

# Nick Zangwill

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## Reply to Gary Iseminger on aesthetic properties and audiences

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Tekst jest udostępniony do wykorzystania w ramach dozwolonego użytku.

Nick Zangwill

### Reply to Gary Iseminger on Aesthetic Properties and Audiences

(A) In his interesting critique, Gary Iseminger concentrates on my general argument against audience theories of art. However, he sketches his "aesthetic institutional theory" of art by way of contrast with my Aesthetic Creation Theory (see further his *The Aesthetic Function of Art*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004). Iseminger and I are broadly speaking on the same team in that we both defend an aesthetic approach to art, but we diverge over the form that such a theory should take. Before I focus on differences, let me celebrate our joint endeavour! I take the variety of options for an aesthetic view of art to be a testament to vitality of that tradition. And aesthetic theorists of different kinds can share arguments for the general kind of view.

Iseminger's positive theory is an *indirect* aesthetic theory, which foregrounds certain institutions. (The view is not far from Nathan's 'practice' theory of art.) Iseminger thinks that the practice or institution of art has an aesthetic function. Works of art get to be art because of the role they have in such a practice. He also allows that art practices or institutions *have* aesthetic functions, but *not* essentially. Moreover, the framework allows it is not essential for all works of art to have aesthetic functions. Thus Iseminger (like Nathan) embraces a social account of art practices, which prioritizes the aesthetic in the constitution of the practice. This is an interesting position. I have sympathy with it in so far as it deploys the notion of the aesthetic. However, I think that there is a loss in explanatory power given such a theory, just as there is for Danto and Dickie's theories.

Either the social practice is explained or not. If not, the existence of the institution is an unexplained explainer. This is unsatisfactory. The existence of the institution needs to be explained. But if some explanation of the institution can be given, either it is a rational explanation or not. If not, it is unsatisfactory. It is true that some phenomena emerge only through cooperative behaviour – they come into existence through joint activity. And the phenomena may not be intended to be brought about by the participants; instead it emerges out of game-theoretic pressures on

joint behaviour. Art is not like this. I would not assume methodological individualism across the board. But we can give rational explanations of individual artist's behaviour. The social practice depends, in part, on such behaviour. Now if individual rational explanations can be given of artistic behaviour, then the existence of the social institution of art can be rationally explained in such terms. If so, we can cut out the institution and directly give rational explanations of art activities. The social explanation would become irrelevant or at least derivative. It would not be fundamental.

So I worry about an indirect theory of art that identifies art via membership to an institution or social practice. I think art institutions are what they are in virtue of works of art, rather than vice versa.

(B) I now turn to Iseminger's critique of my anti-audience argument. He offers a nice reconstruction of that argument. He then challenges my premise that a rational explanation of artistic activity, which appeals to significant properties of works of art that are dispositions to affect audiences, must include an assumption of altruism on the part of the artist. I am not quite sure I followed the counter-argument. I think that Iseminger charges that the anti-audience argument helps itself to an unearned anti-dispositional assumption. He challenges my claim that if the significant properties of art were dispositional properties then it would only be rational to realize them given an (altruistic) concern with an audience. This still seems right to me. If the significant properties *are* dispositions then why would it be rational to generate the disposition? Surely, only because of a desire that the disposition be manifested. Why create something brittle or soluble? Surely with the hope that it will break or dissolve. Similarly, in the case of art: if the significant properties are dispositional properties, we must have an interest in the disposition being manifested. But that manifestation is the audience's experiencing the thing. But artists do not always care about that.

Perhaps an ideal audience is defined either as those who have a godlike ability to recognize aesthetic properties, or just as those who are well 'informed' with refined 'sensibilities'. However, with either notion of an ideal audience, there is a Euthyphro issue. One composes for an ideal audience, let us suppose; but that is *because* it would appreciate the aesthetic properties of the work. 'Because' denotes a fundamental dependency relation, which is explanatory, and which may be stronger than mere metaphysical necessity. Goodness and God-approved might be mutually necessarily linked despite a dependency flowing one way or the other, depending on whether one is a divine commandment or autonomist theorist about ethics. Similarly, beauty might be metaphysically necessary and sufficient for ideal audience appreciation, even though dependency and explanatory relations flow only in one direction. The ideal audience appreciates things because of their aesthetic properties (just as the gods love what is pious because it is pious). If so, we may explain an artist's creation of aesthetic properties without the appeal to an audience's experience. Perhaps those experiences

are a foreseen but unintended consequence in many cases. It is a fact that artist's sometimes have no concern with audiences (composed of other people or even their own future selves). If the dependency flowed from ideal audiences to aesthetic properties then this would be irrational. But if it flows from aesthetic property to audience's experience, then it is rational. Hence the audience drops out of the picture as part of the essence of art, since art production can be explained without it.

Lastly, Iseminger wonders why aesthetic properties would be experientable on my view. The answer falls out of the nature of aesthetic properties. The artist need never actually experience what he has created. But the aesthetic properties themselves are essentially experientable, in a sense. Beauty, for example, is something we take pleasure in; but beauty is realized in nonaesthetic properties, and we do not merely cognize the existence of the nonaesthetic properties that determine beauty, we perceptually represent them. It follows that appreciating the beauty of a thing requires the perception of it. There may, however, be some cases, such as where someone reads a score and gets pleasure from that; but that is because they form an aural perceptual image of sounds, which generate aesthetic properties. Given what aesthetic properties are, artists, on a non-audience view, will generate experientable properties.