

# A Pragmatist's Notion of Work of Art: A foundation for the AWE-Group (Artist, Work-of-Art, Experience)

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**Abstract.** A work of art may be understood as a physical object perceived from a specific, i.e., aesthetic viewpoint. Pragmatist philosophers have, however, usually taken another approach, a contextual, anti-individualistic approach where work of art is rather an experience produced by an object of art (physical object).

Experience is not only a personal, subjective state or process of mind. An object of art produces a work of art (experience) by referring to common meanings, common experience, traditions and habits.

Pragmatism has been a largely neglected viewpoint in philosophy of art during this century. This topic has recently been brought under discussion in different fields (see, e.g., Shusterman 1992, Elliott 1995). John Dewey is a classic figure most often referred to, but same type of ideas have been presented through the century. This approach can be characterized by contrasting it to a view based on a more traditional epistemology.

Since Descartes and Locke epistemologists have usually made a contrast between consciousness and the external world. The world, the object of experience, is out there, and the experience takes place inside, somewhere behind the eyes and between the ears.

The same seems to hold for art, too. Artistic objects are often physical objects: paintings, sculptures etc. In a gallery they are sort of waiting for the opening of the doors, for the audience that will examine them and have aesthetic experiences. The object and the viewer stand opposite to each other, the object has its own properties and the viewer his own experiences.

The properties of an artistic object seem to be independent physical properties.

This is quite unproblematic with some properties: most paintings are flat, most sculptures not. And even if it is said that the beauty is in the viewer's eye, also the aesthetic properties seem to be properties of the object. It is the artistic object that is, somehow, beautiful, impressive, artistic etc.

It is, however, problematic to specify all these properties as properties of the object because in that case the properties seem to be independent of the viewer, history, culture, institutions of art. The properties, aesthetic properties included, seem to be permanent and stable.

### **Experience as interaction**

It is possible to take another viewpoint to the relation between man and world. Instead of making a contrast between consciousness and the external world one can start from the assumption that man and world constitute a whole. The most important distinction is not the one between the individual and the world, in which case the skin is the boundary. Experience is not passive perception but active interaction, in which case the important distinctions are the between different layers in this interaction (e.g., between perception and action).

Interaction and practice have been stressed by several pragmatist theories, and this approach requires a conception of mind and experience different from that of traditional epistemology. There is no distinct spiritual subject, and consciousness is rather a property of the interaction between man and the environment (especially cultural environment) than a property of an individual. Experience is based on action and not on mere perception.

### **Phenomenological standpoint**

Phenomenology examines the nature of perception, it examines how the world is revealed to us in perception. The independent real world, the physical world, is to be distinguished from the world as it appears to us, the phenomenal world. For example, there is no unequivocal connection between a physical and a phenomenal colour. Perception of colours depends on the subject, a certain type of eye is needed. Nobody can be completely sure that the others see the world in exactly the same colours.

Phenomenology typically excludes the real physical world from its field of inquiry, it is “bracketed”. Phenomenology examines perception from the point of view of meanings, intentionality (aboutness). However, this does not necessarily mean that practice and interaction is bracketed as well. Perception must be put in context, it must be analysed in its relation to external action and social and historical practice.

### **Dewey on art as experience**

A theory of human experience which stresses the role of interaction escapes the misleading contrast between man and world. This approach also implies a different conception of a work of art. A work of art is an experience, not an object or a material thing.

John Dewey defined his phenomenological standpoint in the philosophy of art by distinguishing between an object of art (or art product) and a work of art. According to him it is misleading to focus at the object of art. The real work of art is the experience which the object of art produces. The object of art is not perceived as a work of art without an act of recreation (Dewey 1980, 54). Also Hans-Georg Gadamer maintains that a work of art (Werk) exists in experience (Gadamer 1990, 108). According to Maurice Merleau-Ponty it is hard to answer the question: “Where is the painting?” We don’t see the painting, even if it seems so. We see with the painting. We don’t look at a painting as we look at a material thing. (Merleau-Ponty 1964, 23).

Doing or making is artistic “when the perceived result is of such a nature that its qualities as perceived have controlled the question of production” (Dewey 1980, 48). The goal is to produce a certain kind of experience, not to modify the object’s physical properties as physical.

An artist works the physical properties with physical instruments, but the purpose is to produce a certain kind of aesthetic experience. When you paint a picture you concentrate your attention on what it looks like. Someone just might use a painting for rolling meat balls, but in this case the painting is not in the role of an art-product the purpose of which is to produce an aesthetic experience. And if it happens that an artist puts the gallery audience to roll meat balls on a painting, then the main purpose is, again, to produce a certain kind of experience, not to produce some food.

A picture refers to something, but according to Dewey it is not important how it refers to the real world. A lady once told Matisse that she had never seen a woman who looked like the one in his picture. Matisse answered: “Madam, that is not a woman; that is a picture” (Dewey 1980, 113). Pictures do refer to life, to the common experience of humans, to the ways of seeing, in a word, to the phenomenal world. Works of art that “are widely enjoyed in a community are signs of a unified collective life” (ibid., 81).

Dewey’s point is philosophical. He wanted to define the aesthetic experience. He was not prejudiced to new artistic trends and said, for example, that there “is no a priori rule to decide how far abstraction may be carried” (ibid., 94). Dewey speaks about how a work of art refers, but this reference does not require any realistic content of the works; they refer just by being works of art. There are no grounds for taking Dewey’s philosophy of art as a platform for any specific artistic movement.

### **Gadamer on the ontology of a work of art**

Hans-Georg Gadamer examined the ontology of a work of art as an example of how social reality exists. He criticized the contrast between subject and object made by classical epistemology. The reality is not out there waiting to be perceived by an independent subject. We are all in a kind of play or game (Spiel). Game is the best way to characterize the ontology of a work of art. He used the play (Schauspiel) as an example.

A viewer’s relation to the play (Schauspiel) is the same as a player’s relation to the game. The subject of experience is not an individual player’s consciousness but the work of art itself. The subject is the play (Spiel, Schauspiel) itself as a result of cooperation of all players.

A play (Schauspiel) as a work of art cannot be identified with the text, director’s conception, the players’ thoughts and purposes or with the course of events in the theater. A play cannot be identified with a thing as one can (erroneously) do in the case paintings or sculptures. A play is an ontological event that exists in common experience (ibid., 108). All works of art have a relation to a community.

All works of art exist in the same way as play in spite of the fact that some works of art are produced by material objects of art. Objects of art have their role in a

game and the corresponding works of art are ontological events, like plays (Schauspiel), in common experience. Pictures are midway between two extremes: pure indication (Verweisen) and pure representation (Vertreten; Gadamer 1990, 157). A portrait, for example, refers to the person whose portrait it is. But it is not a work of art by virtue of this fact. The other extreme is that the picture itself brings something forth, makes it existent. A picture as a work of art manifests the fact that it is a part of the artworld, it has a role in the habits, traditions and institutions by virtue of which it is a work of art existing in common experience. There is an analogy to a religious symbol that makes manifest that it has a role in the social practices of religious life which bring forth a common religious experience to its participants.

According to Dewey the forming of an experience is a process, and a work of art is also “a construction in time” (Dewey 1980, 65). The object is “perceived by a cumulative series of interactions”, and the corresponding work of art is ultimately inexhaustible (ibid., 220). For example, a building as an architectonic work must be viewed from different angles, you have to walk inside it etc. Gadamer is basically of the same opinion: A work of art becomes existent through performing, and this specific temporality of aesthetic existence is typical especially for poetry and music (Gadamer 1990, 139).

From the pragmatist point of view a work of art is an experience that is constructed in time, that transcends the limits of individual subjectivity and is inexhaustible for an individual. The work is a whole referring to common meanings. The contrast between an object of art and an individual is misleading and hides the social and historical nature of a work of art as an experience.

### **Art and operative thinking**

In Dewey’s pragmatism man’s relation to the world is primarily operative, based on action. The problem of classical empiricism was how to compare perceptions with independent physical reality. The problem is that if perception is the only way to achieve knowledge, then it is not possible to get to know the physical reality independently of perception, and the comparison is just impossible. The solution of pragmatism is that we are physical beings in physical world, and the physical reality is also an object of action.

The conception of a work of art as experience has to be put in pragmatist

framework in which man's relation to the world is based on action. Aesthetic standpoint separates from this practical relationship a layer in which an object of art is not considered as an object of action. It is considered from a point of view of how it produces a work of art, an experience satisfying certain aesthetic criteria.

Henri Bergson was already of the opinion that art "has no other object than to brush aside the utilitarian symbols" (Bergson 1913, 157). For Bergson the human body is an instrument for action. Perception and rational thought, conceptual analysis, are capacities which are directed to practice, action. Perception is for Bergson virtual action (Bergson 1988, 22). He thought that the soul of an artist are detached from life in such a way that "[w]ere this detachment complete, did the soul no longer cleave to action by any of its perceptions, it would be the soul of an artist such as the world has never yet seen" (Bergson 1913, 154).

Maurice Merleau-Ponty was of the same opinion. According to him art gets its strength from a layer of primitive meanings about which operative thinking doesn't want to know anything (Merleau-Ponty 1964, 13). The phenomenological standpoint separates operative thinking from experience.

Bergson disconnects art from operative thinking by considering the relation between art and comedy. The comic "oscillates between life and art" (Bergson 1913, 22). The core of it is a certain kind of bluff. When something perceived generates expectations that are not realized or are possibly turned upside-down, we have a comical situation. "The attitudes, gestures and movements of the human body are laughable in exact proportion as that body reminds us of a mere machine" (ibid., 29; italics HB). In other words, the human body refers naturally to living creatures. When something brings to the same contexts references to inanimate mechanism the result is a comical contradiction. "Any arrangement of acts and events is comic which gives us, in a single combination, the illusion of life and the distinct impression of a mechanical arrangement" (ibid., 69; italics HB).

Laughable is also repetition which differs from the variability of life, inversion where some arrangement is turned upside-down, the possibility of two contradicting interpretations (ibid., 89 ff.). It is amusing when someone say something he has no intention of saying, does something he has no intention of doing, acts absentmindedly or does something absurd (ibid., 112).

It is possible to maintain that comedy is based on a sign's ability to lie. That what

generates expectations functions as a sign which refers to these expectations. The sign's relation to the signified, expectations in this case, is not nomological or necessary relation. A sign can lie, and a comical situation makes this delusion manifest, detaches partially perceptions from that kind of sign relation that in practical life is taken for granted and is useful in operational thinking.

Comedy is partial detachment from operational thinking. Signs which in practical life generate proper and rational expectations are made to lie. Something surprising takes place, and it is experienced as comical. As already said, comedy oscillates between art and life, and art completes this detachment from practical life.

The characteristic of art is the fact that it takes attention away from experience, perception, conceptual thinking and action directed to practical life. Art draws attention to experience itself, internal world.

### **Heidegger's pragmatism**

Martin Heidegger makes the same demarcation between operative thinking and aesthetic experience in his essay about the origin of a work of art. A work of art is also a physical entity. In Heidegger's terms: one aspect of the work is its thingness (das Dinghafte), and it is this thing which is at the same time a work of art (Heidegger 1977, 3-4). The problem is in virtue of what is this entity a work of art, what is the origin of a work of art.

According to Heidegger the origin of a work of art is in instrument (Zeug) which has its peculiar place between thing (Ding) and work (Werk; *ibid.*, 14). An instrument is partly a work of art, but it is not self-satisfied like a work of art. What is the property of an instrument which makes it partly a work of art?

The characteristic property of an instrument is its usefulness (Dienlichkeit). It can be used for some purpose, in some doing or making. It is precisely this usefulness which gives the instrument the capacity to refer to something else. It refers to the activity in which it is used, it refers to the objects of making and doing in which it is used, it refers to other participants of the activity and to other possible agents. An instrument is about all this. An instrument has, therefore, properties of a sign, although it is not a proper sign. In this respect it resembles a work of art which also refers to something else.

An instrument is not self-satisfied like a work of art because it exists for some activity. An instrument is used without taking notice of its own properties and materials. An instrument vanishes in its usefulness (ibid., 32, 52). Materials of a work of art become apparent in virtue of their properties as such and not in virtue of usefulness (ibid., 32). Dewey made the same point by stating that in case of a work of art its qualities as perceived have controlled the question of production.

Heidegger's example is van Gogh's painting depicting a pair of shoes. Shoes as instruments are used without taking notice of them, we just walk. In front of a painting depicting a pair of shoes we are somewhere else (ibid., 21). We are in a world opened by the painting depicting those shoes, and we are there in virtue of the perceived properties of those depicted shoes.

The world opened by the work is, according to Heidegger, a world of a countrywoman (perhaps they were really van Gogh's own shoes, but that's no problem – the world is changed, and that's all). The work refers to this world, and truth is in the work at work (im Werk am Werk).

Truth is a process where something becomes apparent. Experience is not individual experience (Erlebnis) of a viewer in front of the painting. Cherishing a work of art does not isolate people in their individual experiences (Erlebnis), it makes them belong to the truth that is at work in the work (ibid., 55), to the truth that is revealing, opening of the world of the countrywoman.

The subject of experience is strictly speaking not an individual but "das Man" (see Heidegger 1986, 126 ff.). The term is a Heidegger's own and it is constructed out of the word 'man' that is used in expressing passive voice in German language (notice that the English word 'man' is 'der Mann' in German language). The term 'das Man' refers to some kind of common, collective experience. The truth that is at work in the work is a possibility for the viewer to take part in the common experience and understanding of the world of the countrywoman.

A work of art is a thing, but this thingness has nothing to do with that in virtue of which it is art. An instrument is also a thing, but it is also partly a work of art because it refers to something else. A work of art is art because its only determining property is the fact that it refers to the world of a countrywoman, to the practical life-world of that countrywoman. The work does not refer to the economical fact that part of the population earns its living by sowing and



harvesting. It refers to the life of the people who work at this kind of jobs, it refers to the strain and loneliness, joy and satisfaction that belong to this life. van Gogh's painting refers to experiences that anyone can get by living this kind of life and that can be understood by all who are (more or less) familiar with this kind of life.

van Gogh's painting refers to the world of a countrywoman by means of an instrument, a pair of shoes, which it depicts. But of course, it is not necessary to depict an instrument in a work of art. Heidegger's second example is a temple that depicts nothing (Heidegger 1977, 27). But it refers also to a practical world which in this case has nothing to do with toiling in the field. It refers to devotional exercises. God is present in the temple in virtue of the temple itself, and the temple opens the world of religious ceremonies and rituals.

The point is that a work of art is not considered as a thing (physical object) or an instrument but as a sign which refers to common practical life-world in such a way that operational thinking, that is thinking about external action on physical objects (possibly with instruments), is disconnected.

This line of thinking can in principle be applied to abstract works, too. You just must have different common experience in order to understand abstract art. You must have information and experience about the development of modern art, about the practices and norms of the so-called artworld.

As already mentioned, according to Merleau-Ponty it is hard to answer the question "Where is the painting?". The point is analogical to Heidegger's view. With the painting we see a world which exists somewhere else, which is different from the physical world that is our object of eternal action.

The experienced world (phenomenal world) studied by the art of painting is not three-dimensional. Objects are not really behind each other, they just penetrate into each other's area (see Merleau-Ponty 1964, 46). Depth comes from somewhere and is located on the surface of the painting (ibid., 68-69). But this depth is not the depth of the three-dimensional external world which is the object of action. With depth our visual perception attains simultaneity, and a painting can depict an object from several perspectives at the same time. The laws of our phenomenal world are not same as the laws of external, real world.

### **Pragmatist conception of picture**

All the philosophers discussed above have a framework emphasizing action, practice, in a way or another. Their views are different in many ways, but it is possible to speak about a pragmatist point of view in a loose sense. Man's relation to the world is based on action and social practice. But art must be disconnected from operational thinking and experience.

But even if art is to be disconnected from operational thinking, it must not be isolated from the general practical framework. Experienced world (phenomenal world, life-world) which is the object of our aesthetic observation is essentially practical world, part of our common experience based on action and practice.

From this point of view sense experience directs and controls action, and even the perception of an artistic picture has this practical orientation, but this orientation is now limited to the phenomenal experienced world. The perception of an artistic picture connects it to activities, practices and institutions that give the picture its meaning as an object producing a work of art, aesthetic experience.

### **Pragmatist conception of mental image**

If we ignore the alternative that human consciousness is a spiritual subject independent of the human body, a soul in the full meaning of the word, we must hold that mental imagery is somehow realized by the brain. But in what way?

There are, in principle, two alternatives (see Määttänen 1993). Mental images may be concrete spatial representations in the brain. For example, the retinal image just moves forward and is transformed into an internal representation. The other alternative is that mental images are essentially operational. In contrast to common sense, perception is not the basic connection between a human being and the world. To use Spinoza's example, the relation between an external circle and the idea of that circle is not based on visual perception so that a retinal circle (which results when one looks at this eternal circle) somehow matches with the internal representation. According to Spinoza the idea of a circle is not round.

The relation between an eternal circle and the idea of circle is based on action. The hand draws a circle or follows the form of a round object, and the internal brainprocess controlling the movements of the hand need not be "round" in any sense of the word. One can mentally rotate objects and try to visualize what they would look like when perceived from a certain point of view, but this is not based

on an internal rotation of a concrete spatial representation (as in the first alternative). Mental rotation is based on anticipations of what kind of perceptions one would get if one rotated an external object and looked at it from a different point of view.

In the second alternative mental imagery (internal operations) is anticipation of external operations and related (possible) perceptions. Like Henri Bergson maintained, perception is virtual action. This kind of approach fits better in with the pragmatist conceptions of art and experience discussed above.

### **On the phenomenology of art**

Man's relation to the world is practical, based on action. Acts in the physical world must be accommodated to the conditions of that world. Perception helps to plan future action, anticipate the results of action before the action takes place. According to C.S. Peirce habits of action are belief about the real conditions of action. A vast number of people seems to have the habit of exiting a room through a door, not a window. It is a certain kind of belief about the world, about real conditions of action. This belief is based on earlier experiences of exiting rooms plus anticipation of experiences that might come up in both of these alternatives. This belief is not necessarily verbal or based on internal mental images. It is just a propensity to act in a certain way in certain circumstances, and a healthy one, for that matter.

All habits of action, not only in physical reality but also in social and cultural environment, are certain kind of beliefs about this environment, its norms and traditions, about how one can have an influence, participate in it etc. When we act we get perceptions not only of the phenomenal features of the world but also of the results of our action. As a matter of fact, we are completely dependent on our perceptions in the sense that we become conscious about external facts only through perceptions even if our relation to the world is basically practical.

The phenomenology of art separates from this practical phenomenal world a domain in which objects of action, art products, are worked up having only perceived properties in mind. The properties of the objects as objects of external (instrumental) action are ignored. The goal is to produce an aesthetic experience, a work of art. The conditions of physical reality do not control this artistic activity in the same way as they control external action.

The laws of the phenomenal world are laws of human experience. In this world objects may penetrate into each other's area, objects may be viewed from different perspectives at the same time, an artist can paint a picture producing experiences that one even cannot get by perceiving external physical reality.

From this viewpoint the characteristic feature of the development of modern art of painting is the detachment from the conditions of physical reality and its perception, for instance perspective. Sense experience is not considered from the viewpoint of possible external action in external world, it is considered only from the viewpoint of producing an aesthetic experience, a work of art. This is, in the full sense of the word, quest for the real essence of art by using only the own means and possibilities of art. One can examine the laws of the phenomenal world by means of sculpture as well as by means of painting, or actually by any artistic means. It is, of course, possible to discuss also the special limits and demands of purity in different forms of art, but to explain the detachment from perspective in painting only by referring to the flatness of canvas is, from the present phenomenological point of view, a rather flat view.

Properties which seem to be aesthetic properties of a picture, an object of art, are properties of the work of art, aesthetic experience produced by the object of art. This experience is tied to social, historical and cultural environment. From this viewpoint it is clear that aesthetic judgements can change depending on time, place and situation. They are not eternal and ahistorical, pure and disinterested. The meaning of life is the life itself (in the sense that it is hopeless to look for any meanings or goals outside our actual experienced life), and aesthetic experiences help to make this life valuable and satisfactory.

One can see aesthetic values also in other things than in unexplainable creations of a mysterious and bohemian genius. For example, it is hard to justify applied art by referring to eternal and absolute values that can only be attained with some special aesthetic intuition and that are alien from life and practice. For pragmatism this is not a problem. Aesthetic experiences (works of art) are anyhow connected to life, different contexts of action and practice, so why not with contexts of instrumental use.

Also an object that is applied for some purpose, an instrument, can be aesthetically valuable, it can produce aesthetically valuable experiences. At best a useful object has two qualities: it is a good instrument for some purpose, for operational

thinking, and it is designed so well that it is an object of art producing an aesthetically valuable experience, a work of art.

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