

Pragmatism for Architects

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Dewey's pragmatist aesthetics attempts to reconcile the tension between public and private demands on the work of art that has troubled contemporary architecture since the passing of modernism. As a public philosophy of art it holds tremendous promise; but architects will likely find Dewey's characterization of the individual encounter with the work of art less satisfactory. This suggests that Dewey's pragmatism may have over-committed to a singular aesthetic interpretation of the world, lacking the philosophical distance sought by architects. However, pragmatism might inform the reconciliation project as a helpful aesthetic outlook.

Now that the modernist presumption of social purpose naturally emerging through the pursuit of aesthetic excellence is in eclipse, architects are continually faced with an intractable conflict between an aesthetically autonomous architecture that modestly shuns claims of serving the larger good, and an ambitious social agenda for the built environment that reduces aesthetics to a glorified bromide for society's ills. Architects looking for theoretical guidance in the struggle to overcome this conflict and craft a comprehensive design outlook that reconciles the uniqueness of the aesthetic with an interest in improving the world have had reason to be disappointed in continental philosophy. The off-putting — disheartening even — thing about much continental philosophy is that it seduces architects away from the problems of achieving social purpose through their work more readily than it helps them with the task of reconciliation. With Derrida and his followers, this seduction takes the form of an invitation to play with ideas without anyone or anything to answer to save the requirement to be interesting.¹ With both Foucault and Heidegger, the seduction away from social relevance is via ever further retreat into the self, either with an almost private language with which to rise above it all, as with Heidegger, or with construing oneself as a private work of art, as with Foucault.² This characteristic of continental philosophy has led Richard Rorty to characterize Heidegger, Derrida and Foucault as excellent "private philosophers" but of little help when it comes to reconciling the needs of the

self with the demands of others.³ Architects seeking an alternative to the haughtiness and introversion of continental philosophy to help guide the reconciliation of the aesthetic world with the needs of the world at large can do no better than John Dewey's *Art as Experience*, a work which attempts the very reconciliation facing contemporary architecture.

1. The Aesthetic Democracy

As a plausible alternative to today's conflicted culture, Dewey invokes the example of classical Greece; a culture which did not experience a conflict between art and society because the Athenian conception of art was as an inherently public good.⁴ Athenians achieved an aesthetic democracy in which political and aesthetic enfranchisement were one. Rather than dumbing down art in a form of populism (a fear which haunts contemporary attempts at public engagement), Athenian aesthetic democracy created a society of connoisseurs that helped raise art to celebrated heights. By making art a matter of intense public scrutiny, Athens avoided altogether the objective/subjective dichotomy that arises in cultures (such as ours) when it is up for grabs whether aesthetic merit is a matter for interpretation by an elite, or whether it is a matter of personal taste and thus beyond serious dispute. This debilitating dichotomy, according to Dewey, dooms aesthetic evaluation in our culture to swinging between one of two excesses; neither of which is adequate to fully explain the role that aesthetic experience plays in life.

The first excess is the assumption that, without rigidly objective criteria for evaluation, aesthetic judgment is rendered impossible. Dewey labels this the 'judicial' outlook. Judicial theories attempt a scientific level of objectivity by deducing rules for artistic merit derived from the characteristics of the meritorious works of art of the past. A judicial interpretation of a work of architecture, such as Durham Cathedral (a personal favorite), might go as follows: "Its beautiful because it maintains a fine figure-ground composition, a tense balance between solid and void, employs first-rate craftsmanship in a construction enlivened with unusual decorative patterns, and doesn't lapse into a backwards-looking or sentimental form." Such an evaluation presupposes the availability of comprehensive objective standards, that, when met, result in something aesthetically meritorious. Dewey argues that the presupposition of unchanging standards makes this type of evaluation notoriously unable to appreciate new and emerging art forms. He speaks of "its inability to cope with the emergence of new modes of life — of experiences that demand new modes of expression."⁵ Judicial interpretation has other weaknesses Dewey doesn't mention. The emphasis placed on objective analysis leaves a void between interpretation and valuing. In the premium placed on objectivity, one never knows how strongly the evaluator feels about the work. As a result, judicial

evaluations often sound clinical. Furthermore, the emphasis on the features of an artwork that can be objectively described lead inexorably to aesthetic formalism, with all the limitations for which formalism is well-known. The emphasis on rules for analysis leads such criticism to be a better fit with classicizing movements in art than with romantic ones.

In response to the limitations of the judicial outlook, aesthetic theory overcompensates by giving over entirely to a subjective approach, which Dewey describes as the second excess of ‘impressionistic’ response. Impressionistic theories attend more closely to the effects a work of art engenders in the experiencing subject. An impressionistic response to Durham might go as follows: “The massive columns and walls rising into darkness create a powerful sense of God’s might in sublime contrast to the insignificance and frailty of the grounded human worshippers.” Here, while it is clear the connection between interpretation and value — the interpretation IS the value — it is also clear that the viewer’s responses to the work of art have begun to occupy a more prominent place in the evaluation; the artwork itself serves more as a kind of prompt for eloquent interpretation than as an object of scrutiny. It becomes an instrument for the mind to begin veering into its own directions, and this may be seen by most as a weakness of subjective or as Dewey would say, ‘impressionistic’ interpretation.

The presumption of objective rules for evaluation is discarded in favor of the artwork becoming something of a consumer item valued, in this example, for the excitement of experiencing God’s might. Dewey notes that this approach leads to the value of the work becoming dishearteningly ephemeral. It asserts that we can only attend to our impressions of the work of art as a moment in an ongoing personal narrative. “It is in effect, if not in words, a denial that criticism in the sense of judgment is possible, and an assertion that judgment should be replaced by statement of the responses of feeling and imagery the art object evokes.”⁶ Once the work fails to sustain the desired response, due to over-familiarity or even if the subject is having a bad day, it rapidly loses its merit. Though Dewey neglects to note this, it is clear from the example that impressionistic interpretations lend themselves better to consideration of romantic forms of art than they do more classical variations: This approach is also lopsided.

The crucial moment that leads to these excesses of judgment occurs when the aesthetic is assumed to exist in a realm somehow removed and privileged from the rest of the cognitive world. Once this assumption is made, once the aesthetic is declared to be autonomous — to obey rules strictly internal to its own logic and practices — then theories explaining the metaphysics of autonomous aesthetic values and the epistemology of how these values come to be cognized must be advanced. If one chooses to explain aesthetic value by starting with aesthetic objects and the qualities that make

some objects better than others, then a strong metaphysics — one that explains the absolutes that determine merit — in the form of ‘judicial’ formalism appears to be the inevitable result. If one starts instead from an epistemological account of how the subject comes to perceive aesthetic value in objects, then subjective, ‘impressionistic’ explanations become the most plausible candidates. Dewey’s aesthetics trenchantly opposes this entire approach: He thinks the assumption of the autonomy of the aesthetic realm unwarranted, the resulting metaphysical and epistemological theories of art ultimately untenable, and the results for a deeply felt and broadly understood aesthetic disastrous. Instead, he redescribes the aesthetic as something both intimately and commonly experienced by everyone in everyday experiences. The pragmatist aesthetic experience tracks the subject’s engagement with the work of art; it is neither solely derived from the physical properties of the work nor from the imaginative experiences of the subject, but from something forged from the prolonged encounter.⁷ According to Dewey’s definition, then, Durham would be a meritorious work of architecture if it encourages the exploration of a rich exchange between observer and building. It calls the individual back to attend to it time and again. In good pragmatist fashion, the artwork directs the viewer to attend to both the work of art and the subjective response to it indefinitely, or as Dewey puts it, as “a venture.”

This conception is strikingly similar to Adorno’s negative aesthetics.⁸ As with Adorno’s conception, the artwork promises resolution, but the best never provide it. Final meaning and resolution are always in the offing, but they are deferred. With Adorno, one wonders why the subject would repeatedly engage in a task that is made out to be ultimately self-defeating. With Dewey, there is an answer: the enlargement of experience itself is the reward.⁹ With this explanation, Dewey has captured something about aesthetic merit that seems just right. It recognizes both the utility and contingency of rules of evaluation, and it doesn’t depend on the subject’s wallowing in a romantic aesthetic ecstasy at each encounter for the work to have value. A work of art can just as easily be disturbing, perplexing, or intellectually challenging and still be meritorious. But the idea that the aim of this activity is enlargement of experience in general (beyond the recognizably aesthetic) is a harder sell.

It is a harder sell because, not only are many experiences demonstrably deleterious and not in need of enlargement (rape, for example), but also because the enlargement of experience brought on by new aesthetic experiences so often seems to stay comfortably lodged in the aesthetic realm. These aesthetic experiences do not necessarily crossover to experience in general. The enlargement of experience brought on by encounters with art may beget nothing further than more interesting encounters with art. If the point of much contemporary aesthetic experience is nothing more than art itself, then

Dewey would appear to have a dilemma, for either he will need to categorize those who believe they pursue art or aesthetic experience for its own sake to be trivial or somehow misguided, (perhaps by the prevalence of the art for art's sake paradigm) or else he will have to accept that the enlargement of purely aesthetic experience is good enough. Since one of the major objectives of *Art as Experience* was to confront the doctrine of aesthetic autonomy, Dewey opts to explain why art for art's sake is misguided. It is misguided because it presumes that art can be something other than inherently social. For Dewey, aesthetic autonomy is not inevitable. Rather, it is a result of certain misplaced and damaging philosophical traditions, as well as a way of coping with a culture that places extraordinary emphasis on the compartmentalization of experience and on private consumption. In our culture of consumption, the social nature of art is artificially suppressed to serve other purposes. In a different culture that recognizes the inherently social nature of art (ancient Greece), art flourishes in ways one can scarcely imagine or believe to be true were it not for the beautiful evidence, and the subjective/objective dichotomy that leads to the two excesses of evaluation evaporates.

Dewey's emphasis on the centrality of the experience of art over the art object itself, then, arises from an intertwined social and philosophical agenda. On the philosophical front, experience is made central because pragmatism is so opposed to the Platonism lurking behind every attempt to posit aesthetic qualities that somehow achieve independence from human construction. Deweyan pragmatism asserts against the metaphysics of the judicial approach that it is senseless to posit aesthetic qualities that exist independently of perceiving, thinking beings able to mentally assemble such qualities out of sense experience. In other words, the Grand Canyon wasn't grand until a human being (or at least a being with the mental horsepower of humans) was around to come upon it and construct the concept of grandness in response to its depth, breadth, and the like. Similarly, Durham Cathedral isn't a magnificent work of architecture without someone to appreciate it. This is not to accuse Dewey of lapsing into a coarse subjectivism or mentalism; he was equally critical of this excess too. He was steadfast in insisting that we come to know of grandeur or magnificence only through engagement with the world. Only there need not be anything mysterious about how we come to know of these qualities: Perception of grandeur or of magnificence arises in comparison with perceptions based on encounters with other things in the world, and not, as the Platonists would have it, because the Grand Canyon or Durham Cathedral are instances of the eternal qualities of grandness and magnificence. The alternative to a constructivist approach to aesthetic qualities is to assert that such qualities exist independently of human perceptions. This difficult metaphysical notion usually ends up depending on an epistemological appeal to intuition or to a mysticism that generally serves a self-preserving elite.

Dewey's distaste for elitism leads to the social agenda running concurrently through his aesthetics. His belief in democracy extends to an insistence that perfectly valid aesthetic experience doesn't require elite guidance and it need not to occur in a gallery or museum. The elites who prop up the aesthetic autonomy tradition attempt to clarify and distill the aesthetic experience, but in doing so only thwart the ability to take one's aesthetic experience 'neat', as Dewey might say, by elevating the aesthetic object to something supra-human. Dewey emphasizes the contrary; that the availability of aesthetic experience is democratically distributed among all ages, classes, and creeds. This approach, then, recasts the reconciliation project facing contemporary architects to one of discarding a set of elitist beliefs and practices that seek to protect the aesthetic realm but instead end up only blocking the possibility of its magnified relevance. He finds this loss of the personal experience of the transcendence often made possible, if only briefly, by encounters with art to be more than compensated for by the new transcendence made possible in the public realm of the aesthetic democracy. "More in the spirit of Benjamin than Adorno, he is willing to exchange high art's autocratic aura of transcendental authority for a more down-to-earth and democratic glow of enhanced living and enriched community of understanding."¹⁰ This may be a reasonable trade, if a trade is required for the reconciliation of aesthetics and social good. By clearing his aesthetic territory, so to speak, with this two-frontal fight, Dewey hopes to make the enjoyment, appreciation, and judgment, that is, the full experience of art available once again in the way it would be experienced pre-philosophically, before those aesthetic priests who would claim to be our intermediaries perverted art for their own purposes. But does it? Can we go back into the garden and will it be just as we left it?

The pre-philosophical, commonsense response to magnificent art objects is simply to revel in or try to partake in their magnificence; that is, to regard their aesthetic qualities as precisely something Dewey is at great pains to fight: The idea that it is *in* the cathedral or the Grand Canyon that the beauty or defect lies, and not within the mental events that encounters with these objects channel and permit. Dewey would have it that we are welcome to experience things this way if we like, but that on a philosophical level we should realize it is probably a lie, or at best, not really possible to know of eternal, extra-human qualities (or defects). The Deweyan pragmatist conception of art would either seem to require a certain forgetfulness, fancier mental footwork than most of us are capable of, or else a reorientation after it has cleared its ground philosophically. It doesn't appear possible to go back and find one's pre-philosophical conceptions of art entirely undisturbed.

Art as Experience doesn't allow us to leave things as we once found them because it introduces a new self-consciousness into the mix; the self-

consciousness that the experience of art is something we make, rather than something that we would often otherwise experience in the best art at least, as something found. In the best art the work may even carry a stronger impact: It may be experienced as overwhelming, as insistent, as thwarting one's will to resist. It is reasonable to ask whether the Deweyan schema accounts for these perceptions without taming them into something less than they would be pre-philosophically. Dewey would have it that this newly reinforced consciousness of the made quality of aesthetic experience is primarily for use as a sort of metaphysical shield against the Platonists but not something one needs or uses when actually encountering the work of art. In other words, I should still feel free to experience the full emotive impact of the magnificence of Durham as something which exists outside my imagination and persists even after I am long gone. But it seems obvious that to subscribe to a pragmatist aesthetic at the same time, I have at least lost the emotive certainty that this impression is true. It will tend to be wiped out by the logic of the theory as soon as it appears.

This is not to say that the loss of a certain emotive force resulting from a change in beliefs may often not be well-worth the cost. The loss in emotive force of no longer believing in the divine right of rulers is an example that comes to mind. Once I have come to recognize that the magnificence of Durham is a mental construct (albeit a durable and widely shared mental construct) and not something that would exist without beings around to confer such a status on the structure, it would seem that I can no longer go about my aesthetic business exactly as I had before. At the very least, I would have to occasionally acknowledge a certain contingent aspect to such judgments. This realization doesn't bother pragmatists, because they are ever willing to embrace the possible contingency in everything we think we know about the world. This is just, for them, a matter of growing up. But this is a better description of the public aspect of aesthetic experience, in which there is always something overt about the construction of consensus judgment, than it is of the individual or private side. In private aesthetic experience, one-on-one with the aesthetic object, this Deweyan self-consciousness or awareness of contingency actually attenuates the experience itself, and this would appear to be a counterproductive development for a pragmatist aesthetics. A pragmatist aesthetics encourages the subject to get closer to the art object and disregard the Kantian-flavored concept of aesthetic distancing, but its insistence on the constructed quality of, not only judgments of aesthetic merit, but of aesthetic experience itself, introduces a new sort of distance.

The lopsidedness of Deweyan pragmatist aesthetics in favor of the *experience* of art over the art *object* is by design. Architects considering embracing a pragmatic approach as a possible solution to the reconciliation problem need to realize that "the subject-matter of pragmatic aesthetics differs

from that of traditional, analytic aesthetics: it concerns the *work* of art, rather than the art *object*, the dynamic experience that is artistic creation, rather than the static product of that activity; the consequences of art for the improvement of life, rather than 'art for art's sake'.¹¹ This is a focus that "privileges creative process over static object.... Only the latter is available for commodification on the market and fetishization in the museum."¹² Thus, in Dewey's aesthetics, the uniqueness of the work of art that traditional aesthetic theory seeks to explain is not a phenomenon so much as it is a symptom of the dominant, capitalist-instrumental ideology of commodification. Given the dominance of these "values in Euroamerican culture, we can understand the isolation and frequent deprecation of that dimension of communicative experience that is art and aesthetic experience."¹³

Dewey was not unappreciative of the role of the art object in aesthetic experience. But he emphasizes its role in the early stages of that experience by speaking of aesthetic experience as an 'undergoing' that eventually is turned into a 'doing'. That is to say, a complete aesthetic experience contains a submitting, or a taking in phase, that is then turned into an active engagement with the object under consideration. But it is not the object, "the temple, painting, statue, poem" that is the true work of art, these are merely its remnants. "The actual work of art is what the product does with and in experience."¹⁴ This change in emphasis has not been purchased without a price, and it is not likely that repackaging art as experience avoids commodification anyway. Experience is as easily commodified these days as is any other consumable. Disney has made a financial empire out of this fact.

Dewey's hostility to the commodified aesthetic experience brought on by the aesthetic autonomy tradition left him unsympathetic to the possibility that "this concept of autonomy is radically double-edged: if on the one hand it provides a central constituent of bourgeois ideology (the commodification of everything), it also marks an emphasis on the self-determining nature of human powers and capacities which becomes, in the work of Karl Marx and others, the anthropological foundation of a revolutionary opposition to bourgeois utility."¹⁵ This more sophisticated understanding of the function of the art object in contemporary life outlined by Terry Eagleton suggests that it might be worthwhile excavating for good aesthetic autonomy amongst the bad. Good aesthetic autonomy explores the hows and whys of these peculiar things designated as art objects that never seem to quite succumb to complete commodification, either by their resistance to being redescribed in the terms of utility, by the apparent inexhaustibility of their value, or by their vexing ephemerality. Aesthetic autonomy can be used in a spirit of resistance just as easily as it can be used to deliver a commodity and manufacture an elite. Insisting on the validity of the pre-philosophical impression of aesthetic quality residing in the object rather than in the experience, then, contains the seeds of

resistance to the very commodification Dewey opposes. The trade he was willing for us to make might not be required after all.

2. Dewey's Aesthetic Emotivism

Dewey's conviction that the judicial approach implied an untenable platonist metaphysic means that in a pragmatist conception, the only meaningful difference between the statement "Durham Cathedral is a magnificent work of architecture!" and the statement: "I am having a magnificent experience of Durham Cathedral!" is an emotive one, for ultimately, demonstration of the truth of the first statement is in the publication of the experience anyway. But this is not how we are likely to experience this distinction prior to a pragmatic interpretation. Prior to the intervention of pragmatist aesthetics, the gap between the two statements would appear to be that between one that strives for judicial objectivity and one that strives for subjective accuracy. Even if the second statement is changed to "I am experiencing a magnificent work of architecture in Durham Cathedral!" a gap remains. As soon as the experience of the self is introduced, the work of art undergoes a transformation from an object which must be approached, to fodder for human use. The pragmatist approach assumes that this is, in fact, all a work of art is anyway (because, how could we know otherwise?), but architects struggling with the reconciliation problem discussed at the onset will be alarmed at this turn of events. The reconciliation problem architects experience is not only how best to bring art back to a central place in the experience of contemporary life, but also how to bring contemporary life to the best in art. This gap is experienced as more than one of accounting for differences between relative strengths of conviction. It is experienced as the problem of justification.

Dewey was able to overlook this gap because his pragmatist interpretation of art is, by definition, a functional one. Architects should question the completeness of Dewey's characterization of the individual aesthetic experience. Upon encountering the grandeur of Durham Cathedral, it would be odd to focus on the *experience* one is having of the great structure. Instead, a sensitive and appropriate encounter would attend to the cathedral itself; its massive columns, its unusual decorative scheme, its role in visually anchoring the town to the hill, but without, as against the judicial interpretation, saddling the encounter with determining to which aesthetic rules it conforms. Rather than becoming more intensely self-aware, one is more likely to become utterly self-forgetful, and to feel strongly that the quality of magnificence adheres to the building and not to the experience of it. Indeed, the encounter with Durham is apt to make any prior individual aesthetic experience appear inadequate for the task of evaluation. Faced with a magnificent work of art, to hold that the value of such a building is the enlargement of experience is to be colossally

egocentric. The value of Durham is, pre-pragmatically, the magnificent object itself. Attending to Durham Cathedral as an art object doesn't lead inexorably to its commodification, although it certainly leads to recognition of its being both singular and irreplaceable. Forgetting about the experience of Durham and attending instead to the building itself does appear to lead to its valorization, but it's hard to imagine what is wrong with that.

Art as Experience seeks to oppose a clumsy instrumentalist attitude toward the work of art — the consumerist mentality in which aesthetic experiences are to be accumulated as so many conquests — by emphasizing its redoubtable public role. Dewey's aesthetic democracy is the vehicle for transcending both the impressionistic and judicial conceptions of aesthetic merit, but the nature and role of the individual aesthetic experience in his conception undoes some of his success, for at its most fundamental level, before it ever has the chance to transcend an instrumental attitude toward art, the experience of the work of art is held to be good only if it contributes to the personal growth that comes from enlarged experience in general. Dewey finds this acceptable due to his pragmatist conception of mind and world, in which the self only comes to know about itself through interaction with the world. Thus, in a roundabout way, it is temporarily permissible for the work of art to be valued instrumentally, because ultimately the point of pragmatic instrumentalism is to better attend to the world. So, the work of art ultimately gets its dignity back and then some. This is an optimistic thought, but architects should regard it with suspicion.

Dewey thought that if one's ideals were guided by the desire to further human solidarity, then there was nothing wrong with an instrumental attitude because there was really nothing greater to which to aspire. Thus, he could be highly complementary of architecture's function in life and be thoroughly instrumental towards it at the same time. Architecture, he writes, expresses "enduring values of collective human life. It 'represents' the memories, hopes, fears, purposes, and sacred values of those who build in order to shelter a family; provide an altar for the gods, establish a place in which to make laws, or set up a stronghold against attack. Just why buildings are called palaces, castles, homes, city-halls, forums, is a mystery if architecture is not supremely expressive of human interests and values."¹⁶ Though edifying, this sentiment is also worrisome for what it consistently excludes. It excludes the possibility of a kind of transcendence by which the most memorable works of architecture, at least, become the standards against which culture, civilization, and human solidarity are measured. How is it possible for such buildings as Durham to achieve this status unless we admit our smallness, humility, and inability to ever fully possess such objects, while confronting them? This is the part of architecture's reconciliation project the pragmatist interpretation neglects: Architects are also seeking to reconcile an instrumentalist culture with a built

environment that requires respectful treatment if it is ever to reach its potential, aesthetic and otherwise. Only by leaving oneself open to the 'found' quality of aesthetic experience as well as the 'made' quality Dewey insists on does art retain the full potential of the 'radically double-edged' possibility of achieving both public and private transcendence.

In this respect, it is only caricaturing Dewey a little to argue that what we get in *Art as Experience* is excellent public philosophy, but not as much in the way of a private philosophy of art. Dewey's concept of the public nature of aesthetic experience doesn't quite solve the reconciliation problem facing contemporary architecture, but it does offer to change its terms into something perhaps more tractable. By emphasizing the continuity of private aesthetic experience with public good, and by explaining how the aesthetic has needlessly come to be regarded as something separate and exclusive, Dewey handily re-grounds aesthetic experience in the ethical without losing its uniqueness. In Dewey's schema, architects might well succeed in mending the conflict between aesthetics and social purpose by seeking to enlarge and strengthen aesthetic democracy through their work. Directing our efforts in this way would serve a larger social purpose without reducing aesthetics to something merely instrumental to morality. But a large question mark remains regarding the adequacy of Dewey's pragmatic interpretation of the individual aesthetic experience itself in confrontation with the art object. Architects have good reason to assert that the best aesthetic experiences do not present themselves as Dewey outlines. Instead, such experiences present themselves as demanding such intense attention to the aesthetic object that the self is lost altogether, however temporary that loss may turn out to be. This need not be seen as a form of self-loathing, or of fulfilling a desire for self-overcoming. It is only a matter of focusing on something deserving and demanding careful attention. This suggests that the other side of the experiential equation of art Dewey so carefully constructs is to create works of architecture truly worthy of the experience.

One way of resisting the commodification of everything that Dewey so despised is to give ourselves permission to regard certain things in the world as having achieved value beyond whatever contribution to human improvement can be attached to them at any given point in time. Not taking Dewey up on his trade of the transcendental authority of the art object for democratic consensus allows us to do just this. Dewey's aesthetic theory (and pragmatism in general) is hostile to the idea of granting status to objects independently of human schemes because it smacks of requiring an ultimately unprovable metaphysic to justify such status. Standing inside Durham Cathedral, it's hard to imagine why a metaphysic would be required to justify the impression that such a building has innate dignity. This idea just presents itself on such occasions. The pragmatist aesthetic democracy holds potential as a public philosophy

architects ought to take seriously in the project of reconciling the aesthetic with the social, but perhaps it need not crowd out the transcendence of the instrumental traditionally assumed to be part of the individual encounter with the work of art, for making these moments of transcendence more widely available is also part of the same project.

3. The Aesthetics of Pragmatism

If Dewey's aesthetic philosophy comes up short in providing the theoretical grounding architects are looking for in the quest to re-associate the aesthetic and social realms, it may yet be possible to generalize from Dewey's attempt in interesting and fruitful ways. Instead of employing a pragmatic outlook, as Dewey does, as an analytic tool, we might, instead, look to the implicit aesthetic outlook driving *Art as Experience*, and pragmatism in general, as an example of (rather than a deductive argument for) a public aesthetic conception at work. That is, we can usefully regard pragmatism, and Deweyan pragmatism in particular, as a unique type of aesthetic movement.

This may seem to stretch the interpretation of what is traditionally regarded as a philosophic movement, but it is not without precedent. The idea that philosophy is driven by, or at least in part measured by, aesthetic considerations goes back at least as far as Aristotle. Aristotle frequently associates beauty with both character and actions. In more recent times, Kant's strict divorce of aesthetics from morality came under attack from Dewey himself in his insistence that moral deliberation take the form of a dramatic rehearsal, one that pays close attention to both the details and material effects of a given situation. Dramatic rehearsal requires both moral imagination and creativity, leading Steven Fesmire to characterize Deweyan ethics as requiring moral artists, as against the Kantian and utilitarian emphasis of moral deliberation as a rational, deductive process.¹⁷

This aesthetic interpretation of pragmatism is, admittedly, somewhat undercut by the spottiness of the pragmatist tradition when it comes to discussing aesthetics. Long periods of time accrued between Santayana's *Sense of Beauty*, Dewey's *Art as Experience*, and Richard Shusterman's 1992 *Pragmatist Aesthetics*. Despite these fitful, nearly unconnected attempts to theorize a pragmatist aesthetic, it is still worth considering whether the problem with theorizing a pragmatist aesthetics is that philosophy is the wrong venue for such work, because pragmatism itself is already thoroughly imbued with a certain aesthetic outlook. Thus, analyzing aesthetic theories from within pragmatism is no more likely to be convincing than analyzing theories of economic justice from within the stock exchange. Too much is already committed to. With Dewey one gains a sense of democracy as something valuable not merely because it is socially uplifting, but also as the one thing he

is willing to allow a certain transcendent quality: it is also inherently beautiful. It is no stretch, therefore, to propose that Dewey's championing of the aesthetic democracy is, in part, aesthetically driven; not only in the standard sense that it would heighten the cause of beauty in everyday life, but also because his vision of the aesthetic democracy is to him a beautiful vision.¹⁸ If this is a plausible explanation, it suggests that pragmatism is itself an embryonic aesthetic movement in addition to the usual interpretation of pragmatism as a critique of enlightenment metaphysics that occasionally strays into politics. This interpretation of what pragmatism has to offer differs from the usual explanations regarding why its exponents so rarely stray into aesthetic theory. The usual explanation is that pragmatism simply has nothing directly to say to aesthetics, instead, it is a critique and theory of how one does philosophy. It provides few intellectual tools for the evaluation of art. This disclaimer may be excessively modest. Another explanation for why pragmatism becomes mute in the face of aesthetics is that it is already driven by an explicit aesthetic agenda. To be a pragmatist philosopher is to be a protagonist of a certain aesthetic regard of the world.

Two dominant themes drive pragmatism's aesthetic regard for the world. The first has been touched on with Dewey's vision of the aesthetic democracy. This vision crops up in Emerson as well as more recently in Rorty, who has tried to blur the line between philosophy and aesthetics with the idea that philosophy be thought of as a kind of literature, done at its best by certain "strong poets." Dewey, in Rorty's reading, is made out to be one of the strong poets of democracy whose aesthetic democratic vistas can be contrasted with the more private aesthetically driven texts of Heidegger and Derrida. *Art as Experience* can then be understood as a work of aesthetic theory driven by a normative moral philosophy as well as by a normative aesthetic.

The second dominant theme in pragmatism's aesthetic regard for the world is more pervasive to the movement: this is the allure and inherent beauty of what might be called pragmatism's aesthetics of action. Pragmatism resolutely ignores fixed eternal essences, not only as philosophically problematic, but also because they aren't interesting. They lack materiality and movement. Pragmatism snaps to attention in the face of material differences, evidence of change, signs that some sort of action has occurred. William James, in "What Pragmatism Means," writes: "A pragmatist ... turns towards concreteness and adequacy, towards facts, towards action and towards power."¹⁹ Dewey was overt about this when he argued that mind is a verb, and that what should be attended to in the work of art is the verb form of the word 'work'. Hans Joas sums up Dewey's aestheticizing of action: "in his philosophy of nature and even more in his aesthetics ... he develops at length the ideal of both a holistic experience and an action completely pervaded with meaning, and opposes it to all action that satisfies the actor only when the goal has been attained."²⁰ An

action “completely pervaded with meaning” must include the aesthetic regard for the doing of the action, beyond the mere instrumental regard of what the action leads to.

A pragmatist’s eyes light up in the face of verbs. Nouns are not so interesting. Shusterman’s somaesthetics explores the natural extension of the idea that aesthetic interest shouldn’t be confined to mental events: Something interesting should happen to the body as well. Actions should ensue. The aesthetic regard for actions, then, would seem to resonate with the body to produce further actions. The parallels Ray Carney draws between the work of painter Thomas Eakins (whose life-span closely paralleled James’s) and pragmatism are most salient here. Eakins, who was fascinated with arrested motion, of seeing the workings of the mind in the doings of the body, is held to be an ideal artistic analogue to the intellectual currents of pragmatism as they were developing at the time with Pierce and James.²¹ Carney understands Eakins to be showing us the pragmatic insight that “our most profound imaginative attainments take place within the materiality of the world — not as an escape or vacation from it.”²² This thrill of the engagement with the world is utterly aesthetic — and utterly pragmatic. Pragmatic regard for the aesthetics of action help account for Dewey’s distaste for “museum art” which is not only put on a pedestal to serve the interests of an elite, but also thereby becomes revoltingly inert, dead, incapable of fostering further action.

If pragmatism is already committed to an aesthetic outlook, the question for architects becomes, then, not whether pragmatism holds any truths with which to bridge the aesthetic and the social realms, but whether its aesthetically-informed vision of what makes for interesting and worthwhile philosophy provides a compelling example of bridge-building. Pragmatism may lead by example, rather than by argument. The example pragmatism leads with is that social engagement need not mean aesthetic instrumentalism. Instead, pragmatism shows that action, which is frequently social, is aesthetically interesting. We need not be doomed to the unhappy choice between personal, highly subjective interpretations of Heidegger and Derrida, and fixed, eternal, and inhuman essences of Plato. We may look beyond these oppositions for things to cultivate and savor in architecture, such as human action and democracy, which are simultaneously beautiful and social.

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NOTES

1. Mary McLeod takes this tendency to task in “Architecture and Politics in the Reagan Era: From Postmodernism to Deconstructivism” in *Architecture Theory Since 1968*, ed. K. Michael Hays (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1998), pp. 678-704. This is also echoed in political scientist Pauline Marie Rosenau’s observation that the skeptical postmodernism characterized most by French poststructuralists “as that brand which relinquishes the project of social transformation by withdrawing inward from the political and refusing all responsibility for what goes on in the society,” quoted in *Reconstructing Architecture*, eds. Thomas Dutton and Lian Hurst Mann (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), p. 191.

2. Michel Foucault, *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth, The Essential Works of Michel Foucault, 1954-1984*, vol. 1 (New York: New Press, 1997), p. 26. Foucault asks bluntly: “Couldn’t everyone’s life become a work of art? Why should the lamp or the house be an art object but not our life?” As Terry Eagleton observes, with the later Foucault, “To live well is transfigure oneself into a work of art by an intensive process of self-discipline.” “This aesthetic working upon oneself is a sort of self-hegemony; but it differs from humanistic hegemony, as in Nietzsche, in that it allows one to give the law to oneself, rather than come meekly under the sway of heteronomous decree.” Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), p. 391.

Martin Heidegger himself would write a sentence like this: “Moreover, man is a being in the midst of beings in such a way that for man the being which he is himself and the being which he is not are always already manifest.” Heidegger, *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*, 5th edn., trans. Richard Taft (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), p. 159. Rorty opines that Heidegger’s purpose in such talk may have been to “recapture the force of the most elementary words of Being – the words on the list above, the words of the various Thinkers who mark the stages of our descent from Plato – by ceasing to think of these words as the natural and obvious words to use.”

3. Richard Rorty, *Truth and Progress: Philosophical Papers, Volume 3* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 310-311. “I want to see the line of thought that runs from Nietzsche to Heidegger and Derrida as (even if this was not the intent of these writers themselves) opening up new private possibilities, possibilities only incidentally and contingently relevant to liberal social hope....” Rorty also writes: “Habermas is certainly right that if we look to the texts commonly identified as ‘philosophical’ for help in realizing the ideals of liberal democracies, we can just *skip* Nietzsche, Heidegger, Derrida, and (most of) Foucault.”

4. John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (1934) (New York: Perigree Books, 1980), p. 328. Dewey writes: “In Athens, which we regard as the home par

excellence of epic and lyric poetry, of the arts of drama, architecture and sculpture, the idea of art for art's sake would not, as I have already remarked, have been understood.... Architecture in all its significant forms was public, not domestic, much less devoted to industry, banking, or commerce. The decay of art in the Alexandrian period, its degeneracy into poor imitations of archaic models, is a sign of the general loss of civic consciousness that accompanied the eclipse of city-states and the rise of a conglomerate imperialism.”

5. *Ibid.*, p. 303.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 304.

7. For example, regarding painting, Dewey asserts “The painting as a picture is *itself* a *total effect* brought about by the interaction of external and organic causes. The external causal factor is vibrations of light from pigments on canvas variously reflected and refracted. It is ultimately that which physical science discovers — atoms, electrons, protons. The *picture* is the integral outcome of their interaction with what the mind through the organism contributes.” *Ibid.*, pp. 250-251.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 274: “The work of art is thus a challenge to the performance of a like act of evocation and organization, through imagination, on the part of the one who experiences it. It is not just a stimulus to and means of an overt course of action.”

9. *Ibid.*, p. 248: “But just as it is the office of art to be unifying, to break through conventional distinctions to the underlying common elements of the experienced world, while developing individuality as the manner of seeing and expressing these elements, so it is the office of art in the individual person, to compose differences, to do away with isolations and conflicts among the elements of our being, to utilize oppositions among them to build a richer personality.”

10. Richard Shusterman, *Pragmatist Aesthetics: Living Beauty, Rethinking Art*, 2nd edn. (Lanham Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000), p. 21.

11. Lenore Langsdorf, “Reconstructing the Fourth Dimension: A Deweyan Critique of Habermas’s Conception of Communicative Action,” in *Habermas and Pragmatism*, eds. Mitchell Aboulafia, Myra Bookman and Catherine Kemp (New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 152.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 153.

13. *Ibid.*

14. Dewey, *Art as Experience*, p. 9.

15. Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), p. 9.

16. Dewey, *Art as Experience*, p. 222-223.

17. Steven Fesmire. “The Art of Moral Imagination,” in *Dewey Reconfigured: Essays on Deweyan Pragmatism*, eds. Casey Haskins and David Seiple (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999), p. 146. See also

Fesmire, *John Dewey and Moral Imagination* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003). Dewey writes, “The problem of the relation of art and morals is too often treated as if the problem existed only on the side of art. It is virtually assumed that morals are satisfactory in idea if not in fact, and that the only question is whether and in what ways art should conform to a moral system already developed.” Dewey, *Art as Experience*, p. 347. Elsewhere he invokes the organic unity of Greek art and morals: “The Greek identification of good conduct with conduct having proportion, grace, and harmony, the *kalon-agathon*, is a more obvious example of distinctive esthetic quality in moral action. One great defect in what passes as morality is its anesthetic quality.” *Ibid.*, p. 39.

18. Shusterman, *Pragmatist Aesthetics*, p. 262.

19. William James, *Pragmatism* (Buffalo, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 1991), p. 25.

20. Hans Joas, *The Genesis of Values* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), p. 109.

21. Ray Carney, “When Mind is a Verb: Thomas Eakins and the Work of Doing,” in *The Revival of Pragmatism: New Essays on Social Thought, Law, and Culture*, ed. Morris Dickstein (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1998), pp. 377-404.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 397.

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