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**Experience and the Organic Unity
of Artworks**

John Dewey's aesthetics can be naturally viewed from two rather distinct angles—the one emphasizing the experiential process leading to consummation, the other accentuating the immediacy and intensity of discrete moments within that process. His entire theory of art owes much of its interest, as well as its applicability beyond the experience of art proper, to the wedding of these two theoretical elements (the aspects of instrumentality and intrinsicity, respectively), and this gets articulated in Dewey's doctrine of organic unity.

Traditionally, the doctrine of organic unity in art, or "aesthetic organicism," refers to a certain kind of formal inter-relatedness that is alleged to hold among elements within an artwork, where these parts maintain such close affinity with each other that the nature of the whole cannot resist an alteration in any of its essential components.

Without further specifying the nature of the "wholes" in question, however, this qualification alone is obviously barren. Viewed as a mere aggregate, any collection of items is of course altered when one of its elements changes. What traditional exponents of the theory have maintained instead, from the Greeks to the New Critics, is that the aesthetic whole is more than just the sum of its parts. Aristotle held in

the *Poetics* that a well-crafted drama presents "a single piece of action" having a "beginning, middle, and end." And Formalists like Clive Bell insisted that aesthetic experience capture the "significant" form of the artwork in an immediate apprehension of an irreducible quality of the work as a harmonious whole. Dewey's own view, as stated in *Art as Experience* and elsewhere, remains a classical one in just this sense.

But Dewey's aesthetic theory is not, like the Formalists', a view about the inherent qualities of the physical artifact, and for that reason this aspect of Dewey shares interesting affinities with certain themes current today (e.g., Arthur Danto's notion of "artistic identification"). For Dewey, the physical artifact itself is not in fact the "work of art" at all, and use of familiar expressions such as "the art object" can be seriously misleading. This is not perhaps as odd as it may at first seem (even given the fact that Dewey's view implies that a new work of art is created in the perception of each spectator) because speaking about "an object" of inquiry does not guarantee any concrete physical reference, any more than recounting the story of Ponce de León commits us to the existence of the Fountain of Youth. The object of inquiry is the label we give to the intentional focus of procedures we undertake in relation to a situation we want to know more about. Similarly, Dewey wants to say that "being a work of art" is a relational property, and invites us to regard art "as experience" (as his famous title suggests). The artwork is the artifact *working*—working "to make our experiences as complete, as full, as total in their vitality" as possible ("The Philosophy of the Arts," p. 364). The physical artifact is an occasion for a certain sort of interaction between percipient and object, and the "pervasive quality" of that experiential process is the mark of organic unity.

This begins to suggest how Dewey seeks to combine the notions of intrinsic and instrumentality, and also how indebted Dewey is to the aesthetics of Romanticism. Since the advent of Romanticism in the late eighteenth century, the point of designating aesthetic form as "organic" has typically been to mark a distinction from the "mechanical" form of physical causation. Aesthetic perception no less than mundane physical causation is a process, but (Dewey insists) it differs from the latter in its dependence on the "fundedness" of the percipient's sensibilities—by which Dewey means that the informed spectator approaches an art object with a repertoire of emotionally imbued responses that treat the object as one especially arresting solution to a set of aesthetic problems. The perception of the unity of a work is really the culmination of a creative process by the spectator that corresponds, generically if not in specific historical detail, to the actual genesis of such an artifact—a process that makes use of both the apprehension of the intrinsic qualities of the medium and an intuitive sense for the promising directions that the artist's efforts can take.

Dewey's own language here, however, is not always straightforward. He declares, for example, that "we lay hold of the full import of a work of art only as we go through in our own vital processes the processes the artist went through in producing the work" (*Art as Experience*, p. 328). This might seem to commit Dewey to a strong and perhaps suspect theory of art as communication, but this could easily be misleading. What is involved here for the viewer is a "communication" of a rather odd sort—not the reception of information, nor any direct intuition of the historical artist's state of mind. What is really crucial for Dewey is the notion that intelligence, as it applies to aesthetic perception, has certain constant features that are modeled after artistic creativity itself and that make up the general contours of the process of aesthetic appreciation. This involves most prominently a "regulation by an underlying and pervasive quality" ("Qualitative Thought," p. 246). Here we have one of the driving ideas behind not only Dewey's aesthetics but his entire philosophical enterprise as well. "Control by a single pervasive quality" for Dewey implies both a sensitivity to the emotionally charged immediacy of the medium and an intuition for the unfolding artistic solution expressed in the finished artifact—in other words, both intrinsicity and instrumentality. At this point Dewey's view is teleological, naturalistic, and romantic: the work of art is said to "grow" (for the perceiver as well as for the original artist) as an "end-in-view," out of the natural organic process of experience.

Now what enables this process to occur, according to Dewey, is the fact that experience itself, when conditions are right, exhibits organic unity: "the *form* of the whole" is then "present in every member" (*Art as Experience*, p. 62). Experiential processes of this sort are "arts"—activities composed of phases that are internally related by a single pervasive quality, which can be discerned early on by an immediate "total seizure, an inclusive qualitative whole not yet articulated" (*Art as Experience*, p. 195). The salient feature of such a qualitative whole Dewey calls a "consummation"—"a summing up and a fulfillment" of its prior phases (*Art as Experience*, p. 177). What would otherwise be a disconnected series of acts is here transfigured into a cumulative process, and this for Dewey is an entirely biological occurrence, a function of appropriate environmental cues on the one hand and settled human habits on the other. These latter (which Dewey designates as "intelligence") get formed over similar previous occasions, in which a person's "doings and undergoings" join an action and its experienced consequences into a "fused" relationship that remains embodied in the dispositional makeup of the agent. Dewey would say that aesthetic experience is "expressive" of those settled dispositions.

It is apparent here how a full understanding of Dewey's view of organic unity introduces topics that, traditionally, have not been considered especially relevant to aesthetics

proper. But recent commentators have come to regard this as a major source of interest: Virtually the whole of Dewey's mature work, and much of what he did prior, is grounded on his wider views about the aesthetics of experience. For this Dewey has stretched not just the concept of "aesthetics" but also "experience" far beyond its familiar connotations. "Experience" for Dewey is not simply a phenomenological category. The term is a placeholder for the complex of operations and apprehensions that occur in what he calls "the interactive situation"—which is his way of describing the functional relationship between the human organism and its environment. All perceived qualities themselves emerge from this kind of complex, but "pervasive qualities" in particular emerge only when the human organism has learned to sustain a certain range of responses (emotional as well as cognitive) throughout the experiential process. In that case, and in the presence of appropriate environmental conditions, the result is a particular "system"—an assembly of parts connected together so that a particular end (consummation) is attained. Dewey's familiar model here is biological (as in the case of the respiratory system of the human body, comprising the lungs and their associated vessels and airways). But he extends the reach of such a system beyond the boundaries of the organism proper, to include not only external elements that temporally coexist with the present state of the organism, but also future conditions that are created out of tensions internal to that present state. Dewey's substantial, and controversial, claim at this point seems to be that what emerges from this interaction—and what constitutes the entire interactive situation as an organic unity—is more than simply the "pervasive quality" itself: it is also a telic element within the system that orients it toward consummatory "equilibrium," for which the agent's immediate apprehension of intrinsic pervasive quality functions instrumentally as an orienting clue for conduct.

So for Dewey, what has organic unity in such cases is not a physical artifact but a succession of interrelated events, and a physical art object may serve as an occasion not only for consummatory satisfaction but for a reinforcement of a spectator's capacity for intelligent conduct in any field of practical inquiry. This (Dewey insists) is a central aspect of human life that Formalists missed by cordoning off "fine art" from other human products, and the fundamental impulse behind Dewey's aesthetics is to "restore the continuity" between art and life that prevalent modernist theories had been ignoring. The encompassing breadth of the term *aesthetic* in Dewey is an indication of this. Life has real human value, Dewey would say, insofar as it exhibits the organic unity of experience.

All this places Dewey in an interesting relationship to recent developments in aesthetic theory. If we identify "modernism" with Clement Greenberg's view of a "self-critical tendency" that focuses exclusively on the intrinsic properties of the medium, Dewey is not a modernist because he

does not hold that preoccupation with material properties, apart from other practical concerns, is even possible. But if we identify “postmodernism” with the Derridean rejection of any fixed frame for the artwork that could definitively set it apart from “outside” elements, then Dewey is no postmodernist either because he holds that experience itself does naturally exhibit structures of organic unity that define interactive situations. Here, as Richard Shusterman has pointed out (*Pragmatist Aesthetics*, pp. 71ff.), the contention between Dewey and postmodernism is not over the notion of organic unity per se but rather over the priority one should ascribe to the experience of aesthetic richness. Dewey takes such experience to be of supreme value for human life, and this fact he believes should determine our critical interests in art. His theory of organic unity is intended to provide a basic naturalistic framework for those critical interests.

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DAVID I. SEIPLE

DICKIE, GEORGE (b. 1926), contemporary American philosopher specializing in aesthetics. Since the early 1960s Dickie has made numerous important contributions to the philosophy of art. Among the most influential of his contributions are his attacks on key aspects of widely held aesthetic theories and his creation and critical development of the *in-*

stitutional theory of art. His critique of aesthetic theory addresses a number of theses about what is involved in people’s experiencing something’s aesthetic qualities (and associated theses about aesthetic objects), whereas his Institutional Theory provides an account of the concept of art that locates art’s essence within a special category of social practices attributed to a social group Dickie calls *the artworld*.

A widely held view among aesthetic theorists is that someone must in some way invoke a special mode of perception in himself or herself in order to experience something’s aesthetic qualities (or in order to experience something as an aesthetic object). Invoking this special mode of perception is commonly equated with adopting a special attitude toward what is being experienced, a disinterested attitude, for example. Speaking generally, Dickie shows that experiencing aesthetic qualities cannot require adopting a special attitude by providing counterexamples to the various attempts philosophers have made to show that there is a distinct kind of experience (properly classified as aesthetic experience) that people must have in order to experience something’s aesthetic qualities, and that having this kind of experience requires adopting a special attitude. [See *Attitude*, *article on Aesthetic Attitude*.]

Early on in his attack on aesthetic attitude theorists, Dickie argued against the view that experiencing something’s aesthetic qualities required attending to it disinterestedly. He did this by providing examples to show that the difference between people who are experiencing something’s aesthetic qualities and people who are experiencing the same object without being aware of its aesthetic qualities merely is a function of which characteristics of the thing each person is paying attention to, regardless of the interests motivating his or her attention. Since the difference in what is experienced is explained by what is being attended to, not the mode of attention, it is not necessary to introduce notions like disinterested attention or other special modes of perception (identified in terms of the perceiver’s interests, purposes, or motives) in order to understand the experience of something’s aesthetic qualities. [See *Qualities, Aesthetic*.]

Acknowledging Dickie’s criticism of aesthetic theories that made disinterested attention the special attitude necessary for experiencing aesthetic qualities, aesthetic attitude theorists replied that the relevant distinction was between aesthetic and nonaesthetic perception, where these two modes of perception are distinguished by reference to three things: the perceiver’s motives, purposes, and interests, the qualities of the thing attended to, and attention. [See *Disinterestedness*.] Dickie pointed out that since attention is common to both aesthetic and nonaesthetic perception, and since nonaesthetic qualities can be the object of aesthetic perception, the perceiver’s motives, purposes, and interests are what must distinguish aesthetic from nonaesthetic perception. He then provided examples to show that someone