

thinking

togetherness

ANDREJ BOŽIČ (*Ed.*)

**THINKING TOGETHERNESS**

**PHENOMENOLOGY AND SOCIALITY**

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PHENOMENOLOGY AND SOCIALITY

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Antonia Veitschegger

# DISAGREEMENT ABOUT AN ART WORK'S VALUE

WHY IT IS UNAVOIDABLE, WHAT IT CONSISTS IN, AND HOW TO DEAL WITH IT

*Abstract:* Disagreements about an art work's value are among the most common but least investigated ones. In order to clarify the issue, I present a structural analysis of the object of disagreement. The structure proposed is threefold, consisting of the spatiotemporal *art thing*, the purely intentional *art work*, and the experiential *art object*. I argue that disagreement about an art work's value is unavoidable, because one art work allows for differing art objects. Disagreeing parties reveal differing art objects, which are meant to manifest the same art work. The disagreement has three subkinds: it can stem from one party having a less extensive awareness of the art thing, from one party misunderstanding the art work's determinacies, or from both parties revealing differing but legitimate art objects. The former two subkinds are resolvable; the latter one is blameless. Finally, I sketch a worthwhile strategy to deal with disagreement about an art work's value.

*Keywords:* aesthetic disagreement, phenomenological aesthetics, ontology of art, Roman Ingarden.

## Introduction

Disagreements about an art work's value are among the most common ones within and between societies. Nevertheless, they are also among the least investigated ones.<sup>1</sup> In this paper, I endeavor to resolve the following three

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<sup>1</sup> The contemporary philosophical debate on disagreement mainly focuses on the epistemology of peer disagreement concerning empirical matters (Feldman and Warfield 2010; Frances and Matheson 2019). Investigations of what is called "aesthetic disagreement" or "disagreement about taste," which also concern art, are mostly embedded within semantic and epistemological debates about aesthetic properties (Goldman 1993; Bender 1996, 2001; Lasersohn 2005; MacFarlane 2007; Schafer 2011; Sundell 2011; Huvenes 2012). Andy Egan focuses on disputes about taste—

questions. How come our art evaluations disagree so often? What does disagreement about an art work's value consist in? And is there any worthwhile way of dealing with it? I address these questions from a phenomenological point of view. My approach is especially indebted to Roman Ingarden's insightful analyses of the work of art.

In section 1, I present three ordinary examples for disagreement about an art work's value. In section 2, I clarify the object of disagreement by presenting its threefold structure, consisting of *art thing*, *art work*, and *art object*. Based on this structural analysis, in section 3, I show why disagreeing art evaluations are not only common, but also unavoidable. Furthermore, I clarify in section 4 what disagreement about an art work's value necessarily consists in, and what contingent shape it can take. In section 5, I revisit the exemplary disagreements from the beginning of the paper, now being in a position to clarify them. In section 6, I define three subkinds of disagreement about an art work's value, as illustrated by the exemplary disagreements from section 1. While two of them are resolvable, one of them is blameless. Finally, in section 7, I sketch a worthwhile strategy to deal with disagreement about an art work's value.

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## 1. Exemplary disagreements

In the following, I introduce three ordinary examples of disagreement about an art work's value, which will later help us to illustrate three subkinds of this disagreement.

The first example stems from my personal history. It concerns a famous painting dating from the 16<sup>th</sup> century known as *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus*, which was long attributed to Pieter Bruegel the Elder. The disagreement in question emerged, when I was introduced to the painting at school during the Latin class. We had just learned about Ovid's take on Icarus's story in his *Metamorphoses*. Since it illustrates the scenery described by Ovid, we were shown a depiction of the painting in our schoolbooks. My teacher was convinced that the painting was "ingenious." Aged thirteen at the time, I

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understood as conversational exchanges—, and questions, under which conditions they are defective (Egan 2010).

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evaluated the matter a little differently: I agreed that the painting was beautiful, but I did not see its ingenuity.

The second exemplary disagreement concerns a work by the German-American artist Eva Hesse: *Expanded Expansion*, a sculpture from 1969 consisting of several fiberglass poles and latex panels. Latex is an unstable material, which caused the panels to turn stiff and brittle over the years (Getty Conservation Institute 2012; Chao and Deluco 2021). At the time the sculpture was first exhibited, the following disagreement arose: contemporary critics of Hesse's work, pointing to its ephemeral material, thought it was sloppy. Others, who were contemporary lovers of Hesse's work, thought it was poetic for precisely the same reason.

The third and last exemplary disagreement concerns a poem by Edgar Guest entitled "Keep Going," which was published in Guest's popular newspaper column *Breakfast Table Chat* in 1921. The disagreement arises between an expert literary critic and what I would refer to as public opinion. In his *The Company We Keep*, the literary critic Wayne Booth quotes the first stanza of the poem as follows:

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When things go wrong, as they often will,  
When the road you're trudging seems all uphill,  
When the funds are low and the debts are high  
And you want to smile, but you have to sigh,  
When care is pressing you down a bit,  
Rest! If you must—but never quit. (Booth 1988, 212.)

Whereas Booth considers the poem to be trite, the public opinion deems it inspirational—or so I assume, given the enthusiastic comments on the poem one can find online.

## 2. The object of disagreement

We all recognize a disagreement about an art work's value if we come across one. But, in order to better understand it, we need to clarify the object of disagreement first. What we disagree about in cases, such as the exemplary ones

introduced above, is the object that we encounter in art experience (commonly referred to as the “art work”). However, that object is a complex one (and talk of the “art work” thus ambiguous). In the following, I present its threefold structure, consisting of the spatiotemporal *art thing*, the purely intentional *art work*, and the experiential *art object*. My analysis is deeply inspired by Roman Ingarden’s ontology of the work of art, and I will thus repeatedly refer to his writings. But, although I incorporate many of his insights, our views differ crucially. I cannot elaborate on the differences here, but I will try to point out the most important ones in the footnotes.

### 2.1. *Art thing*

446 The object we encounter in art experience has a spatiotemporal aspect, which I call the “art thing.”<sup>2</sup> Art experience typically initiates and evolves in virtue of our direct perception of the art thing. We might, for example, see a painted canvas, fiberglass poles and latex panels, or printed letters in a newspaper. To be sure, our direct perception of the art thing might to a certain extent be replaced by mediated perception (e.g., via depictions in the visual arts). The art thing is the spatiotemporal manifestation of the art work (see section 2.2.) as the individual object it is. Its purpose is to grant us access to the art work, to make it repeatedly and intersubjectively available (Ingarden 1961, 290; 1997, 200).<sup>3</sup>

Extensive awareness of the art thing is the basis for encountering the art work as fully as possible. If we miss features of the art thing that are relevant in light of its purpose, our access to the art work is to a certain extent limited. If a painted canvas, for example, were displayed in a poorly lit room, we would miss some of its color characteristics, in virtue of which we could grasp the painting’s specific brilliancy.

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<sup>2</sup> The term “art thing” is reminiscent of Husserl’s “Bildding,” which he uses in his analysis of image perception (Husserl 2006, 20–22).

<sup>3</sup> Ingarden assumes the work of art to be in need of a physical ontic foundation (Ingarden 1969, 146), but he stresses that the object we experience in a genuine encounter with a work of art (that is, aesthetic experience, in his view) is not to be identified with any real object (Ingarden 1969, 3). While I agree that the object we encounter is irreducible to the art thing, I take the art thing to be one of its dependent parts.

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## 2.2. *Art work*

The art work is the center around which art experience revolves. It is the core aspect of art experience's object. It is the "skeleton," which is fleshed out within art experience (Ingarden 1972, 5, n. 1; 1997, 266). In the following, I will elaborate on three of the art work's characteristics: its ontic dependence, its two-dimensionality, and its being an invitation.

The art work is ontically dependent for its existence upon an intentional act of its creation: it originates from someone intending it (Ingarden 1972, 121–122). Unlike spatiotemporal objects, such as the desk I sit at, and alike imagined objects, such as the pink elephant in my mind's eye, the art work is a purely intentional object. It is ontically dependent also for its subsistence (Ingarden 1972, 127–128): if it were not for the art thing and being intended in virtue of it, the art work would "vanish" just like the elephant in my mind's eye.

Furthermore, the art work—as any purely intentional object—is two-dimensional (Ingarden 1965, 211–219; 1972, 123–25). First, it has a structural dimension as the individual object it is, with its own characteristics and parts. We refer to its structure, when we speak about a work's artistic means or parts, such as a painting having a fore-, middle-, and background or a poem having four stanzas. Second, the art work has a substantial dimension. We refer to its substance, when we speak about what we reveal in our encounter with the work: a specific kind of beauty, the human inattention to Icarus's death, the power to keep going, etc.

Finally, the art work is an invitation to actualize its substantial dimension by intending—and thereby completing—it in virtue of the art thing. The art work's substance, as it is manifested in the art thing, is not fully determined, but only a schema: it has both determinate aspects as well as spots of indeterminacy (Ingarden 1965, 219–224; 1972, § 38). It is "unfinished" and calls for completion. Following the invitation, we fill some spots of indeterminacy in accordance with the work's determinacies. For example, we are aware of the ploughman not noticing Icarus's death in *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus*. As a determinate aspect of the work, it comes along with several spots of indeterminacy—the ploughman's state of mind, for example. In actualizing the art work's substance, we implicitly fill this vacant spot: we might take the ploughman as focusing on his work, or we might take him as being indifferent to another's plight. In each case, we actualize moments that

are not yet determined, but only potentially present in the art work's substantial dimension. Our actualization determines its specific qualitative character.

In order to encounter the art work as fully as possible, we need to be aware of its determinacies as they are manifested in the art thing. Consider a case, in which we are unaware of the ploughman not noticing Icarus's death, because we are ignorant of Icarus's story and the scenery described by Ovid: we might still see a ploughman doing his work, but we would be unaware of other important aspects of the art work's substance. A legitimate understanding of the art work's determinacies is yet another basis for encountering the art work as fully as possible.

### 2.3. *Art object*

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The art work's call for completion, then, is fulfilled in virtue of our revelation of what I call the "art object." The art object consists of the valent qualities we find based on our actualization of the art work's substance. In other words: it is the art work's specific ingenuity, beauty, poetic power, etc., experienced by us. The art object is the art work's experiential manifestation.

The art object unites two kinds of valent qualities: those we reveal as the art work's substance ("aesthetic qualities") and those we find in the art work's structure based on the former revelation ("artistic qualities"). The artistic qualities determine the art work's characteristic way of granting us access to its substance. Like the art work, the art object is two-dimensional. Its overall character depends on both aesthetic and artistic qualities including their relation to one another.<sup>4</sup>

In our actualization of the art work's substance, the aesthetic qualities together form a new qualitative whole, such as two tones forming a single chord (Ingarden 1961, 305–307; 1969, 6; 1997, 231–234). Furthermore, they can play a predicative role, figuring as properties of another intentional object

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4 According to Ingarden, the genuine encounter with a work of art is directed at a solely aesthetic object, excluding artistic qualities (Ingarden 1969, 153–179), since he does not consider the physical ontic foundation as a dependent part of the object we encounter. Trying to do justice to our lived experience, I assume that a genuine encounter with a work of art transcends aesthetic experience and incorporates the artistic appreciation of the work of art.

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(Ingarden 1969, 5; 1997, 229–231). The specific kind of beauty we find in *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus*, for example, does not appear as the painted canvas's, but as the depicted landscape's beauty. We look “through” the art thing at something else.

Due to our actualization of the art work's substance, we find artistic qualities, too. Seeing the depicted landscape's beauty, for example, reveals to us the work's excellence in its use of artistic means. Artistic qualities determine the art work's value as the invitation it is. They concern the art thing and its features in the light of their purpose to grant access to the art work in question. In virtue of our awareness of the art thing and our understanding of the art work's determinacies, some of the art thing's features appear to us as artistic merits, others as flaws.

To each art work, then, there corresponds more than one art object. The art work allows for different legitimate art objects, because the invitation to actualize and thereby “complete” its substance comes along with a certain scope of variability, within which this can be done. The artistic qualities, in turn, are related to our actualization of the art work's substance. However, not just any art object successfully manifests the art work in question. An art object is legitimate only, if it involves the determinate aspects of the art work as manifested in the art thing, and actualizes potential moments in accordance with the former.<sup>5</sup>

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### 3. Why disagreement is unavoidable

Thanks to the preceding structural analysis of the object of disagreement, we can now see the possible roots of disagreement about an art work's value. We might be aware of different features of the art thing, or we might have different understandings of the art work's determinacies and its corresponding spots of indeterminacy. The object's complexity alone explains why disagreement is so common in the realm of art. But, more importantly, we can see that disagreement is “built into” an art work's nature, insofar as it allows for several art objects that differ in their qualitative character. Disagreements about an art

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<sup>5</sup> This is reminiscent of the conditions of legitimacy formulated by Ingarden regarding the aesthetic object (Ingarden 1969, 22–24).

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work's value are, thus, an unavoidable part of our living social practice, insofar as that practice includes the encounter with genuine art works at all.

#### 4. What the disagreement consists in

We can now also gain a better understanding of what disagreement about an art work's value consists in: two (or more) parties find different valent qualities and thus a different overall qualitative character in their respective encounters with one and the same object, namely the art work. Interestingly, the two parties' disagreement about one and the same object consists in their being directed at two different objects, namely the respective art objects revealed. This specificity of the disagreement is due to the art work's nature: it can manifest itself in different experiential "bodies."<sup>6</sup> Each of the disagreeing parties holds that "their" art object is a legitimate manifestation of the work in question.

Thus, the disagreement might also take the following contingent shape: the two parties disagree about "whose" art object is legitimate. Each party takes  
450 the art object revealed by the other party to be illegitimate.

Since both art objects might in fact be legitimate, disagreement about an art work's value in the former sense (concerning the overall qualitative character found in one and the same art work) need not coincide with disagreement in that latter sense (concerning the legitimacy of the differing art objects). I might find tranquil beauty in my encounter with a painting, while my friend finds harmonious ease in it, without us having reason to deny the legitimacy of the other one's findings.

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<sup>6</sup> Ingarden warns not to identify the object of aesthetic appreciation (and thus of aesthetic disagreement) with the work of art (Ingarden 1969, 13, 21–22). And surely, what we aesthetically disagree about (the work's actualized substance, in my view) is irreducible to the work as the "skeleton" it is, apart from being experienced. On the other hand, aesthetic appreciation, as it figures in our encounter with a work of art, is part and parcel of our appreciation of the work as the invitation it is. In our encounter with a work of art, aesthetic and artistic appreciation are entangled.

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## 5. Exemplary disagreements revisited

We can now further clarify the three exemplary disagreements from section 1.

Consider, again, the disagreement between my teacher and my thirteen-year-old self about *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus*: while he thought it was ingenious, I agreed that it was beautiful, but did not see its ingenuity. How come we disagreed? The reason is simple. At the time of disagreement, I did not see Icarus in the picture. At first glance, I only saw the landscape, one of the ships, and the ploughman I knew from Ovid's text. Looking at the small depiction in my schoolbook, I simply overlooked Icarus's legs, struggling in the right corner of the picture a little above the fisherman. I missed that important detail of the painting, in virtue of which I could have grasped its ingenuity. The suffering protagonist being completely out of focus in an otherwise peaceful scenery—what an ingenious way to convey human inattention to Icarus's plight! My teacher, of course, knew and saw that Icarus was there. The disagreement stemmed from my awareness of the art thing being less extensive than his.

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The disagreement concerning Eva Hesse's *Expanded Expansion* is one of a different kind. Both the critics, who thought it was sloppy, as well as the lovers, who thought it was poetic, were sufficiently aware of the art thing and its features. Beyond that, both of their evaluations referred to the art thing's ephemeral material. The same feature appeared as an artistic flaw to the critics and as a merit to the lovers. This is due to their different understandings of the sculpture's determinacies. The work's lovers realized that the ephemerality found in the art thing manifested a determinate aspect of the work. Answering the work's invitation and actualizing its substance, we can reveal, in a unique way, the ephemerality of life. We "see" life's ephemerality through the art thing. For the critics, by contrast, a successful sculpture was meant to be durable. Only from that perspective does *Expanded Expansion* appear as sloppy, lacking precaution in its use of artistic means. Taking into account the work's determinacies, though, we can see that it does a successful job in the way it grants access to its substance, having a specific poetic power. In this case, the art object revealed by the lovers successfully manifested the work, whereas the critics revealed an illegitimate art object.

The disagreement stemmed from the critics misunderstanding (or being ignorant of) the art work's determinacies.<sup>7</sup>

Finally, let us take a closer look at the disagreement between Wayne Booth, who thinks Edgar Guest's "Keep Going" to be trite, and the public opinion, which deems the same poem inspirational. Again, this disagreement differs from the aforementioned, as it neither stems from one party having insufficient awareness of the art thing nor from one party misunderstanding the art work. Both evaluations take into account the poem's determinacies: its message of "Keep going," its obvious diction, its easy rhymes and meter, and its imagery ("trudging uphill," "you want to smile, but you have to sigh," etc.). Nevertheless, Wayne Booth and the public opinion reveal different aesthetic and artistic qualities in their respective encounters with the art work.

452 Let us first consider the public opinion's evaluation. "Keep going" is widely understood as an everyday motivational motto. In most readers, the poem's imagery evokes a familiar fatigue of everyday working life. Furthermore, the poem's obvious diction, and its easy rhymes and meter, reveal a specific kind of vividness and ease to them. Through what the poem offers, the readers "see" the fatigue of everyday life "through a vivid lens," as something they can overcome with ease. From that perspective, the poem is inspirational.

For Wayne Booth, on the other hand, "Keep going" means something more serious. It refers to the tedious overcoming of major troubles in life, which the poem's imagery seems to contradict, having little to do with serious obstacles. Booth criticizes that "trudging uphill" rather sounds "like a bad day at the writing desk, not like the feeling after a death of a loved one or discovery of a major illness" (Booth 1988, 213). The seriousness of the poem's message seems to clash with the superficiality of the problems its imagery offers, and with the particular vividness and ease found in the poem's rhymes and meter. Furthermore, the poem's obvious and easy diction reveals a specific kind of thoughtlessness (*ibid.*). From that perspective, then, the poem is trite.

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7 To be sure, the critics might not have genuinely misunderstood the art work's determinacies, but were possibly unwilling to encounter the art work on its own terms. Since I am concerned with kinds of disagreement arising from genuine encounters with an art work, or efforts thereof, I was only interested in the former case, thereby presupposing the critics' willingness for encounter.

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Both the art object revealed by the public opinion as well as the one revealed by Booth are legitimate, insofar as they involve the determinate aspects of the art work and actualize potential moments in accordance with the former. The crucial distinction between the two lies in their actualization of the poem's message: "Keep going" can be understood as an everyday motivational motto or as a serious appeal to overcome major troubles in life. If we do the former, the poem appears inspirational. If we do the latter, it appears trite. The disagreement stems from both parties revealing legitimate but differing art objects.

## 6. Three subkinds of disagreement

We are now in the position to see that each of the three exemplary disagreements illustrates one subkind of disagreement about an art work's value. According to the three possible roots of disagreement, we need to distinguish between three subkinds: disagreement about an art work's value can stem from:

1. one party having less extensive (or insufficient) awareness of the art thing;
2. one party misunderstanding (or being ignorant of) the art work's determinacies; or
3. both parties revealing differing art objects based on extensive awareness of the art thing and legitimate understanding of the art work's determinacies.

The former two subkinds, illustrated by the disagreement between my teacher and myself about *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus* (subkind 1) and the disagreement concerning Eva Hesse's *Expanded Expansion* (subkind 2), involve one legitimate and one illegitimate or severely limited art object. One party misses or misconstrues some of the art work's aesthetic and artistic qualities due to insufficient awareness of the art thing or due to misunderstanding the art work's determinacies. These disagreements are, at least in principle, resolvable. The third subkind, illustrated by the disagreement between literary critic Wayne Booth and the public opinion about Edgar Guest's "Keep Going," is blameless, because it involves two legitimate art objects.

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## 7. How to deal with disagreement

What remains to be answered is the question whether there are worthwhile ways to deal with disagreement about an art work's value, especially concerning

its blameless subkind. It is not a worthwhile endeavor to try and resolve a blameless disagreement, in the sense of aligning both parties' evaluations of an art work. Instead, the preceding analysis allows us to develop other strategies to deal with disagreement. In the remaining part of the paper, I want to briefly sketch one of those strategies.

The strategy I propose is fairly obvious: we should share our disagreeing takes on an art work, in the sense of reciprocally clarifying them. We should point out those features of the art thing, in virtue of which we found certain valent qualities, and we should share our understanding of what the art work invites us to "see." We can thereby help each other to yield a more extensive awareness of the art thing and a better understanding of the art work's determinacies. We can help each other to reveal further qualities of the art work and to grasp its richness. Sharing our respective takes on an art work can benefit our future experiences of the same work, and possibly of other works, too. Furthermore, clarifying our disagreement can benefit our understanding of others and ourselves, because differing aesthetic sensibilities, personal interests, and value hierarchies come to the fore. Dealing with disagreement in this way can help us gain awareness of some of our own peculiarities and priorities as well as those of our fellow human beings.

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## Conclusion

At the beginning of the paper, I posed the following three questions. How come our art evaluations disagree so often? What does disagreement about an art work's value consist in? And is there any worthwhile way of dealing with it?

Regarding the first question, the structural analysis, presented in section 2, reveals the complexity of the object of disagreement. That complexity alone explains the disagreement's commonness: given its threefold structure consisting of the spatiotemporal *art thing*, the purely intentional *art work*, and the experiential *art object*, there are many possibilities of reaching differing "results." We might pay attention to different features of the art thing or we might have different understandings of the art work's determinacies (and its corresponding spots of indeterminacy). Furthermore, and more importantly, one and the same art work allows for different legitimate art objects. Thus,

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disagreeing art evaluations are not only a common, but also an unavoidable part of any society's genuine artistic practice, since they are "built into" an art work's nature.

Regarding the second question, we realized that disagreement about an art work's value necessarily consists in two parties finding different valent qualities (and thereby revealing different art objects) in their encounters with one and the same art work. Furthermore, disagreement about an art work's value might—but need not—take the shape of the two parties disagreeing about "whose" art object is a legitimate manifestation of the art work in question.

We also learned to distinguish three subkinds of disagreement about an art work's value according to its possible roots: it can stem from one party having less extensive (or insufficient) awareness of the art thing, from one party misunderstanding (or being ignorant of) the art work's determinacies, or from both parties revealing differing but legitimate art objects. While the former two subkinds are resolvable, the latter one is blameless.

Finally, regarding the third question, I outlined a worthwhile strategy to deal with disagreement about an art work's value, taking into account that an alignment of the two disagreeing evaluations is not always an appropriate objective. Instead, reciprocally clarifying our disagreeing takes on an art work can benefit both our future art experiences as well as our understanding of ourselves and others.

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