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TWO FACES OF ART – PUBLIC AND PRIVATE – IN JOHN DEWEY’S AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE

John Dewey was a modernist philosopher in the sense that his thought belonged to the intellectual formation called modernity that spanned roughly the period between 1850–1950 (Bradbury, McFarlane 1991: 19–51). The thing really important to him was a quest for balance between art and science, private and public, self and community (Hickman 1990: 169–171). I am just giving these three spheres as examples of what was important for modern thinking as such. At first it looks as if he would agree that all art is public. Before I go further, his meaning of art has to be explained in detail.

For Dewey, art is not so much an object as it is an experience. He understands an experience as a kind of natural, normal, balanced interaction between an organism and the environment, or between a person and his/her surroundings, or between two people, or between an observer and a piece of art, e.g. a picture in a museum. The sides involved in an interaction which eventually creates an experience are of secondary importance. They could be literally anything, even a stone down the hill (Dewey 1987: 46). What shapes an experience is not what is interacting but how it is interacting. “How” is of a crucial significance, while “what” is irrelevant (Wojnar 1975: V–LV). Firstly, all experiences are active and motor; secondly, all experiences keep balance between doing and having (undergoing); thirdly, all experiences have a beginning and an ending. They do not finish prematurely before a kind of climax. What differentiates a normal, common experience from an experience is that an experience marvels those specifics. An experience is more than active – it is proactive and creative, it is more than balanced – it is integrated, it is more than having the beginning and the ending – it is the unified whole developing in its own timing. An experience understood in that way is an aesthetic one and it creates art.

There are a few meanings of the aesthetic experience in Dewey’s thought. The very first one is the collective and public one. It could be observed while the ancient Greeks were building the Parthenon. That experience was collective

because it arose from the specific needs of Greek community life. The temple was and still is an embodiment of civic feelings and the spirit of the polis (Dewey 1987: 11–13). It was also a collective effort. Then it led to collective aesthetic experiences while people were inside the building during a religious service. This meaning of art – as an expression of a collective spirit of a specific community – is similar to Walter Benjamin's idea of an aura: an aura is present when a piece of art is born out of a social ritual (Benjamin 2009: 5–20). Dewey believed that art as embodiment of the spirit of a civilisation comes into being through rites and rituals. In this context art is obviously public.

The other understanding of the aesthetic experience is while an agent (e.g. a person) is interacting with a piece of art in a museum or a gallery, or in some other public space (in a music hall, in the street, etc.). Let us imagine a situation when a person is interacting with a painting in a museum of art. The interaction is an emotional engagement because to be fully connected with the piece of art the person has to be emotionally involved in the process. The person follows the aesthetic qualities present in the painting such as: colours, light and shades, lines, etc. He or she not only tries to find a meaning embodied in the piece but also fills the process with his or her own private meanings. In the aesthetic experience of this kind, expressiveness of the interaction is crucial. Dewey understands expression in his own way as a process that creates a change both in the aesthetic object and in the viewer. It is so because expression for him is related to overcoming difficulties in the process of interacting with the painting.

We can imagine someone watching *The Ambassadors* by Hans Holbein in the National Gallery in London for the very first time. Following aesthetic qualities can be easy at first. But at some point interacting with a strange shape on the floor is inevitable. The question appears: What is this? A fish, a ship?¹ To overcome this difficulty, the observer/viewer needs to allow himself or herself some "solution": having decided that was a ship, he or she continues to watch the rest of the painting. The expression took place because the person managed not only to interact with the aesthetic qualities but also to overcome the difficulty. For him or her, *The Ambassadors* will never be the same painting: because it has changed from a realistic piece of art at first to a piece with a mystery. He or she is also changed as he or she has experienced the picture in a new, deep, expressive, emotional way. An important feature of this experience is that it does not have any outer purpose. It develops in its inner timing and with no regard to anything beyond itself. One of the examples of the aesthetic experience was described by Iris Murdoch in her novel *The Bell* from the mid fifties:

¹ It is known that the shape on the floor represents a skull (Roskill, Hand 2001: 25).

Dora had been in the National Gallery a thousand times and the pictures were almost as familiar to her as her own face. Passing between them now, as through a well-loved grove, she felt a calm descending on her. She wandered a little, watching with compassion the poor visitors armed with guide books who were peering anxiously at the masterpieces. (...) Dora was always moved by the pictures. Today she was moved, but in a new way. She marveled, with a kind of gratitude, that they were all still here, and her heart was filled with love for the pictures, their authority, their marvelous generosity, their splendor. It occurred to her that here at last was something real and something perfect. Who said that, about perfection and reality being in the same place? Here was something which her consciousness could not wretchedly devour, and by making it part of her fantasy make it worthless. Even Paul, she thought, only existed now as someone she dreamt about; or else as a vague external menace never really encountered and understood. But the pictures were something real outside herself, which spoke to her kindly and yet in sovereign tones, something superior and good whose presence destroyed the dreary trance-like solipsism of her earlier mood. When the world had seemed to be subjective it had seemed to be without interest or value. But now there was something else in it after all.

These thoughts, not clearly articulated, flitted through Dora's mind. She had never thought about the pictures in this way before; nor did she draw now any very explicit moral. Yet she felt that she had had a revelation. She looked at the radiant, somber, tender, powerful canvas of Gainsborough and felt a sudden desire to go down on her knees before it, embracing it, shedding tears.

Dora looked anxiously about her, wondering if anyone had noticed her transports. Although she had not actually prostrated herself, her face must have looked unusually ecstatic, and the tears were in fact starting into her eyes (Murdoch 1979: 191–192).

This aesthetic experience seems to be public as it takes place in the museum and as it is an interaction between a person and a public piece of art available to everyone. Dewey also distinguishes an aesthetic experience of a mostly private nature: namely an experience called also a consummatory experience (in *Experience and Nature*). It happens during daily actions like gardening, cleaning a room, arguing with a friend, having dinner in a restaurant in Paris, doing sports, shooting, etc. An experience can also be undergone at work: during a surgical operation, scientific research; it can happen to a car mechanic or a seamstress (Dewey 1987: 11, 42–43, 103–104).

These interactions become aesthetic under the same conditions as the interactions during the contact with a piece of art, namely when they are integrated both emotionally and with regard to the purpose. It means they cannot be done mechanically without emotional engagement. Emotional openness is required as well as carrying out an interaction for pure interacting, for pure enjoyment of the

process. It seems tricky at first because all practical interactions have their outer aims: we clean a room to keep it in a good shape, we eat to fill our stomachs, we shoot to kill an animal, etc. In the circumstances, however, when these actions are taking place for us to enjoy them and not to fulfil any outer criteria such as goals, results and so on, they become aesthetic. All “results” are indispensable parts of the process of interacting because they can be felt and emotionally foreseen before the ending. A surgeon operating on a patient can tell how it goes during the whole process. Of course, difficulties have to be overcome but dealing with them can be smooth and rhythmical, namely aesthetic, and the operator knows before the final stitch that everything has been unfolding in its perfect order. According to Dewey, this is even more aesthetic than smooth dealing with some usual obstacles of the matter.

The question must be asked: is an experience really only private? There is no doubt that emotional openness and integration, namely acting with a regard to the enjoyment of an action, not with a regard to an aim, is strictly private. It depends on people’s emotional disposition and attitude towards the world and life as such, it is a side effect of personal maturity or even charisma. It is something which cannot be taught at school or at university. However, there are factors of an experience which are not strictly private. I mean not only the surroundings, namely that they take place at work and, obviously, places of work such as a hospital, a studio, a school, a university are public. It is not only a place that is public, but public are also motor sets of operation of the body as well as perception. In this respect “public” means belonging to a community, civilisation, something that has been passed from generation to generation. Motor sets of operation or motor lines of operation are Deweyan terms referring to somatic actions (Dewey 1987: 103–104). Certain actions and perception intertwined with these actions in one process are taught, instructed, and even improved. For example, becoming a surgeon is a long process filled with years of surgical training in the operating room. The same situation happens in a lot of jobs: to be a sportsman, a craftsman, a lawyer – specific learning is necessary. Learning covers both body and perception. In the case of artists: musicians, painters, sculptors, dancers, etc. the process of learning how to use their body with connection to perception is equally significant. The motor and perceptive part of the aesthetic experience is always public. This factor decides that an experience is not only private but also public. The only situation when an experience is totally intimate is at someone’s home and when no specific sets of body are required. Cleaning a room or gardening can be given as an example.

In Dewey’s vision, all aesthetic experiences are both public and private. The question has to be addressed: what is private in listening to Chopin concerto in a music hall or in interacting with a painting in a gallery? Firstly, emotional

openness and expressive engagement, secondly, all feelings and emotions felt during the process with a special reference to satisfaction. Satisfaction, no matter if it is undergone in a mostly private experience or in a mostly public aesthetic experience, is of an intimate, personal nature. All these mixtures decide that in Dewey's aesthetics art is both private and public. Public pieces of art lead to personal, intimate emotions and thrills and private satisfaction from a job is founded on public training of body and perception.

All strict distinctions in the case of Dewey have to be always reconsidered as his thought tends to blur all oppositions and dualisms. He always gives space to pluralism. The same situation is with public and private. To understand this, it is worth quoting his vision of society from *Democracy and Education*. To Dewey, there is no clear cut border between private and public life:

Such words as "society" and "community" are likely to be misleading, for they have a tendency to make us think there is a single thing corresponding to the single word. As a matter of fact, a modern society is many societies more or less loosely connected. Each household with its immediate extension of friends makes a society; the village or street group of playmates is a community; each business group, each club is another. (...) Inside the modern city, in spite of its nominal political unity, there are probably more communities, more differing customs, traditions, aspirations, and forms of government or control, than existed in an entire continent at an earlier epoch (Dewey 1985: 25).

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