

APPLIED AESTHETICS

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Introduction

If one is good, why not two? The question is asked by an artist. It is rooted in practice. It addresses a tradition of valuation and is posed here to colleagues as a challenge to identify, to discuss and to evaluate this tradition. My agenda in responding is to promote a practice-based identification of approaches to art that are in need of re-evaluation, and to contribute to this re-evaluation so that it can in turn support a broader practice, a more open-minded presentation, and an expanded public appreciation of art. John Dewey states that “the common fact that we prize in proportion to rarity has a good deal to do with the exclusive esteem in which knowledge has been held.” (Dewey, *Certainty*, 282) Following this lead, I will seek out relations between art, subjects and methods of knowledge, and valuation. Several narratives that combine historical configurations of the above co-exist today. I will follow their genesis to better unravel the contemporary tangle.

First Diagram: John Dewey suggested that the early Greeks fashioned philosophy analogous to pre-existing arts. An artist was assumed to contemplate or observe the changing world of objects. From his observations he actively distilled a vision that he then embodied in a physical medium by applying his craft. The resulting art object revealed to the viewer the beauty that the artist had experienced, a beauty that was now embodied in the art object. In a parallel movement philosophy promoted what Dewey calls a “spectator view of knowledge”, emphasizing that the word theory is derived from the Greek word “theoros”, spectator. Like the artist, a philosopher contemplated the changing world of objects. Like the artist, he distilled a vision. By applying his craft of reason, he created the philosopher’s art work, which was represented in the description of an immutable cosmos that had yielded its ultimate truths to the observer. Truth and beauty were culled from the fleeting world of

change by individuals who possessed specially valued skills of observation and information that allowed them to access the infinitely superior realm of the fixed and final.

Second Diagram: Dewey holds that Plato, as a philosopher in possession of reasoned truth, sought supremacy over the arts and over the artists, not only by belittling their results in his mimetic theory, but also by cutting down the artist's active contribution. Plato proceeded from his vantage point to deny that artists were capable of the mindful activity needed to ascend from the world of change to the ultimate reality. Plato proposed instead that the artist's vision originated in divine inspiration, was not achieved but received, to be merely expressed through the specific physical skill associated with the individual artist's craft. Philosophy owned all of theory, along with the higher prestige awarded to thinking over doing, while inspired practice determined art. Truth was still associated with beauty, but superseded it now.

Third diagram: After the formation of philosophy, the first fundamental re-consideration of knowledge took place with the inception of classical science. The left side of the diagram represents the familiar natural philosophy, where the world of flux was contemplated to allow the reasoning mind to distill the ultimate truth from an eternal reality. The right side shows the emerging approaches of natural science, the "transfer of interest from the permanent to the changing" (Dewey, Darwin, 8) that was under way in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Pure mental contemplation was replaced by intelligently guided physical experimentation that led to the extrapolation of data from material objects. The relationships of those data were the subject of investigation. As active manipulators of nature, scientists replaced reason and the philosopher's pursuit of theoretical certitude with the search for practical certainty through the experimental method. The philosopher's ultimate authority was replaced with the scientist's willingness and responsibility to rebuild fallible theory when challenged.

Fourth diagram: Three expert realms crystallized in the eighteenth century following this emergence of science from philosophy: 1. Within the cognitive or instrumental realm, on the left, intelligent

scientists sought a disinterested truth, now understood as fallible and regarded as practical certainty. This realm also enabled technology when it was engaged by members of the practical realm. 2. Shown in the center, the remaining moral/practical realm from which science had arisen, continued to claim rectitude that was founded in contemplation. Here were located philosophy, the humanities, law, and politics. This realm enabled the administration of civic concerns. It also commented on the pursuits of science and art and shaped their perception by the public. 3. Seen on the right side, the aesthetic/expressive realm as determined by Immanuel Kant who was a member of the practical realm, housed the creators and the judges of beauty, who exercised skill and taste. Kant denied art's relation to outlying concerns. He established the concept of art for art's sake while cementing the notion of the artist as inspired genius who practiced apart from rules. In denying that art was a form of understanding, which would align it with the realm of science, Kant patterned the concept of subjective universality that determined good taste after the disinterested moral judgments that ranked highest in his esteem. As I understand it, art was actually aligned with the moral realm by admitting to the system the need to authoritatively judge its quality. If that holds true, art for art's sake was a fiction from its inception. I surmise that artists who fully adopted this assessment of their role were the ones prone to madness, a condition that was also ascribed, albeit less fatally, to passionate scientists.

Fifth diagram: According to John Dewey, Darwin's Theory of Evolution allowed and necessitated a philosophically relativist world view because "he conquered the phenomena of life for the principle of transition. ... prior to Darwin the impact of the new scientific method upon life, mind and politics, had been arrested, because between these ideal or moral interests and the inorganic world intervened the kingdom of plants and animals. The gates of the garden of life were barred to the new ideas." (Dewey, Darwin, 8) When Darwin firmly posited change as the only constant in biology, in 1859, he eliminated a lingering buffer that had separated the experimental investigations of inorganic science from the contemplative approaches to humanist and moral considerations. Now the scientific reassessment of knowledge in the differentiating humanities intensified, inserting quite questionable methods of experimentation, but most momentously admitted the awareness of fallibility. Relativist and relational

considerations are now evident throughout academic pursuits. The initial emphasis on experiment and the accompanying statistical evaluations of information patterned on the investigation of inanimate nature are now increasingly opposed by a recourse to experiential narrative, by attention to the voices of the subjects investigated while simultaneously questioning the role of the investigator and the agenda that shapes which questions are pursued. Relativist and relational considerations have migrated from the professional world into lay consciousness as well, where they mingle with relics of older views.

Sixth diagram: I believe that this changed habit of popular thought (from which artists emerge as well) has affected post-Darwinian art production - Modern as well as Postmodern - by directing a renewed focus onto what I experience as the inherent, central method of making art : intelligently directed experiment founded in perceived perception - applied aesthetics. Perceived perception means the intelligent awareness of our active directedness through our extensions. Our extensions include our senses, the functions of which have been shaped by habits of use, and our systems or at least patterns of thought that have been shaped by experience, education, socialization and/or indoctrination. If art materializes our directedness it follows that its range reaches from sensory perception to intellectual perception. It is love of knowledge if knowledge is understood as our interface with the world. It is an embodiment of experience won from actuality. As such it is always specific to its situation, in the moment of its creation and in each instance of its perception. As the artist is responsible for the object created, the viewer is responsible to create an experience in engaging it.

Seventh Diagram: The political and the popular culture that surround us reflect concerns with an ultimate reality and its attendant concepts of objective truth, beauty and goodness in public narratives. Largely apart from those narratives, actuality appears to be constantly re-negotiated among parties of varying power and influence. The recent American legal contests, including Simpson, Hill/Thomas and the presidential election, manifest an actual world. At times the assumption is voiced that an objective reality suffers falsification in the courts of law, but what is intended to take place is precisely

the negotiation of coveted actualities. Commonly, the advertising industry practice of creating narratives for profit that are intended to induce consumption or other desired behavior is accepted by consumers as not exactly truthful, but as useful, sometimes as annoying, sometimes as enjoyable. These proceedings inadvertently create an actual world as well. Many may still underestimate the shaping power of mediation by assuming that we look through a construct at a given, while we are actually given a construct. The step that cannot be made unless we re-appraise traditions of thought is to acknowledge that what we still read as objective reality is negotiable by its very nature, and that we have negotiated beyond the point at which we can meaningfully agree on its interpretation as fixed or objective. If practice precedes understanding and theories are not matched by actions, then values are in limbo. The so called 'reality' TV shows, 'Survivor', 'Big Brother', and the coming "Temptation Island" clearly address this conflict within public culture. Two great, affluent professions of this era are held by public negotiators, advertisers and lawyers. They proffer agendas that drive the administration of private and of public property. In a hierarchy of pecuniary, but not always of prestigious esteem, they are now replacing scientists and medical doctors, who had previously superseded the philosopher. Next to the realm of moral, civic and economic administration and to the realm of science, the third realm of society now is the realm of mediation, including propaganda, entertainment and fine arts. Mediation is the realm in which narratives may be prescribed or explored. It is capable of housing multiple agendas. Today, fine art is functioning at low capacity, in part because members of the administrative realm have usurped the lion share of the realm of mediation, and in part because many of Fine Art's practitioners are unclear what its and what their functions can be today. Clashes between narratives that reflect one tradition of our interface with the world, and events shaped by negotiations that are rooted in another habitually occur and create a world in which it is easy to lose one's footing. Cynicism may grow from the thwarted effort to consolidate all into one dominant narrative. But where Suzi Gablik discerned the Modernist artist's precarious turn to rootless individuality, I see frequently unappreciated intelligence working through experimentation towards practical certainty.

Conclusion: John Dewey expected a new kind of art to evolve. He might have noticed that it already existed. In 'Art As Experience' he wrote: "Scientific method tends to generate a respect for experience, and even though this new reverence is still confined to the few, it contains the promise of a new kind of experiences that will demand expression." (Dewey, Art, 399) Scientific method relates data to each other. It is my conviction that with the begin of modernist art the expression of this changing experience presents itself as an investigation of relatedness, initially as an investigation of the relation of acts of perception to representation. It leads to explorations of relations of figure and ground, of objects to each other, of the relation of the viewer to the work in painting, sculpture and installation work, of the relation of artist and institution, to now engender questions of valuation and legitimation. I also believe that the lack of a narrative in support of this work has inhibited this effort, leading to the uneasy refocussing of one strain of postmodern activity onto the unaccountable Kantian "genius" who creates "quality masterpieces", while the other strain has moved on to focus on an exploration of experience as the basis for communication. The definitions of knowledge and of truth that Dewey proposes are relational and can be extended to art as well: "Like knowledge, truth *and art* itself is an experienced relation of things and it has no meaning outside of such relation." (Dewey, Darwin, 95) Under this postulate, we are not only free to determine systems of value, but we are responsible to do so. Dewey continues: "The more widespread become the habits of intelligent thought, the fewer enemies they meet from those vested interests and social institutions whose power depends upon immunity from inspection by intelligence, in short, the more matter of course they become, the less need will there seem to be for giving knowledge an exclusive and monopolistic position. It will be prized for its fruits rather than for the properties assigned to it when it was a new and precarious enterprise."(Dewey, Certainty, 282) It is up to each of us to embrace the responsibility to prize in relation to the amount of meaning we are able to create.

Sources:

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