

Nick Zangwill

### Reply to Daniel O. Nathan on Art

I very much appreciate Daniel Nathan's thoughtful commentary on *Aesthetic Creation*. He describes my view accurately, with a full understanding of what is moving me, and with some sympathy for my methodological concerns, even if he thinks that I over emphasize some desiderata and even if he cannot endorse the particular aesthetic theory that I argue emerges from the methodological reflections. He makes a number of interesting criticisms.

(A) Nathan worries about doodles being classified as art according the aesthetic creation theory. Nathan says that this violates certain *intuitions* about the nature of art. I query this appeal to intuition. Whose concepts? Which intuitions? Why do such intuitions have evidential weight? We have intuitions about the physical world: that the earth is flat not round. More to the point we have intuitions about kinds. For example, it is intuitive that a whale is a fish. But such intuitions may be mistaken. Similarly with intuitions about what is art and what is not art. With intuitions I say at least that there is, or should be, a question mark standing over them. We are interested in the world, not in our concepts or intuitions. The question is: what are these things? And the question about concepts is: which do we need to understand the things? Which concepts *should* we have? Not: which *do* we have? As Nathan notes, for me, explanation trumps extension if there is a conflict. Or perhaps rather, for me, extension is subsumed under explanation. It is true that there are avant garde works that I exclude that other theories include. And there also are doodles that I include and they exclude. The question is where we go from there.

(B) Nathan worries about the success condition. I required that to some extent artists are right about aesthetic/nonaesthetic dependencies. Actually, I would not kill for the success condition. Perhaps aesthetic intent is enough.<sup>1</sup> A person might form an aesthetic intention but never get round to acting on it, in which case we do not have a work of art. Why did

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<sup>1</sup> See Nick Zangwill, *Aesthetic Creation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 41.

I endorse the success condition? I was drawing on general principles about artifacts. Artifacts have essential origins in intentions. But one can fail to make an artifact that one intends to make. I might intend to make a space rocket out of a television, but what I make is not a bad space rocket it is no space rocket at all, so far short has it fallen. If I succeed in making a bad space rocket, something has gone right, even if not quite enough. Similarly, I thought, with art. But anyway – I wonder whether the issue is important. I cannot see that much hangs on it. Most art gets a lot right, and a rational explanatory story is good both in cases of success and in cases of failure.

(C) Nathan also worries about the mental state condition whereby I required that artists intend to produce aesthetic properties by producing nonaesthetic properties. My requirement seems an over-intellectual picture of what happens in artist's heads. I agree that we need not consciously believe in aesthetic/nonaesthetic dependencies. However, Nathan thinks that we can aim directly to produce aesthetic properties. I don't think so. I think we must go through the nonaesthetic properties. We aim to produce aesthetic properties that are realized in certain nonaesthetic properties. So, to use Nathan's nice example, a dancer intentionally realizes beauty or grace *in* particular movements. Nathan says "She just moves with grace". But this seems too *under*-intellectual. Of course, some aesthetic properties of the dance are not intended by the dancer and just brought about by her; but others are there because she intended them. Retrospectively we might ask why she did what she did and the answer will invoke aesthetic properties in a specific nonaesthetic realization. Often we act automatically but with quite sophisticated intentions nonetheless. Consider driving. In a sense one 'Just drives...'. But a judge in court might ask why one stopped at a red light. Automatic actions still have intentional reasons and causes, and that also goes for automatic artistic actions. She intends *some* aesthetic properties to be realized in her physical movements. An animal, such as a cat, may "just move" with grace. But a cat is no dancer. The dancer knows what she is doing, unlike a graceful animal. The cat does not intentionally move gracefully; the dancer does. I think that aesthetic/nonaesthetic dependence is a ubiquitous principle of aesthetic thinking, one that we all tacitly grasp in thinking in aesthetic terms. Any time we think that aesthetic properties are instantiated it is always because of the nonaesthetic properties in which they are realized (apart from special cases like testimony). I am requiring something similar of artists' inspired thoughts about non-actual aesthetic properties. Is this over-intellectual? I do not think so, although it is somewhat intellectual. The principle of aesthetic/nonaesthetic dependence is tacit knowledge, which we presuppose in aesthetic thinking and desiring and intending and acting and inspiration. If it is essential to one kind of aesthetic thought it is essential to all.

(D) Nathan considers the case of copying a scene from nature, which turns out to have positive aesthetic properties. Is that a work of art? Nathan

worries that there is an epistemological problem about knowing whether something is art, because it depends on knowing the nature of inaccessible intentions. I couldn't see this. In such cases, we can often just ask the artist what his motives were in making the thing. And even where we have no evidence of artist's intent, there would be a similar problem for almost all theories of art since they almost all impose constraints on the mental states of art makers. I couldn't see why there is a problematic unverifiability here. In the case of Cycladic sculpture, inference to the best explanation suggests that beauty was an important aim of the makers. Beauty was intentionally realized there in those marble forms, even though we cannot ask their makers, and even though there are no records that indicate their intentions. However, with many other artifacts, archeologists we do not and perhaps cannot know. That is a good epistemological problem, not a bad one. Sometimes we cannot know whether something is or is not art, and our theory should preserve that.

(E) Nathan briefly proposes a kind of aesthetic functionalism that includes many avant garde works *and* that also yields the explanations that I desire. He has in mind a 'practice' theory, which models art on the law. On such a view, the law has a certain social function, but may not always discharge it and may even evolve away from that original function. Similarly, Nathan thinks, with the social practice of making and consuming art – which may have had an aesthetic function, although not every artwork has an aesthetic function, and that social function may evolve and the aesthetic function may no longer be central. Nathan suggests that on such a theory, we can have our explanatory cake and also eat the extension. Part of his proposal is to widen the notion of the aesthetic so that literary values turn out to be aesthetic, rather than just visual or aural aesthetic features. For Beardsley, wit counts as an aesthetic feature. So why not broaden the notion of the aesthetic and colonise the avant garde? I don't want to spoil the cake-eating party, but I worry: (1) will there now be a deluge? Even more things outside the high-artworld will be included. Nathan worried about doodles; but now we will have mobile phone text messages. Many are witty, for example. Including text messages seems worse to me than including doodles. (2) Even if we broaden the notion, and let in the avant garde and text messages, will there then be a single kind of act of mind in play in all these cases that will generate and explanatory interesting kind? This seems doubtful. What will unify the new notion of the aesthetic, thus broadened? (3) I worry about the social aspect of the theory. I cannot see how individual acts of participation in the practice are to be rationally explained by the existence of the practice; and I cannot see how the existence of the social practice can be rationally explained by individual acts of participation in the practice without making the social theory unnecessary. So while I see the attraction of an aesthetic social practice theory of art, I do not have much faith in it.