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The Great Debate about Art (Paradigm)

Roy Harris

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In this lucid and insightful essay, renowned linguist Roy Harris reflects on the early nineteenth-century doctrine of “art for art’s sake.” This was attacked by Proudhon and Nietzsche, but defended by Théophile Gautier and E. M. Forster. It influenced movements as diverse as futurism and Dada. Over the past two centuries, three main positions have emerged. The “institutional” view declares art to be a status conferred upon certain works by the approval of influential institutions. The “idiocentric” view gives absolute priority to the judgment of the individual. The third is the “conceptual” view of art, which insists that what counts is the idea that inspired a work, not the physical execution. But as Harris shows, the tacit assumptions which once supported this Debate and these positions have now collapsed. “Art” as a coherent category has imploded, leaving behind a historical residue of empty questions that contemporary society can no longer answer. *The Great Debate about Art* provides much needed signposts for understanding this sorry state of affairs.

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