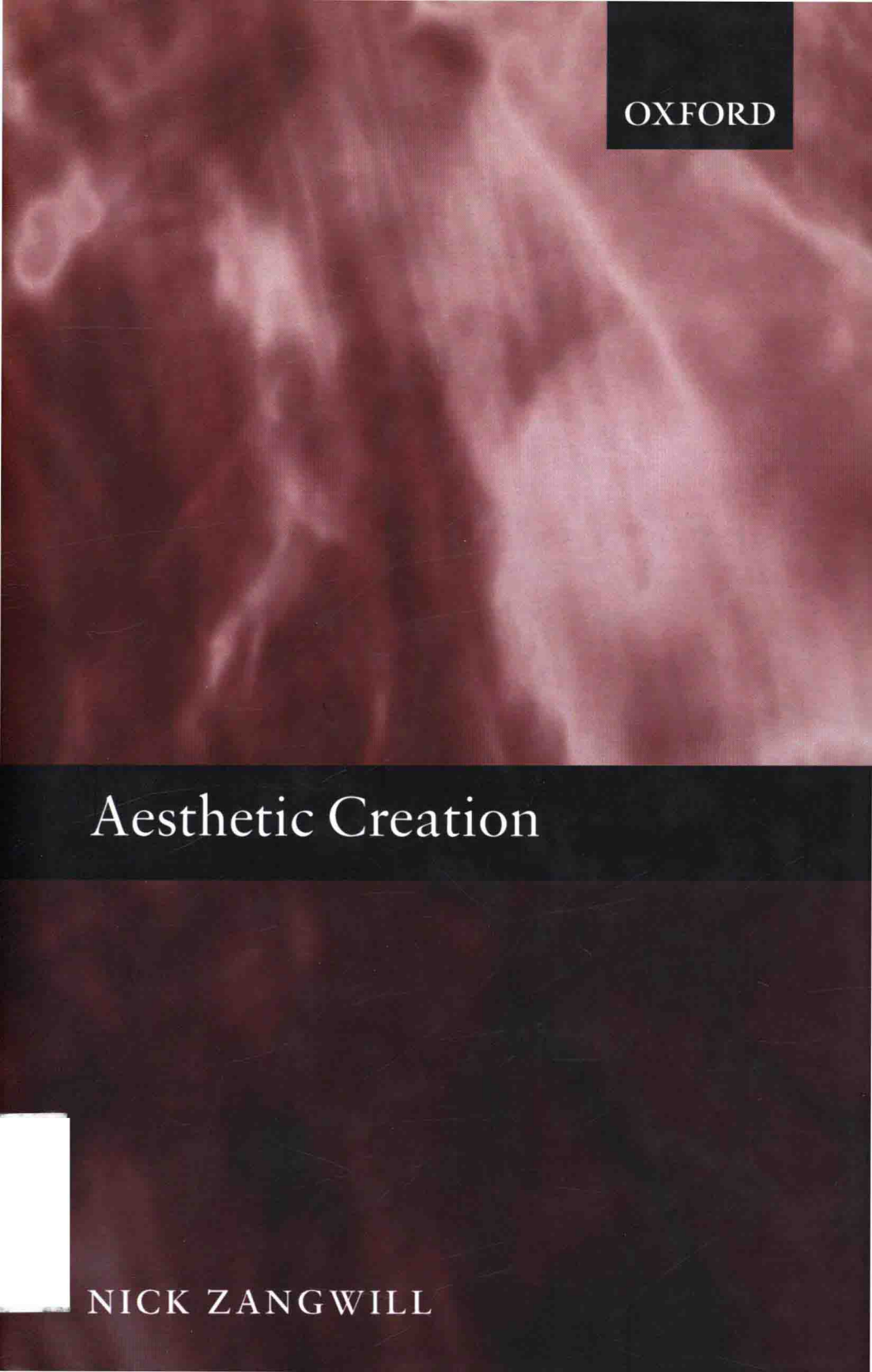
OXFORD
Aesthetic Creation
NICK ZANGWILL

What is the purpose of art? What drives us to make it? Why do we value art and consume it? Nick Zangwill argues that we cannot understand the nature of art without first answering these fundamental questions. On his view, which he dubs 'the Aesthetic Creation Theory', a work of art is something created with an aesthetic aim. More specifically, the function of art is to have certain aesthetic properties in virtue of its non-aesthetic properties, and this function arises because of the artist's insight into the nature of these dependence relations and the intention to bring them about. In defending this view, Zangwill provides an account of aesthetic action and aesthetic creative thought and shows how the Aesthetic Creation Theory is not threatened by two kinds of seeming counterexamples to aesthetic theories of art: narrative art and twentieth-century avant-garde art. *Aesthetic Creation* also contains a critique of a range of rival views, including Dickie's institutional theories of art, accounts of art that make essential reference to an audience, and sociological theories which purport to explain the nature of art without recourse to the notion of the aesthetic.

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AESTHETIC CREATION

For Takahiro

岳洋に捧ぐ

Preface

In this book I defend a particular version of the aesthetic theory of art. Many people who have no sympathy with any such view have nevertheless helped me considerably to develop, refine and to defend the view. My greatest debt is to Jerrold Levinson, for written comments and discussion—but not agreement!—on most of the papers from which the chapters derive, and for encouragement over many years. For comments on the whole manuscript I am grateful to John Bender, Malcolm Budd and Peter Kivy. I received very useful written comments on the papers from which the chapters originated from: Stephen Davies, Simon Evnine, Brian Garrett, Berys Gaut, Serge Guilbaut, Alan Goldman, Gary Kemp, Matthew Kieran, Philip Percival and Robert Stecker.

The chapters were all originally published as papers, but they have all been more or less rewritten for this volume. Some new material has been added. Two of the papers were originally given as talks at the national meetings of the American Society of Aesthetics, in Reno, NV, and Washington, DC.

I intend each chapter to stand as far as possible on its own, which leads to some repetition of basic principles about aesthetic properties, dependence and contextualism. Partly this is due to the origin of the chapters as journal articles. And partly it is because I do not flatter myself that people will read this book from cover to cover. There are some places where I rely on arguments and considerations offered in other chapters. Discussion of certain topics is distributed throughout this book, such as the discussion of appropriation, creative thinking and the sociology of art. Those with specific interests in a topic that is dispersed in the book might find the indexes useful.

I would like what I write here to be of interest to non-philosophers. But I recognize that some parts are likely to seem somewhat technical or abstruse, particularly the more metaphysical discussions. I hope that those who are not interested in such matters will skip them and continue with something that speaks to them more directly. I make no apology for metaphysical discussion, however. There is no escaping metaphysics.

This book was more or less complete in 2001. I originally envisaged the material sharing the same covers as what became my book *The*

Metaphysics of Beauty (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001) But the pursuit of various other projects kept it from an earlier completion. Some work was done during a year in which I held visiting fellowships at Harvard University, MIT and The University of California at Berkeley. A sabbatical from Glasgow University, with a matching sabbatical from the Arts and Humanities Research Board, made that year possible.

I do not claim much originality for the view defended here. In my view the greatest book on aesthetics written in the twentieth century is probably Monroe Beardsley's *Aesthetics* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1958), and I am happy to follow in his footsteps in many respects. This book falls comfortably in what was the mainstream trend of aesthetics in Western philosophy since Plato. This tradition is now widely thought to be passé. Some readers will think that any aesthetic approach to art is 'conservative'; but I do not care much about that. One generation's conservative is the next generation's radical, and vice versa. The aesthetic tradition was under attack for much of the twentieth century. However, that tradition, like many good things that we can easily take for granted, needs articulation, nurturing and vigorous defence, not the least so that its glories can be bequeathed to future generations and not squandered.

N.Z., London

Contents

Preface ix

Introduction 1

Summary of Chapters 13

1. Groundrules in the Philosophy of Art 16
2. Art as Aesthetic Creation 36
3. Are There Counterexamples to Aesthetic Theories of Art? 59
4. Art Essence, Identity and Survival 82
5. Aesthetic Functionalism 97
6. Art and Audience 127
7. Against the Sociology of Art 167

Acknowledgements 180
Bibliography 181
Subject Index 187
Author Index 191

Introduction

1 BASIC QUESTIONS

Sometimes it is best not to begin at the beginning. The question "What is art?" might seem to be the obvious starting point for the philosophy of art. Surely, one might think, an inquiry into the nature of art should take the question "What is art?" to be central and therefore ask that question first. After all, if we want to know what art is, what else should we ask?

However, my view is that this is the wrong place to begin. I shall address that question, in a way; and, in a way, I shall propose an answer to it. But I think that there are questions that should precede it. If asked alone, the question, "What is art?", invites us to speculate on what works of art have in common and on how they differ from other things. It invites us to conceive of the project of understanding art as being about finding a description that snugly fits all and only those objects and events that are art. But producing such a description would not address what really puzzles us about art. It would not settle the perplexities that drove us to philosophical reflection on art in the first place. There are other important and pressing questions. Why are we concerned with art? What drives us to make it and behold it? Why does it motivate us? Why do we think it important? Why do we value it? In my view we need to ask these questions *before* we ask the "What is art?" question. Our perplexity was never really about a bizarre class of *objects*, but rather about *us* and our bizarre attitudes to those objects. It is only out of a concern to answer these prior questions that we need to find an answer to the "What is art?" question. In thinking about art, reflection on value and our evaluations should precede more metaphysical questions.[1] And

[1] In my view, this is true in quite a few areas of philosophy where purely metaphysical debates reach stalemate. Reflection on values and our evaluations helps to break the deadlock. The debates over personal identity and free will are examples.

if our inquiry into art turned into a purely metaphysical one, we would have lost the thread of what originally puzzled us.

My guiding methodology in the theory of art is that of seeking a *rational explanation*. I want to explain our art-activities. And I want to make our art-activities intelligible. That is, I want to show how they are rational and worthwhile, or at least how they seem rational and worthwhile to us. I argue for this methodology in Chapter 1. In later chapters, I apply this methodology in order to support the view of art that I favour, and as a way of arguing against rival views.

2 THE AESTHETIC CREATION THEORY

I shall develop and defend a particular version of the *aesthetic theory of art*. Aesthetic theories of art form a family. Roughly, according to an aesthetic theory of art, *having an aesthetic purpose* makes a thing art. Monroe Beardsley proposed a particular theory of art which rested on his instrumentalist view of aesthetic appreciation.[2]

The particular aesthetic theory of art that I develop in this book I call the Aesthetic Creation Theory. In a nutshell, this is the view that it is the function of art to have certain aesthetic properties in virtue of having certain nonaesthetic properties; and this function arises from our insight into these dependence relations and the intentional realization of them. Nature *possesses* aesthetic properties, but nature does not have the *function* of possessing them. That function has its origin in aesthetic intentions.

This theory depends on the notion of an aesthetic property, and on the principle that aesthetic properties depend on nonaesthetic properties. Obviously, we should *not* say that aesthetic properties are those possessed by works of art or that they are those properties that it is the function of art to possess. We need an independent definition of aesthetic properties. My view is that aesthetic properties should be delineated with reference to beauty and ugliness. Beauty and ugliness are the central aesthetic properties, and other properties are aesthetic if they stand in a particular, intimate relation to beauty and ugliness. Daintiness, dumpiness, elegance, balance and delicacy are so related,

[2] Monroe Beardsley, "An Aesthetic Definition of Art", in (ed.) Hugh Curtler, *What is Art?*, New York: Haven, 1983, but also conveniently reprinted in Peter Lamarque and Stein Olsen (eds.) *Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art*, Oxford: Blackwell, 2004

unlike nonaesthetic properties such as physical or representational properties. Daintiness, dumpiness, elegance, balance and delicacy are all *ways* of being beautiful or ugly. I pursued this account of aesthetic properties in my book *The Metaphysics of Beauty.*[3]

These are the main assumptions of the specific aesthetic theory that I develop and defend in this book. But for the moment let us stay with the general family of Aesthetic Theories of Art according to which a work of art is something that has an aesthetic purpose.

3 OBJECTIONS TO AESTHETIC THEORIES

There are two main sources of hostility to aesthetic theories of art of any sort. One source of hostility springs from a general hostility to the notion of the aesthetic. The notion of the aesthetic has not been popular in the twentieth century. Indeed, considerable dismissiveness has been directed at it. Many believe that the notion is somehow fraudulent and should be jettisoned. I disagree. I am in favour of the notion of the aesthetic. Those who say they reject the notion either fail to do so in practice or else produce patently false or unilluminating theories without the notion.

However, many philosophers and art theorists think that even if the notion of the aesthetic is not itself to be rejected, it is nevertheless a mistake to deploy the notion in trying to understand art. Again, I disagree. The notion of the aesthetic is in fact indispensable in understanding art. It is a fundamental mistake *not* to appeal to the aesthetic in giving an account of art. Deploying the notion of the aesthetic is essential if we are to understand art because it is essential if we are to *explain* our attitudes to art, and it is essential if we are to *justify* our attitudes to art.

The standard objection to aesthetic theories of art, of countless papers, textbooks and monographs, is that there are many works of art with no aesthetic purpose. That is, there are thought to be *counterexamples* to aesthetic theories of art. The usual source of counterexamples is twentieth century avant garde visual art.[4] Very many aestheticians in

[3] *The Metaphysics of Beauty,* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001.

[4] I use 'avant garde' in a broad sense so that it includes the artistic movements of the 1920s and 1930s that thought of themselves under that label. Thus, avant garde art includes the ready-mades of the early twentieth century. But I also use it to include pop art and conceptual art of the 1960s and onwards.

the last few decades have thought that it is *obvious* that the avant garde provides clear counterexamples to aesthetic theories of art, and so they think that such theories are easily shown to be false. It is common to hold that these examples *refute* the theory (a remarkably strong claim). This objection, using avant garde counterexamples, is *so* common that I want now to indicate, in brief, what my attitude to it is.[5]

4 'DEFINING' ART

There is often said to be a project called *defining art*, which is consecrated in aesthetics anthologies and textbooks. This project usually involves the search for 'necessary and sufficient conditions' for being art. Avant garde art enters the stage as a candidate counterexample to certain theories. The somewhat Hegelian picture that many urge us to accept is that theories of art attempt to describe art, but meanwhile art itself moves on and refutes the theories. The theories of art are pitched at something moving and changing, and they tend to describe art as it was but is no more.

This project of 'definition' is usually thought of as presenting the meaning of the word, or concept, "art". But it is in fact odd that this project is pursued by seeking 'necessary and sufficient conditions' for being a work of art. Giving necessary and sufficient conditions for something being X (a modal equivalence) is not the same as giving the meaning of "X" (a semantic equivalence). Water is necessary and sufficient for being H_2O, but there is no equivalence of meaning between "water" and "H_2O". In fact, the project of 'defining art' is clearly not coherent; the phrase "defining art" is not well-formed. One can define the word "art" but not art itself. Are those who seek a 'definition' really in search of what is sometimes called a 'real definition', which is not a matter of meanings? I suspect that those who pursue definitions in the philosophy of art have not made up their minds.

Suppose that the project that is being pursued is the analysis of the concept of art, and this concept is assumed to include painting,

[5] We will see in Chapter 3 that this objection usually rests on a hasty interpretation of the kinds of counterexamples that the critics have in mind. I argue that in fact there is not too much to worry about from twentieth century avant garde visual art. Almost all the usual examples are fairly easily tamed by an aesthetic theory without much difficulty. But what is more important, and needs to be highlighted now, is the methodologically naive approach that this kind of dialectic embodies.