

Must Aesthetic Definitions of Art be Disjunctive?*

Robert Stecker has argued that in order to account for the historical, functional, and institutional features of art and for the role played by intention, all feasible definitions of art must be disjunctive.¹ A definition of art is disjunctive if it states that *A* is art if it satisfies condition *x* or condition *y* (or condition *z*, etc.). Aesthetic definitions of art focus on aesthetic experiences, properties, attitudes, functions, etc., in order to explain what makes something art. As Stecker and others have pointed out, such theories face difficulties when it comes to dealing with art that is nonaesthetic (or at least that does not have the right sort of aesthetic features to satisfy the aesthetic definition in question).

In *Aesthetic Creation*,² Nick Zangwill suggests that since it appears that not all artworks have an aesthetic function, some artworks are *second-order* works of art—their status as artworks is parasitic on that of works that do have an aesthetic function. In other words, Zangwill's theory involves a disjunctive definition of art. I will examine his theory in the hope of showing that we do not need to appeal to disjunctive theories of art, and so the notion of second-order art may be unnecessary. I will not consider other potential problems for or arguments against Zangwill's theory, and although I will discuss only this particular aesthetic definition of art, I believe similar moves may be made with regard to other such definitions.

I shall begin by briefly describing Zangwill's theory before considering the three responses to nonaesthetic art that he discusses. I will then look at one of these approaches in more detail and argue that it warrants further attention.

I. THE AESTHETIC CREATION THEORY OF ART

To understand Zangwill's Aesthetic Creation Theory (ACT), we need to distinguish between aesthetic and nonaesthetic properties. Zangwill takes it that "Nonaesthetic properties include physical properties ... and secondary qualities.... [They] also include semantic or representational properties."³ That a painting is of a certain size, or depicts a certain person, or is predominantly of a particular color, then, are nonaesthetic properties. Aesthetic properties can be substantive or verdictive.⁴ Substantive aesthetic properties include those of being "dainty, dumpy, elegant, powerful, garish, delicate, balanced, warm, passionate, brooding, awkward, or sad."⁵ Verdictive properties are those of being beautiful or ugly (or, equivalently, of having or lacking aesthetic merit). The substantive/verdictive distinction does not play a central role in the issues I am concerned with in this essay, so I will refer only to aesthetic properties in general.

Zangwill takes it that aesthetic properties supervene on nonaesthetic properties. If properties of type *X* supervene on properties of type *Y*, then the instantiation of certain *Y*-type qualities necessitates that of certain *X*-type properties, although the instantiation of particular *X*-type properties need not necessitate any particular properties of type *Y*. With regard to aesthetics, the

supervenience relationship is such that something's having certain nonaesthetic properties determines that it has certain aesthetic properties.

That something has aesthetic properties does not mean that it is thereby a work of art. According to the ACT,

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.⁶

For Zangwill, insight involves acquiring knowledge of the determining relationship between certain nonaesthetic and aesthetic properties, and is not prompted by an instantiation of this relationship. Once insight is gained, the artist intentionally realizes the aesthetic properties by way of producing the nonaesthetic ones. This task must be carried out successfully: the nonaesthetic properties involved in the insight must be produced, and they must necessitate the relevant aesthetic properties.⁷

To summarize, then, Zangwill holds that for something to be an artwork, the artist must have had an insight into the necessary connection between certain nonaesthetic and aesthetic properties. This insight must then lead to an intention to produce something with these nonaesthetic features in order to realize the aesthetic ones. Finally, this intention must be acted on successfully. In order to distinguish these appropriately created aesthetic properties from those aesthetic properties that something may have regardless of anyone's intentions, I will henceforth refer to the former as Arthood-relevant Aesthetic Properties (AAPs).

II. ART WITHOUT AAPs

Zangwill is not worried about whether his theory includes more things than are usually counted as "fine art, high art or artworld art (whatever we call it)... If cake-decoration, tattooing and fireworks fall out as cases of art," he says, "that's fine for the aesthetic theorist."⁸ That his theory might not include things that *are* counted as "fine art," however, is more problematic. The worry is not that certain nonaesthetic properties of a piece might be more important than its aesthetic properties; as long as the nonaesthetic qualities were produced because (amongst other things, perhaps) they entail the production of the aesthetic properties, such a work will be an artwork. What causes difficulties for the ACT is the existence of pieces that are generally accepted as art but whose aesthetic qualities are not connected in the way required by the ACT with an insight of the artist.

So the question is: can something be an artwork despite lacking AAPs? Zangwill notes that "in at least *some* cases, such as Duchamp's famous urinal *Fountain* [link] and *L.H.O.O.Q.* [link] (*L.H.O.O.Q.* is a reproduction of the *Mona Lisa* with a moustache added), we have a complete rejection of *all* aesthetic properties."⁹ I think it is clear that here Zangwill means "all *arthood-relevant* aesthetic properties": it is by lacking AAPs—rather than any old aesthetic properties—that these works are problematic for the ACT. Further, Zangwill appears to accept that *Fountain* does have some aesthetic properties.¹⁰ Other problematic works for Zangwill's theory include Duane Hanson's "hyper-realist" sculptures [link]: "Hanson's sculpture seems to be an extreme case of works that only have meanings without any aesthetic aspiration, or even anti-aesthetic aspiration."¹¹

Zangwill suggests three ways in which we could attempt to deal with such cases. First, we could admit that the theory can account only for those works that *do* have AAPs. Secondly, we could "disjunctify" the ACT so that there is more than one way for something to be art. Finally,

we could claim that, on close inspection, these so-called hard cases do in fact appear to have AAPs.¹²

Zangwill rejects the first option. To accept that the ACT can account only for works that have AAPs would be to acknowledge that it fails as a general theory of art.

The second response takes it that pieces like *Fountain* can be accounted for by the ACT by acknowledging them as second-order works of art. “Such works have no immediate aesthetic function, their point lies in the fact that they are meant to be seen in the context of, and by contrast with, traditional works of art. They indirectly involve the aesthetic functions of those other works.”¹³ It is only because *L.H.O.O.Q.* and similar works refer to earlier artworks which themselves have aesthetic functions that these nonaesthetic works are considered to be art. Moreover, the earlier, first-order, artworks are artworks solely because they possess AAPs. Hanson’s sculptures, on the other hand, are artworks because they are “an instance of a *sort* of thing that has an essential aesthetic function.”¹⁴ They belong to a category of first-order works of art: sculptures.

This is the response that Zangwill plumps for. It allows his theory to function as a general definition of art by being disjunctive. On this view, to be an artwork is *either* to have aesthetic functions (i.e. AAPs), *or* to be contextually related to such an artwork or artworks in the way that *Fountain* and *L.H.O.O.Q.* are (by way of “commenting on” or appropriating first-order works) *or* (as with Hanson’s sculptures) by belonging to a category of first-order artworks.

If we are to accept this response, we need to know much more about the second and third disjuncts. For example, why do essays of art criticism that comment on first-order works fail to count as artworks (as presumably they ought to)? What does it take for something to “belong” to a category of artworks despite not being a first-order work? Much more could be said, but my aim here is to commend Zangwill’s third response, not criticize his second. I will turn now to this third response and argue that we can modify the ACT in a way that does not make it a disjunctive definition, but that does allow it to cope with nonaesthetic artworks.

III. DOES ALL ART HAVE AAPs?

The third option suggested—that we claim that so-called “nonaesthetic art” does in fact have AAPs—is rejected by Zangwill: “Danto says that *Fountain* was ‘daring, impudent, irreverent, witty, and clever.’ But those are surely not *aesthetic* qualities, although they are artistic properties.”¹⁵ Zangwill admits that he holds “perhaps a rather restrictive notion of the aesthetic.” He continues, “But I think that we need such a notion if the notion of the aesthetic is not to become a vacuous notion and the interesting issues dissipated. Given such a non-vacuous notion of the aesthetic it does seem that there are *some* works of art that have no aesthetic functions.”¹⁶

It does not seem obvious to me that taking wittiness, say, to be an aesthetic property is inappropriate, nor does it seem that doing so must result in an empty notion.¹⁷ I will, then, consider whether this line of thought can be rescued. This examination will necessarily be brief, but I hope to show that it is at least arguable that more could be made of this approach. I will concentrate on the quality of being witty, since this seems to me, of the properties mentioned, the best candidate for being an aesthetic quality.

Two conditions must be met for this third response to be an acceptable one. The first is that wittiness must be considered an aesthetic quality. The second is that we must be able to explain why *Fountain* is witty, but an identical urinal in a plumber’s shop is not. In other words, we must be able to show that the ACT can account for the role of context in art.

Whether wittiness is an aesthetic property is the kind of thing over which people can reasonably disagree. Frank Sibley has given “witty” as an example of an aesthetic property, and Noël Carroll suggests that Duchamp’s *In Advance of a Broken Arm* [link] (a snow shovel) “is a work of art because, among other things, it possesses the aesthetic property of being

humorous.”¹⁸ Perhaps Zangwill denies that being witty is an aesthetic property because wittiness seems connected with meaning, and, as noted earlier, he does not consider semantic properties to be aesthetic ones.¹⁹ I would argue, however, that, in the same way that the aesthetic quality of gracefulness might supervene on certain sensory, nonaesthetic properties of a work, the aesthetic quality of wittiness might supervene on certain semantic, nonaesthetic properties of the work. This could be done in two ways. Either we could claim that, *pace* Zangwill, some aesthetic properties are also semantic properties, and that wittiness is an example of this; or we could deny that any aesthetic properties are semantic ones, but hold that wittiness is not a semantic property but an aesthetic property—one that supervenes on nonaesthetic, semantic properties. To adopt this modification of the ACT, then, is to say that if *Fountain* is witty, it is because what it means is witty, in the same way that if a vase is graceful, it is because the shape of the vase is graceful. I will take it that we may allow wittiness to be an aesthetic property, and will now consider the role of context in art.

Zangwill says that his theory does allow for the importance of context in art.

We can say that the artistic intention is the intention that by creating nonaesthetic properties *in a wider context*, certain aesthetic properties are thereby realized. Or alternatively, we can say that the nonaesthetic properties of works of art, on which its aesthetic properties depend, can include relations to artistic contexts as well as intrinsic nonaesthetic properties.²⁰

If we accept the latter rendering of this point, then the aesthetic difference between *Fountain* and a similar urinal in a plumber’s shop depends on a difference in their nonaesthetic relational properties. Duchamp’s work refers to earlier sculptures and the art world in a way that the plumber’s does not. This would also explain how it is that *Fountain*—which, although an artifact, was neither made nor commissioned by Duchamp in order to realize an insight—can be considered as an artwork by the ACT. Duchamp’s insight presumably involved the idea that certain nonaesthetic features of the urinal-in-context (including, for instance, those of being a urinal, being put up for exhibition in an art gallery in 1917, and perhaps being exhibited with certain intentions in mind) would necessitate certain aesthetic qualities (such as wittiness).²¹ Thus the artwork is the urinal-in-context, rather than just the physical object.

Perhaps we can accept this, but it is still true that the nonaesthetic relational properties that determine *Fountain*’s aesthetic qualities involve recourse to the art world. Zangwill suggests that only those relations to contexts that are relations to *artistic* contexts be allowed into the collection of nonaesthetic properties on which aesthetic features supervene. If he is right, then we must take *Fountain* to be a second-order artwork. But Zangwill has not offered good reasons to allow only relations to artistic contexts into the supervenience base. Certainly it seems that in the case of *Fountain*, it is relations to artistic contexts that are most important: it would not be the work it is without the art world being the way that it is and has been in the past. In a similar way, however, a portrait of Napoleon, say, which gains its AAPs only by their supervening on its nonaesthetic relational property of being a portrait of *Napoleon*, could not be *that* piece of art (i.e. could not have *those* AAPs) without Napoleon’s having been the person that he was. If we imagine a possible world in which Napoleon never joined the army and instead became a shopkeeper in Corsica, then the same portrait (a physically identical painting, but this time of Napoleon-the-shopkeeper) would have different relational, nonaesthetic properties, and so different aesthetic properties. I would claim that such a portrait could have the property of being witty, and so be considered art because of this. Similar remarks could be made about Hanson’s sculptures.

So it seems that some artworks (e.g. *Fountain*, *L.H.O.O.Q.*, Hanson’s works, and the portrait of Napoleon) have arthood-relevant aesthetic features that supervene only on their *relational* nonaesthetic properties. In other words, the AAPs of these artworks depend on relations to things in the world. For some of these artworks, those things in the world are objects and events in the

art world; for others, they are European dictators and ordinary people. It seems to me that none of these relationships is problematic.

There are good reasons, then, for thinking that this third option warrants further investigation. Of course, what I have said will not help Zangwill's Aesthetic Creation Theory if it has flaws elsewhere. Even if this is the case, however, my discussion of Zangwill's third response to nonaesthetic art could be applied to other aesthetic definitions. I believe this gives us good reasons for denying that aesthetic definitions of art must be disjunctive.

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1. Robert Stecker, "Is It Reasonable to Attempt to Define Art?" in *Theories of Art Today*, ed. Noël Carroll (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2000), 48–53.

2. Nick Zangwill, *Aesthetic Creation* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2007), 70–71.

3. *Ibid.*, 37.

4. *Ibid.*, 37.

5. *Ibid.*, 100.

6. *Ibid.*, 36.

7. Surely there are utterly unsuccessful artworks? Zangwill says not. In the same way that, in order to truly be a joke (rather than just a remark), a joke must succeed at some minimal level, a work of art must also succeed. How successful is a work required to be? "We can leave this requirement deliberately vague: *some significant proportion* of aesthetic intentions must be successfully executed." *Ibid.*, 41.

8. *Ibid.*, 60.

9. *Ibid.*, 63.

10. *Ibid.*, 67.

11. *Ibid.*, 71–72.

12. *Ibid.*, 59–81. It is perhaps worth noting that in earlier work (Nick Zangwill, "Are There Counterexamples to Aesthetic Theories of Art?" *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 60.2 (2002): 111–18), Zangwill discusses a fourth possible response to these problematic cases. This approach is to argue that the very fact that certain artworks do not have AAPs is vital to their nature as artworks. The idea seems to be that we modify the ACT so that artworks must be intended either to have *or to lack* aesthetic properties. In *Aesthetic Creation*, Zangwill doesn't consider this approach on its own, but seems to think it supports either the first or second responses (Zangwill, *Aesthetic Creation*, 64 n9, 71, respectively). I won't discuss this fourth approach.

13. *Ibid.*, 70.

14. *Ibid.*, 72.

15. *Ibid.*, 66.

16. *Ibid.*, 74.

17. Others agree. For an example of a wider view of aesthetic properties than that favored by Zangwill, see, for instance, Noël Carroll, "Aesthetic Experience: A Question of Content," in *Contemporary Debates in Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art*, ed. M. Kieran (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), 69–97 (especially 89–91).

18. Frank Sibley, "Particularity, Art and Evaluation," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* Suppl 48 (1974): 8. Noël Carroll, *Philosophy of Art* (London: Routledge, 1999), 223.

19. Zangwill does discuss narrative art—poetry, literature, plays, films, etc.—and says, "It seems that there are arts of pure narrative meaning, where what is important is the story." (Zangwill, *Aesthetic Creation*, 73). Such works do not count as art under the ACT. Works like this have no aesthetic functions, he says, because all aesthetic qualities must depend (to some extent at least) on sensory properties (see

Nick Zangwill, *The Metaphysics of Beauty* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001), 127–45). The modification of the ACT I sketch here would allow such works to fall under it.

20. Zangwill, *Aesthetic Creation*, 50.

21. Duchamp might well have denied that such a psychological process took place, but since we can be mistaken about such things, it doesn't follow that such a process did *not* take place.

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