

Is Pragmatism the Next Big Thing?

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Now that the modernist presumption of social purpose naturally emerging through the pursuit of aesthetic excellence is in eclipse, architects are continually faced with a seemingly 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, or of relating aesthetic good to life in the larger sense.

Some architects seeking an alternative to the haughtiness and introversion of continental philosophy have recently turned to philosophical pragmatism: An American-grown philosophical tradition which inverts the continental postulate (beginning with Descartes) of a detached mind or self able to puzzle out the metaphysics of knowing by instead emphasizing a social concep-

tion of the self that ultimately relies on an experimental approach to knowledge and truth to make sense of the world.³ Architects looking for a “public philosophy” of art in the pragmatist tradition 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 architects.

THE AESTHETIC DEMOCRACY

As a plausible alternative to today's conflicted culture, Dewey invokes the example of classical Greece, a culture which knew no conflict between art and society because the Athenian conception of art was as an inherently public good.⁴ Athenians sought and 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 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 like this: "Durham is 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 criticizes this presupposition of unchanging standards: He speaks of "its inability to cope with the emergence of new modes of life—of experiences that demand new modes of expression."⁵ 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.

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 in which the artwork becomes 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. Dewey writes: "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 some other reason, it rapidly loses its merit.

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 pragmatist aesthetics trenchantly opposes this entire approach: He thinks the assumption of the autonomy of the aesthetic realm is 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 that is intimately and commonly experienced by everyone in everyday experiences. The pragmatist aesthetic experience tracks one's engagement with the work of art; it is neither solely derived either from the physical properties of the work nor from the imaginative experiences of the subject, but from something forged from the prolonged encounter.⁷ This compelling conception helps to explain the failures of the judicial and impressionistic approaches to evaluation. Judicial criticism cannot readily attend to the enlargement of experience due to its assumption, at any given time, that the criteria for evaluation are ready-made. It ignores the idea that part of the task of any evaluator of a work of art is to critique the criteria during the aesthetic encounter. Impressionistic criticism fails to adequately attend to the transaction between artwork and observer because it encourages the evaluator's making his response the true work of art. According to Dewey's definition, then, Durham would be a meritorious work of architecture if it encourages one to explore a rich exchange of observation and thought 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 some 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.

Its a harder sell because, not only are many experiences demonstrably deleterious and not in need of enlargement (rape, or attempted murder, for example), but also because the enlargement of experience brought on by new aesthetic experiences so often seem to stay comfortably lodged within the aesthetic realm. They don't necessarily crossover to experience in general. The enlargement of experience brought on by encounters with art may beget nothing more 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 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 (he gives the example of 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 disappears.

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 trenchantly opposed to the neoplatonism 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 assert aesthetic qualities that exist independently of perceiving, thinking beings who can 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 neoplatonists 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.

This leads to the social agenda running concurrently through Dewey's aesthetics. Dewey's belief in democracy extends to an insistence that perfectly valid aesthetic experience doesn't require elite guidance and doesn't need to occur in a 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. As Shusterman has observed, "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 this 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. The Deweyan, pragmatist conception of art, then, would either seem to require a certain forgetfulness, fancier mental footwork than most 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 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 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. Dewey would have it that his 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 that one needs or uses when one is actually encountering the work of art. In other words, I should still feel free to experience the full emotive impact of Durham's magnificence 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 experiencer 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, fights this motive.

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 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. But subsequent developments in capitalist systems have left this view looking painfully naïve. Experience is as easily commodified these days as is any other consumable. Disney has made a financial empire out of this fact.

AESTHETIC INSTRUMENTALISM

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 and the widespread assent or denial it garners 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. Perhaps it is more like a wedge than a gap. As soon as the self-consciousness of the experiencing self is wedged into the evaluation, 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 that introduced this discussion 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.

PUBLIC AND PRIVATE PHILOSOPHY

With *Art as Experience* we get an 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 regrounds 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 aesthetic good to a societal bromide. 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. 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. It seems that, in order to work out its reconciliation problem, contemporary architecture needs both a good public philosophy as well as a workable private one.

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, its hard to imagine why a metaphysic would be required to justify the impression that such a building has integrity and dignity. This is just an idea that presents itself on such occasions. Durham is one of the reasons that an idea such as innate dignity has any currency in the first place. 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 democratically available is also part of the same project.

NOTES

¹ Mary McLeod takes this tendency to task in "Architecture and Politics in the Reagan Era: From Postmodernism to Deconstructivism" in K. Michael Hays, ed. *Architecture Theory Since 1968*. Boston: MIT Press, 1998. 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 Dutton, Thomas A. and Mann, Lian Hurst, eds. *Reconstructing Architecture*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996. 191.

Michel Foucault, in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth (The Essential Works of Michel Foucault 1954-1984* vol. 1) New York: New Press, 1997, 26. 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, UK: Blackwell Publishers, 1990. 391.

² For example, Heidegger 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." 159, *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*. Richard Taft, tr. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990. 5th ed. 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." (Richard Rorty, *Truth and Progress: Philosophical Papers Volume 3*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998. 310-11.) "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."

³ The famous pragmatist aphorism is that "truth is what works." Joseph Margolis states of the pragmatic outlook: "Pragmatism is best construed as committed to the doctrine of flux: not chaos but the postulate that there are no inviolably necessary structures in nature at large and that human cognizing powers are practical, *ad hoc* habits at best, not changelessly apt faculties that evolve effectively within nature itself." ("The Vicissitudes of Transcendental Reason" in *Habermas and Pragmatism*. Mitchell Aboulaflia, Myra Bookman and Catherine Kemp, eds. New York: Routledge, 2002. 33.)

⁴ John Dewey, *Art as Experience*. New York: Perigree Books, 1980, (1934). 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 Dewey, 303.

⁶ Dewey, 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." Dewey, 250-251.

⁸ Dewey, 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 Dewey, 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 ed. Lanham MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2000. 21.

¹¹ Lenore Langsdorf, "Reconstructing the Fourth Dimension: A Deweyan Critique of Habermas's Conception of Communicative Action" in Aboulaflia, Mitchell, Myra Bookman and Catherine Kemp, eds. *Habermas and Pragmatism*. New York: Routledge, 2002. 152.

¹² Langsdorf, 153.