, it is rational to take steps to bring it into existence. That is to say,

- (3) If S properties are not D properties, then if A believes that W has S properties, then A's believing that W has S properties is a sufficient rational explanation of W's existence.

That is to say, given that the S properties are what might be called *intrinsic* properties of W, plainly no reference to an actual audience or A's thinking of an audience is required to provide a rational explanation of W's existence, just Beethoven's desire and successful effort to create something beautiful. So under this assumption reference to an audience is unnecessary for a sufficient rational explanation of the existence of at least some works of art; hence, an audience is not 'essential' for something to be a work of art.

But, of course, many philosophers have held that S properties *are* D properties.<sup>10</sup> If this could plausibly be maintained, and the S properties themselves could not be explained without reference to an actual or possible audience, then essential reference to an audience might sneak in 'by the back door'. (142) A's belief that W had S properties would be a belief whose very *content* included reference to an audience.

Zangwill's strategy for dealing with this apparent possibility is to consider under what conditions it might still be rational for A to create W even if the S properties *were* dispositions to create an experience in an audience, and to argue that those conditions are not always fulfilled in works of art. Thus the next premise, call it the *altruism condition*, is:

- (4) If S properties are D properties, then if there is a sufficient rational explanation of W's existence, A must have an altruistic interest in an audience's experience.

If we now add the plausible premise that the altruism condition fails:

- (5) A need not have an altruistic interest in an audience's experiences,

it follows from (2), (4), and (5) that:

- (6) S properties are not D properties,<sup>11</sup>

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works of arts that have typically been valued and often analyzed as dispositions to produce experiences in audiences are aesthetic properties of the sort that make up Zangwill's list.

<sup>10</sup> Zangwill cites Beardsley. (142) A famous example is St. Thomas's claim '*Pulchra sunt quae visa placent*.'

<sup>11</sup> This step explains Zangwill's remark that he 'may have stumbled inadvertently upon a powerful argument against purely dispositional theories of aesthetic value'. (159n37)

and from (1), (3), and (6) that:

(7) A's believing that W has S properties is a sufficient rational explanation of W's existence.

Finally, a principle underlying what Zangwill characterizes as a move 'from minimal explanation to essence', invoked in the interpolated quotation at the end of the preceding section, may be expressed thus:

(8) If there is a work W such that A's believing that W has S properties is a sufficient rational explanation of W's existence, then a relation to an audience's experience is not part of the essence of art,

and from (7) and (8) it follows that:

(9) A relation to an audience's experience is not part of the essence of art.

## VI

I want, first, to challenge premise (4). It is not obvious to me that, if the beauty of the Beethoven slow movement, for example, is a disposition to cause a certain experience in some actual or possible audience, then Beethoven's only motive for creating that work with that property would have to be an altruistic concern for some audience's experience. Even if he had only selfish motives for wanting to produce a work of beauty, if that S property *were* to be a D property, then producing such a work would *be* to produce something with an appropriate disposition to affect an audience in a certain way. Indeed, no matter what the status of S properties might be, if he wanted to test his results, he might seek out a knowledgeable and sympathetic audience and see if the experiences of its members confirmed the success of his creative efforts without necessarily being in any way motivated by the thought that he was enriching their experience.

If I am right in this, then the sub-argument from (2), (4) and (5) to:

(6) S properties are not D properties,

is unsound, and, hence, so is the argument to the ultimate conclusion that reference to an audience in a theory of art is unnecessary.

An observation about premise (8) is also in order. If one accepts the Aesthetic Institution account that I have outlined, according to which being a work of art involves standing in some at least minimal appropriate relation to the artworld such as I have described, and the artworld is conceived of as including, among other people, audience members, then it seems that,

even though the existence of a painting or poem required no audience nor thought of an audience by its maker, its status as a work of art requires the existence of the artworld and hence of an audience. So a defender of this kind of a 'theory' of works of art, if not of their essence in any significant sense, can still claim that reference to an audience is necessary for a theory, no matter whether or not S properties should turn out to be D properties and even in the face of the most convincing counter-examples Zangwill proposes.

## VII

Zangwill talks in many places of the role of audiences in art and readily concedes that they are in fact an important part of art as it is practiced and that explaining that role is as important as explaining the role of the artist. We want to know not only why it is rational for artists to produce art but why it is rational for audiences to consume it. But he claims that, once one agrees that the work has or is intended to have valued S properties, there is a *rational convergence* (138) of the artist and the audience on those properties. If the artist's believing that the work has valued S properties is a sufficient rational explanation of the artist's making it, so is the audience member's believing this very same thing a sufficient rational explanation of his or her 'taking an interest' in it. (138).

The question of why artists want to make works of art and the question of why audiences want to experience them can both be answered by a theory which appeals to the fact that works of art have the valued S properties. (137)

But if it then seems that the artist and the audience are explanatorily on a par, a principle of *minimal explanation* kicks in:

What is the *minimum* that we can postulate to attain a rational explanation of artistic creation? The answer is swift. The intention to realize S properties would suffice to explain an artist's activity. (138)

Neither an audience nor any thoughts of an audience is required.

So we can give a rational explanation of the creation of art solely by reference to an artist's desire and intention to realize S properties. (138)

The emphasis once again is on what is required for a rational explanation of why a work of art exists, and the claim is that the only thing needed for a rational explanation of a work's existence is the artist's thoughts and intentions with regard to those properties. The rationality of the audience's activities then directly 'falls out' as a consequence, but clearly those activities are not necessary conditions of the existence of the work in the way the artist's activities are.

Zangwill recognizes that this argument presupposes that S qualities are not D qualities, and proceeds to propose the argument I have been considering that effectively aims to show that they are not. But leaving

aside my objections to this argument, I want to turn finally to a separate issue.

### VIII

As I have observed, Zangwill describes the aim of a 'theory' of the nature of art as explaining 'much that we independently believe' (19) about works of art, especially why they 'appear to us to be worth making, preserving, and using' (6) and how these judgments of value are manifested in our artistic activities, in our 'traffic' with art. (6) Of these three broad categories of activities, he is mainly concerned to explain artists' making and audiences' using art, or as he sometimes puts it, the 'production and consumption of art'. Artists' making and producing are typically described as creating, as befits the title of the book. Audiences' using and consuming are sometimes described as contemplating, more often as appreciating, and perhaps most frequently specifically characterized as *experiencing*, as for example, when he proposes that the existence of the artwork with its valued S properties is sufficient to answer both 'the question of why artists want to make works of art and the question of why audiences want to *experience*' [my emphasis] them.

I think that it is indeed one of things 'we independently believe' about works of art that audiences want to experience them, but I do not think that Zangwill's creation theory provides a sufficient rational explanation of this fact. That a thing has (will have, is thought to be likely to have, is intended to have) valued qualities might be sufficient to explain why someone would want to make it, but it does not by itself explain why someone else might want to *experience* it as opposed merely to valuing its existence or wanting to know that it exists. There are many things that have valued qualities (sharp surgical tools, for example) that one might be glad existed and glad to 'use' in the sense of having been operated on by a skilled surgeon wielding them, but would not value *experiencing* (feeling the incision being made.) There are also things with qualities that one values that cannot be experienced, as one might value some of the relations between various natural forces that make human life possible on this planet but cannot in general experience (see, hear, etc.) them.

Equally unexplained is why the particular valued qualities that typically do rationally explain why artists create works of art are in fact experienceable properties. Is the overwhelming preference of artists to produce paintings, prints, and sculptures to be *seen*, pieces of music to be *heard*, poems to be *read*, merely an accident or a prejudice? If that particular aspect of our artistic activities is to receive a rational explanation, the view that the function of the artworld and practice of art is aesthetic specifically in the sense that it is to promote aesthetic communication as I understand it – the making of something with the aim and effect that it be (aesthetically) appreciated, where (aesthetic) appreciation is finding the *experiencing* of something to be valuable in itself – is in a good position to provide it.

## IX

The Aesthetic Institution Theory takes works of art to be fundamentally connected with an informal institution, one of whose components is an audience, understands art as a form of communication between artists and audience members, thinks of the most important properties of works of art as properties that are experienceable by members of an audience, and is even inclined to analyze some of those properties as capacities to afford experiences valued in themselves by audience members. It is an audience theory in about as many ways as it can be. If it can evade Zangwill's argument against audience theories in general while meeting his standards of rational explanation more fully than his own Aesthetic Creation Theory, it presents a serious alternative to that theory within the broadly aestheticist tradition, recently revived, to which they both belong.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Zangwill advances several criticisms to the Dickie's Institutional Theory of art. (160–166). Though I will not argue the case here, I think that the facts that my account is not an essentialist theory of the nature of works of art and that it is as much aestheticist as it is institutional renders it immune to these criticisms.