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Edited by Dan-Eugen Ratiu and Connell Vaughan

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Purposiveness and Sociality of Artistic Action in the Writings of John Dewey

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ABSTRACT. The concept of the end is transformed by Dewey into an intrinsic purposiveness which he explains by recourse to the meaningfulness and value of human actions. He sharply distinguishes this intrinsic purposiveness of meaningful action from the pursuit of rigidly set external ends. For Dewey's concept is not based upon a separation of rational means from individual and public values but rather upon the idea of a completeness. The focus of the text is Dewey's theory of art which he understands as an experience and reaction in its actualization and as an activating experience in its reception. Finally, this theory will be contextualized in its social dimension. From the perspective of Dewey's aesthetic theory of art, the contribution which art and design are able to make in the framework of democratic processes, can be discussed in a quite specific manner – a manner which averts the frequent accusation that art and design are being instrumentalized.

1. Introduction

In recent years, the writings by the pragmatist John Dewey on artistic action and esthetic experience have played a minor role in the German language context of esthetic theory construction. Already in a very brief appraisal of Dewey's concept of esthetic experience by the literary theorist Hans Robert Jauß... it becomes clear that in Dewey – barring the application of his concept of experience – his entire philosophic scenario which he developed around this concept, has not been received in the mainstream of esthetic theory construction. Jauß writes, notably critical:

To the extent that Dewey extends the focus on the esthetic beyond art and describes his field as if it were limitlessly extendable, classicistic

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definitions of the art beautiful such as order, form, harmony are turned undetected into characteristics of an esthetic thing world and Aristotelian definitions of the unity of the epic fable become the condition for the possibility of experience in general. (Jauß 1991, 162 pp.)

Jauß was unable to appreciate Dewey's claim that esthetic experiences are also of democracy theoretical concern. Not the alterity of the esthetic stands at the centre of Dewey's theory, but rather its exemplariness for human conduct, also in a democracy. This program, which Dewey already developed in the 1930s, does not have a figure of withdrawal or refusal at its center, but rather the experience of completeness. Here, art is not just the instance upon which the esthetic ignites – it also merely represents one of the activating possibilities of projecting oneself towards a community. In this elision or gap, which is only briefly mentioned here, a historical contingency in theory construction reveals itself which it would pay to examine more closely. But this is not the topic of this paper. Instead, I would merely like to explain some of the premises in Dewey's theory of art as well as to show the connection to his concept of esthetic experience which goes far beyond Dewey's thoughts on artistic action. I shall conclude by briefly sketching the embedding of his art theoretical thinking in the framework of his democracy theory.

The concept of the end is transformed by Dewey into an intrinsic purposiveness which he explains by recourse to the meaning and value of human action. He sharply distinguishes this internal purposiveness of meaningful action from the pursuit of rigidly set external goals. Let us consider Dewey's concept with regard to two prominent applications of the concept of the end. His 'teleology of the intrinsic pursuit of self-set goals' stands in contrast to Hannah Arendt's proposal of a separation of working action (as an at times violent achievement of goals) from action in the public realm. According to Arendt, it is not possible to achieve self-set goals while acting. Similarly, Dewey's version of the concept of the end stands in contrast to Max Weber's distinction of the *zweckrational* from the *wertrational*. For Dewey's concept is not based upon a separation of rational

means from individual and public values but rather upon the idea of completeness. Here first of all a summary of the epistemological and anthropological premises underlying Dewey's concept of intrinsic purposive action will be presented. The focus of the paper will be Dewey's theory of art which he understands as an experience and reaction in its actualization and as an activating experience in its reception. Finally, this theory will be contextualized in its social dimension.

2. Conceptual Difference between Aesthetic Experience, Artistic Action and Art

Dewey sees a dimension of specifically 'aesthetic' experience in all those realms in which it is possible to unify that which has been experienced; or in other words, to bring into a process of becoming complete. Here, he distinguishes his concept of esthetic experience from the traditional concepts of experience in philosophy prevailing in his day. Dewey criticizes these concepts for *retroactively* carrying out the attribution of a unity in the sense of the cognition of a logical relation. In contrast to these concepts, his concept involves a *unifying* movement in the experience (Dewey 2005, pp. 36). According to Dewey, the artistic however is not to be equated with this experience process because it implies consequently an "action that involves materials and energies outside of the body" which are indeed processed by artists but which cannot be subsumed under the intrinsic processes revealed. During this action something more than this experience emerges; *something* emerges – an object or a designed product. With the aid of this object, an esthetic experience is again able to be had as "*an* experience" (Dewey 2005, p. 38) but which is systematically not to be equated with the artistic (Dewey 1958, p. 356). In order to have an esthetic experience of an artwork, one does not need to participate "in the operations of production"; but in order to determine the artistic, one has to include these processes. (Ibid.) Thus Dewey deplores not only the frequently occurring confusion of the esthetic with the artistic; he also deplores the fact that the artistic is often seen as

subordinate to the esthetic.²

The concept of art – or fine art, as Dewey says – stands for all manner of things produced in its name: architecture, painting, novels, dramas etc. These are “a production, which in reality is largely a form of commercialized industry in production of a class of commodities.” (Dewey 1958, p. 364) These things play their roles in the framework of economic processes which adhere to certain rules. They do not need to evoke esthetic experiences. Dewey says of them: „Obviously no one of these classes of activity and product or all of them put together, mark off anything that can be called distinctively fine art. They share their qualities and defects with many other acts and objects.” (Ibid.) Dewey has other criteria in mind for a definition of art: an “instrumentality” which means that art works become means for esthetic experiences. For Dewey, this constitutes the definition of the concept of art with regard to the *quality* of activities and products.

3. Theory of Evolution Principle Idea

“A bird builds its nest and a beaver its dam when internal organic pressures cooperate with external materials so that the former are fulfilled and the latter are transformed in a satisfying combination.”
(Dewey 2005, p. 25)

This empirically esthetic approach constitutes the foundation for Dewey’s concept of art. Here Dewey places the focus on the fact that human and thus also artistic intentions always depend upon internal and external parameters. This perspective both includes the body in reflections as well as making clear that all action means an interaction with external “energies”(Ibid.) Thus the intention of the artist is fundamentally anchored in an “impulsion” but does not completely coincide with it: “Because it is the movement of the organism in its entirety, impulsion is the initial stage of any complete experience.” (Dewey 2005, p. 60) But only by overcoming obstacles in the course of achieving a targeted goal does one become conscious of that

² Cf. *ibid.* p. 357.

which is targeted. According to Dewey “instinctive tendencies are transformed into contrived undertakings.” (Dewey 2005, p. 62) Reflection is brought about by “resistance and check.” (Ibid.)

We are constitutively uncertain about everything that we begin. This uncertainty of ours inherent in action is due to action always being a beginning in concrete situations about which we cannot know whether and which results are brought about. At first sight, this concept of action recalls that of Hannah Arendt’s. According to Dewey, the key issue here is to establish a philosophical difference between actions which are open-ended and detached observations or contemplative participation in that which already exists. A certain kind of anthropologized naturalism enables Dewey to consider this difference more precisely. Throughout the most diverse texts and different periods, Dewey constantly maintains an anti-dualistic stance. He rejects the traditional dualities of “theory and practice”, “cognition and action”, “mind and matter” etc.³ Instead, his naturalism is based upon the premise of evolutionary continuity. We human beings are an embedded part of the organic and yet, because of our capacity for cognitive anticipation, we are also distinct from the organic world. However, this fact is not to be regarded in light of a nature – culture dualism, nor in the sense of an opposition between the animal and the human. Instead at issue here is the notion of a progressive development of abilities.⁴

Of great interest for current debates concerning this theoretical setting is surely the fact that Dewey explains the process of thought not only through recourse to verbal cognition but by employing a concept of design which emphasizes the pictoriality of thought. By this he does not just mean the metaphoricity of our language, but a kind of visual contact that every organism has with its environment. On the one hand, the environment is always being observed, but on the other hand, it is also being *formed*.⁵ The

³ Cf. Dewey 1998, pp. 7–29.

⁴ Cf. Matthias Jung 2010, pp. 145–165, here p 160: “Nevertheless, Dewey’s naturalistic stance is very special in that it combines radical antidualism and evolutionary continuity with full acknowledgment of qualitative differences between human action and organic behavior.”

⁵ In his text about the influence of Darwinism on philosophy Dewey describes this fact as “as the old problem of design versus chance.” (Erfahrung, Erkenntnis und Wert,

relation of the organisms to the environment is thus always more than just their passive experience and evaluation of it: it also involves the constant act of pre-reflexive construction of design in the sense of an anticipation of possible options of action. Individuals are thus guided away from a state of 'being orientated to' towards their well-being. This dimension cannot solely be explained by analysis of propositional relations of substantiation. Rather, it occurs "through processes of resistance and adaption, or, in Dewey's terminology, 'doing and undergoing.'" (Fluck 2000, p. 179) And yet, according to Dewey, at issue here is indeed a dimension of thought and cognition and not, for instance, their opposite.

The difference to "wertrational action" in Max Weber is quite obviously the following: action-guided values are, in Dewey's view, not fixed, but rather dynamically conceptualized, constantly emerging and shifting, also in regard to the situation of specific individuals. Hence action-guided ends are comprehended by Dewey also as intrinsic ends and no longer as the external setting of ends ("externalist means-and-ends model" (Ibid., pp. 149). But to become conscious of one's own intentions always means at the same time to consciously or unconsciously include one's own experiences in the momentary act. Dewey describes such a repository of experience as "inner material" – pictorial representations, memories and sensations, which are "progressively re-formed" (Dewey 2005, p. 77).

4. Material

Dewey's concept of material is thus twofold: "concrete" (that is, external) materials, about which Dewey says, "every one knows that they must undergo change" (Ibid.), correspond to the inner material which is re – formed in the artistic act. Through this supposed scenario it also becomes apparent that the re-forming of materials cannot be solely consciously

2004 p. 36), interestingly, Martin Suhr has translated "design" as "Zweck", which provides a link to the traditional philosophical question about the relation of end and design. Dewey's remark that the Aristotelian concept of design "eidos" was translated by the scholastics as "species" (the concept of the species in biology) also connects the Gestalt character with the idea of the creation of an order. Cf. Dewey 2004, pp 31-43.

conceived – they must entail a more complex process of change.⁶ According to Dewey, the artistically forming individual is driven by a yearning for unity. This yearning is not to be understood in psychological, but rather in evolution theoretical terms. Here one sees at work a variation of the Aristotelian teleology principle towards perfection. In the sense of a rhythmicity, however, the unity of “action, feeling, and meaning” (Dewey 2005, p. 15) appears and disappears. It is only in a kind of touching with the external that Dewey calls world, that the vitality and also completeness of *an* experience (the esthetic experience) can emerge. It emerges namely then when there are momentary co-incidences, orders or harmonies; when something merges. In such moments something “is expressed” (Ibid., p. 74)

Values “that past experiences have incorporated in personality” (Ibid.) are revealed in external material in which “meaning...is...[thus] incorporated.” (Ibid., p. 14) But at the same time they also reveal themselves as altered values through the esthetic experience. (Ibid., p. 14) Here also, Dewey’s antipathy towards the antique model of philosophical contemplation becomes apparent. Against this model he sets the “active and alert commerce with the world” (Ibid., p. 18) How this achieved harmonization or merging that occurs while dealing with materials and concrete situations is to be precisely understood, is certainly here a kind of epistemological foundational question of considerable importance. Dewey leaves us in no doubt that it is not solely to be understood as an inter-subjective process or a process of projection.

On account of the impulses and struggles of the artist subject which are forever being diverted and changed by hurdles and obstacles, an “intrinsic integration” emerges - one could say, a state of the subject emerges. This state has been co-formed by the contents and materials of the environment and these have been integrated into the inner through a chain reaction. But consciousness also emerges in a similar manner. It emerges with the aid of the ‘problems’ requiring solutions and tasks as a reflection of its own activity and contents. Activities such as choosing, simplifying, clarifying, abbreviating and summarizing are described by Dewey as

⁶ Cf. *ibid.* p. 75.

processes of abstraction during which that which is of significance is so to speak filtered out. (Ibid., p. 99) Because every artist has an individual reservoir of experiences at her disposal, it is evident that in each individual case (at least considered in systematic terms) something different can emerge. The process of artistic action is comprised of different stadia in which the material, up until now modified, “sets up demands to be fulfilled and it institutes a framework that limits further operations.” (Ibid., p. 116) Dewey also uses the concept of relation” to describe such esthetic “modes of interaction.” (Ibid., p. 140) He thus relates the concept of form to a relation that is conceptualized as dynamic to the extent that it is seen as being in constant change.

5. Work

Allowing that the „predetermination of an end-product” (Ibid., p. 144) by the artist at the outset of her activity is impossible – it leads at best “to the turning out of a mechanical or academic product” (Ibid.) – the artwork that does emerge is on the one hand “self-identical throughout the ages.” (Ibid., p. 112) On the other hand, however, “as a work of art it is recreated every time it is esthetically experienced.” (Ibid., p. 113) Thus the artwork is so to speak comprised of two components: that which is fixed, self-identical and that which is respectively experienced afresh. Both these concepts of the work, or both of these aspects of the work, constitute an analogy to the two aforementioned aspects of the material as inner material and external materials. The fact that “upon its completion an artwork is also a part of the objective world, like a locomotive or a dynamo” has remained valid up until the present day. This also applies to works which only continue to exist in their documentations or which have passed into the history of art as documents. This holds true, for example, for theater productions. Here, not only a prescribed text is always fixed just as it is in many music scores, but in a certain sense recordings, photos, videos, catalogues can also be thought of as fixed – they have become “part of the world.”

Artworks represent for other persons the experiences of those persons who produced them and they bring about new actions. Thus Dewey

treats art works in the final analysis as mediating objects and not as subjects of action. In this manner, an ethical dimension of art emerges. It concerns the responsibility of artistic actors for the instrumentality of their works for others, although Dewey does not claim that artists can prescribe what may and may not be done with their works.

6. Collectivity / Society

For Dewey, democracy theoretical and pedagogical consequences follow from the exemplarity of artistic action and experiences. I shall cite here something Winfried Fluck said in 2000. “If there is a reason to re-examine Dewey’s work, then it would be that it represents a contribution to a concept of democracy in which the social dimension of individual self-realization is always implied.” (Fluck 2000, p. 188) While this interpretation may not be entirely new, it has not lost its validity. For, from the perspective of Dewey’s esthetic theory, the contribution which art and design are able to make in the framework of democratic processes, can be discussed in a quite specific manner – a manner which averts the frequent accusation that art and design are being instrumentalised. In the act of art and the experience of art something can be practiced or experienced which is substantial for the democratic constitution of a society in its entirety: the succeeding relationship of the individual to something which transcends it, namely to society as its historically concrete environment. For Dewey, succeeding in this context does not mean the achievement of a stabile harmony, and certainly not the submission of oneself to external rules, that is, rules set by other persons. Nor does it mean being locked into an organic community. Rather, the relationship to society is regarded as a process of encountering and working through obstacles which leads to a concretely experienced *feeling* of the meaningfulness of a whole. Analogously – perhaps we could also say: ‘at a small level’, such a process takes place during the experience of an art work. This is not to say that the experience of the art work occurs in the mode of the ‘as if’, a figure of thought which plays a role in so many esthetic theories. For at issue here is precisely the same kind of activity and intensity attributable to many situations. Dewey says: “A work of art elicits

and accentuates this quality of being a whole and of belonging to the larger, all-inclusive, whole which is the universe in which we live. This fact, I think, is the explanation for that feeling of exquisite intelligibility and clarity we have in the presence of an object that is experienced with esthetic intensity.” (Dewey 2005, p. 202)

At first sight, this “distinctness and clarity” invoked by Dewey recalls the esthetic teleological judgment in Kant. As a supposition of meaning, the esthetic teleological judgment is essentially a conceptual judgment which a subjectively apprehended wholeness inheres. The fundamental difference however between both models is that “distinction and clarity” in Dewey are results of a self-relationality. Meaning arises during action or on account of stimulation through something (e.g. an artwork), from which the subject has received an impulse which influences it even in action. The meaning which arises here is the result of reactions and their numerous inner corrections which are responding to a contextual environment – it is not the content of a onetime judgment. Speaking in history of philosophy terms, one might thus say that the subjectivity of the Kantian esthetic judgment is relativized in Dewey through ‘contact’ with the things and the environment. The ‘instrument’ of the relativization is the vital interest of each and every individual. This interest is conceived by Dewey neither solely materialistically and nor, as in Weber, as a purely technical interest in finding the best means to obtaining a defined end in a disillusioned world. According to Dewey, the genuine interest of the human being lies in giving meaning to his own actions and the contexts connected to them.⁷

Translation: Oliver Schumacher

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⁷ Cf. Kloppenborg, 2000 p. 50: „Nach Dewey ist Erkenntnis untrennbar verknüpft mit den Zwecken und Konzepten, die der Mensch als denkendes und wertendes Wesen in eine Situationserfahrung mit einbringt.“

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