John Dewey

_Aesthetic Experience and Artful Conduct_

Kenneth A. McClelland

But it was not a choice
Between excluding things. It was not a choice

Between, but of. He chose to include the things
That in each other are included, the whole,
The complicate, the amassing harmony.
—Wallace Stevens

Dewey’s writings on art and aesthetics have, since the time of their publication, received somewhat modest attention in comparison to the coverage given other important areas of his philosophy. In recent years, however, there has been a gradual recognition that Dewey’s writings on art and aesthetics, written later in his career, exhibit a deeper and more comprehensive synthesizing of the major themes that had been developing throughout his entire philosophy. Failure to come to terms with Dewey’s writings on art and aesthetics is, in many ways, a failure to come to fuller terms with the deeper implications of his entire philosophy. It is my contention, therefore, that Dewey’s writings on art and aesthetics provide the most thoroughgoing and mature rendering of the major themes that preoccupied his entire philosophical project. Experience is the major theme running throughout Dewey’s work, and it is my focus here. The many aspects of his philosophical project are difficult to grasp unless his reconstruction of experience is understood. Attempting to overcome the gulf between theory and practice begun in Greek philosophy and continued throughout much of the history of Western philosophy, Dewey comes to this bold conclusion in chapter 9 of _Experience and Nature:_

But if modern tendencies are justified in putting art and creation first, then the implications of this position should be avowed and carried through. It would then be seen that science is an art, that art is practice, and that the only distinction worth drawing is not between practice and
theory, but between those modes of practice that are not intelligent, not inherently and immediately enjoyable, and those which are full of enjoyed meanings. When this perception dawns, it will be a commonplace that art—the mode of activity that is charged with meanings capable of immediately enjoyed possession—is the complete culmination of nature, and that “science” is properly a handmaiden that conducts natural events to this happy issue. Thus would disappear the separations that trouble present thinking: division of everything into nature and experience, of experience into practice and theory, art and science, of art into useful and fine, menial and free.

No doubt, this passage still sounds radical today. A cursory look at how and why it is radical is the intention behind this paper.

**Art and the Commons**

In his writings on art and aesthetics, Dewey seeks to bring art back into the fold of the sociocultural and the sociotemporal, making aesthetic experience less elite and escapist and more applicable to everyday life experiences. The origin and destiny of aesthetic experience and artistic works is, for Dewey, the commons. The task, for Dewey, “is to restore continuity between the refined and intensified forms of experience that are works of art and the everyday events, doings, sufferings that are universally recognized to constitute experience.”

It is not Dewey’s intention that everybody will, upon following this road, rise to the level of fine artist (he has room for the unique qualities, insights, and even the genius of particular artists and their work). He is saying, however, that the creative process and expressive potential so vividly expressed in fine works of art—the complex movement from some vision (end-in-view) through that vision’s manipulation in production toward an aesthetic outcome (consummation)—is a process exemplary of how we intelligently experience and shape our world.

We all have an ongoing aesthetic hunger. This hunger is not easily diminished by faulty personal and social bearings. Understanding that experience’s embodied movement in time constitutes us as the shapers of our world, and that our world is a canvas of unlimited possibility, we may begin to appreciate more fully the aesthetic possibilities of an ameliorative stance to the day-to-day problems we face. For when that which is considered cultivated or refined is also remote and disconnected from common life, then “esthetic hunger is likely to seek the cheap and the vulgar.” When this occurs experience is degraded, and the problems of our world are left to whim and chance or, conversely, fanaticism and tyranny.

It is, therefore, no mere coincidence that Dewey’s most mature work deals with art and aesthetics. It is there that he found the subject matter most amenable to the deepest implications of his own democratic vision. Art as Experience is the strongest title he gave to any work. Art, when aesthetically charged, is representative of “experience in its integrity.” As Dewey says:
Had not the term “pure” been so often abused in philosophic literature, had it not been so often employed to suggest that there is something alloyed, impure, in the very nature of experience and to denote something beyond experience, we might say that esthetic experience is pure experience. For it is experience freed from the forces that impede and confuse its development as experience; freed, that is, from factors that subordinate an experience as it is directly had to something beyond itself. To esthetic experience, then, the philosopher must go to understand what experience is.

Dewey’s point is a particularly modernist one—artful conduct as leading to aesthetic experience is representative primarily of the kind of beings we are potentially in the world as well as the kind of world we are beings in. The organic relation between humans and their environment is a transactional affair, and one in which both become equally productive in manifesting the ongoing struggle to endow our world with meaning and value. This begins at an immediate or felt level, and art, at its best, demonstrates this pervasive organicism when it culminates to a level of aesthetic experience, aesthetic experience representing the fullness of experience. It represents a culmination or a consummatory phase in which the organism finds a new posture toward the world, helping to fortify the aesthetic against the anaesthetic.

As a way of deepening my own analysis I now turn to Dewey’s use of the terms “pervasive quality” and “situation.” Understanding these terms as he applies them is fundamental to arriving at a less myopic and more complex understanding of what Dewey means by aesthetic experience.

**Qualitative Situations**

Amidst our “undergoing” and “doing” in day-to-day life our thinking seems to have become severed from the more qualitative dimensions of our experience, what Kaufman-Osborn calls the “pragmata” of our lifeworld, and thus what we undergo and do tends to be aimless, disconnected, and arbitrary. Rather than by any real relation of undergoing and doing from some felt and embodied connection to primary experience, we are tugged and pulled by bloodless abstractions which step in with false promises of meaning and fulfillment.

Central to Dewey’s theory of art and aesthetic experience is his thinking on pervasive quality. Without an understanding of pervasive quality as the fundamental feature of any experience, consummatory experience or an experience, as Dewey alternately calls it, is not properly intelligible. Pervasive quality is a very difficult concept to tease out, because its ineffable features are not easily amenable to description. For any description or attempt at definition is already a step removed from the essential “isness” of qualitative experience. One might wonder, then, if we can say anything at all about the pervasive quality of any given experience. Well, in a sense, we cannot. We cannot, that is, say anything of its immedi-
acy, for its immediacy is something had or felt, wholly pre-reflective and thus pre-discursive. It is that quality of immediate experience which is irreducible and indescribable. Yet, if this were the be-all-and-end-all of experience, we would find ourselves in no vital connection to our environment, receiving no more than a meaningless barrage of sensory impressions. We can and inevitably must say something out of the pervasive quality that flows in and through experience, but what we say is a reflection of how we have defined, discriminated, and situated ourselves in relation to any particular experience. Language mediates our experience, but the way in which we situate ourselves can be productive of a deeper connection to life-experience or it can remain merely surface and thus stunted. We must be careful not to conflate what we come to know about an experience with the experience in its immediacy. When we do this we diminish that experience, the qualitative dimensions of which fundamentally shape and give logical force to our knowledge as an achievement.

It is this problem that has plagued much of modern philosophy, and its most prominent manifestation is to be found in modern science. There has been the tendency to ignore or reduce to soft irrelevancy the qualitative dimensions of experience. In this, philosophers and scientists have insisted on a fundamental split between subject and object, wherein the subjective mind somehow has access to a correspondent knowledge of a wholly independent realm of epistemic objects. They have equated, in other words, knowledge of the experience with the experience itself, and have thus confused having an experience with knowing it. With Dewey’s more inclusive understanding of experience, he writes:

Many modern thinkers, influenced by the notion that knowledge is the only mode of experience that grasps things, assuming the ubiquity of cognition, and noting that immediacy or qualitative existence has no place in authentic science, have asserted that qualities are always and only states of consciousness. It is a reasonable belief that there would be no such thing as “consciousness” if events did not have a phase of brute and unconditioned “isness,” of being just what they irreducibly are. . . . And also without immediate qualities those relations with which science deals would have no footing in existence, and thought would have nothing beyond itself to chew upon or dig into. Without a basis in qualitative events, the characteristic subject-matter of knowledge would be algebraic ghosts, relations that do not relate.  

Immediate experience, then, is a quality that inheres neither exclusively in external objects nor exclusively in the contemplating mind of isolated subjects. It is rather the experience as “felt” or “had” by way of our transaction with the environment. Saying that there is an immediate quality within experience is not to undermine the possibility or relevance of any kind of mediation. At this point I wish only to emphasize that the pervasive quality of any given experience, as it is felt or had, represents the initial phase of absorption between the organism and
its environment. This is the primary phase of experience. The context of the initial or primary phase is non-cognitive and it is controlling. This ineffable and controlling quality of the context is anticipated in the introduction to Essays in Experimental Logic. There Dewey tells us that the non-cognitive quality of the context is “the vast, vague continuum . . . this taken-for-granted whole.” As he goes on to add, “The word ‘experience’ is . . . a notation of an inexpressible as that which decides the ultimate status of all which is expressed; inexpressible not because it is so remote and transcendent, but because it is so immediately engrossing and matter of course.”

This active and dynamic field of participation is what Dewey calls a “situation” or its “context.” The immediate existence of quality is entirely prereflective, but importantly it “is the background, the point of departure, the regulative principle of all thinking.” It is the pervasive quality that defines and unifies each situation as that unique situation. As 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 the variation of its constituent parts. This unity is neither emotional, practical, nor intellectual, for these terms name distinctions that reflection can make within it. In discourse about an experience, we must make use of these adjectives of interpretation.

Each unique situation is made up of both primary and secondary qualities, but the primary fused quality that makes the situation that particular situation is what originally binds the organism to its surrounding environment. The organism has not as yet reflected upon the situation, but is in the position to do so, as the primary situation is the necessary and controlling guide to reflection, also referred to as the secondary phase of experience.

We begin to sense, then, the rhythm within experience as any given experience moves through its successive, but wholly interdependent phases. Dewey here envisions a more organic reintegration of the primary and secondary phases of experience, in which he attacks the absolutist epistemology of traditional philosophic inquiry that has unfortunately turned the primary and secondary dimensions of experience into an irreconcilable dualism. It is these epistemological absolutes that have little room for the ineffable rhythm and quality of day-to-day life, which, we must remember, represents the primary source for drawing epistemological conclusions to begin with. When the primary dimensions of experience are denied or ignored, lived experience becomes stunted, not quite whole. We wittingly or unwittingly fail to take experience in its complex fullness when our knowledge and actions, reflective outcomes from the pool of pre-reflective primary experience, fail to get referred back to that primary ground for testing.
Conclusions or ends that fail to return to the primary qualitative ground of experience for testing remain the conclusions of a non-empirical mode of analysis. The potentially more empirical outcomes of organic secondary reflection are thus cut short in the name of indubitable truth, and the sterile dualism between primary and secondary experience is reinforced. The possibility of grounded intelligent action is checked by the over-arching desire for absolute epistemological certainty. Those who hunger after indubitable epistemic certainty neglect the recognition that “the situation controls the terms of thought; for they are its distinctions, and applicability to it is the ultimate test of their validity.” The primary qualitative situation, Dewey goes so far as to say, is the very condition of our sanity:

The undefined pervasive quality of an experience is that which binds together all the defined elements, the objects of which we are focally aware, making them whole. The best evidence that such is the case is our constant sense of things as belonging or not belonging, of relevancy, a sense which is immediate. It cannot be a product of reflection, even though it requires reflection to find out whether some particular consideration is pertinent to what we are doing or thinking. For unless the sense were immediate, we should have no guide to our reflection. The sense of an extensive and underlying whole is the context of every experience and it is the essence of sanity.

Potentially artful conduct, therefore, inheres in the organic and dynamic movement of experience as it passes through various phases toward consummation, toward something that can properly be called a fully embodied experience. What carries us through these various phases might properly be called the materials of our experience.

**The Materials of Artful Conduct: Habit, Sense, and Imagination**

Every situation inheres in a degree of precognitive meaningfulness, and this meaningfulness is, as Kaufman-Osborn puts it, the result of “accustomed patterns of culturally transmitted interpretive response, of habits that emerge out of the noncognitive intercourse between agents and the world in which they are heirs.”

Every artist uses materials. We typically think of them as brush, paint, and canvas, or as instruments to be played upon, or as marble to be sculpted; but when experience itself is conceived as art then we need to be aware of alternative materials of a more psychological and phenomenological nature. For the transaction between organism and environment that issues experience forward in more or less refined ways depends on drawing from those materials of habit, sense, and imagination. My focus here is not intended to be exhaustive, of course, but these three materials, as I am calling them, are nonetheless centrally important. This, of course, is not intended as an exhaustive list of the so-called materials of experience, but they are some of the centrally important ones. Through
them we may come closer to grasping something of the consummatory power of aesthetic experience, for if our movement in the world (conduct) can inhere through higher degrees of artfulness, then the aesthetic achievements that come on the heels of art give heightened meaning and value to that movement.

Often we hear the claim that we are creatures of habit. But how often do we stop to think about what this means? Of course, stopping and thinking about habits, in many situations, is entirely counter-productive. Habits, under most stable conditions, embody the pervasive quality that infuses situations, and as such are part of the taken-for-granted whole that we feel as this or that particular situation. Habits exercise a certain mechanical power in our lives precisely because, under a great many conditions, we do not have to think about them. “If each act has to be consciously searched for at the moment and intentionally performed, execution is painful and the product is clumsy and halting.”

In other words, our habits are not self-consciously realized nor are they intellectually scrutinized. Rather, habits form the background of a situation, providing the taken-for-granted field of meanings, “serving not as external means of identification, but rather as atmospheric media whose entrance into the constitution of every situation provides the ill-defined yet meaningful field upon which specific phenomena are brought before focal consciousness.” In his essay “Context and Thought” Dewey draws the analogy of a picture or a painting in which the “spatial background covers all the contemporary setting within which a course of thinking emerges.”

That which is looked into, consciously scrutinized, has, like a picture, a foreground, middle distance, and a background—and as in some paintings the latter shades off into unlimited space. . . . This contextual setting is vague, but it is no mere fringe. It has a solidity and stability not found in the focal material of thinking. The latter denotes the part of the road upon which the spotlight is thrown. The spatial context is the ground through which the road runs and for the sake of which the road exists.

The habits that constitute the background, colour and saturate the foreground, providing the subconscious intelligibility of what is presently in conscious focus. It is part of the non-cognitive pervasive quality of the situation. Now, under conventional, untroubled conditions these habits carry us smoothly along. We feel a sense of situatedness without necessarily “knowing” it, for habit, when untroubled, “is too thoroughly implicated in its medium to survey or analyze it.” Habits thus supply a spatio-temporal locational power that acts as precognitive guides to everyday experience. Kaufman-Osborn puts the point nicely when he states that

in addition to furnishing a ground for the recognizability of conventional phenomena within everyday life, habits are dynamic potentialities that are vitally present even when not immediately engaged. As patterned dispositions to action whose incorporation of the past navigates
each moment into the future and so insures that conduct’s unfolding in time is something other than a meaningless juxtaposition of isolated reactions to discrete situations, habits’ constellation constitutes our effective desires and furnishes us with our practical capacities. As such, the term “habit” does the work more often done by that of “will.”

The smooth flow of habits, under stable conditions, is powerful because it is through them that we come to in-habit our world. They are the effective background and mechanism of stable bearing and meaning in our lives. Yet, if life experience were perpetually stable, then all situations would be untroubled, and habit would be equated with a state of eternal constancy.

Under such impossible conditions, habit as constancy would be continuous with a state of either absolute inertia or perfect automatism and we would have reached the pinnacle of our growth. Its logical expression in human terms would be sleep or death, for being awake would be inconceivable, as there would no longer be any necessity to think. The very idea of experience and its aesthetic possibilities would thus also be inconceivable because of the absolute absence of tension. For it is only through tension that experience is propelled forward, that life moves.

Although a great many of our habits have staying power, that is, their projective meaningfulness proves adequate to many of the untroubled situations of day-to-day living, nonetheless habits cannot prove indefinitely stable. Those habits that do achieve what we might call a working constancy have a very practical import. They offer sufficient inertia so that, if we are willing to take advantage, we can engage in higher-order thinking. For we need to recognize that we are prone to habits of thinking, and these habits can be routine or they can be artful. It is important to emphasize that the habit-laden meaningfulness of any present untroubled situation is itself a result. It is the cumulative effect of some past occasion of thinking, some past tensional situation that has managed to locate a present stable bearing. Habit, if it is intelligently formed, is representative of a deep adjustment of the organism to its environment. This adjustment, if it is intelligently fashioned and adopted, might properly be deemed aesthetic. Master musicians often exhibit a fluid virtuosity in their playing wherein mechanical habit has become fused with thought and feeling. A masterful technician does not perform as a matter of mere automatism. To do so would make for a mechanical performance. If habits are intelligently formed, they are alive and flexible within the organism’s ongoing adjusting to the world. Habit is art when it embodies thought and feeling as its mode of adjustment. The opposite of habit thus conceived is not thought, but deadening routine.

It is only at those moments of instability, when our habitual world threatens to come apart, that we are incited to grow and develop: when we must think, take stock, and become conscious of our dynamic relation to the environment. It is at this point of tension that life incites us to potentially artful conduct, when we might become the crafters of a new stability. At this moment of tension, there
is a newly released impulse, insisting on some re-direction and re-qualification of old habit. Indeed this is when habit, previously not explicitly conscious, is exposed as subject to temporal movement. We can refer to something as an old habit only because our movement in time has manifested a disruption or tensional break that necessitates a new adjustment. Getting to a new point where a situation makes sense represents the crucial phase in the organism’s transaction with its environment, wherein the process of making sense can potentially become aesthetically charged, making conscious experience itself more artful. This making sense is intelligence at work.

“Sense” is a very important and rich term for Dewey. As he says, “‘sense’ covers a wide range of contents: the sensory, the sensational, the sensitive, the sensible, and the sentimental, along with the sensuous. . . . but sense, as meaning so directly embodied in experience as to be its own illuminated meaning, is the only signification that expresses the function of sense organs when they are carried to full realization.” Sense, therefore, is integral to that experiential phase when the organism, having fallen out with its environment because of some tensional rupture in the situation, begins to consciously focus on the relations that make up that situation. The organism, through tension, has come to a stage of reflection on and within the situation. It is important to note that this reflective phase of experience has its own quality, but it is different in kind from the original pervasive quality that binds the organism to the primary objects of its environment. This original quality is vague and indefinite, whereas sense via reflection has a recognized reference: “it is the qualitative characteristic of something, not just a submerged unidentified quality or tone.” What sense now picks out is the relation between the primary and secondary qualities of objects within the environment as the situation becomes consciously focused within the thinking subject.

Dewey understands “sense” as an active/dynamic capacity wherein, as a focal point of consciousness, it both illuminates a situated moment and also opens the body to the world in exploratory and receptive intensity. As Dewey explains: “Perception is an act of the going-out of energy in order to receive, not a withholding of energy.” If we recall the analogy of a painting in “Context and Thought” we remember that a situational field has a foreground, a middle distance, and a background. It is the foreground in which we locate that part of the road that is illuminated by the shining light of sense. Yet, we remember also that the pervasive qualitative context is that through which the road runs and “for the sake of which the road exists.” Sense, therefore, signifies the organism’s embodied movement in the light of a troubled situation, wherein the body itself becomes a lived meaning, moving in a spatial and temporal drama where body and mind become unified in heightened sensitivity to the possibilities of where the road might lead. In other words, if making sense is to result in some kind of aesthetic value, then imagination must be viewed as integral.
When an otherwise stable situation becomes tensional, when new impulses are released, old habits are immediately brought to conscious attention, new paths of action explored. This exploration is what deliberation is about. It is, as Dewey says, “a dramatic rehearsal (in imagination) of various competing possible lines of action.” Activity in this sense does not cease in order that reflection may take the fore. Rather, “activity is turned from execution into intra-organic channels, resulting in dramatic rehearsal.” Aspects of impulse and habit are put in various combinations, experimental trials so to speak, in order to determine what an action would be like if it were entered upon. Thinking at this point is wholly hypothetical. It is the safety mechanism of imaginative deliberation that “runs ahead and foresees outcomes, and thereby avoids having to await the instruction of actual failure and disaster. An act overtly tried out is irrevocable, its consequences cannot be blotted out. An act tried out in imagination is not final or fatal. It is retrievable.”

The interpenetration of subject and object releases potential avenues of overt activity via the imagination. For even imaginative rehearsal achieves its content and meaning only when its activity involves a process of trying out various avenues of potentially fruitful conduct: “In imagination as in fact we know a road only by what we see as we travel on it.” The subject, rehearsing the possibilities of some future overt conduct, partakes of experience’s objects in imagination. Objects object to the movement, thus necessitating activity’s new direction, or they do not, thus providing activity’s point of rest. There is, essentially, no difference between this process as it occurs in the imagination and as it might take place in overt activity. It is equally dynamic and organic. The only thing that makes imaginative rehearsal more sensible is that the consequences of going down any chosen road are not overtly real, although they implicate any real choice that might be made as a result. When a choice is really made it is “not the emergence of preference out of indifference. It is the emergence of a unified preference out of competing preferences.” Choice comes at the moment when imagination envisions the objective consequence of an action and deems that consequence fruitful and just. Overt action is released. All deliberation therefore is a search for the best action, its “office is to facilitate stimulation.” If a choice be a reasonable choice, then the human subject travels a road of intelligent conduct, and experience is given new direction, new depth, and new meaning.

This cognitive dynamic highlights the creative capacity of the human imagination. The quality of meaning and value in our lives is funded by our ability to imagine possibility. The radical import of Dewey’s aesthetic thinking is that imagined possibilities or ideals represent the capacity to mediate and improve upon observed actualities. It is not a separate faculty that works independently of experience’s embodied temporal movement. The quality of working imagination is a universal quality of wholeness and unity, but that quality gets its life-energy from the local act, the observed and limited here and now. The temporal drama enacted in imagination is a virtual expansion and refinement that
utilizes what is in order to manifest what might be. The observed here and now becomes stunted to the degree that the organism fails to recognize the universal quality of extension that impels the imagination’s ongoing relation to a vital present, which is itself a manifestation of past experience. Imagination becomes pure fancy when it becomes disconnected from the energizing capacity of the here and now, forging for itself castles in the air. Imagination projects ideal possibilities and therefore reflects the creative and expanding capacity of human intelligence. It is in this sense that imagination provides the infusing stuff of aesthetic experience.

The object of thought stimulates a unification and harmonization of competing tendencies in which each competing tendency is reduced to a component in a reformed action exhibiting a transformed quality. Human conduct thus draws from a profound reservoir of preparatory competence. The competence of conduct’s unfolding in time is a matter of embodied deliberation leading to intelligent and humane outcomes. For Dewey it is a human wonder:

> Nothing is more extraordinary than the delicacy, promptness and ingenuity with which deliberation is capable of making eliminations and recombinations in projecting the course of a possible activity. To every shade of imagined circumstance there is a vibrating response; and to every complex situation a sensitiveness as to its integrity, a feeling of whether it does justice to all facts, or overrides some to the advantage of others. Decision is reasonable when deliberation is so conducted. There may be error in the result, but it comes from lack of data not from ineptitude in handling them.\(^{31}\)

Reasonable conduct thus comes by way of a vital harmonization of competing desires (impulses, habits), and the age-old dualism between reason and desire collapses. Traditional philosophical thinking has pitted desire against reason, when in the light of artful conduct the fact is that they are tightly interrelated. Reason is, as Dewey maintains, “a quality of an effective relationship among desires rather than a thing opposed to desire.”\(^{32}\) Reason, rather than being an antecedent, bloodless abstraction, actually gains its vital energy through passion. Deliberation’s science, its experimental mode, is at the same time deliberation’s art, as reason becomes fully implicated in the passionate phase of activity. Rationality is what remains when we make a reasonable choice, and choice is reasonable when it results in reasonable conduct. Rationality is the effect of complex processes that involve the thinking, feeling human subject. It is not, as traditionally understood, the antecedent base of all thought and feeling. This is a radical aspect of Dewey’s thinking and shows that the cultivation of intelligence is art. Art’s outcome, the result of conduct’s manifestation through cultivated intelligence, is reason, and reason itself becomes the dynamic realization of experience’s consummatory potential. Life’s art is achieved through our embodied transaction with our environment in which both organism and environment coalesce in...
crafting experience’s deeper possibilities. Artful conduct is the manifestation of experience in its integrity, and its outcome is properly called aesthetic.

The dynamic relation, then, between past meaning (habit) and future expectation (imagination) is what gives direction to the present, gives it its sense. To the degree that the organism’s senses are alive to this transactive movement in time, the experience becomes one of “heightened vitality.” It is during such moments of “heightened vitality” that experience is consciously manifest, and to the extent that the experience becomes aesthetically charged, such represents the richer depths of meaning and value which are sensed within and through the experience. At this point an experience becomes truly consummatory. Temporal quality pervades every situation and sense lights its way. Heightened sensitivity is sensitivity to the relational meanings consciously becoming manifest within a moving situation, wherein the original, pervasive, felt quality becomes enriched by and infuses the consciousness of temporal movement. As Stuhr points out, “the quality is active and regulative—that is, intrinsically inclusive of its future transformation or negation.” As a situation is transformed from a state of disequilibrium into one of equilibrium, where the organism intelligently develops a new posture to the world, it is the original state of disequilibrium (a problematic or tensional situation) that is both the quality condition and the quality control of the situation’s movement toward consummatory close. It is through tension and resistance, then, that we come to sense life’s quality and rhythm, that we get a “feel” for life. As Dewey says: “Friction is as necessary to generate esthetic energy as it is to supply the energy that drives machinery.” Rather than mere intellectual relations, life’s qualitative dimensions give consummatory moments their poignancy, and make possible the aesthetic within experience. As Dewey states:

That which distinguishes an experience as esthetic is conversion of resistance and tensions, of excitations that in themselves are temptations to diversion, into a movement toward an inclusive and fulfilling close.

**Art Works**

In determining why art is important to life, it is no understatement to consider with Dewey that art, to a great degree, is life. Our temporal and embodied transactions with and within our environment may not, under a great many social and cultural conditions, manifest art’s potential, but this is not an inevitable and inherent condition of our living in the world. Social and cultural conditions press externally on individual experience, and to the degree that these external pressures emanate from some vital connection to the conditions of their own development, so the potential baseness or fineness of what experience might become hangs in the balance.

What I have attempted to show thus far is that art is “prefigured in the very processes of living.” Art signifies our capacity to grow and develop, and growth and development are what occurs in any medium of tension and recov-
The human organism is born and its subsequent growth and development is the accumulating result of its transactions with its surroundings. As with the individual, so too are social and cultural developments the accumulating result of transactions between organism and environment. In capturing something of the “psychology” of artful conduct—the potentially artful movement of habit, sense, and imagination—I have attempted to convey the complexity of our embodied status within our environment and within time. I have attempted to capture something of the depth implicit in this statement by Dewey: “Art celebrates with peculiar intensity the moments in which the past re-enforces the present and in which the future is a quickening of what now is.”

Art works much like the human organism works in its daily doings and undergoings. Whether art’s working manifests what can justifiably be called a work of art, that is, something exhibiting aesthetic, consummatory, and expressive refinement, depends on the degree to which art’s working arises from an enhancement of experience as it is lived in connection with its surroundings. In this sense if art is not working it is merely a product, static and dumb.

As I have been suggesting, we need to look at the word “works” not as a noun, but rather as a verb. For art is a working movement, and its culmination in an aesthetically charged work does not bring art’s working to a close. If the final work is something having depth and substance, then it will continue to work within the community. The substance of a work of art is to be found in what it communicates within a community. If an artwork exhibits fineness of form, then we have determined something of how the work communicates within a community. Completion of a work by an artist is like a new birth within the community as that work is dependent on ongoing communal engagement for its survival. It becomes expressive, and its continued expressiveness is the sign of its continued constructive possibility, its continued working.

Art is simply a refined expression or language exhibiting experience’s aesthetic capacity, manifesting our temporal movement as being capable of greater depths of meaning. This profounder wellspring of meaning implicates human beings in a world of ongoing potential development in which we partake of our material surroundings and in doing so extend our expressive nature in socially significant and meaningful ways. As Dewey says:

The *material* out of which a work of art is composed belongs to the common world rather than to the self, and yet there is self-expression in art because the self assimilates that material in a distinctive way to reissue it into the public world in a form that builds a new object.\(^8\)

The artwork fails to communicate something new, or, for that matter, anything at all, when it is consigned to a collector’s vault where, at most, it can be only potentially expressive.

Although art museums are considered “public” venues, Dewey tends to view them more as public mausoleums. The modern history of the development
of museums is, for Dewey, too thoroughly implicated in the capitalist creation of “nouveaux riches” who tend to denigrate art’s potential by exhibiting it not as a refined expression of common experience out of which it is born, but rather as a refined symbol of their cultural and economic status. “Generally speaking, the typical collector is the typical capitalist.” Art thus gets severed from its place in the life of the community and takes on all the accoutrements of acquisitiveness and “high” status. Such art become “specimens of fine art and nothing else.”

It was not that Dewey had an utter distaste for museums. He was, after all, gainfully employed for a time at a museum at the Barnes Foundation. What did worry Dewey about the museum conception of culture was that it tended to create and reinforce “a chasm between ordinary and aesthetic experience.” As Alexander points out, there are two standing and interrelated temptations (not inevitabilities) when we participate in the museum’s conception of fineness:

First we are tempted to isolate our museum experiences from other experiences in life at large. Thus, we fail to see how the works we encounter in museums (or their equivalents for other artforms, such as concert halls or classrooms) have actually grown from those common conditions in life which we share with the artists who made those works. Having done this, we may make a second mistake. In believing that aesthetic experience belongs to a segregated realm, we fail to see how the artists’ success in making expressively meaningful, intrinsically fulfilling objects from the raw material of life can be applied across the whole spectrum of human existence. The great moral to be learned from the arts for Dewey is that when ideals cease to be confined to a realm separated from our daily, practical experience, they can become powerful forces in teaching us to make the materials of our lives filled with meaning.

In attempting to steal art back to the commons we may more properly conceive of the ways art is potentially expressive and how this expressiveness is vitally connected to common life experience.

Of all modes of human inquiry art most exemplifies the human capacity to elevate life’s expressive potential. Our temporal embodiment within nature signifies life’s rhythmic movement. The very idea, therefore, of order, balance, and harmony can make sense only as life’s rhythm is engaged and expressed. The more intelligent this engagement and expression, the more life’s artful potential is realized. The aesthetic in experience is the result of experience’s differentiation out of an otherwise undifferentiated stream of impressions. The aesthetic marks an experience as an experience only because “the material experienced runs its course to fulfillment.” Life’s rhythm thus gains consummatory potential as its expressive capacity is realized through the organism’s “dynamic organization” of the materials at its disposal. The quality of our growth within life’s rhythmic movement is thus a matter of intelligent conduct. Our “undergoing” within this rhythm signals us as vulnerable to suffering. We are open to the precariousness
that attends and is an integrated part of any rhythmic development. Our “doing” signals our ability to channel what we undergo into a newly refined integration. Life’s rhythm is thus complemented by the degree of order we are able to establish with and within our environment. Order itself is developmental. However, achieving the aesthetic out of this rhythmic movement is something more than just an intellectual achievement. It is the embodied realization of harmony. The “material of reflection is incorporated into the objects as their meaning.” The aesthetic thus results from a movement from disturbance to harmony, and that moment of harmonization is “that of intensesst life.”

The expressive potential, therefore, of a work of art is realized through this rhythmic development, and for this realization to achieve deepened aesthetic value and meaning it must inhere in a higher degree of conscious refinement and control. This refinement and control is saved from the haphazard only as it is an intensified transaction between organism and the encompassing materials of experience. As Dewey says: “The expressiveness of the object is the report and celebration of the complete fusion of what we undergo and what our activity of attentive perception brings into what we receive by means of the senses.” Expressive art is exemplary of an intensification and amplification of this transactional dynamic, and it brings subject and object into refined relation. For Dewey,

The moments when the creature is both most alive and most composed and concentrated are those of fullest intercourse with the environment, in which sensuous material and relations are most completely merged. Art would not amplify experience if it withdrew the self into the self nor would the experience that results from such retirement be expressive.

The expressiveness of a work of art is thus exemplary of life’s artful potential as levels of aesthetic consummation become realizable by virtue of the spatio-temporal dynamics that give life its rhythm. However, artworks are not merely static achievements. They provide the fuel for enhanced communication and thus the social importance of art comes to the fore.

In Experience and Nature Dewey explicitly makes this point when he says that “a genuinely esthetic object is not exclusively consummatory but is causally productive as well. A consummatory object that is not also instrumental turns in time to the dust and ashes of boredom.” Staving off this all-too-common ennui is art’s power. As I have already highlighted, the power of any aesthetic consummation can be fully achieved only as it recognizes the part played by the inef-fable, the immediate. But life’s art, the fullness of its consummations, is also a fullness born out of and into new possibilities. Our temporal status has us constantly “on the go,” so to speak. Being on the go, of course, can be frenetic and arbitrary; but this occurs only when “doing” becomes disconnected from “under-going.” The implications for communication are enormous. When “doing” is elevated for its own sake, we tend towards a chaotic and frenetic pace. A cursory look at contemporary society shows this all too clearly. However, when “under-
going” is taken up for its own sake, separated from any resultant activity, it tends towards mere contemplation and imaginative fancy with no real embodiment in action. Dewey reminds us that “[a]n experience has pattern and structure, because it is not just doing and undergoing in alternation, but consists of them in relationship. . . . This relationship is what gives meaning; to grasp it is the objective of all intelligence.”

It is this relationship that leads also to the fine art of communication. To get at communication’s finer potential we need a better understanding of Dewey’s instrumentalism, for it is through his instrumental understanding of art that the relation of consummation and productivity gains its communicative potential. Bringing the instrumental into a discussion of art and aesthetics may seem odd if not downright disturbing to those of a strong aesthetic bent. We are accustomed to thinking about the instrumental in the strong scientific sense, with its use of hard tools for the achievement of narrow ends. Dewey reminds us that “the sciences were born of the arts.” If art rested only in what immediately is, and failed to pay attention to what is made possible out of what is immediately enjoyed or suffered, art would never have become an “intellectual” achievement. For the instrumental in art is its character of intellectual meaning, and as such, involves art “in transforming purely immediate qualities of local things into generic relationships.” Art as “the greatest intellectual achievement in the history of humanity” is singly important to our understanding of science, itself an intellectual achievement of fine art. It is in this sense that the relation of the consummatory and the instrumental is the heartbeat of communication.

When communication occurs between two or more parties, there is always a change to all involved—there are consequences. The communicative effect of art is just what it is, an effect. It is not necessarily a moral/instrumental intention on the part of the artist. The way art communicates is the effect it has on those who partake of it. The art object is thus invariably caught up in its consequences for further reflection, communication’s art. When the implications of this are taken up within the community at large, we begin to get a sense of art’s vital educational role in expressing what Dewey calls “the collective individuality” of any given culture.

The level and style of the arts of literature, poetry, ceremony, amusement, and recreation which obtain in a community, furnishing the staple objects of enjoyment in that community, do more than all else to determine the current direction of ideas and endeavors in the community. They supply the meanings in terms of which life is judged, esteemed, and criticized. For an outside spectator, they supply material for a critical evaluation of the life led by that community.

Because art is at once consummatory and instrumental, its power of communication resides not only in conveying the mores of a community or culture, but also in impelling them imaginatively forward in new directions, toward new rela-
Art subtly shapes our experience of the world by educing new possibilities. If it simply conveyed what is customary and familiar, there would be little tendency to reflect. The general result would be stasis and the entrenchment of dogmatic habit. This is all too prevalent throughout history where rituals often become entrenched dogma. Rituals themselves can be springboards to deeper experience, or death marches toward experiences cut off from and sapped of meaning. The power of works of art is that they “are means by which we enter, through imagination and the emotions they evoke, into other forms of relationship and participation than our own.”

Importantly, the language of art is an acquired language, and to the degree that the arts of any community or culture fail to flourish, to the degree that they are denigrated by any variety of external forces, marks the failure of effective education and communication. Life’s art is manifested when, through consciousness of a larger field of meanings and values, we are able to imaginatively enter into new experiences. Art sustains conscious activity, “and thereby exhibits, so that he who runs may read, the fact that consciousness is not a separate realm of being, but is the manifest quality of existence when nature is most free and most active.” The lack of this fuller communication as it now exists between nations is steadily becoming an intracultural phenomenon as well. The cultural politics so prevalent in today’s societies, more than anything else, speak to the erosion of full communication. It is not that cultural sub-divisions are inherently bad, but if these divisions are not informed by fuller communication, that is, by a consciousness of the larger field of meanings and values flowing within the culture at large, then a corrosive isolationist tendency develops. Under such conditions there is a marked disposition toward impulsive brutality as a way of dealing with experience’s emptiness brought on by the inability to artfully communicate. These are deadening divisions, but add conscious and conscientious communication, and deadening divisions might be transformed into productive distinctions. Life’s art becomes more fully realized under these conditions. Dewey extends art’s full potential when he states that

Instruction in the arts of life is something other than conveying information about them. It is a matter of communication and participation in values of life by means of the imagination, and works of art are the most intimate and energetic means of aiding individuals to share in the arts of living. Civilization is uncivil because human beings are divided into non-communicating sects, races, nations, classes and cliques.

We see the structure of another stale division begin to crumble—that between the individual and the social.

Dewey clears the path for a more pragmatic exploration of our political experiences. This becomes even more pressing in our contemporary global society where it is not just a matter of “non-communicating sects, races, nations, classes and cliques,” but rather the proliferation of insidious, noncritical forms of
communication that are successfully uniting masses of people with superficial consummations. Dewey’s notion of artful experience, I think, shoulders well the burden of our most profound personal and social experiences. Needless to say, artful conduct is not easy in today’s world, but with Dewey’s complex and detailed reworking of the philosophical tradition, I think we have something that we have not seen a great deal of since Dewey’s time—a working philosophy. Dewey offers us something to go on, and what he offers might perhaps be an important key to our survival.

Notes

5. Ibid., 6.
6. Ibid., 274.
7. Ibid.
21. Ibid., 191.
22. Dewey, Art as Experience, 22.
26. Ibid., 133.
27. Ibid.
28. Ibid., 134.
29. Ibid.
30. Ibid.
31. Ibid., 135.
32. Ibid.
35. Ibid., 56.
36. Ibid., 24.
37. Ibid., 18.
38. Ibid., 107.
39. Ibid., 8.
40. Ibid., 9.
41. Ibid., 10.
44. Ibid., 55.
45. Ibid.
46. Ibid., 17.
47. Ibid., 103.
48. Ibid.
52. Ibid., 108.
54. Ibid., 330.

Kenneth A. McClelland is a Ph.D. candidate in education at Brock University, Ontario, Canada.

ken@brocku.ca