

Dewey's Philosophy of Art and Aesthetic Experience

By Thomas Alexander

Generally, philosophy tends to ignore art and aesthetic experience. Indeed, the subject we know as “aesthetics” was inaugurated by a German academic, Alexander Baumgarten, as recently as 1750. It is true that Plato described his highest form of forms, the most truly real, as the Form of the Beautiful (also the Form of the Good). “Beauty” was another word for the absolute perfection each Form not so much *had* as *was*. But the modern period, beginning in the 17th century—the period of Galileo, Thomas Hobbes and René Descartes—was committed to overthrowing the last traces of the classical and scholastic heritage for the idea of a science of nature based on bodies obeying mathematical laws of motion. The haunting question for these thinkers was: Is knowledge possible? After all, it was evident that since the Greeks we had been operating under a false cosmology, deemed true, and Aristotle, for all his knowledge, was clearly ignorant of the New World. The question of knowledge, summarized in the term “epistemology,” displaced all others and has continued to do so in most professional philosophy. Concerns like the experience of beauty or the possibility of establishing standards of artistic judgment were relegated to the “subjective” side of experience. One has but to look in today on various websites for departments of philosophy to see that most members of Anglophone departments are epistemologists—and those that are not, might as well be. Aesthetics itself has been turned into a subspeciality of epistemology. One reason the late Arthur Danto was so excited in 1964 on seeing Warhol's *Brillo Box* was that it offered an ideal problem in epistemology: How is it that two objects, in all respect identical visually (i.e., a real Brillo box and Warhol's exact rendition) are so ultimately different, one a carton for merchandise and the other a work of art?

It is thus a little more than astounding that John Dewey came to find a central place for aesthetics in his conception of philosophy and to criticize what he called “the epistemology industry.” This insight came gradually for him. He began his philosophical life as an adherent to one of the versions of absolute idealism that had flourished in Germany with G.W.F. Hegel in the early 19th century and in England later on. From the beginning, Dewey had wanted a philosophy that did justice to the richness of experience, and he thought he found this in absolute idealism, which argued that the piecemeal and fragmentary nature of our experience implied a fuller, indeed infinitely full, realization of truth, meaning, and beauty in that absolute totality of infinite mind. Our minute piece of experience contained evidence of the whole. This is expressed in his first book (1887), meant

to be a textbook in psychology—it was titled *Psychology*—but which was in fact a primer of idealist metaphysics. A couple of important events came quickly upon its heels. First, only three years after Dewey’s *Psychology* saw light, William James published his monumental *The Principles of Psychology* (1890), rendering Dewey’s book irrelevant; second, in 1894 Dewey was appointed chair of the new University of Chicago’s Department of Philosophy where he had a chance not only to build a department, but integrate it with allied departments of pedagogy and psychology. Instead of studying Absolute Mind, Dewey was to study children learning.

Dewey always said that James’s *Principles* was the most influential book in his life. Not only did it incorporate genuine empirical material while being written in James’s unforgivably lively prose, but it presented to Dewey the thesis that experience did not come to us the way that philosophers like Locke or Hume—or Kant or Hegel—said, bits of mental units in need of an all-unifying rational mind. Experience came as a complex but integrated flow or, in James’s metaphor, “stream.” It was not thought’s job to *organize* it all but to *select* those aspects that had relevance for the life activity of the organism. Experience did not need some “absolute” to unify it; it came whole. James was also particularly sensitive to the way the field of experience exceeded what was at the forefront of consciousness and reason at any moment. The felt or qualitative “fringe” or “horizon” often had a much stronger say in what “made sense” or didn’t than philosophers liked to think. Dewey realized this; he realized he didn’t need the “absolute”—that experience had within it the material for developing its own inherent richness of meaning.

The other important event in Dewey’s early career, his appointment as chair of the Department of Philosophy at the University of Chicago, was important not least for allowing Dewey to become familiar with the actual process of learning and child development. Like the impact of James’s *Principles*, the result from this was that the abstractions of idealist metaphysics were of no use in studying how people made sense of experience. Dewey eventually came up with his well-known “pattern of inquiry” model. We begin with an ambiguous, disturbed, or troubling situation and then undertake a process of analysis and trial to seek to render it unproblematic and settled. The outcome here had implications for the philosophical claim that human beings were always “knowing” experience as well as having it. Kant had tried to prove this by saying that we could always add “I think” to any proposition about experience. But what Dewey came to see was that experience was much wider than “knowing,” especially if by “knowing” we mean an actual process of inquiry, like looking for lost keys, and not some mental proposition. In other words, knowing or inquiry was a mediating phase of experience, not the whole picture. Dewey spelled out the extended argument for this in a series of essays published in 1903 along with contributions from the other members of his department, *Studies in Logical Theory*.

Dewey left Chicago the following year for Columbia University as a result of a conflict over his wife's involvement with the experimental "Dewey School." The new situation seems to have allowed Dewey to undertake a very creative extension of some of his ideas and to drop any connection remaining with the school of absolute idealism. In a remarkable, indeed watershed, article published in 1905, "The Postulate of Immediate Empiricism," Dewey there explicitly renounced the idea that all experience was also some sort of knowing—that, in other words, the problem of knowledge was the central problem of philosophy. The critical storm this essay raised indicated that Dewey had touched a very deep nerve, once so deep that many of today's Dewey critics—and supporters—still can't accept that this is what he meant. They like to focus on Dewey's theory of inquiry, his "instrumentalism." Some think this is a generic name for Dewey's overall philosophy. It is not. The term he finally settled upon was "cultural naturalism."¹ All this is important in order to realize how Dewey came to place such significance upon art and the aesthetic experience. What he was trying to say was that the field of experience was a lot wider than the most beloved topic of philosophy, the theory of knowledge, and that instead it was concerned instead with *meaning*.

By the time that Dewey came to write his magnum opus, *Experience and Nature*, in 1925, he had come to a remarkable thesis: human beings crave meaning—not in the sense of polished abstractions but in the sense of lived, embodied, *experienced* meanings, meanings both had or undergone and done or enacted. With this went Dewey's sustained view that human beings were to be understood as living organisms fully involved with the world in the constant rhythmic balancing of organic functions. The terms "environmental" or "ecological" were not then widely used, but Dewey's conception of human existence is thoroughly environmental or ecological in its basic description. Part of our environment, of course, is the world of society and culture. Culture gives us at birth an inherited world of symbolic meanings within which we gradually begin to take part. The process of meaning, too, is rhythmic, involving speaker and hearer, and, as a process, involves the possibility of development toward an integrative closure, a type of experience that Dewey came to call "consummatory." In the next to last chapter of the book Dewey explicitly addressed the topic



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¹"I have come to think of my own position as cultural or humanistic Naturalism. Naturalism, properly interpreted, seems to me a more adequate term than Humanism. Of course I have always limited my use of 'instrumentalism' to my theory of thinking and knowledge; the word 'pragmatism' I have used very little, and then with reserves" (Dewey to Corliss Lamont, Sept. 6, 1940, cited in Corliss Lamont, "New Light on Dewey's *Common Faith*," *The Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 58, No. 1 [1961], p. 26.)

of art for the first time in his career. And he did so in rather superlative terms. Art, he says, is but another name for intelligent conduct of all sorts:

“When this perception dawns, it will be a commonplace that art—the mode of activity that is charged with meanings capable of immediately enjoyed possession—is the complete culmination of nature, and that “science” is a handmaiden that conducts natural events to this happy issue. Thus would disappear the separations that trouble present thinking: divisions of everything into nature and experience, practice and theory, art and science, useful and fine art, menial and free.”²

These are amazing claims. Not only is art rather mystically said to be the complete culmination of nature, with science being but a “handmaiden” to it, but that in art are resolved the central dualisms that Dewey had spent his life battling (see LW 1: 293). These claims were especially surprising for those who saw in Dewey little more than, as one of my colleagues put it, “a cheerleader for science.” Had Dewey taken a dramatic shift?

The short answer to that question is: No. Rather, I believe, he had found his voice. One can find passages from “The Postulate of Immediate Empiricism” (1905) on that anticipate this, not least Dewey’s insistence that the greater part of human experience was a concern for meaning, not truth, not, that is, science. But these were startling words. For at least a decade, Dewey had cultivated one of the oddest friendships of his life with the irascible “self-made man” millionaire and art collector, Albert C. Barnes. Barnes had an amazingly good eye, especially for some of the newer artists: Matisse, Cezanne, Renoir, Seurat and others, and began to build the collection that is housed in the Barnes Foundation in Philadelphia. Barnes had become enthusiastic over Dewey’s philosophy and somehow opened a crack in his otherwise pugnacious nature for friendship to enter in. He began taking Dewey to Europe to visit not only the great museums but the ateliers of painters.³ In 1931 Dewey was asked to give the William James Lectures at Harvard. These lectures would become *Art as Experience* (1934).⁴ This was a substantial book of over 350 pages, and it has proved as troubling to all those who want to see Dewey simply as an “instrumentalist,” taking “instrumentalism” here as “cheerleader for science.” But in that book Dewey says, “To

² John Dewey, *Experience and Nature*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston as Volume 1 of *The Later Works of John Dewey* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1980), p. 269. Hereafter cited as LW 1. The original edition appeared in 1925.

³ See George Dykhuizen, *The Life and Mind of John Dewey* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1977), esp. p 221 ff.

⁴ Volume 10 of *The Later Works of John Dewey* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1985). Hereafter cited as LW 10. I will also give the corresponding page reference to the original edition (New York: Minton, Balch and Co., 1934), cited as AE. This also corresponds to the Capricorn paperback edition.

esthetic experience then the philosopher must go to understand what experience is.” A philosophy is tested in its ability to grasp the nature of experience by its treatment of aesthetic experience (AE 274; LW 10:278). Experience was certainly the core idea of Dewey’s philosophy and it seems clear he meant this test to be applied to himself.

What, then, are some of the key ideas of Art as Experience? I will briefly discuss the following topics: (1) approaching art without the “museum attitude”; (2) the roots of art in “the live creature”; (3) consummatory experience; (4) the work of art vs the art product, and (5) The role of art in society.

When Dewey came to write *Art as Experience*, the reigning aesthetic theories could be described as formalism and expressionism. Formalism, finding its origins in Kant’s *Critique of Judgment* (1790) wanted to say art aspired to pure form; it didn’t have any “purpose” like pleasing the crowds or edifying them. “Aesthetic” here means “without ulterior purpose.” Art was ultimately about only itself, a play of imagination. This idea was taken up by artists in the 19th century like Charles Baudelaire or Théophile Gautier who famously summed up the idea in the phrase “l’art pour l’art,” art for the sake of art. Art was supposed to lift one out of the sordid matters of daily existence and let one float in an aesthetic cloud of contemplation. In “Le cygne,” Mallarmé symbolized the artist by the image of a swan trapped in a frozen lake. Expressionism, by contrast, saw art as the outpouring of the inner vision of the genius, especially in terms of communicating with the crowd and thereby uplifting them. This was a view, by the way, that went well with ideas of the artist as a political reformer or as reconnecting a people with its mythic roots, as in the case of Wagner. Dewey’s aesthetics offers an alternative view, one broad enough to accommodate the insights of formalism and expressionism.

1. Against the Museum Attitude

Art as Experience begins with a strange warning: if one is going to theorize about art, the worst place to begin is by thinking of “art” as it is enshrined in art museums. At first this seems almost counter-intuitive: are not some of the world’s greatest visual arts precisely in museums—and thank God they are, for there we can see them! Dewey is not against museums. After all he was on the board of The Barnes Foundation and had visited the great museums of Europe. Dewey’s point here is about the danger of aesthetic theory beginning here. For one thing it inclines one to think of “art” as a collection of physical things. As we will see, for Dewey the real work of art is the way the art object (or “art product” in Dewey’s terminology) interacts with its audiences. The art lies in the “working of the work” more than simply being a “thing” as a physical thing.⁵ But there is a further problem. Many of the

⁵ The same point is made—rather more laboriously—by Martin Heidegger in his essay “The Origin of the Work of Art” (1935-37, published 1950 and revised 1960).

objects filling museums were not originally intended for being seen there. They were artifacts in the life of a culture, not dead and lifeless but charged with meaning and a part of a community's shared way of existence. A statue of a Greek god would have been revered in a temple just as a painting of the Virgin would have been venerated in a church. A red and black Greek kylix or wine bowl would have been filled with wine for a party filled with song and conversation. A Japanese raku-ware tea bowl would have been a part of the choda or tea ceremony, admired for its embodiment of “wabi” and “sabi,” words evoking an array of values among which are rustic simplicity and inward solitude.⁶ Dewey thinks these contexts are important in grasping the nature of art, at least art that was not intentionally created for being experienced in museums. “Art” arises in the way human beings express what gives meaning and value to their lives, even where the culture does not have either the idea or a word for “art.” To lose this root, as is likely when one begins with art objects abstracted from their living contexts in a museum and offered as candidates for “aesthetic” contemplation, is to lose the insight that art springs from the intensification of experienced meaning.

If you think perhaps that Dewey was being overly cautious, look at André Malraux's monumental *Le Musée Imaginaire*. Malraux was a formalist among formalists. Art was the creation of form, not just in individual works, but in the artist's overall style. He celebrates books that bring all sorts of visual art objects together not just because they decontextualize the works even more than a museum but because they reproduce them in black and white—abstracting color—and do so in images close to the same size; this reveals you see their true reality as form, as expressions of “style.” He would have loved the internet.

2. The Live Creature

Dewey turns instead toward what he calls “the live creature.” Dewey's philosophy always came back to the idea that we are alive, organisms who are dynamically and rhythmically interacting with our environments. We, too, are not “things.” Our bodily involvement with the world pervades our unconscious experience and appears on the dim horizon of consciousness as a pervasive qualitative tonality or mood. Our relations to the world are not stable. At one moment we are thriving and at another suffering, be it something as mundane as hunger or as life-changing as the loss of a friend. When we are in balance, it is never mere balance, but a balance that could have been otherwise. Life is precarious, as Dewey liked to insist, and whenever order and stability have been achieved, values preserved, meaning attained, this experience is fraught with poignancy.⁷ This gives experience a vibrancy and

⁶ See the famous discussion by Okakura-Kakuzo, *The Book of Tea* (New York: Duffield and Co., 1906).

⁷ Dewey had a close personal knowledge of this, having lost two of his children to disease. His older brother had been scalded to death in an accident.

tension. If the world offered complete stability or utter chaos, there would be no sense of realization or achievement. “These biological commonplaces are something more than that; they reach to the roots of the esthetic in experience” (AE 14; LW 10: 20). Art is born in this middle ground in the great rhythm of life. Indeed, the role of tension in the experience of the heightened vitality of meaning often leads artists to cultivate tensions and explore dangerous limits. Animals often exhibit this fully alert activity of being sensually in tune with the world: the dog seeing its owner return, the cat fixated on the twitching lure, the mockingbird singing full-throated from the top of its tree.

There is a counterpart to this in human existence—a great deal of modern life is compartmentalized or disorganized so that the fundamental need for the experience of heightened vitality, of the aesthetic, is not realized. Our very senses cannot be themselves in the fullest way. “Only occasionally in the lives of many,” says Dewey, “are the senses fraught with the sentiment that comes from the deep realization of intrinsic meanings” (AE, 21; LW 10: 27). Yet art itself is the proof that human beings can deliberately organize material in order to produce aesthetic experience. This leads us then to ask “What is aesthetic—or, in Dewey’s term, consummatory—experience?”

3. Consummatory Experience

While much of human experience is fragmentary and unfulfilling there are instances whereof we can say “That was an experience!” An experience is a synonym for “consummatory experience,” the sort of experience that is inherently fulfilling. The energies driving the experience are not dissipated but establish an organization and reach closure. “Such an experience is a whole and carries with it its own individualizing quality and self-sufficiency. It is an experience” (AE, 35; LW 10: 42). Such experiences need not be happy, harmonious or upbeat. Dewey mentions storms at sea, a rupture of friendship or a near accident. What they all have are intensified meaning that is felt as unifying the parts into a whole.

In such experiences, every successive part flows freely, without seam and without unfilled blanks, into what ensues. At the same time, there is no sacrifice of the self-identity of the parts. A river, as distinct from a pond, flows. But its flow gives a definiteness and interest to its successive portions greater than exist in the homogeneous portions of a pond. In an experience, flow is from something to something. As one part leads into another and as one part carries what went on before, each gains distinctness in itself. The enduring whole is diversified by successive phases that are emphases of varied colors. (AE, 36; LW 10: 43).

These characteristics may be found in all sorts of experiences to which we might give other names—Dewey cites an experience of thinking or moral action. The key thing is the felt

underlying quality that emotionally pervades the whole and gives a sense of closure or resolution at the end. There are both doing and undergoing as in all experience, except here they are experienced in relation to each other.

4. The Work of Art

Dewey's concept of an experience should help us understand why he didn't want us to think of art objects as "things" that could be housed in museums. Dewey came to call the physical side of artworks—the canvass, stone, printed notes or words—the "art product," reserving "art work" for the actual "working of the work." He says, "the actual work of art is what the product does in with and in experience" (AE, 1; LW10: 1). There are not just many "Hamlets" but many Guernicas or Farewell to Arms. Of course some encounters may be superficial, but Dewey is willing to allow a plurality of "works," traced back to the same art product, as revealing the on-going vitality of the work.

Dewey finds a way to accommodate the ideas of expression and form through this process view of the art work. Expression is not to be thought of as something internal being "pressed out" of the artist—that the art product is like water coming from a tap. Expression is an interactive process in which the actual medium of the work—words, paint, stone—must come to embody and transmit a perceptual process of tensions, resistances, resolutions, structures. It is insofar as the artist is able to make the object an expressive ground that the audience may itself come to have an experience based on its encounters with the art product. Once the art object is made, either it becomes a basis for consummatory experiences or not and the artist becomes, as it were, a member of the audience.

Form for Dewey is also linked with the idea of process. It is not some static underlying structure that we are supposed somehow to intuit, a ghostly Platonic essence shining through the film of matter. Form is rather how the art product organizes its energies to lead to an experience. It is how its various components work together toward the end of an experience. This sounds a bit like Frank Lloyd Wright's famous saying "Form follows function." If the function is conceived externally, then that is not the case. One may make a chair that fulfills the end of being a comfy chair that is nevertheless an eyesore. The end that an art work aims at is consummatory experience that is embodied in or directly expressive by the art object. A chair may be visually artistic—and quite uncomfortable. (Wright was notorious for making such things.) But if the chair makes its total form and its immediate utilitarian end consummatory, then form has followed function. Thus Dewey would be very sympathetic to the idea of aesthetic design in ordinary household objects.

5. Art and Society

To conclude, I want to say a few words about Dewey's conception of art and democratic life. One of the main reasons Dewey thought art important was that it was able to show that

at least in some instances we were able to reorganize the world so as to embody the direct experience of meaning and value that by nature we seek. It thus provides a moral lesson to anyone who says that fatalistic acceptance of our generally alienated and unfulfilled existence is the only wisdom. Of course Dewey's ultimate vision is for a community in which the richest potential for human existence was cultivated, one in which we took upon ourselves the ultimate work of art, our own lives. This is yet one more reason that beginning with the museum conception of art is problematic for aesthetic theory: we are disposed to see art as an escape from life, a "pause that refreshes," instead of the implicitly revolutionary thing that it is, a call to restructure the way things are for the way things ought to be. As a mode of communication, Dewey saw art as achieving the most that we can hope for. Communication is not just transferring information. At its highest it is a way in which people partake of something together at an emotional and intuitive level. It becomes, in Dewey's phrase, "shared experience."

In an address for a celebration of his 80th birthday in 1939, "Creative Democracy—The Task Before Us," Dewey said that the essence of democracy was not to be found in political organization so much as in the respect for the potential of human life to create and experience those meanings and values that ultimately make life worthwhile. A society dedicated to that end—in which education of the young is central—would be illumined, to use a phrase of Wordsworth's Dewey used often, "by the light that was never on land or sea."⁸

⁸ For a more extended discussion of Dewey's aesthetics, see my essay "The Art of Life: Dewey's Aesthetics" in *Reading Dewey*, ed. Larry Hickman (Indianapolis: University of Indiana Press, 1998) and the discussion in Steven Fesmire, *Dewey* (New York: Routledge, 2015), Chapter 6.