



“But if one sets out to understand the flowering of plants, he is committed to finding out something about the interactions of soil, air, water and sunlight that condition the growth of plants.”

~ John Dewey

<p>ART AS EXPERIENCE: Chapter 1, “The Live Creature” by John Dewey</p>
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This outline is adapted from chapter 1 of Dewey’s *Art as Experience* for class discussion in the graduate course on aesthetics (Spring 2006) at Texas A&M University.

We will begin by stating the thesis and complementary statement of *Art as Experience*, review the purpose of chapter 1, & then proceed to summarize the content of chapter 1. We will conclude our summary by considering six questions for conversation.

**I. Thesis Statement:** *Restore continuity between works of art and the everyday life.*

- A. Complementary Statement:** Since art is separated, categorized, classified, and isolated from human the conditions that created it from the first place in actual-life experience (such as events, doings, and sufferings), we must restore the continuity between the object and the subject by returning to the conditions and factors that make esthetic qualities a necessary and developing aspect of the normal processes of every living. The process of restoring that continuity will begin by examining the conditions and factors that make an ordinary experience complete since artistic and esthetic quality is implicit in every normal experience.
- B. Purpose of chapter 1:** Dewey contends that theories that isolate esthetics from everyday life, placing them in a realm of their own whereby they are disconnected from common every day life are driving away esthetic perception which is a necessary aspect of the human experience. Thus, we need to discover the esthetic qualities that enhance ordinary experience in everyday life by recognizing ourselves as a “live creature” whereby we discover our association, our interactions, and contributory factors with our environment (natural, cultural, social factors etc) which foster development, change, stability, conflict, & harmony, that relate to our past successes and failures, inform our present living, and punctuate potentialities for our future, personally and collectively.

**II. Summary of Chapter 1:**

- A.** A perversion has occurred whereby works of art are separated from human experience, the very basis where art is created:

1. *Art is identified apart from human experience.* In common conception, the work of art is often identified with the object apart from human experience.
  2. *Art is isolated from human experience (e.g., fresh insight and location).*
- B. This task to restore continuity between works of art and every day experience we must do the following:
1. We must examine the ordinary forces and conditions of experience that we do not usually regard as esthetic (e.g., Parthenon); we must begin with the human experience (pg. 3), look at the pleasurable events that hold the attention of people, arouse interest, and enjoyment in their everyday lives.
  2. Sources of art in human experience is learned by the person who is observant of the pleasure that motivates people to do what they do artistically, carefully, and enjoyably.
- C. So extensive and subtly pervasive are the ideas that set art upon a pedestal, that many people would be repelled rather than pleased if they were told that the reasons why they enjoyed casual recreations, is in part, because of their esthetic qualities (pg. 4):
1. Aesthetics is an act, reproduction, imitation, extension, or enhancement of the processes of objects that were designed as enhancements of the processes of everyday life.
  2. Arts which have the most vitality for the average person are things he or she does not take to the arts (i.e., movie, jazzed music, comic strips, and newspaper accounts of “love-nests”, murders, and exploits of bandits).
  3. When objects are closely connected with the products of usual vocations (e.g., trade, career, occupation, craft, or trade) appreciation of the objects are most widespread and most intense (pg. 4).
  4. When art is isolated from culture they become weak or colorless to the mass of people, then aesthetic hunger is likely to seek the cheap and the vulgar.
- D. The factors that have glorified fine art by setting it upon a far-off pedestal did not arise within the realm of art nor is their influence confined to the arts. It arose by dislocation and division of art from every day experience.
- E. Consider: we find highly admired objects as an extension of everyday living; art is a direct experience:
1. Jewelry
  2. Fashion
  3. Home decorating
  4. Drama
  5. Music
  6. Athletics
  7. Architecture

- F. Historical reasons for the rise of the compartmental conception of fine art:
1. Memorials of the rise of nationalism and imperialism.
  2. Every capitol seeking to exhibit the greatness of its artistic past, conquest of other nations, and nationalization of temples.
  3. Growth of capitalism with the capitalist being a collector of art with his new found riches.
  4. Communities and nations build places to collect their artistic treasures which results in cultural elitism.
  5. Economic cosmopolitanism: the mobility of trade and of population, due to the economic system, has weakened or destroyed the connection between works of art and the *loci* of which were once natural expression (indigenous expression).
  6. Intimate social connection is lost in the impersonality of a world market.
  7. The artist has been pushed to one side from the main streams of active interest. Industry has become mechanized and an artist cannot work mechanically for mass production. He is less integrated than formerly in the normal flow of social services. The artist responds with a non-conformist disposition to the point of eccentricity.
- G. The conditions that create the gulf which exists generally between producer and consumer in modern society operate to create also a chasm between ordinary and esthetic experience:
1. Philosophies of art that locate it in a region separated from its origins.
  2. Confusion of values enters in to accentuate the separation.
  3. Aesthetics become adventitious [added from an outside and often unsuspected source rather than being intrinsic], pleasure of collecting, of exhibiting, of ownership and display, simulate esthetic values.
  4. Criticism is affected in that there is much appreciation for the wonders and glory of beauty of art without much regard to capacity for esthetic perception in the concrete.
- H. The separation of art from experience deeply affects the practice of living, driving away esthetic perceptions that are necessary ingredients of happiness, or reducing them to the level of compensating transient pleasurable excitations.
- I. Though we may appreciate or enjoy flowers we will *not understand* flowers without knowing about the interactions of soil, air, moisture, and seeds of which they are the result.

- J. We must go back to the *sine qua non* of human experience that we don't currently regard as esthetic.
- K. What Dewey means by normal human experience (organic) involves the following ideas (biotic principles):
1. Nature of experience is determined by the essential conditions of life (basic vital functions; adaptability);
  2. Life goes on in an environment through intimate interaction and interchange.
  3. Life is enriched by the state of disparity and resistance.
  4. Adaptation through expansion.
  5. Balance and harmony attained through rhythm.
  6. Equilibrium comes about because of tension.
  7. Form is arrived when equilibrium is reached.
  8. Order is not imposed from without but is made out of relations of harmonious interaction that energizes and relates to one another.
  9. The rhythm of loss of integration with environment and recovery of union becomes conscious with him; its conditions are material out of which he forms purposes.
  10. Emotion is the conscious sign of a break, actual or impending.
  11. Discord is the occasion that induces reflection.
  12. Direct experience comes from the interaction of nature and man.
  13. There are 2 possible worlds in which esthetic experience would not occur; in a world of mere flux, change would not be cumulative, stability and rest would have no being; (2) everything is already complete; there is no fulfillment to seek.
  14. Because of the actual world, that in which we live, life is a combination of movement and culmination, of breaks and re-unions, the experience of a living creature is capable of esthetic quality; the live being recurrently loses and reestablishes equilibrium with his surroundings.
  15. Inner harmony is attained only when, by some means, terms are made with the environment.
  16. In the process of living, attainment of a period of equilibrium is at the same time the initiation of a new relation to the environment, one that brings with it potency of new adjustments to be made through struggle.

17. The time of consummation is also of beginning anew; consummation never reaches perfection or finality; it is always in process.



### Questions:

1. Do you agree with Dewey that the “Arts which have the most vitality for the avg. person are things he does not take to the arts”?
2. Could one argue in Dewey terms that “art for art’s sake” is an extension of our Western culture via art museums, a social purpose, a form of associated life?
3. Does capitalism enhance or isolate aesthetics from everyday life (e.g., sponsoring collections, building opera houses, etc)? Does capitalism foster aesthetic segregation and aesthetic discrimination between the richer and poorer?
4. How is it that the everyday making of things grows into that form of making which is genuinely artistic (pg. 11)?
5. If artistic and esthetic quality is implicit in every normal experience, how shall we explain how and why it so generally fails to become explicit?
6. What is his basis for stating that “inner harmony is attained only when, by some means, terms are made with the environment” (pg. 16). Do you agree?