

The Artful Life as Transactional Process: How John Dewey Connects Art, Democracy, and Everyday Experience

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Abstract

This article explores John Dewey's influential perspective on art, which challenges traditional views that confine art to museums and galleries. Drawing on Dewey's seminal work, "Art as Experience," the article demonstrates that art is not merely about objects, but rather the quality of experience we have with the world around us. This experience is an ongoing transactional process between ourselves and our environment. Artworks serve as powerful tools within this process, shaping how we engage with everything from everyday tasks to artistic masterpieces. Through art, we can refine our experiences, gain new perspectives, and even undergo personal transformation. Furthermore, the article delves into the connection between Dewey's concept of art and his broader philosophical ideals, particularly his democratic vision. Art, according to John Dewey, plays a crucial role in a healthy democracy. Artworks can foster a sense of community by providing shared experiences and sparking communication about important social issues. The article further discusses how art can challenge the status quo and inspire citizens to become active participants in shaping their society. Finally, the article explores Dewey's notion of the "Everyday as Artful," where artistic principles can be applied to even the most mundane tasks, enriching our daily lives and contributing to a more aesthetically pleasing society. To illustrate these concepts, the article references various art examples throughout the discussion.

Keywords: Artful Life, Transactional Process, John Dewey, Art, Democracy, Everyday Experience

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INTRODUCTION

John Dewey, a prominent American philosopher and educational reformer, developed a unique and influential perspective on art. Dewey challenged traditional views on art and its place in our lives. In this paper, I will particularly delve into his notion of art as Transactional Process (Dewey, 1934), which proposes a radical shift in perspective. Dewey argued that art is not confined to museums and galleries, but rather encompasses the quality of experience we have with the world around us. This ongoing transaction between ourselves and our environment shapes how we engage with everything from everyday tasks to artistic masterpieces. Through art, Dewey suggests, we can refine our experiences, gain new perspectives, and even undergo personal transformation (Hickman, 1990).

I will further explore how Dewey's concept of art connects to his broader philosophical ideas, particularly his democratic ideals. Dewey envisioned art playing a crucial role in a healthy democracy. Artworks can bridge divides and foster a sense of community by providing shared experiences and sparking communication about important social issues. This focus on the public role of art aligns with Dewey's view of democracy as an ongoing process that thrives on citizen engagement. Art, in Dewey's perspective, has the power to challenge the status quo and inspire citizens to become active participants in shaping their society (Evans, 1980).

Finally, I will examine Dewey's notion of the "Everyday as Artful" (Dewey, 1934). He argued that artistic principles can be applied to even the most mundane tasks. By bringing intentionality, skill, and imagination to our daily activities, we can elevate them into artful experiences. This does not require grand gestures, but rather a mindful appreciation for the process and the details of our lives (Garrison, 1987). Dewey believed that cultivating an artful way of living can not only enrich our personal experiences but also contribute to a more aesthetically pleasing and harmonious society (Hausman, 1989).

To illustrate John Dewey's concept of art throughout this article, I will present examples of artworks that embody his ideas.

Art as Experience: A Transactional Process

Dewey challenges the idea that art is separate from our everyday experiences. He suggests refined experiences of artworks are an extension of how we engage with the world around us. Dewey emphasizes the importance of the experience itself, rather than focusing solely on the characteristics of the art object (Egan, 1990). Art, according to him, has the power to enrich and intensify our experiences. This focus on experience contrasts with traditional theories like those by Immanuel Kant. Dewey argues for the value of all art forms, including "popular art," not just the often-privileged "high art" or "fine art." Through art, Dewey argues, we can undergo a transformation. Art can help us reorganize our understanding of the world and equip us to have more meaningful experiences in the future (Goldblatt, 2012; Novitz, 2004).

Dewey (1934) believed art was not a static object for contemplation, but a dynamic process of interaction between artist, artwork, and audience. Art experiences are intentional, aimed at resolving problematic situations encountered in everyday life. Engaging with art allows us to reorganize emotions, perceptions, and beliefs, leading to personal and social growth (DeLong, 2019).

Dewey's transactional view emphasizes the ongoing interaction between humans and their environment. In "Art as Experience," he applies this idea to art. We do not passively receive art; we actively engage with it, and this interaction shapes our experience (Dewey, 1934).

Dewey argues that experience is not something that just happens to us. It is the result of this ongoing transaction. Similarly, our aesthetic experience with art is not just about the artwork itself. It is about the dynamic interplay between the artwork, our background experiences, and how we engage with it (Egan, 1990).

The transactional view emphasizes growth and learning through interaction. Dewey suggests art can be a powerful tool in this process. By confronting us with new ideas and ways of seeing the world, art can disrupt our existing patterns and lead to a more refined and meaningful way of experiencing the world (Cavadini, 1997).

In essence, “Art as Experience” shows how art functions within Dewey’s broader philosophical framework. Art becomes a medium for this ongoing transaction, shaping our experiences and allowing us to grow through our engagement with it (Abbing, 2003).

In contemporary art, the idea of art as a transactional process, inspired by John Dewey’s philosophy, manifests in diverse ways. Here are some examples:

- *Transactional/ Participatory art*: Works invite active engagement from the audience, blurring the lines between artist and viewer. For instance, Miranda July and Harrell Fletcher's *Learning to Love You More* (2002-2009) stands as a significant example of collaborative internet art in the early 21st century. This web-based project functioned as a participatory platform inviting users to engage with a series of creative prompts, fostering a global exploration of themes surrounding love, action, and human experience. The project unfolded over a seven-year period (2002-2009) and offered over sixty prompts for user-generated responses. These prompts, ranging from the introspective ("Write the phone conversation you wish you could have") to the playful ("Draw a constellation from someone's freckles"), encouraged participants to creatively interpret and document their everyday lives. The completed responses, encompassing various artistic mediums, were then uploaded and archived on the project's website.
- *Relational aesthetics*: Artists create social situations and interactions as the artwork itself. Tino Sehgal’s performances, for example, involve encounters with individuals hired to perform actions or offer experiences, emphasizing the artwork’s existence within the dynamic between participants. Sehgal throws a playful wrench into the traditional art exhibit. His works are like games, inviting visitors into strange situations that challenge the way we think about museums. The heart of the art is not a painting or sculpture – it is the unique interaction between each visitor and the piece. No two people experience it the same way. His works are completely intangible, relying solely on movement, conversation, and social connections. Through these encounters, Sehgal asks museum-goers to consider something deeper: how they create value and meaning in their daily lives.
- *Bioart and environmental art*: These practices engage with living systems and ecological concerns, inviting audiences into critical dialogues about our relationship with the environment. Eduardo Kac’s “GFP Bunny” sparked debates about bioethics and the intersection of art and science, highlighting the transactional nature of art's impact on society.
- *Technology-driven art*: Interactive installations and digital platforms allow audiences to actively manipulate and shape the artwork. Refik Anadol’s “Dreams” immerses viewers in a dynamic cityscape generated by their movements, emphasizing the co-creation aspect of the experience.

Dewey’s concept extends beyond these specific examples. Any artwork that encourages active engagement, critical reflection, and dialogue between artist, artwork, and audience can be seen as participating in a transactional process. This approach challenges traditional, passive art consumption and empowers both artists and audiences to shape meaning and impact through their interactions (Clark, 2001).

Democracy and the Public Role of Art

John Dewey had a unique perspective on democracy and the public role of art. Dewey didn't see democracy as a fixed state or a set of rules. Instead, he viewed it as an ongoing process—a social experiment—that requires active participation from its citizens. For Dewey, a healthy democracy relies on a vibrant public sphere. This is a space where citizens can freely exchange ideas, deliberate on issues, and work towards a common good (McCluskey, 2004).

Dewey believed art has the power to bridge divides and cultivate a sense of community. Artworks can spark shared experiences and understanding, fostering the social connection crucial for a functioning democracy (Duncum, 2000).

Dewey saw art as a powerful tool for communication beyond just words. Artworks can address complex social issues in ways that resonate emotionally and intellectually, stimulating public discourse (Ryan, 2006).

Dewey also viewed art as a crucial tool for fostering democratic participation and social good. By engaging with diverse perspectives and emotions through art, citizens can develop empathy, critical thinking, and a shared sense of community (Dooley, 2009). Art experiences, therefore, have the potential to challenge unjust norms and inspire social change. Art can challenge the status quo and raise awareness of social injustices. By prompting critical reflection and emotional engagement, art can inspire citizens to become active participants in shaping their society (McCluskey, 2004).

Dewey's concept is not without its limitations. Critics argue that his focus on shared experiences might overlook the importance of dissent and critical voices in a democracy. However, Dewey's ideas remain significant. He reminds us of the potential of art to revitalize public life and empower citizens to become active participants in shaping their democratic societies (Duncum, 2000; McCluskey, 2004).

To illustrate the connection between Dewey's views on democracy and the public role of art, let's consider some specific artworks.

- *Theaster Gates' Dorchester Project* in Chicago which transforms abandoned buildings into vibrant arts and performance spaces, could be a good example to the Dewey's notion of Art, Dewey would appreciate how the project not only creates a beautiful space but also fosters dialogue about urban renewal, racial equity, and the importance of cultural centers in a community.
- *Hank Willis Thomas' "For Freedoms"* billboards are another example to the Dewey's notion of democratic nature of Art. These powerful photographic billboards placed in public spaces address issues of race, identity, and social justice. By placing these artworks in the public sphere, Thomas sparks conversations and encourages viewers to engage with social issues.
- *Tania Bruguera's Immigrant Movement International (IMI) project* can be seen as another example to the Dewey's view of art. This participatory art project invites immigrants to share their stories through workshops and performances. Dewey would find value in how IMI empowers immigrants to use art as a voice and fosters a sense of community among participants.
- *The Guerrilla Girls*, an anonymous feminist art group, uses street art, posters, and performances to challenge sexism and discrimination in the art world. Dewey would appreciate how their work uses art to raise awareness of social injustices and promote a more inclusive art scene.
- *Ai Weiwei's large-scale installations* are good examples to the Dewey's notion of democratic nature of Art: This Chinese artist's work often critiques government policies

and human rights abuses. By confronting viewers with uncomfortable realities, Ai Weiwei's art encourages critical reflection and challenges the status quo.

These are just a few examples, and the beauty of Dewey's notion is its broad applicability. Artworks that spark conversation, empower communities, and challenge the way we see the world all contribute to a more vibrant and engaged democracy.

The Everyday as Artful

Dewey rejected the notion of art existing solely in museums or elite cultural spheres (Dewey, 1934). He saw artistic potential in all aspects of life, from cooking to gardening to daily interactions. This view encouraged art education for all and challenged elitist notions of aesthetics (Dewey, 1938; Egan, 1990).

Dewey challenged the notion that art is limited to paintings, sculptures, or performances. He argued that art is a quality of experience. It is about how we approach and engage with the world around us.

According to Dewey, everyday activities have the potential to be aesthetic—meaning they can be infused with a sense of beauty, care, and mindful attention. Cooking a meal, gardening, or even cleaning a room can be approached with an artistic spirit, focusing on the process, the materials, and the final outcome (Shusterman, 2000).

Dewey believed that by bringing intentionality and imagination to everyday tasks, we can elevate them into artful experiences. This doesn't require grand gestures; it is about finding beauty in the ordinary and appreciating the small details.

Dewey emphasizes the importance of skill in making the everyday artful. Honing our skills, whether in carpentry, playing a musical instrument, or even cooking, allows us to approach tasks with greater care and control, leading to a more fulfilling experience.

Dewey's concept is not just about personal satisfaction. He believed that by cultivating artful living, we can create a more aesthetically pleasing and meaningful environment for ourselves and others (Jacob, 2018). This, in turn, can foster a more connected and harmonious society.

It is important to note that Dewey does not suggest that everything we do needs to be a masterpiece. But by incorporating mindfulness, skill, and imagination into our daily activities, we can find greater enjoyment and enrich the overall quality of our lives (Hoopla, 2000).

Traditional Japanese Tea Ceremony, for instance, embodies Dewey's concept of the "Everyday as Artful." Every step, from preparing the tea utensils to whisking the matcha, is done with meticulous care and attention to detail. The focus is on the experience itself, creating a moment of mindfulness and shared beauty in the ordinary.

The following contemporary artworks exemplify John Dewey's enduring concept of "The Everyday as Artful":

- *Joseph Beuys' 7000 Oaks project*: Joseph Beuys, a German artist known for his unconventional performance and installation works, created 7000 Oaks over five years (1982-1987) in Kassel, Germany. The project involved planting 7000 oak trees around the city, each with a basalt stone placed beside it. The act of planting trees and the use of natural materials like basalt connected the artwork to the environment and daily life. In essence, Beuys' 7000 Oaks exemplifies Dewey's notion of art existing within the everyday. It takes an ordinary activity, imbues it with intention and social commentary, and creates an

artwork that is both aesthetically pleasing and has a lasting impact on the surrounding environment.

- *Street Embroidery by Yarn Bombers*: This global movement involves artists using yarn to “bomb” public spaces with colorful knitted or crocheted installations. These interventions elevate the act of knitting or crocheting from something done at home to a form of public art, transforming everyday objects (yarn, knitting needles) into tools for creative expression.
- *Urban Foraging and Cooking Projects*: Many restaurants and chefs now focus on foraging for wild ingredients in urban environments. This practice incorporates elements of exploration, skill (identifying edible plants), and creativity (using foraged finds in dishes) to transform a routine task (gathering food) into an artful experience.
- *Citizen Science Projects*: Online platforms like eBird and iNaturalist allow people to contribute to scientific research by documenting the plants and animals they encounter in their daily lives. These projects elevate the act of observing nature into a form of citizen art, engaging everyday people in a creative and scientific process.
- *Upcycled Clothing Design*: There is a growing trend of transforming old clothes into unique and fashionable pieces. Dewey would appreciate this approach, which takes readily available materials and, through skill and imagination, breathes new life into them, blurring the lines between everyday objects and art forms like fashion design. This perspective challenges the traditional distinction between the ordinary and the extraordinary, suggesting that art lies in the act of creation and appreciation, rather than solely in the finished product.

These contemporary examples showcase how Dewey’s concept of “The Everyday as Artful” remains relevant today. Artists and individuals are constantly finding new ways to imbue everyday activities with intentionality, skill, and imagination, transforming the ordinary into the extraordinary and enriching the aesthetic experience of our daily lives.

CONCLUSION

John Dewey, a prominent American philosopher, offered a unique perspective on art that challenged traditional views. In his influential book, “Art as Experience”, Dewey (1934) argued against the separation of art from everyday life. He proposed that art is not just about objects in museums, but rather the quality of experience we have with the world around us. This experience is an ongoing transaction between ourselves and our environment, and art serves as a powerful tool within this process (Dewey, 1934). Through art, we can refine our experiences, gain new perspectives, and even undergo personal transformation (Walford, 1998).

Dewey’s concept of art extends beyond the aesthetic realm and connects to his broader philosophical ideas, particularly his democratic ideals. He saw art as playing a crucial role in a healthy democracy (Novak, 1995). Artworks can foster a sense of community by providing shared experiences and sparking communication about important social issues (Dewey, 1934). Art can also challenge the status quo and inspire citizens to become active participants in shaping their society. This focus on the public role of art aligns with Dewey’s view of democracy as an ongoing process that thrives on citizen engagement.

Dewey (1934) further expanded his notion of art by advocating for the “Everyday as Artful.” He argued that artistic principles can be applied to everyday activities. By bringing intentionality, skill, and imagination to even mundane tasks, we can elevate them into artful experiences. This approach does not require grand gestures, but rather a mindful appreciation for the process and the details of our daily lives (Schiralli, 2007). Dewey believed that cultivating an artful way of living can not only

enrich our personal experiences but also contribute to a more aesthetically pleasing and harmonious society (Lederman, 1987).

In conclusion, John Dewey's view of art was complex and multifaceted. He saw art as a transactional process, a tool for democracy, and accessible in everyday life. By engaging with diverse academic sources, we gain a deeper understanding of his unique contribution to the philosophy of art, with lasting implications for education, aesthetics, and social engagement.

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