

Dewey's Institutions of Aesthetic Experience

Joe Swenson

Hamline University

The concept of aesthetic experience has weathered some tough times in the last century. Some eighty years ago, John Dewey had enough confidence in the concept that he gave his own major work on aesthetics the rather straightforward title: *Art as Experience*. One would be hard pressed to find such confidence exhibited today. Contemporary discussions of aesthetic experience are rare and when the concept is discussed it is now usually addressed in cautious tones that take great care to deny it the prominent role it once enjoyed in the history of aesthetics. In this way, aesthetic experience now occupies a place in the philosophy of art that is something akin to the status of an eccentric aunt or uncle at a family reunion: nobody denies that they are part of the family, but it's probably best not to draw too much attention to that fact for fear that something embarrassing might happen. And in the already eccentric history of aesthetic experience, Dewey's *Art as Experience* has to be one of the most misunderstood members of the family.

Art as Experience is an easy book to misunderstand for a variety of reasons. The fact that Dewey offers an account of aesthetic experience meant to apply not only to the fine arts but to all forms of human experience make this work as much a piece of philosophical anthropology as one devoted to issues specific to the philosophy of art. In a context where contemporary attitudes towards aesthetic experience are already dubious, Dewey's grand aspiration to formulate an account of aesthetic experience that encompasses both art and life tends to make many critics doubly dubious. If only Dewey had limited his discussions of aesthetic experience to the fine arts exclusively then perhaps we might revive his theory as making common cause with contemporary philosophers like Noël Carroll who do see value in deflationary conceptions of aesthetic experience that highlight features like "quality detection" or "design appreciation" in our experiential interaction with artworks (Carroll, 2001, pp. 58-62). But Dewey repeatedly claims that he does not want to place such artificial constraints onto his understanding of aesthetic experience. Rather, he states the main task of *Art as Experience* is, "to restore continuity between the refined and intensified forms of experience that are works of art and the everyday events, doings, and sufferings that are universally recognized to constitute experience" (Dewey, 1934, p. 16). Consequently, it is difficult

to know just where to place Dewey in relation to the philosophy of art today. He appears to be rejected both by those who prefer to throw aesthetic experience into the conceptual trash-bin and also by those who wish to save the concept, albeit by re-casting it into more conservative and art-specific formulations.

For these reasons, *Art as Experience* is often portrayed today as a well-intentioned, perhaps even admirable book, but also a work that is too speculative, too vague, and above all, too old-fashioned to contribute to ongoing debates in the philosophy of art. This is a picture I would like to dispute. The rest of this paper will focus on one way Dewey is still relevant today by showing how he offers an account of aesthetic appreciation that fits within and could be of benefit to many contemporary contextual theories of art and, in particular, George Dickie's institutional theory of art.

Dewey's relation to contextual theories is a good place to start a rehabilitation of *Art as Experience* for two reasons. First, Dewey advocates his own version of contextualism that not only bears resemblance to many contemporary contextual theories but also goes beyond their non-evaluative classificatory definitions of art to additionally supply an experiential account of our interaction with the many contexts of the artwork. Second, Dewey's so-called "obsolescence" is due, at least in part, to the influence of George Dickie and other contextual theorists who were highly critical of traditional accounts of aesthetic experience and who helped set the stage for Dewey's present state of neglect in the philosophy of art. While I agree with Dickie that many traditional accounts of aesthetic experience fail in their ability to accommodate the peculiarity of modern art, I do not think Dewey's formulation of aesthetic experience should be lumped together with a now standard story that is told about the demise of aesthetic experience in the 20th century. And it is to this story that I now turn.

Dewey and Disruptive Art

The story of the demise of aesthetic experience and the rise of contextual theories in the philosophy of art is one intimately tied to the ontological twists and turns of 20th century art. One major subplot of this story focuses on how and why art movements such as Dada, Pop Art, and other forms of conceptual art, chose to exhibit everyday objects such as urinals, snow shovels, grocery store items, and even selections of silence as works of art. The fact that these artworks were perceptually identical to our experience of ordinary mere things began to raise serious doubts amongst philosophers about whether traditional theories of art that rely upon manifest aesthetic properties or distinct aesthetic experiences could define or even identify these new works of art as art. Agitated by general doubts about whether traditional aesthetic theories could incorporate novel

forms of art like Duchamp's Fountain or Andy Warhol's Brillo Boxes into the same category as Greek sculpture and paintings by Caravaggio, and goaded by a prevalent atmosphere of Wittgensteinian anti-essentialism, anxieties soon arose among many philosophers about whether the concept of "art" could even be defined at all.

In the quest to provide a new definition of art, a number of philosophers began to shift attention away from questions about the perception of manifest aesthetic properties in artworks and towards the context of the theories, social institutions, practices, narratives, and histories in which artworks are imbedded. A major consequence of this movement is that these new definitions of art were framed in largely conceptual rather than experiential terms. Questions about the obsolescence of aesthetic experience in the face of modern art soon gave way to questions about whether aesthetic experience ever even existed in the first place.¹ What had once been the one of the most central concepts in the philosophy of art soon found itself unemployed. Schopenhauer's time-less will-less subject of aesthetic experience might very well be able to transcend space and time but when placed in front of a urinal it apparently soon lost all of its majestic powers.

It is true that Dewey never wrote significantly about Duchamp or other members of the 20th century avant-garde. It is equally true that his folksy prose style certainly seems more at home discussing Greek sculpture, the poetry of Keats, or a painting by Matisse than it does discussing red squares, urinals, moments of silence or other paradigmatic works of conceptual art. Nevertheless, I would argue that Dewey's account of aesthetic experience is in a much better position to describe our experience of an artwork like Duchamp's Fountain than are most traditional aesthetic theories. Experience, for Dewey, is a concept that should not be detached from its environmental context but rather is best understood to represent a form of dynamic engagement with a given environment. Given that the artwork is not simply comprised of the context of social roles, practices, and theories but also of people who appreciate, applaud, and condemn artworks, who get inspired or shocked, and who debate and evaluative various opinions and attitudes about art, one might think that an experiential account of these dynamic engagements would be welcomed by any fully worked out contextual theory of art. But such accounts have not been welcome. If the need for a richer account of our experience of the context of contextual definitions has largely been resisted it has been because of the difficulties most traditional disinterested accounts of aesthetic experience face in their attempts to incorporate objects like urinals as art. Dewey's engaged account of experience offers not only an experiential alternative to these traditional accounts of aesthetic experience but, additionally, also helps to bridge the stark distinction between the classification of art and the evaluation of

art that is often held to be a problematic feature of contextual theories. In order to set up how Dewey's account of experience can benefit such theories, I will now turn to a brief discussion of one of the more influential contextual definitions of art: George Dickie's institutional theory of art.

Dewey and Dickie on the Institutions of Art

Dickie has formulated a number of different versions of his institutional theory over the years. For the purposes of this paper, I will use one of his later, more succinct definitions which states, "A work of art in the classificatory sense is an artifact of a kind created to be presented to the artwork public (Dickie, 1984, p. 80). Art, in other words, is defined in reference to the context of the social roles that we adopt and the social practices in which we participate. The difference between an ordinary urinal and an artwork like Duchamp's Fountain depends not on any directly exhibited perceptual properties but on the situational context each urinal occupies, as well as upon the roles, practices, procedures, and attitudes we take up when we go to an art gallery as opposed to the practices and attitudes we take up when we visit a public restroom.

While Dickie's earliest formulations of his institutional theory (Dickie, 1974) was sometimes accused of portraying an authoritarian attitude towards art (i.e., that only acknowledged artists, certified galleries, etc., have the authority to confer the status of "art" upon an object), it is fairly clear in his later formulations that Dickie does not think membership to the context of the artworld demands an elite membership card but rather simply entails participation in a loosely organized, informal network of practices and procedures that only require that one takes on the role of artist or spectator. One of the great benefits of Dickie's highly democratic definition of art is that, institutionally speaking, it makes no distinction between so-called high and low art. No essential distinctions are made between an exhibition of Matisse at the Metropolitan and a child's macaroni sculpture exhibited in a local middle school gallery. Rather, Dickie's strictly classificatory project attempts to isolate what set of practices, procedures, and behaviors bind things like Matisse and Macaroni together into one category called "art."²

Yet, for many critics, the value neutrality that allows Dickie's theory to be so effective at demarcating art from non-art is also a significant obstacle for answering questions about the general significance of art. Dickie's institutional definition might insist on being committed to value-neutrality, but it is unlikely that our actual engagement with the context of the artworld and its institutions admits of same kind of neutrality in practice—particularly, when confronted with controversial works of art. In practice, one might wonder if acts of identification and evaluation are capable of being separated institutionally as easily as Dickie wants them

to come apart. Dickie claims that a rationale for a strictly classificatory theory of art is that, "a theory of art should not have the result of making the expression 'good' art redundant or 'bad' art self-contradictory (Dickie, 1984, p. 13). One might wonder, however, that even if one has not yet judged a controversial object to be good or bad art, one's willingness to acknowledge it as an artwork by virtue of its institutional context entails at least a tacit reevaluation of one's previously held evaluative standards towards the object in question. In cases of highly provocative artworks, one might well undergo significant disruptions of one's experiential habits regarding the meaning of art generally. The history of the institutions of art is hardly static. Disrupted habits and readjustments of experience are a significant part of our interactions with the changing face of the artworld. This idea, that the history of art institutions is also a history of disrupted habits of experience and their re-acclimation into new evaluative theories, is where Dewey can be of most help to institutional theories.

Many passages in *Art as Experience* actually anticipate the basic kind of contextual arguments Dickie advocates in his institutional theory. Like Dickie, Dewey also argues that the division between art and non-art in modern society is based largely on the acceptance of existing social conditions, roles and institutions. Dewey's attempt at an institutional explanation of art is perhaps an underappreciated argument in *Art as Experience* because, unlike Dickie, Dewey proposes his idea by way of criticism rather than by way of definition. The institutionalized nature of art and its subsequent identifications, according to Dewey, is just one aspect of our larger modern tendency to separate culture into isolated compartments of meaning and value. However, Dewey claims that the idea that an object can become an object of aesthetic appreciation through its placement in a certain institutional context is readily seen in the ways that "domestic utensils, furnishings of tent and house, rugs, mats, jars, pots, bows, spears" are taken out of their instrumental context of everyday use and then elevated in galleries and museums into objects now called "art" (Dewey, 1934, pp. 12-13).

Dewey does not dwell excessively on this institutional definition of art but I think he would agree with the basic points of Dickie's classificatory theory even if Dewey might view it more as a deficiency of culture than a cure for certain definitional problems confronting the philosophy of art. One significant difference between these two thinkers, however, is that Dewey does not advocate a strict classificatory/evaluative distinction in his discussion of art institutions. Rather, he claims that any object can be made capable of aesthetic appreciation if it is placed in a context that allows it to be 'liberated from limitation to a specialized end' and allowed to serve "the purposes of immediate and vital experience" (Dewey, 1934, p. 121). In other words, Dewey places no inherent aesthetic constraints

on what could count as an object of art. And there is nothing in Art as Experience that would lead one to think that a urinal once liberated could not become an object of aesthetic appreciation or to put it in Dewey's language an object of an experience.

Institution and Identity: Dewey's An Experience

The concept of "an experience" is not only Dewey's most important concept in Art as Experience but also one of his most misunderstood. Unfortunately, Dewey's heavy reliance on organic metaphors of unity aided in creating significant misunderstandings of this concept and led many critics to claim he was unjustifiably reifying experience into an idealistic aesthetic entity. Dickie, himself, offers a representative criticism of Dewey along these lines. Dickie claims that, "Dewey caught up in his idealist vocabulary, italicizes the 'an' of the ordinary expression 'an experience' and gives the expression a metaphysical twist" (Dickie, 1965, pp. 134-135). Here Dickie places Dewey alongside Monroe Beardsley and other aesthetic theorists that Dickie claims mistakenly transform a simple matter of "paying close attention" to an artwork into some special ontologically distinct form of experience. But, according to Dickie, whatever unity or coherence one finds is actually a property of the artwork and not of the structure of purported phantoms of aesthetic experience.

At times, Dewey's language may well invite such misunderstandings. But given his repeated attempts to reveal continuities between the aesthetic and the everyday, it seems highly implausible to claim the "an" of an experience represents a metaphysical attempt to detach aesthetic experience from the rest of experience. Rather, I want to suggest that a more charitable reading of the consummation of experience constituted by an experience reveals no "twist" of metaphysics but rather an emergent evaluative identity that, once consummated, can serve as a new experiential standard of evaluation and appreciation.

Dewey writes, "an experience has a unity that gives it its name, that meal, that storm, that rupture of friendship. The existence of this unity is constituted by a single quality that pervades the entire experience in spite of variation of its constituent parts" (Dewey, 1934, p. 44). In an essay written a few years prior to Art as Experience, Dewey makes much the same point when discussing one's ability to identify a particular painting in terms of its overall quality, "its quality is not a property which it possesses in addition to other properties. It is something which externally demarcates it from other paintings" (Dewey, 1931, p. 245). Understood in this way, the unity of an experience is an identity that is not reducible to a set of properties, a psychological state, nor to the ability to "pay close attention" to a work of art. Rather, it is a unity that allows certain experiences within one's overall stream of experience to take on a particular and personal kind of value. It

is what separates conceptions of painting in general from that painting by Matisse I enjoy so much, poetry of the ages from that poem by Wallace Stevens that captures this moment so well, or generalizations about the emotional effects of music from that experience of the Magic Flute on that memorable night back in 2011. Furthermore, these experiences are not merely had, for once undergone, Dewey claims that they can now become standards for the evaluation and appreciation of future experiences.

The concept of an experience therefore not only provides an identity that allows for appreciation but it, itself, allows experiences to appreciate, that is to appreciate in value when applied to future experiences. For Dewey, the quality of aesthetic experience goes beyond the mere perception of observable properties of objects or events but also includes the background of tradition, history, culture, and personal narrative that supply normative contexts that allow an objects, events, or people, to obtain a particular identity amenable to evaluation. According to Dewey's theory of inquiry these standards are revisable and each new context encountered signifies at least a possibility of altering one's previously held evaluative standards.

If aesthetic experience is understood along the lines of Dewey's contextually bound and dynamic approach to the context of the artwork, then it is hard to know what to make of Dickie's criticisms of aesthetic experience or of the notorious problem of "perceptual indiscernibility" that initially gave rise to most contextual definitions of art. For both the criticism and the problem rely, somewhat ironically, on a context-less account of aesthetic experience. But we do not experience urinals floating in the contextual void. Whether it is a work of art or a piece of plumbing, our experience of these objects is already situated within pre-existing institutions of meaning and habituated forms of experience.

Dickie is surely correct to point out the difference between plumbing and art is found in each object's institutional placement. But this placement goes far beyond re-classification in a strictly neutral sense. Such contextual reconceptualization also allows an object like a urinal to gain a new identity that is now open to experiential features it did not possess in its previous institutional background. For example, a urinal not only takes on a new identity of art by way of definition but it now also opens up an evaluative space that disrupts our previously held experiential habits and becomes an identity that admits of being controversial, shocking, revolutionary, inspiring, capable of being applauded or condemned—that is, something that can be critically appreciated. Furthermore, this identity also allows a urinal to become a paradigmatic standard of modern art that is often ranked as one of the most influential artworks of the 20th century.

Such experiential standards and evaluations come into being not simply through the classification of an object as "art" but also through our continued readjustments to the experiential novelty of art in the midst of

its changing institutional settings. It is a great benefit of Dewey's account of aesthetic appreciation that it not only provides an account of how the transformations of the commonplace becomes art but also how these transformations can explain how one's experiences of art might change in light of such transformation. A urinal in this case represents no radical break with our experience of the history of art and its institutions, nor does it signal the end of aesthetic experience. It simply represents an extreme episode in the history of experiential disruptions, revaluations, and readjustments that already characterize the history of the experience of art more generally.³

Notes

¹ For a more detailed account of the demise of aesthetic experience in Anglo-American philosophy of art (and also an argument for Dewey's recovery) see Richard Shusterman (1999).

² Nor perhaps even limited to human beings. Dickie speculates that chimpanzees could create art provided they are given the proper training to initiate them into the procedures of the artworld (1984, p. 27).

³ I would like to thank the audience for my session for a great discussion. Special thanks to Stuart Rosenbaum for his comments and overall rousing defense of Dewey's importance for philosophy.

Works Cited

- Carroll, Noël. (2001) *Beyond Aesthetics: Philosophical Essays*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Dewey, John. (1988) Qualitative Thought. In Jo Ann Boyston (ed.), *The Later Works 1925-1953*, Vol. 5, 1929-1930 (pp. 243-263). Carbondale: Southern Illinois Press.
- _____. (1990) *Art as Experience*. In Jo Ann Boyston (ed.), *The Later Works 1925-1953*, Vol. 10, 1934. Carbondale: Southern Illinois Press.
- Dickie, George. (1965) Beardley's Phantom Aesthetic Experience. *Journal of Philosophy* 62(5): 129-136.
- _____. (1974) *Art and the Aesthetic: An Institutional Analysis*. New York: Cornell University Press.
- _____. (1984) *The Art Circle*. New York: Haven Publications.
- Shusterman, Richard. (1999) The End of Aesthetic Experience. *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 55(1): 29-41.

Kierkegaard, Charles Taylor, and Narrative Sources of Identity

Andrew D. Rose

Fuller Theological Seminary

Abstract: This essay is an attempt to demonstrate that Charles Taylor's "social imaginaries" should not be viewed as sources of identity. For Taylor, making sense of society's practices allows an individual to develop a conception of the self – an idea Taylor borrows from Hegel. I therefore suggest that Kierkegaard's critiques against Hegel may similarly be used against Taylor's conception of identity.

Kierkegaard's critiques of Hegel are applicable to Taylor's social imaginaries for two reasons. First, Hegel's system only provides approximations – mediation in the ethical nullifies the individual's subjective relation to Kierkegaard's "Absolute" by objectivizing the relation. Thus, despair ensues. Second, if knowledge of the Absolute is mediated through social imaginaries, the individual's responsibility to perpetually renew faith in her constituting power is diminished. Taylor's "system" is therefore insufficient for achieving a positive view of existence (actuality) because selfhood is properly understood through the inward subjectivity of one's relation to her constituting power (God).

Charles Taylor's Narrative Sources of Identity

I would like to talk about our identity, our sense of self. Charles Taylor suggests it is derived from the way we can understand or imagine society. He coins the term "social imaginaries" to describe this understanding of society and ourselves within it (Taylor, 2004, p. 23). Because humans are narrative beings, our understanding of ourselves as within a social narrative informs who we are, particularly regarding an ethical vision of the good that narrative upholds. A social imaginary is a teleological frame that enables individuals to make sense of the practices of a given community, thus orienting the individual in relation to the community's vision of the good. Taylor's concept of identity here is rooted in his interpretation of Hegel. His reliance on Hegel for his notions of identity immediately led me to Soren Kierkegaard's critiques of Hegel.

Applying Kierkegaard's criticisms of Hegel to Taylor has been especially helpful in highlighting certain weaknesses in Taylor's approach. I will focus on two of those critiques: first, Kierkegaard finds