

In Praise of Quotidian Aesthetics

Larry A. Hickman

Center for Dewey Studies

Southern Illinois University Carbondale

Quotidian: "Of an everyday character; commonplace, mundane, ordinary." (OED online edition, 2012)

Yes, it is true, as John J. McDermott has reminded us, "yea, painfully true that the 'things' of our everyday experience are increasing de-aestheticized, not only by misuse and failure to maintain, but forebodingly in their very conception of design and choice of material. . . ."¹ But it is equally true, as he also takes pains to remind us, that things not only are; they happen. Enter the realm of aesthetic. Enter "the rhythm of how we experience *what* we experience."

Dewey knew it. Dewey said it.

In order to *understand* the esthetic in its ultimate and approved forms, one must begin with it in the raw; in the events and scenes that hold the attentive eye and ear of a [hu]man, arousing his interest and affording him enjoyment as he looks and listens: the sights that hold the crowd—the fire-engine rushing by; the machines excavating enormous holes in the earth; the human-fly climbing the steeple-side; the men perched high in air on girders, throwing and catching red-hot bolts. The sources of art in human experience will be learned by him who sees how the tense grace of the ball-player infects the onlooking crowd; who notes the delight of the housewife in tending her plants, and the intent interest of her goodman in tending the patch of green in front of the house; the zest of the spectator in poking the wood burning on the hearth and in watching the darting flames and crumbling coals.²

At the risk of taking liberties with Dewey's Whitmanesque riff—at the risk of supplanting his implicit metaphor of the raw and the cooked with one that is aquatic—I suggest that he is keen to

¹ McDermott (1986, 130)

² Dewey (AAE, 1943, p. 11)

remind us that these experiences and many more like them are the "plankton" of the grander and more "refined" arts. Plankton, of course, are "drifting organisms (animals, plants, archaea, or bacteria) that inhabit the pelagic zone of oceans, seas, or bodies of fresh water. Plankton are thus defined by their ecological niche rather than phylogenetic or taxonomic classification. They provide a crucial source of food to larger, more familiar aquatic organisms such as fish and whales. Though many planktic . . . species are microscopic in size, plankton includes organisms covering a wide range of sizes, including large organisms such as jellyfish."³

With Dewey, I suggest that the objects and rhythms of quotidian aesthetics are the plankton of our extended and refined aesthetic environment. They are instrumental, in the sense that they nourish those works of art that Dewey calls "ultimate and approved" and that we also tend to call "refined," and "spiritual." But they also share in what we call "final" or "fine" or "consummatory." They have their own delights. Aesthetic plankton are the many and varied "things" large and small, that are defined by their ecological niche rather than by common structure or appearance. They provide the energy, the rhythm, the nourishment that makes possible the more abstract and refined arts, lesser as well as greater. Put another way, they can be instrumental to larger and more comprehensive aesthetic productions. But they also have their own delights, and they provide the kind of raw enjoyment that Dewey mentions: the giant earth moving machine, the tense grace of the ball player, the zest of the spectator in poking the wood burning on the hearth. They are both consummatory and instrumental to the development of further aesthetic meanings.

The street sounds and cries of vendors that inspire the work of Mexican jazz pianist Hector Infanzon. The folk melodies and rhythms that stimulated the Hungarian Dances of Brahms and the Slavonic Dances of Dvorak. The speech rhythms of Missouri backwoods and Mississippi river bottom that motivate and populate Mark Twain's seminal novels *Huck Finn* and *Tom Sawyer*, those works themselves ultimately resonating in the work of writers such as William Faulkner. We sometimes say that it is the mark of a successful artist to take the vulgar, the banal, the quotidian, and refine it, and then refine it still further until it becomes "real art," "fine art." Each of those quotidian things – the street cries, the folk dances, the backwoods speech patterns– is

³ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Plankton>. Retrieved 04.18.12

instrumental. But they are also what they are because of something final, fine. They are the source of immediate aesthetic enjoyment.

[note: ballet of cafeteria]

So it is here that we must take special care. We must take care, as Dewey tells us, to avoid a "conception of art that 'spiritualizes' it out of connection with the objects of concrete experience." What we require instead is a conception of art, he says, that "discloses the way in which these works idealize qualities found in common experience."⁴ What we need is a conception of art that recognizes that even humble quotidian objects and events have aesthetic qualities and that they, too, can be the source of experiences that are consummatory as well as instrumental.

We call the sonnet sublime and spiritual, for example, but dismiss the button as banal and boring. Historian Lynn White, Jr. cheerfully admits that "it is doubtful whether the chilly 13th century Northerner who invented the button could have invented the sonnet then being produced by his contemporaries in Sicily." "But," he quickly adds, "it is equally doubtful whether the type of talent required to invent the rhythmic and phonic relationships of the sonnet pattern is the type of talent needed to perceive the spatial relationships of button and buttonhole."

Despite thousands of years of brilliant technical innovations, for example, painstakingly documented in Joseph Needham's monumental work *Science and Civilization in China*, the Chinese never invented the button and button hole – more properly, the buttonhold – nor did they adopt their use when Portuguese missionaries arrived in the 16th century. The Japanese, on the other hand, were so delighted with that humble object that they not only adopted it, but took over the Portuguese name.

Shall we speculate on which of these inventions is the finer, the more spiritual, the more capable of consummatory experience? The button we call commonplace, mundane, ordinary, and quotidian. The sonnet we know as a "dialectical construct which allows the poet to examine the

⁴ Dewey, AAE 17

nature and ramifications of two usually contrastive ideas, emotions, states of mind, beliefs, actions, events, images, etc., by juxtaposing the two against each other, and possibly resolving or just revealing the tensions created and operative between the two.⁵ The sonnet we call "fine" and "spiritual." But White insists that we take account of the aesthetic qualities of the button –consummatory as well as instrumental: "The billion or more mothers who, since the thirteenth century, have buttoned their children snugly against winter weather might perceive as much spirituality in the button as in the sonnet and feel more personal gratitude to the inventor of the former than of the latter."⁶ There is perhaps no better example than the humble button of the interpenetration of the instrumental and the fine, or final, in quotidian aesthetics.

It was in this vein that Dewey refused to accept the received distinctions between those arts we refer to as "fine" and those that we call "useful," or "technological." He thought that what matters instead is the "degree of completeness of living in the experience of making and of perceiving that makes the difference between what is fine or esthetic in art and what is not."⁷ The real issue involves expansion of the meanings of life in ways that contribute to their continuing enrichment.

Dewey did not shy from providing a definition of art that incorporates this idea. Art, he wrote, is

a process of production in which natural materials are re-shaped in a projection toward consummatory fulfillment through regulation of trains of events that occur in a less regulated way on lower levels of nature. Art is "fine" in the degree in which ends, the final termini, of natural processes are dominant and conspicuously enjoyed. All art is instrumental in its use of techniques and tools. It is shown that normal artistic experience involves bringing to a better balance than is found elsewhere in either nature or experience the consummatory and instrumental phases of events. Art thus represents the culminating event of nature as well as the climax of experience.⁸

⁵ Nelson Miller, "Basic Sonnet Forms" <http://www.sonnets.org/basicforms.htm>

⁶ White, 1968, p.130.

⁷ Dewey, AEE 34

⁸ Dewey, Experience and Nature, 9

It has been a source of scandal among some partisans of the "fine" arts, such as Lewis Mumford, that Dewey compared the emergence of works of art out of ordinary experiences to the invention and development of tools and techniques, that is, to the refining of raw materials into valuable products. To Mumford and others this has seemed unworthy, and perhaps even "an actual attempt to reduce works of art to the status of articles manufactured for commercial purposes."⁹

In *The Golden Day*, for example, Mumford characterized Dewey's approach to aesthetic experience as surrendering to a type of "industrial utilitarianism." He charged Dewey with being "bound up with a certain democratic indiscriminateness in his personal standards: a Goodyear and a Morse seem to him as high in the scale of human development as a Whitman and a Tolstoi: a rubber raincoat is perhaps a finer contribution to human life than 'Wind, Rain, Speed.' What indeed is his justification for art?"¹⁰

Mumford was particularly offended by Dewey's remark that "fine art consciously undertaken as such is peculiarly instrumental in quality. It is a device in experimentation carried on for the sake of education. It exists for the sake of a specialized use, use being a new training of modes of perception. The creators of such works of art are entitled, when successful, to the gratitude that we give to inventors of microscopes and microphones; in the end, they open new objects to be observed and enjoyed." It is telling, however, that Mumford ignored the sentence that followed the quoted passage: "This is a genuine service;" Dewey continued, "but only an age of combined confusion and conceit will arrogate to works that perform this special utility the exclusive name of fine art."¹¹

There is something deeply ironic about the examples that Mumford deploys to attack Dewey's affection for the quotidian. A first irony is that Mumford was one of the 20th century's great

⁹ Dewey, AAE 17-18

¹⁰ Mumford, *The Golden Day*, p. 262. Reference is to J. M. W. Turner's painting "Rain, Steam, and Speed."

¹¹ Dewey, LW.1.293

historians of technology. His magisterial work *Technics and Civilization*, for example,¹² is replete with examples of technical objects. A second irony is his reference to J. M. W. Turner's painting "Wind, Rain, and Speed" (also known as "Rain, Steam and Speed-The Great Western Railway"). Turner's painting in fact depicts—"celebrates" may not be too strong a word—the advance of a great railway locomotive of the Western Express crossing the Maidenhead Bridge over the Thames during a thunderstorm. In Turner's painting the forces of nature and technical production are fused into one magnificent visual display. This tribute to the meeting of nature and industry is the late-career work of a great landscape painter.

Here are the interpretive notes of one perceptive critic: "The lesson of Rain, Steam and Speed" is that speed—mechanical motion and its action on the flesh—unlike the tectonic and meteorological forces of the Romantic landscape, cannot be 'represented'. By an irony of History and the unique genius of an old man, it was given to one of the creators of the 'Romantic landscape' to understand this. In the 'Romantic landscape,' the elements – wind, fire, water, earth—were the actors. Speed is not an 'actor' on the scenery of nature, but a force organizing its perception. What we, today, call "the environment" is perhaps the landscape seen through the looking glass of speed by the successive generations which came and passed since Turner painted a train. Or better: 'speed'—the vision of nature through a vehicle's window—changed people's gaze."¹³ Turner's painting thus celebrates the very sort of object that Mumford dismisses as inferior to the "fine" arts: the speeding train and the technical expertise that went into its development.

For his part, Dewey simply registers Mumford's complaint and remained unapologetic. Deflecting the charge of "instrumental utilitarianism," he deployed a move that his readers encounter frequently. He distinguished what is experienced, what is valued, from those experiences to which intelligence and emotion have contributed structure, or put another way, what has been enriched and secured through processes of evaluation. "Flowers," he wrote, "can be enjoyed without knowing about the interactions of soil, air, moisture, and seeds of which they are the result. But they cannot be understood without taking just these interactions into

¹² Mumford, Lewis. *Technics and Civilization*. Reference here.

¹³ Jean Robert. "Rain Steam and Speed and the New Scopic Regime." <<http://www.pudel.uni-bremen.de/pdf/robert88Ra.pdf>>, retrieved 04.26.2012.

account—and theory is a matter of understanding."¹⁴ Here you have it. Flowers provide aesthetic enjoyment that is fine or final in the sense that nothing more is required. But they are also instrumental to further, enhanced aesthetic enjoyment once their context is understood and taken into account.

Depending on one's location, locomotives may be quotidian. But they are not humble. They may be experienced as both instrumental to travel and as consummatory to those who have a profound appreciative eye for beauties of mechanical objects in general and more particularly for the magnificence of the ‘iron horse.’”

Other objects, however, present themselves to us as both quotidian *and* humble. The candle, a source of domestic light that has a much longer history than that of the electric bulb, is one such object. Lighted candles have their own delights, and in that sense their appreciation is final, or consummatory. But they are also instrumental to lighting otherwise dark spaces, and also, perhaps, to romantic evenings. The immediate delight of candles is thus one thing, but an appreciation of their historical and cultural context and their role in the visual arts is another.

Viewing Rembrandt's *Student at a Table by Candlelight*, for example, we see we see a young man seated at a table reading a newspaper. The scene is dimly illuminated by a single candle on the wall. The remainder of the space, all about the young man, is shrouded in darkness. Rembrandt's etching can be *enjoyed* without knowing the subtleties of depicting the interactions of light and shadow, or about the innovative techniques that he used in producing his untutored etchings. But it cannot be *understood* without taking account of the very quotidian artifact—the candle—that is one of its focal point.

In his magnificent book *At Home*, for example, Bill Bryson helps us expand our appreciation of this scene. He reminds us just how dim the world was before electric lighting. He estimates that a good candle provides approximately one percent of the illumination of a 100-watt lightbulb. "Open your refrigerator door," he writes, "and you summon forth more light than the total amount enjoyed by most households in the eighteenth century. The world at night for much of

¹⁴ Dewey, AAE 18

history was a very dark place indeed."¹⁵ Perhaps it is not too much to say that Bryson's account allows us to see Rembrandt's etching in a new light. Without an aesthetic appreciation of the quotidian artifacts in Rembrandt's image, I suggest, our understanding of it is impoverished.

In all of this, of course, I am echoing Dewey's call for greater appreciation of the aesthetic qualities of our quotidian, lived experiences—not just because the meanings of "ordinary," "useful" objects and events about us are the "raw materials" that carry the potential for refinement by artists into objects and events we call "fine," but, perhaps less obviously, because appreciation of such quotidian events and objects and the "aesthetic plankton" that enriches our experience more generally. Marcel Duchamp was pleased to communicate this fact to us, as was the photographer Man Ray.

That quotidian aesthetic is not "disinterested," bothered Dewey not one whit. Perhaps as a corollary to his remarks on the reflex arc concept in psychology, he thought that all meaningful aesthetic experience is marked by selective interest. If it were otherwise, such experience would have no context. It would have no energy. Nor did he shy from acknowledging that quotidian aesthetic can be instrumental. He argued that "a consummatory object that is not also instrumental turns in time to the dust and ashes of boredom. The 'eternal' quality of great art is its renewed instrumentality for further consummatory experiences."¹⁶

Failure of quotidian artifacts to do their work, to be meaningful, is ultimately a failure of properly conducted inquiry. It is a failure of evaluation. It is a technological failure.

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¹⁵ Bryson, p. 112

¹⁶ Dewey LW1.274